



PLA Working Group: professional development for prison educators

How can we train, support, and develop the prison teacher workforce?

Introduction

Prison education succeeds or fails on the qualities and quality of prison educators. The Coates Review, *Unlocking Potential*, called for education to be at the heart of the prison system.¹ Dame Sally Coates said:

'My vision for learning to be at the heart of regime requires a whole organisation approach to education and to workforce development.'



Professional development for all staff—including Governors and their Senior Leadership Team, teachers, prison officers, instructors, and peer mentors—will be a crucial part of reform and rapid change.'

Six years later this vision for prison education has not been realised. Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown of prisoners, the struggle to recover a regime in many prisons and an exodus of officers and teachers, have taken a heavy toll on prison education.

In 2021 the University and College Union and the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) released the report, *Hidden Voices*, on the experiences of teachers working in prisons.² This report recognised that the teacher workforce was undervalued and underinvested in. As a follow-up to the report, the PLA convened a working group to look at teacher development.

The PLA Working Group on Professional Development for Prison Educators met between December 2021 and August 2022. Its remit was to explore recommendations for the professional development of prison educators, canvassing views from members of each of the four prison education providers, teacher educators, academics and members of organisations which support prison education.

Currently, there is no standard route or standard set of qualifications to be a prison teacher. Candidates will usually need to have a qualification in their subject, show skills and aspirations that are essential to be a prison teacher and may have a teaching qualification. Each prison education provider can set their own recruitment criteria.

¹ Coates, S. 2016. *Unlocking Potential: a review of education in prison*. Ministry of Justice.

² *Hidden Voices*. 2021. University and College Union and the Prisoner Learning Alliance.

The messages to emerge from meetings of this group – the challenges and what is needed to meet them - are similar to those that have been presented before in *Hidden Voices* (2021) and *Prison Educators: Professionalism against the Odds* (2014),³ and they are consistent with findings from the *Coates Review*.

Members of the Working Group agreed on many points, including the central point that there is not enough being done in the way of professional development to meet the needs of aspiring and current prison educators. On some points there were a range of views, including on what ‘professionalism’ meant as applied to prison educators and at what point prison educators and potential teacher educators, should embark on prison-education-specific training.

The issue of professional development can only be adequately addressed if learning and education is given a more prominent role in the prison system as a whole. This includes providing the funding, salaries, and career paths to attract more teachers. But it is also a matter of vision and commitment, of establishing learning and education at the heart of a rehabilitative prison system.

The report covers:

- Key messages
- Conclusion and recommendations
- Working Group Membership

³ Rogers, L., Simonot, M Nartey, A. 2014. *Prison Educators: Professionalism Against the Odds*. 2014. University and College Union and the Institute of Education.

Key Messages

These are the key messages to emerge from discussions of the Working Group.

Raising the profile of prison education

There is little systematic effort to embed prison education in mainstream teacher training in colleges and universities, or to promote it as a meaningful career choice.

At the same time, we know that people are interested in exploring a career as a prison teacher. The PLA receives frequent requests from individuals and some requests from teacher training courses for information about becoming a prison tutor.

Prison educators are under-represented in teacher training. Many initial teacher training organisations do not do enough to make students and teachers aware of prison education as an option.

There is a significant gap between what is available to teachers in secondary education and Further Education (FE), and also, between what is available to teachers in FE and in prison education. More needs to be done to address the salary differences between prison educators and Further Education college educators.

Between 2014 and 2018 the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), funded by HMPPS, delivered a sector-led Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offer to prison educators. The funding ceased in 2018 although the CPD resources, including the career guide, 'Offender learning: a career of choice' are still available on the ETF website.⁴

Recruitment

There should be significant investment in recruitment, as with 'Unlocked Graduates', an initiative which grew out of the Coates review. A similar initiative could be undertaken to encourage early career teachers to go into prisons.

The recruitment of vocational tutors is an issue. One suggestion was that businesses and industries could supply staff for prisons to support workshops and training. This could be incentivised or considered as part of corporate social responsibility projects.

The *Teach in FE* campaign⁵ has the potential to make more people aware of teaching in prisons as a career.

⁴ <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/professional-development/offender-learning/>

⁵ <https://www.teach-in-further-education.campaign.gov.uk/where-to-start-in-further-education.html>

Existing training

Within Initial Teacher Training (ITT), there is very little in the way of prison-education-specific professional development training and qualifications.

More training opportunities are available in the context of CPD. Prison Education Framework providers make CPD opportunities available to support prison teachers but capacity and getting time out of the classroom can be difficult.

A wide range of online material is available from the Education and Training Foundation, which has been found to be helpful.

There are a few relevant mainstream materials – on trauma-informed teaching, for example.

Guidance produced for awarding bodies and Higher Education on the implementation of the new Professional Diploma in Teaching (FE and Skills) should include a statement on best practice in prison education, with examples of curriculum content included for INFORMATION. In addition, an optional unit could be included that is dedicated to prison education.

There is potential for the government to create bursaries for the prison education sector, and potential for providers to offer teacher apprentices to early career teachers, both of which may encourage teachers to pursue a career in prison education.

Developing prison education specific training and qualifications

There is a need for prison-education-specific training in the demands of the prison environment and the prisoner-learner population. The Working Group did not consider generic teaching qualifications as an adequate preparation for prison teaching.

More training is needed on responding to learning differences and mental health needs, trauma informed teaching and working with learners who have poor prior experiences of education. The specialist nature of teaching in prison was highlighted by the Working Group, along with the need to develop ‘jail craft’ – the operational and cultural knowledge needed to work in a prison effectively and safely.⁶

Some members saw merit in standalone prison education qualifications, given the need

⁶ During OLASS, the four education providers, UCU and ETF developed an induction health and safety pack which included this; this was held by MoJ/HMP

to understand the teaching and learning demands that are specific to a prison environment.

Consideration should be given to the scope for collaboration between the four prison education providers for providing prison-education-specific training. For example, it would be valuable to set up a working group 'space' hosted online providing a forum for education managers, curriculum leaders and teaching staff (specific subject groups) to connect with each other.

When prison officers are first recruited, they are provided with an intensive training programme. Similarly, a national intensive training programme could be offered to new education staff whilst the clearance process is in progress, or during the first month of employment. The programme could be run online and focus on the specific needs of a prison environment, such as supporting adult learners, managing adult mental health, jail craft and adult group management. It would be a useful way to support staff from all providers and build solid working relationships.

It was agreed that prison education should be appealing to a wide range of teachers and professionals, and high-quality initial teacher training and professional development can play a central role in helping to achieve that.

Qualifications: a flexible approach

Offering one, and only one same qualification to all new teachers may not necessarily be the right approach. The prison system is a hugely diverse workplace, often requiring a wide range of skillsets. One option is to devise a professional framework that offers points of entry and progression that are suitable for the many differently qualified and experienced people who want to teach in prisons. The framework may value a range of skills in addition to teaching-specific skills.⁷

There is also a need to consider how to support those who are entering teaching from a vocational background rather than from a more traditional training background.

There should be scope for multiple points of entry and pathways into prison education, catering to the diverse range of backgrounds, training, and ages of potential teacher educators.

⁷ <https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/Offender%20learning%20-%20a%20career%20of%20choice%20March%202017.pdf>

Some prisons have found creative ways of 'growing their own' prison teachers. For example, prisons in the East of England identified prison officers with vocational skills, and using an apprenticeship route, created their own vocational instructors. Additionally, vocational instructors were given the option of training to become maths teachers.

People come into prison education from a variety of backgrounds, and with a variety of qualifications- for example, a Certificate of Education or an Award in education and Training, as an alternative to a PGCE. There is a need to take account of the training needs of (sometimes older) people with vocational experience and qualifications, who may not have a PGCE, and who are thinking of entering prison education.

A two-stage process was suggested. In the first stage, people training as teachers are introduced to prison teaching as an option. After initial teacher training, there is then the option of prison specific teacher training, tailored to a suite of prison-related/prison-specific training opportunities. The best time to offer some prison specific training and qualifications may be after newcomers are already engaged in prison education.

Qualifications: other options

Other options canvassed included:

- A module on teaching in alternative settings within existing teaching qualifications.
- Qualifications at different levels: for example, a Level 2 qualification, as part of a Cert Ed/PGCE (post graduate certificate in education), and a professional qualification as part of the 'AP advanced practitioner' or QTLS (Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills) programme.⁸
- Level 2 and Level 3 discrete qualifications which are suitable for vocational instructors.
- A non-accredited course that equips teachers who have never taught in prisons before.
- An online qualification for teaching in prisons, to sit alongside the non-operational training, which is mandatory for anyone starting as a prison educator.
- Within teacher training programmes there are specialist modules designed to equip teachers for particular groups and sites of learning. This could include an introduction to prison education.

⁸ See also the Level 5 Diploma in Education and Training

A portfolio of qualifications

A further option is to build a portfolio of qualifications, which would recognise both formal training and informal experience, including experiences of prison visits and conferences aimed at prison educators. Though, not everyone was persuaded that the 'portfolio' option would have a broad appeal.

Prison specific training and the PGCE

There was a view that a discrete prison education qualification, offered during initial teacher training, would not recruit a sufficient number of teachers. It would be better to offer prison education as an optional module – for example, within an existing PGCE. Alternatively, prison education could be included as part of a 'migratory' qualification that teachers take before moving onto prison education.

Prison education training should feature in a suite of qualifications available to people who are already teaching. Having a module related to prison education in a PGCE would promote prison teaching to a wider group of teachers, many of whom will not know much about the prison environment.

One Prison Education Framework (PEF) provider worked with several universities to develop prison education units for a PGCE. Level 3 and 4 teaching qualifications were offered which followed the regular curriculum whilst also being directed at prison educators – using materials and examples from prison teaching practice- however, these were local with a view to embedding delivery practices of prison education. They also have a New Teachers forum to enable networking and support in the first year of prison teaching. These are ongoing initiatives, and there is scope for more activity from education providers.

Continuing Professional Development - CPD

Some prison education providers have a budget for CPD that is used to enable colleagues to access internal CPD as well as external courses. It should be possible for teachers to apply for additional CPD funding in return for a commitment to staying in their roles for a specified period.

If CPD is led by people with personal experience of the criminal justice system, this can be effective for staff and learners. One member said that some of the best CPD they had seen was co-created with prison learners.



One member noted that the prison they worked in did not provide CPD or mentoring to education staff. New people were often 'thrown in' to do the best they could. There was no culture of support for prison educators. On the other hand, some members of the Working Group pointed out that there are prison education providers that offer a comprehensive induction for new colleagues.

There is scope to engage more with the CPD offered by HMPPS that covers prison specific matters, even when it is not related to teaching and learning.

Recognising and using existing skills

Prison teachers do not receive the recognition they deserve for their skills, expertise, and professionalism.

There should be a greater use of existing expertise among prison educators, and more opportunities for prison educators to meet with peers, or to form communities of practice.

There is scope for teachers to act as mentors for teachers who are new to teaching in prisons. New tutors, and some existing tutors, would benefit from mentoring and there are some examples of this happening.

It is especially important that a tutor should have an opportunity to visit subject peers in other prisons. Again, there are some prisons where this is standard practice.

A qualified workforce?

Some members commented that not all prison teachers are qualified to teach. However, the view of the workforce as underqualified was disputed by several members of the group. 'Professionalism Against the Odds' suggests that prison educators are often very well qualified. Of the 400 plus educators that responded to the *Hidden Voices* survey, nearly three out of ten respondents (29.2%) held a postgraduate certificate in education, which is similar to further education, where 32% of teachers hold a postgraduate certificate in education.

Prison officers and prison educators: more collaboration

The tension between the priorities of the prison system and those of prison education remains unresolved. However, the Working Group felt that there were ways to alleviate this. It would be helpful for prison officers and education staff to learn about what each other does, and for trainee prison officers to spend some time in prison education. As

an example, a resource pack⁹ was created with Newbold Revel (HMPPS's training centre) for prison officers to enable them to develop an understanding of prison education and recognise their role in the rehabilitation process.

One member was struck by how the two sets of staff in their prison had very little idea of what the other would be doing: prison officers did not know when education started, and education staff did not know when exercise started. It would not take long for prison and education staff to learn more about each other's responsibilities. It was observed that this is less of a problem in women's prisons, which provide a more therapeutic environment, in turn requiring a cross-department approach.

One member commented that they had once worked closely with a governor, staff, and inmates to develop an education initiative. Often, the issue wasn't a lack of willingness to engage, but a lack of capacity.

At one prison, there was a proposal to appoint an education advocate - a prison officer - on each wing. On some wings this occurs naturally, but the appointment of advocates should be systematic if it is not to be undermined by shift changes and changes in personnel.

A significant number of staff in prisons report as sick owing to stress and anxiety. The mental health and well-being of teaching staff should be given a higher priority.

It is also important that prison leaders and staff have realistic expectations for prison education. The Working Group discussed the desirability of current learning goals. The question was raised whether the target of all learners achieving a Level 1 qualification was always achievable. For some learners this may be unrealistic.

Prison as a site for teaching practice

Trainee teachers might be encouraged to do their PGCE teaching practice with prison educators. One member commented that they had previously looked into using their prison as a site for teaching practice, but that this had not been pursued owing to the administrative demands involved.

There are some established relationships between ITT providers and prisons in the Northeast. At least one provider delivers initial teacher training for all prison contracts either online (or distance learning) or at the main college campus.

⁹ <https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf2817>

Building the evidence base and sharing good practice

The group wanted to know more about training and qualifications in contracted out prisons. One member noted that there was more flexibility and inter-linked provision at the contracted-out prison they had worked in, compared with other prisons. In many contracted-out prisons and public sector prisons in South Wales, for example, (where education is devolved) teachers are employed by the establishment. This can lead to a more integrated approach to supporting prison education. It is important that network and information sharing can develop between regions and sectors, so that good practice can be shared.

There is a need for a systematic compilation and critical review of the evidence on the profile, qualifications, effectiveness, and pedagogies of prison educators. This would include evidence from research, policy, and practice, national and international. There is a need for more practitioner research and more time and funding to support this.

A whole prison learning environment

For some members the issue of professional development can only be adequately addressed if learning and education is given a more prominent role in the prison system as a whole. This includes providing the funding, salaries, and career paths to attract more teachers. But it also a matter of vision and commitment: of establishing learning and education at the heart of a rehabilitative prison system.

The PLA has set out a vision for prison as a learning environment.¹⁰ The proposal of a 'learning prison' was explored by Rachel O' Brian for the (RSA) Royal Society of Arts in 2010.¹¹ The whole prison was conceived as a learning environment, where education was not a marginal activity in a discrete part of the establishment, but central to the functioning and priorities of the prison as a whole.¹²

The Working Group strongly supported the idea that everyone in prison should understand the importance of education in rehabilitation and work towards the same aims. This approach may serve to reduce tensions between colleagues working in different departments. One member recalled tensions between people on prison education contracts and learning skills staff which eased once they began to train alongside each other.

¹⁰ <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Theory-of-Change-Report.pdf>

¹¹ Rachel O'Brien. 2010. *The Learning Prison*. RSA.

¹² An example of a whole prison approach resource which brought prison and education staff working together: <https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf2466>

Conclusion

Numerous reports have outlined the challenges that face prison education and prison educators. The 2021 report, *Hidden Voices*, found that seven in ten teachers were considering leaving prison education in the next five years.

The Ministry of Justice has launched the process for the next iteration of the Prison Education Framework contracts and are committed to a new Prisoner Education Service. This offers an opportunity to develop prison education provision that values and supports prison educators. The Prisons Strategy Whitepaper makes a commitment to 'invest in staff training to build a prison culture that values education and learning across the prison and increase the quality of teaching and training.' However, as no specific funds have been allocated to education delivery or teacher training; without significant investment in prison teachers, the contracts are unlikely to deliver the change that prison education so desperately needs.

Recommendations

For the Ministry of Justice

The crisis in recruiting and retaining prison education teachers requires urgent action:

- The MoJ (Ministry of Justice) should ensure that contracts include conditions and salaries equivalent to further education in the community and which allow for sufficient time for the training and development of prison teachers.
 - The MoJ should develop a national recruitment strategy, working in partnership with PEF providers, further education institutions and teacher training colleges.
 - The MoJ should develop a scheme like 'Unlocked Graduates' for early career teachers.
 - The MoJ should work together with PEF providers to assess the feasibility of an eight-week tutored online course to support the induction of prison teachers.
 - The MoJ should work with teacher training colleges and PEF providers to develop a framework for continuous development of prison teachers, some of which could align with training for officers and/or Governors.
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For HMPPS

Prisons and Governors need to take some ownership for supporting teacher development:

- The prison service should ensure that resources, teaching materials and technology for prison education are equivalent to the community, to ensure that teachers are able to utilise modern teaching methods and practices.
- The prison service should develop a central online hub for people interested in a career in prison education to access information and advice and opportunities to visit a prison.
- The prison service should ensure that Governors develop a training plan for the whole prison, including prisoner-learner input and the co-creation of materials, and involving prison teachers in regular ongoing training and development opportunities with officers and other staff.
- The prison service should develop a formal induction process for all prison teachers, to be carried out by the host prison, and which enables them to develop a good understanding and knowledge of prison culture and operations.

For PEF/prison education providers

Investment in teacher development is essential:

- PEF providers should put sufficient investment into ongoing training of their workforce, and CPD and training time for teachers should be ring-fenced and protected.
 - PEF providers should be resourced to develop training programmes that include officers, instructors, and other prison staff.
 - Prison teachers should routinely be offered networking opportunities across all providers and across the wider further education sector.
 - Providers should develop incentives for teachers, including progression routes, training, mentoring, and shadowing schemes.
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For teacher training colleges and PCGE providers

Prison education is part of the further education community:

- Training providers should develop links with prisons and prison education providers and placement and careers teams in teacher training colleges should be able to advise on opportunities for teaching in prisons.
 - All diploma level courses for teaching adults should provide an initial session on prison education.
 - There should be more emphasis on neurodiversity and special educational needs, in teacher training. There are a large number of such learners in prisons, and providing strategies and guidance within teacher training would help tutors to recognise and support their needs.
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We are incredibly grateful to all the Working Group Members for their time and contributions and to Natalia Catechis and Hannah Stevens for providing the secretariat support and Isabelle Wan for design.

We are particularly grateful to John Vorhaus for chairing this group and leading this work.

This report is a synthesis of the Working Group discussions and not all points represent the views of all the individuals or organisations involved.

Prisoner Learning Alliance

The Prisoner Learning Alliance is a network of organisations and individuals with expertise in prison education. We use our collective voice to improve learning opportunities for prisoners.

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