Prisoners as learners: voice and potential

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‘I’m 23 years old and feel that I have a lot to offer in this world but don’t have many qualifications and I am willing and determined to broaden my educational aspects.

My life has not amounted to much and I’d like to achieve as much as I can before I find it’s much too late. I’d very much like to work my way towards a degree.’

Applicant for OU Openings course in Law

Key themes

- Prisoners have potential; many seek a second (or even first) chance.
- Awareness of educational deficits.
- Prisoners have aspirations.
- Challenges for offender learning: curriculum range and reach; engaging learner voice; maximising partnership.

Prisoners Education Trust

- Grants for distance learning (DL): 2200 each year, c. 1000 from statutory funds.
- The role of DL; 402 subjects and levels funded last year.
- Project themes: training prisoners to be peer mentors supporting other learners.
- ‘Learning Matters’: making the case for offender learning with policy makers and building a constituency of interest and support.

1. Voice

- User involvement: key priority in improving public service outcomes.
- User voice in prisons now emerging despite inherent difficulties; prisoner councils, adviser and volunteer roles.
- Prisoner learner voice has potential to make learning more effective.

Brain Cells finding: the impact of learning

How respondents found the learning experience	Responses	%
I got a qualification/accreditation/certificate	297	75%
It boosted my self-esteem	211	53%
It has improved my job prospects	174	44%
It has given me an appetite for learning	160	41%
It changed the way I see myself and my future	160	41%
I got a kick out of getting good marks/results	137	35%
It has been helpful in applying for recategorisation/parole	54	14%
Other	20	5%

Brain Cells finding:learning after release

50% want to continue learning as well as working.

30% want to continue academic study.

16% aiming at university.

59% said they had acquired skills in prison that would help employment.

OU graduate insider

‘Equality and discrimination policies are easily surpassed by using references to ‘mental health’ problems, the claim that 66% of prisoners have one or more personality disorders. Does this in any way hinder their ability to learn? Prior to conviction, this group were never referred to as the ‘x% of the population who cannot do this or that..’

Challenges

- Engage prisoners in design and delivery of education inside.
- Enable personalised learning…using distance and e-learning.
- Ensure a range of peer support roles are in place, with accredited training.

2. Potential

- Paradox of prison education: takes place in a context 'inherently hostile to its liberating potential' (UN Rapporteur) yet can achieve a great deal.
- Prisoners' openness to learning whilst inside: evidence from PET applicants.

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education of Persons in Detention: A/HRC/11/8

I left school at 16 without any qualifications. To be honest, I did not think I was intelligent enough to further my education. Then I came to prison and started doing education just to pass the time. But surprisingly I started to enjoy it and found I could do a lot more than I thought I could. The Education Department has opened my eyes to a whole new future…I didn’t realise until now that there were so many opportunities open to me..

Themes from prisoners' letters

- Desire for change; for escape routes from poor prospects
- Desire for social inclusion and useful citizenship; employment, volunteering, helping others avoid drugs and crime.
- The specificity and diversity of learning needs.
- The transformative power of OU study.
- The value of self-chosen goals.

Potential for prisoners: learning and desistance

- Key elements in desistance: a hook or trigger, someone who believes in you, experience of agency, thinking differently about yourself leading to a new identity, generative activity.
- Learning can offer these; user involvement in learning, and distance learning, can enhance its potential within rehabilitation.

Desistance research:Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, Fergus McNeill

Prisoners and lifelong learning

- Learning is not just about employability or just for custody – society needs lifelong learners.
- Alongside the crucial OLASS agenda, we need a bigger idea of learning, which includes informal learning, arts activities, HE, voluntary projects.
- Learning that builds human and social capital and strengthens identity and capability.

Potential for society

Bynner's IFLL Public Value paper;

1% rise in the proportion of the population with L2 qualifications cf no qualifications would cut costs of crime annually by £320 million.

1% rise in L3 qualifications would cut costs by £500 million.

Matrix research; investment in education could cut the cost of re-offending by 25%.

Lifelong Learning and Crime: a Life-Course Perspective: John Bynner, Institute of Education: IFLL Public Value Paper 4

- ‘The advantage that prison education has, is that with its controlled learning environment, opportunities are available for intensive exposure to learning, to rectify past failures in a way that is unlikely to be repeated elsewhere.’

Bynner: IFLL Public Value paper 4

- ‘My life before prison was one fraught with tragedy and anger. From the age of 16 my whole life revolved around crime. I am now 25 years old and I have decided I no longer want to live a life of crime. I understand that I need to change my life around and I have chosen education as the way forward. My hunger for education has never been greater. This course will help me on my journey towards realising my dream of helping the misguided youth of today..’ *OU applicant*

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Conference on Prisoners and Lifelong Learning, with Dr Tom Schuller, Director of the IFLL and author of 'Crime and lifelong learning'

27th May 2010, Institute of Education