



RSA
Prison Learning Network

The Learning Prison
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The RSA

The RSA has been a source of ideas, innovation and civic enterprise for over 250 years. In the light of new challenges and opportunities for the human race our purpose is to encourage the development of a principled, prosperous society and the release of human potential. Underpinning our work are enduring beliefs in human progress, reasoned enquiry, environmental sustainability, and ethical commitment, combined now with a dedication to public participation and social inclusion.

Drawing together different disciplines and perspectives, we bring new ideas and urgent and provocative debates to a mass audience. Our way of working consists of providing a platform for critical debate, new thinking and practice: working with partners to translate knowledge and progressive thinking into practical change.

We work with partners to generate progress in our chosen project areas, and through our Fellowship of 27,000 people we are seen as a source of capacity, commitment and innovation in communities from the global to the local.

RSA and public services

The Prison Learning Network speaks to the RSA's history of work on education; from our campaign for equal education for girls in the late 1800s, to our current Whole Education Campaign a coalition of practitioners, parents and educationalists, providing a space for sharing innovation and debate about schooling in the 21st century.

For over a decade the RSA has been developing the Opening Minds curriculum to focus on children's need to learn practical life skills alongside gaining knowledge. The RSA Academy in Tipton, West Midlands, is the first school to be designed around Opening Minds and we are now using our experience to pilot area-based learning in Manchester.

The Prison Learning Network forms part of our wider work on public services. Our Connected Communities programme is developing new methods of social regeneration based on a better understanding of the role of social networks, while our drugs project is involving users in service innovation and design. The RSA hosts the Public Services Trust, which is undertaking a major commission on the future of public services.

These initiatives are focused on the need to engage practitioners, end-users and the public in innovation, delivery and debate. They place the issue of civic empowerment centre stage in thinking about how we meet our need for good public services in the context of fiscal pressures and rising public expectations. We have tried to bring this emphasis to the Prison Learning Network, which has been driven by and aimed at practitioners who have to deliver in exacting circumstances.

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Organic restaurant

In spring 2009 a new restaurant opened. Its customers can expect dishes like paupiette of chicken with spinach mousseline and lavender mascarpone with spun sugar. Organic ingredients are supplied from the restaurant garden. Many new businesses are currently facing tough times. This venture has additional challenges: diners have to hand over their valuables, undergo a body search and pass through several reinforced steel doors before being seated. Unlike other restaurants, this one is inside a prison and will be staffed by prisoners – who will continue to eat standard fare – serving up food to staff and invited members of the public. It offers prisoners a chance to gain catering qualifications, work experience within an exciting and operational business, and guidance to a full-time job upon release. The venture aims to encourage employers to be more open to offering jobs to ex-offenders.

Radio Station

Broadcasting since 2007 in a prison that had a high level of self-harm and suicide, this radio station recently won a prestigious national broadcasting award, even though its audience is limited to 800 prisoners. All programmes are pre-recorded and edited by civilians who run the station. Shows cover religion, poetry and music but are punctuated with information and public service announcements rather than with advertisements. In the evening the station broadcasts interviews between prisoners and there is a regular slot where the governor responds to questions. The aim of the station is to improve communication and build skills in broadcasting and in information and communication technology (ICT) among prisoners. Volunteers undertake full-time production courses, learn how to use editing software and the broadcast deck. They are taught to work as if they were in a normal job.

The projects included here are not in Norway, or the Netherlands, nations that have reputations for welfare-led approaches to criminal justice. They are in the UK. The Clink restaurant at HMP High Down in Surrey opened in May 2009 and Electric Radio at Brixton Prison, won a Sony Award in spring 2009. These initiatives are well known within the criminal justice world. However, there are hundreds of less visible examples involving governors and staff, often working with small external organisations engaging with offenders. The RSA Prison Learning Network was set up to provide space for sharing more of these examples and for championing innovation taking place behind locked doors within a prison system under intense pressure.

Prison policy is complex and controversial. We spent some time thinking about how to balance depth and focus in this context and chose six central themes, addressed by working groups and papers that were central to our purpose¹:

¹ Authors of the working group papers: Isabella Boyce, Emma Disley, Lisa Englebright, Mike Hough, Gillian Hunter, Patsy Quinn, Jennifer Rubin, Anton Shelupanov and Craig Watt.

1. Learning inside: from capabilities to qualifications
2. Online inside? Offender learning and the role of technology
3. Peer-to-peer work, mentoring and user engagement
4. Through the gate: the first six months after release
5. Breaking down the barriers: the challenge of post release employment
6. Structure, culture and management

We restricted ourselves largely to in-custody and through-the-gate provision (not alternatives to custody). Our objective was to look at practice across the estate and not to restrict ourselves to one section of the prison population. We recognise that sentence length (Table 1) can shape interventions and that there are particular issues facing groups of individuals and prisons that we have only touched on.

In recent years there has been significant progress in the area of offender learning and skills, including an increased emphasis on employment and technology use. There have been significant changes aimed at building a more consistent approach to young offenders, including the creation of the Joint Youth Justice Unit in 2007. The aim of the Network was not to undermine these important steps; our objective was to explore ways in which this quiet evolution could be celebrated and built upon in the context of prison overcrowding.

Table 1. Numbers serving different lengths of sentence

Sentence length	March 2008	March 2009
Remand	13,073	12,987
Under 6 months	5,706	5,243
6 months to 12 months	2,698	2,491
12 months to 4 years	23,260	23,922
Over 4 years	23,561	24,279
Indeterminate	10,911	12,228

Source: 'Population in Custody', March 2009, MOJ Statistical Bulletin, 30 April 2009

The Learning Prison aims to reflect the views and experiences of the people involved including the discussions we held with prisoners. The RSA would like to thank all those involved including the Bowland Trust, who helped fund the project and our Fellows without whom none of our work would take place.

The Policy Context

Prisons provide a critical public service. Keeping the public safe, and running a humane regime, are the primary duties of the criminal justice system². This is an onerous challenge: in January 2010 there were 82,761 people being held in prisons in with around a further 9,000 in Scottish and Northern Irish prisons³.

One of the prison service's critical roles is in enabling prisoners to engage in adult education. The Government has recognised this work as fundamental to achieving its ambition to reduce the rate of reoffending by 10 per cent by 2010. Many recent changes to NOMs reflect that commitment. A significant step was taken in 2001 with the transfer of responsibility for prison education in England from the Home Office to what was then the Department for Education and Skills.

The LSC (Learning and Skills Council) awards contracts to providers, mainly established further education colleges and private companies as well as the probation service. OLASS (the Offender Learning and Skills Service) provides the mechanism for delivery through a partnership between what is now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which sets the overall policy framework and holds the budget, and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), under the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), which leads on policy to reduce reoffending, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Progress

As from Autumn 2009 OLASS contracts stipulate that while all LSC-funded provision is expected to be purposeful and outcome driven, 80 per cent must relate to skills appropriate to offenders. This includes literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, English Spoken as Other Language (ESOL) and vocational qualifications. The remaining 20 per cent would be given over to developmental learning. To inform new contracts, OLASS undertook regional reviews with the aim of increasing local relevance and further reducing reoffending.

The Government has recognised the need for an efficient way of managing information on learners in the prison context. The creation of MIAP (Managing Information Across Partners) is expected to streamline information on learning and achievement for education and training organisations. It is too early to assess the impact of new contracts or MIAP. However, the more strategic approach to rehabilitation, resettlement and learning seems to have had positive impacts. OLASS figures show engagement levels up from 36 per cent in 2006/7, to 42 per cent in 2008/09; in the academic year 2007/8 providers worked with 115,807 people⁴. The frequency of adult reoffending fell by over a fifth between 2000 and 2007.

Lord Carter's 2003 review of prisons concluded that the increased use of imprisonment since 1997 had reduced crime by around 5 per cent during a period when crime fell by 30 per cent. Carter concluded: 'Given the current level of the prison population there is no convincing evidence that further increases in the use

- 2 There are currently 12 private prisons in England and Wales managed by private companies G4S, Kalyx and Serco. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons inspects all prisons. Ofsted inspects the adequacy of learning and skills provision in prisons.
- 3 HM Prison Service, *Prison Population and Accommodation Briefing*, 15 January 2010; Scottish Prison Service (SPS), *Prison Population at 15 January 2010*; Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), *Prison Population at 18 January 2010*. Unless otherwise stated in this report, prison population figures are based on England and Wales.
- 4 Provided by LSC. See also Learning and Skills Council, *Making Skills Matter: LSC Annual Report and Accounts 2008–2009, 2009*

of custody would significantly reduce crime⁵. With prisons full and evidence that custody can increase the frequency and severity of offending, rehabilitation within custody and resettlement have a central role to play in reducing crime.

Overcrowding

In January 2010, there were 86,290 places in 139 prisons in England and Wales⁶. The number of people being held at any one time rose by more than 20,000 between 1997 and 2009.

Overcrowding is a massive challenge. On the surface there is broad consensus on the need to reduce overcrowding and enhance work that delivers rehabilitation. In addition to the changes outlined here, the Government's aim is to provide an additional 1,500 places and to bring the total estate capacity to 96,000 by 2014⁷. Since 2008 it has operated an early release programme.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to rolling out restorative justice programmes nationally, would introduce community justice panels and have called for a more evidence-based approach to prison policy. They support the use of more rigorous non-custodial punishments to replace short sentences. The Scottish National Party has announced that it will replace these with community service⁸.

The Conservative Party has said it would tackle overcrowding through faster deportation of foreign nationals and building an additional 5,000 places by 2012 (over and above what is proposed). The party aims to reduce the two-year reoffending rate by 20 per cent within five years⁹. It has set out its plans for reform based on 'the most fundamental shake-up of prisons for two centuries'. Promising a 'rehabilitation revolution' should it win the general election, the party has proposed regional Prison and Rehabilitation Trusts, which would be paid by results¹⁰. This sits uneasily with the expected announcement that it is to reintroduce prison ships (to meet the need for places which would arise from scrapping the early release programme).

This typifies the dilemmas politicians face, where short-term political realities stand in the way of long-term sustainable solutions. We argue for political courage in the face of these tensions and leadership in forging a clear public narrative around the role of prisons that is realistic about risk, puts learning and rehabilitation at its heart and engages front line practitioners.

- 5 P Carter, *Managing Offenders, Reducing Crime: a new approach*, Strategy Unit, 2003
- 6 HM Prison Service, *Prison Population and Accommodation Briefing*, 15 January 2010
- 7 Ministry of Justice, 'Jack Straw sets out prisons and probation plans', news release, 27 April 2009: www.justice.gov.uk/news/newsrelease270409b.htm
- 8 A similar approach has been advocated for England by the Howard League in *The Commission on English Prisons*, Final Report, 2009
- 9 The Conservative Party, *Prisons With a Purpose*, Security Agenda, Policy Green Paper No. 4, October 2009.
- 10 *ibid*

Principles for Reform

The Learning Prison argues that many of the significant advances that have been made have been done so “by stealth” without corresponding public discourse or recognition. We argue for a more positive and powerful vision of prisons and suggest that this needs to be framed around key principles for reform.


Leadership is needed among policymakers and practitioners in building a public conversation *about prisons as a core public service* that serves us all, not just the victims and perpetrators of crime.

We believe that rehabilitation is too difficult and too important to leave prisons always ‘behind the curve’. *A brave strategy on modernisation* should ensure that the prison service is able to utilise the new tools and thinking we have at our disposal to best effect. Most notably, we argue that there are huge gains to be had in developing a technology strategy that better balances risk and benefits.

We argue for greater *user engagement*: we do not underestimate the difficulties such an agenda presents in relation to prisons. We believe that effective and appropriate engagement of users in the delivery and design of prison services will deliver greater efficiency and complement rehabilitation programmes aimed at building skills and increasing personal responsibility.

Fair, transparent and effective public services are most likely to emerge through a process of *wider community participation*, not just through reasoned debate, but also by forging local partnerships with employers and others, and by enabling direct public involvement wherever possible.

There are some who argue that the principles that really matter are prevention, compassion and understanding: that as well as concern for victims, changing public attitudes to prison requires us to emphasise the causes of crime, the hardships that people have suffered before, after and in prison. We disagree about the emphasis but not the substance of this and stress the need for greater engagement with the public on the realities of what works to keep them safer by reducing recidivism. Without measures to *dramatically strengthen the evidence base* on what works to reduce reoffending and closely associated risks, overcrowding, security and sentencing will continue to dominate mainstream discussion.



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A New “Common Sense”

Debate about prison policy gets rapidly polarized around numbers, safety and conditions. This puts governments on the defensive, the reform lobby on the attack and practitioners without a powerful voice: a dysfunctional public conversation often brokered by a media that combines righteous indignation with lack of interest in the detail. Esmée Fairbairn Foundation’s work on rethinking criminal justice concluded that ‘there is something of a “comedy of errors” in which policy and practice is not based on a proper understanding of public opinion, and public opinion is not based on a proper understanding of policy and practice.’ However, the public may be more rational than we assume, particularly when faced with evidence they trust¹¹.

People’s views on treatment of offenders seem to soften with access to reliable and objective information: we support harsh punishment for serious offences but are in favour of rehabilitation; we are capable of proportionality and support *effective* prevention and believe that drug users and those with mental health problems should receive treatment, not punishment.

Around half of those surveyed for Esmée Fairbairn thought that people leave prison ‘worse’ than when they go in and only a tenth believe that having more offenders in prison would do most to reduce crime. When asked where they would invest £10 million to reduce crime, only 2 per cent chose to spend it on prison places and building prisons was the least popular choice for tackling overcrowding: preferred options included tougher community alternatives. However, additional investment to increase prison places tends not be resisted by the public¹².

Evidence

The Government has commissioned *Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction*, a longitudinal study that is already providing useful information¹³. There is important work being done at the University of Cambridge’s Prison Research Centre and progress has been made in assessing the cost effectiveness of different kinds of interventions¹⁴. All this provides some evidence on what types of approaches are likely to work best and a strong base on which to develop new ways of evaluating the myriad projects in existence. However, we cannot compare return on investment for each programme or practice; this is a serious problem in the context of a controversial public service involving a wide range and scale of players.

The Government draws on work by the American academic Lawrence Sherman that set out to compare crime reduction interventions in the US. Commissioned by Congress in 1996 to assess the impact of the \$4 billion invested in crime reduction programmes on actual reductions of offences it concluded¹⁵: ‘Lawmakers and policymakers are shirking their responsibility to the taxpaying public by not giving funding priority to those programmes with evidence of effectiveness in preventing crime.’ We argue that the UK Government faces a similar problem and suggest it takes a similar approach to that set out by Sherman:

11 Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, *Rethinking Crime and Punishment*, 2004.

12 *Ibid.*

13 D Stewart, *The Problems and Needs of Newly Sentenced Prisoners*, MOJ, 2008

14 L Sherman L and H Strang, *Restorative Justice: the evidence*, The Smith Institute, 2007; Matrix Knowledge Group, *The economic case for and against prison*, 2007

15 DP Farrington, D Layton MacKenzie, LW Sherman and BC Welsh (eds) *Evidence Based Crime Prevention*, Routledge, 2002

- * Using the internationally recognised Scientific Methods Scale that aims to rate quality of evidence. The scale has five levels (5 being the highest) determined by qualities such as sample size, control samples, randomisation and so on.
- * The US research recommended that government require all funded programmes to evaluate work to at least level 3 and that 10 per cent of the criminal justice bill be allocated to scientific evaluation of this kind and that a further 10 per cent given to programmes be allocated to scientific evaluation.

We argue for a similar approach. Government would need to choose between providing additional funding for good quality evaluation or maintaining this money for delivery but without, we believe, the information it needs to know whether it is getting value for money.

Centre for Rehabilitation and Crime Reduction

Despite the plethora of organisations working in this field we conclude that there remains an institutional gap and that transforming the evidence base requires what Geoff Mulgan has called a “NICE approach” to offender interventions¹⁶. Creating a body along the lines of NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) to evaluate and endorse interventions and innovations based on solid evidence on outcomes would add an important objective presence and take political heat out of the prisons debate. Such an institution would need to:

- * Use success criteria based on the number of crimes prevented and specific reduction of risks to reoffending but ensure that methods are flexible enough to recognise value added, innovation and user engagement.
- * Adopt a sufficiently high level of evaluation: we suggest that following Sherman’s model of Scientific Methods Scale level 3 has the advantage of being internationally recognised and enabling comparisons with models abroad.
- * Develop a common metric of cost and crimes prevented and establish ways of aggregating evidence locally, regionally and nationally.
- * Establish a high profile reputation based on objectively trusted and rigorous research, not advocacy on behalf of prisoners or victims of crime.

We believe that the absence of evidence and public awareness of what really works to rehabilitate people – and the lack of visibility of practitioners in this policy space – is a first order issue. Short-term answers to human beings’ immediate fears tend to trump long-term solutions and so without consistent, trusted evidence on what will make us safer in the long-term, the common-sense but myopic truth of ‘when they do time, they can’t commit crime’ wins out. Forging a new commonsense on prisons will take time and effort but will enable the kinds of innovation already taking place within the prison system to be replicated and celebrated with confidence.

¹⁶ *Escape from the Titanic: Why Britain’s criminal justice needs systematic innovation and how innovation can help secure a justice dividend for local communities*, position paper, the Young Foundation, 2008.

A Brave Strategy for Modernisation

In its efforts to transform public services, the Government has set out three areas for priority: ensuring that services enabled by ICT are designed around the citizen not the provider; the development of a shared services culture which releases efficiencies by standardisation, simplification and sharing; and the involvement of the public including service users in policy development. The Conservative Party has set out four central concepts for reform should it win the general election: public services will get smaller, be more localised, more market orientated and co-produced by users and communities.

There are clear common themes for reform driven in part by rising public expectations, particularly in relation to health and education. In the absence of this outside pressure from citizens, it is tempting for prison policy to be less ambitious. We argue that in order to meet public needs, for safety and for value for money, we must raise our expectations of what prisons (with staff and prisoners) can achieve.

Aspiration

Motivation matters both ways: the expectations of teachers are shown to have an impact on learners' aspirations and educational outcomes¹⁷. Setting the bar too low can reduce the aspiration of pupils whether in schools or further or higher education: there is no reason to suggest that this should be any different in prison.

The RSA ran three consultations with groups of prisoners: male adults, female adults and young offenders. All raised the need to train officers so that they are able to play a larger role in learning provision. When asked what single thing they would change in relation to education and skills work in custody, many wanted courses to go beyond NVQ level 2. We suggest a target of level 3 in line the *Leitch Review of Skills* and the Government's target for most of those having 'intermediate' skills to be qualified at level 3 rather than level 2 by 2020¹⁸.

An equal offer to staff and prisoners should reduce resentment among prison officers and increase prison capacity to deliver wing-based learning. Since September 2007 new prison officers must undertake an NVQ level 3 in Custodial Care¹⁹. It has been suggested that in the short term a minimum of level 2 literacy, numeracy and ICT qualifications should be embedded within this. We suggest a more ambitious target of level 3 where possible.

Although qualifications are important indicators of individual and institutional progress, they are not always sufficient to show a change in behaviour or a prisoner's employability. Capturing progress (individually and across each prison) should be possible with more structured use of systems like RARPA (Recognition and Recording Progress and Achievement), which can provide clear indicators of changes to prisoners' soft skill base²⁰.

We argue that in order to meet public needs, for safety and for value for money, we must raise our expectations of what prisons (with staff and prisoners) can achieve.

- 17 C Rubie-Davies, J Hattie and R Hamilton, 'Expecting the best for students: Teacher expectations and academic outcome', *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76.3, September 2006
- 18 HM Government, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*, DIUS, 2007
- 19 M Bolger and J Bennett, 'Training and Developing Prison Staff' in J Bennett, B Crewe and A Wahidin (eds) *Understanding Prison Staff*, Willan Publishing, 2008
- 20 RARPA seeks to measure softer outcomes and non-accredited learning without lowering aspiration and has become increasingly important in relation to post-16 learning and skills.

The Role of Technology

The pervasiveness of technologies means that competence in their use needs to be counted as an essential life skill. Some 90 per cent of new jobs require ICT skills and many are advertised solely online²¹. The rapid development of technologies means we cannot predict what future jobs will look like or the skills gaps that may open up. Better digital inclusion goes beyond improving individual short-term outcomes (having a home computer can lead to a two grade difference in one subject at GCSE, for example)²². For us all to gain from the wider social benefits of increasing access and digital capabilities, government strategy is right to focus on the most excluded. This must include prisoners if they are to secure jobs on release.

The Prison Context

While significant proportions of the prison estate are still housed in Victorian buildings there are pockets of cutting edge design and technology. Due to a combination of innovative practice on the part of some governors and prison staff, backed by major investment (£11m) from the LSC in 2008, technology is being used more widely and a body of good practice is emerging across the prison estate²³.

Prison is exactly the kind of environment where technologies can make a big difference and where innovation should be encouraged. This is particularly true in the context of overcrowding as prisoners spend more time in their cells and moving around the system. The Network heard from projects that showed technology's potential to:

- * prepare prisoners for work and life in the community, enabling distance and in-cell learning while being cost-effective and suited to a population where special needs are prevalent;
- * open up the opportunity for the public to become more involved in prisons and enable inmates to keep in contact with their families, which seems to play an important role in reducing the chances of reoffending on release;
- * assist in creating valuable 'bridging' social capital for prisoners to draw on upon release, increase their potential for developing correctional support networks rather than returning to older criminal ones.

There is a willingness on the part of practitioners, technology companies and prison providers to take a more ambitious approach. Providing prisoners with access to cutting edge technologies is controversial because of security concerns and perceptions of 'luxury' conditions. We do not underplay these factors or the progress of recent years. However, much innovation remains 'below the radar', preventing learning across the system.

Ahead of the Curve

We recommend a bolder "ahead of the curve" strategy for technologies in prisons running up to digital switchover in 2012 (a deadline which has already driven public debate on digital exclusion). Four drivers should underpin such an approach:

21 Communities and Local Government, *Delivering Digital Inclusion. An Action plan for consultation*, HM Government, October 2008

22 Chowdry et al. *Drivers and Barriers to Educational Success - Evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England*, Institute of Fiscal Studies 2009.

23 E-learning and technology-enhanced learning includes a variety of techniques and tools: digital cameras, voice recorders, interactive whiteboards, cordless keyboards, voting systems, closed online learning platforms and courses.

- * *The 'double digital exclusion' of prisoners:* on entry to prison, offenders are much more likely to be digitally excluded than the average population. Incarceration restricts them from a wide range of learning and they enter a system that lags behind other public services in relation to technology.
- * *The speed of technological change:* without continued innovation and investment ongoing advances in technology could make recent progress made in prisons obsolete. The risk is that prisons will continue to play 'catch up' at best and, at worse, fall further behind.
- * *In need for innovation and investment:* unless current and future advances are advocated for by government, it will prove much harder to persuade those developing products and to continue to innovate and invest.
- * *Public assurance:* as technology use and tools change, the challenge will be to ensure consistent and appropriate restrictions are in place alongside clarity on actual risks.

The multiple benefits (including public safety) of enhancing technology use in relation prison learning justifies the aim of ensuring that it is bought up to and go beyond that which is available in mainstream learning. Such a strategy should include:

- * The engagement of the public and the participation of the best technology companies and employers. Costs could be reduced by inviting the latter to test products and build sophisticated ICT skills where possible and appropriate.
- * An overarching e-learning framework for offender learning and skills incorporating all delivery settings. This should include all learning provision owned and sponsored by the MOJ, NOMS, BIS, private sector prisons and the LSC and should be charged with outlining the benefits, both of participation in learning and skills and the role of technology in enhancing those opportunities.
- * The development of standard security protocols for equipment use across the estate alongside a requirement for prisoners to have access to up-to-date and industry-standard ICT equipment and software applications.

Such an approach would provide an opportunity to ensure that the new prison estate is designed around the potential that technology brings: by adopting a 'Building Prisons for the Future' programme along similar lines to the existing 'Building Schools for the Future'²⁴. It is, for example, technically possible for prisons to adopt wireless technology now and for this to be secure. Doing so now would send a powerful message about the importance of technology to rehabilitative services, would leapfrog some of the infrastructure challenges prisons present and help to "future proof" the new estate. This is very difficult political territory. Failure to take a braver approach risks seeing the gap between prisoners' employability and skills and those of general population become even wider.

24 For information on Building Schools for the Future see www.number10.gov.uk/ Page5801

Personalisation

In mainstream education, a more holistic approach to teaching has been adopted, where focus has been placed on individuals with particular needs, disabilities or difficulties and those who might be ‘harder to reach’.

The more focus given to improving the education and employment outcomes of prisoners, the more prison staff as well as providers will need to embrace this personalisation agenda, which places user voice and choice at its heart. This presents challenges in the prison context. Even at a basic level, personalised learning is understood to include tailoring interventions to the needs and choices of the individual and removing barriers that prevent people achieving their full potential²⁵. As well as the obstacles presented by their immediate environment, many prisoners will have primary needs that need to be addressed for learning to take place. Many will be more likely to learn if education is presented by a ‘side-wind’, as a prerequisite to doing something that appears more conducive.

Skills for Personalisation

Governors and prison officers are critical in shaping access to learning and the emphasis it is given in each institution. Officers are the largest staff group and have the most contact with prisoners; there are concerns within the prison system that there are too few to ensure the safety of prisoners and the security of institutions, let alone further engage in rehabilitation or learning provision.

Research suggests that there is an untapped interest in learning from prison officers²⁶. A study on enhancing officers’ role in learning provision published in 2006 showed that prison officers saw their role as enforcer, carer and reformer and expressed an interest in being enabled to put more emphasis on the latter roles²⁷. Wing-based learning strategies are one way in which key players, including external teachers and voluntary sector providers and officers, can work together as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

There is a plethora of training programmes and materials that have been developed in relation to schools to draw on. These tend to emphasise negotiation and reflective thinking, the ability to empathise and engage with pupils in ambitious goals while taking a flexible approach, recognising barriers and being able to work collaboratively with others to overcome these.

Personalisation in prisons has deeper implications for the types of skills needed amongst officers and providers. The current workforce reform agenda has yet to address many of the skills that will be needed to match the emphasis on user engagement and collaboration. We propose that key skills – in particular those pertinent to personalisation and ICT – be addressed wherever possible through current workforce reviews.

25 Department for Children, Schools and Families, ‘Personalised learning’: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning and *Every Child Matters*: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/personalisedlearning

26 T Irwin and DA Wilson, *The ‘Good Relations’ Agenda and the Changing Context of the Prison Officer in Northern Ireland: The Development of a Pilot Project*, Paper presented at the fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, 15 September 2008, University of London

27 See also J Braggins and J Talbot, *Wings of Learning: The role of the prison officer in supporting prisoner education*, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation/The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2006

Engaging Service Users

The prison service will always need to place issues of security and safety centre stage, but the aspiration should be to break down the distinction between external learning providers and prison staff. We argue it should also aspire to increase the participation of prisoners and ex-offenders in developing services that are most likely to increase their ability to learn and reduce their likelihood of re-offending.

There is broad political consensus that better public services require deeper engagement with their users. This is based on a belief that achieving high-quality, responsive public services requires empowering service users as much as addressing their needs. Greater user involvement implies a rebalancing of the relationship between practitioners and clients. Not surprisingly, this agenda has not been fully embraced in the prison system and we have already touched on some of the tensions that arise through the personalisation agenda.

A recent survey of governors found that prisoner inclusion was rated behind security and staff competency as the third most important attribute necessary for the successful running of a prison. When asked how the prison service currently delivers this, inclusion was rated last; those at the sharp end of managing the service think prisoner inclusion is crucial, yet it is largely absent in delivery priorities²⁸. We suggest three areas where there could be gains to be had in enhancing user participation: peer-to-peer schemes, prison councils and through the gate support.

Peer to peer

Peer-to-peer mentoring programmes in which offenders or ex-offenders work with those in prison or attempting to resettle, are popular with policymakers and practitioners, can be cost-effective and speak to our intuitive sense of reciprocity and altruism. In 2004 a survey of 139 prisons found that peer mentoring schemes, such as Toe by Toe, which recruits volunteer literate prisoners to teach other prisoners to read, were being used over 80 per cent of prisons²⁹.

We believe that mentoring (peer and otherwise) has significant potential and should be further integrated across the prison regime. There remains a lack of evidence on the impact of mentoring on those involved and in particular on its role in reducing reoffending. Research aimed at determining what components are linked to reductions in reoffending did find some positive correlations, although most schemes compared were not in the UK³⁰. We conclude there is a pressing need to build the evidential case in order to underpin expansion of peer schemes that utilise technology, involve the community and serve to change public perception of the role of offenders and former prisoners in enabling others to change their lives.

Prison councils

Prison councils are broadly defined as 'any structure that exists for consulting prisoners on a wide range of issues'³¹. A 2004 review concluded that councils were effective in encouraging prisoners to take more responsibility and contribute to their own rehabilitation. Governors welcomed them as a way of

28 User Voice, forthcoming 2010

29 The survey was undertaken by the former Forum of Prison Education and is cited in the Education and Skills Select Committee' seventh report on prison education: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmeduski/114/114ii.pdf>

30 Jolliffe and Farrington *op cit*.

31 E Soloman and K Edgar, *Having Their Say: The work of prison councils*, Prison Reform Trust, 2004

sharing proposed changes, and giving prisoners a chance to respond. Councils benefited staff/prisoner relationships by breaking down barriers and led to greater understanding between prisoners and staff³².

The existence of prison councils in most institutions (even where these are not working to best effect), provides a starting point for assessing and expanding user engagement in prisons. We recommend a national review commissioned by the LSC. To give this a focus we suggest this explores prisoners' involvement in designing and delivering learning, skills and work programmes with a particular emphasis on peer-to-peer approaches. This should draw on the work being undertaken by User Voice in developing a model of good practice in relation to prison councils³³.



The existence of prison councils in most institutions, provides a starting point for assessing and expanding user engagement in prisons.

Prisons are not schools. However, if they are to become centres of learning some of the changes and debates that are exercising head teachers and school governors need to seep through prison walls. This has meant recognition that as well as delivering qualifications, schools play a key role in socialising young people, building their capacity to deal with life in the future, in encouraging pro-social behaviour and active citizenship. If we want prisoners to become 'good citizens', there is a strong argument that the more they can take responsibility and engage in decision-making – within the constraints of prison – the better.

The Government has recognised the need for personalisation in relation to prison learning and resettlement; this is reflected in the 'reducing reoffending pathways' used by NOMs³⁴. However, we believe that much has been done without addressing the specific prison context. A strategy developed with staff participation in mind, that is honest about the limitations of user engagement and is clear with staff and inmates about the merits of increasing participation in delivery and design, could reap real benefits in motivating learning and delivering better outcomes.

Service through the gate

Supporting offenders through the prison gate is widely acknowledged as good practice and can be a cost-effective way of reducing recidivism³⁵. The RSA is piloting user-centred drugs services, working with a range of agencies in one geographical area. The aim is to engage drug users in the design and delivery of services. While the pilot is in its early days, consideration could be given to looking at some of the more innovative user-centred initiatives like this one, which works with people with relatively serious and complex needs, to assess whether or not they work and could provide lessons for a more locally based, user-centred approach to prison resettlement.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*

34 gov.uk/managing-offenders/reducing_re-offending/reducing_re-offending_pathways/

35 J Roman and A Chalfin, *The Case For and Against Prison*, The Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007

Community participation

Unlike most other public services, for most people knowledge about prisons is unlikely to arise through direct contact. Just as immediate experience of hospitals increases understanding of how the NHS operates, direct and frequent contact with and knowledge of the prison system changes attitudes³⁶. The more people involved in direct work with offenders the better; but, given the closed nature of prison, wider engagement in the criminal justice system and the broader visibility of learning and other interventions really matters.

The Network consistently highlighted the need to strengthen local partnerships in the community to ensure through the gate provision was informed by local context. We argue that prisons should seek to engage the public on a broader scale and suggest two ways of doing so: employment strategies and in developing a stronger practitioner voice within civic debate.

Employment

Recent figures from the Office of National Statistics showed that the increase in unemployment in the third quarter of 2009 was the smallest since spring 2008. The number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance had fallen compared to the previous quarter and there has been a slight increase in the number of vacancies. In 2007/8, 16,500 ex-offenders – including those who had served community sentences – were placed in employment for four weeks or longer³⁷.

All of this is welcome news. However, this needs to be seen in context: unemployment remains high, approximately 80,000 offenders are released each year and around 190,000 are subject to supervision by the probation service at any one time. Over 50 per cent of people under the supervision of probation and of those leaving prison are unemployed and many will go on to experience long-term unemployment. For about half of vacancies, employers are likely to reject most people with a criminal record solely due to this factor rather than because of a lack of suitability for the job.

Second Chance employment campaign

We recommend the need to inject a sense of urgency into the employment needs of ex-offenders through a short-term 'Second Chance' campaign, a national and regional coalition focused on crime reduction through employment. This should include some focus on particular skills areas and options for ex-offenders (such as how we support enterprise and self-employment) with broader emphasis on our shared responsibility for securing the social benefits of crime reduction.

- * The Government, working with the Corporate Alliance, should consider developing and seed-funding a short-term employment strategy aimed at increasing the number of employers proactively engaging with prisons, probation and ex-offenders³⁸.
- * A 'Second Chance' campaign for ex-offenders should seek to put further pressure on public organisations to proactively open their recruitment to ex-offenders. It should engage those organisations involved in promoting the cause of ex-offenders but who do not themselves employ any ex-offenders.³⁹

36 Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, *Rethinking Crime and Punishment*, op.cit.

37 National Probation Service, *Community Sentencing – reducing reoffending, changing lives*, 2008: www.justice.gov.uk/publications/community-sentencing.htm

38 The Corporate Alliance brings together employers of all sizes from the public, private and voluntary sectors. This mix of business world skills has been successful in finding ways of increasing the numbers of offenders going into jobs and the Alliance has sought to communicate with other employers, outlining how they can get involved in skills, employment and employability programmes for offenders that will contribute to reducing reoffending.

39 M Johnson, *The User Voice of the Criminal Justice System*, Aldridge Foundation, 2008

- * Consideration should be given to developing a Second Chance Awards Accreditation Scheme that would assess, recognise and promote initiatives aimed at increasing offender employment. This provides a way of giving high local profile to best practice employers.

Local coalitions focused on invest-to-save approaches based on the cost of local crime and unemployment should be created. These should involve the Regional Development Agencies and the Corporate Alliance, working with individual clusters or prisons, bringing together Jobcentre Plus, the voluntary, public and private sector to agree a shared strategy for increasing ex-offender employment and volunteering opportunities.

Area-based learning

Much recent innovation in schools has been driven by the idea that in order to prepare young people adequately for their lives, they must take a greater account of the changing world around them, locally, nationally and globally. This argument is not just made within schools but by external groups, notably employers, who feel they have a particular stake in educational outcomes. The RSA's has been working in Manchester to develop an area-based curriculum based on the Opening Minds approach. The approach takes schools' role in their communities to another level and seeks to work in partnership with institutions and stakeholders outside the school to shape the curriculum. We recommend that a similar approach be piloted in relation to prison education and skills. External relationships should be fundamental to prisons: properly preparing inmates for release is not within the remit of any one institution, but is a shared effort, with responsibility distributed across institutions in a locality. A partnership with external organisations would see a new process of curriculum co-development between prison staff, potential students, former prisoners and external organisations.

Celebrating success

Such an approach would have the benefit of increasing broader engagement with prisons. It is often prison governors who are leading innovation in the prison system, being prepared to take brave decisions in the face of media disapproval. Yet governors are rarely seen trumpeting the work they do in public or engaged in debate about the role that others could play.

Nationally, figures on prison numbers and capacity are readily accessible. However, there is no such equivalent information available on how prisons are working to meet their objectives, or accessible information on progress. Compare this to schools, police and other public services that seek to engage the public – and in particular local communities – in their work and giving voice to the practitioners leading change. Giving greater priority to promotion comes with its risks but is a key component to fostering a more informed and positive discourse about prison services as a core public service.

The Learning Prison

The Prison Learning Network set out to provide a space for practitioners to examine the new approaches that are taking place in prison learning and skills. Our starting point was that there had been a quiet evolution in policy and practice that was drowned out by a louder agenda around crises within the prison system.

Some people thought we were naïve: that trying to be positive about prison education was a bit like doing health and safety training on the Titanic. Of course, the current level of overcrowding is undesirable and tackling this would probably be the single most effective way of improving rehabilitation. We wanted to find a way to celebrate good practice and to explore ways in which this could be enhanced *within this context*.

The hope was that our naivety combined with cross-sector expertise would foster objectivity and optimism in the face of overwhelming complexity and a service under pressure. We wished to play to the RSA's history of work in education and its contemporary exploration of how we can foster individual and community resilience. Have we stuck to our purpose? Yes and no. We have tried to focus on practice and the role of staff, providers and users in bringing about change. Where we have shifted from our remit is in the extent to which we now argue that pragmatism should be underpinned by ambition and vision.

The public debate about prisons can at times be unedifying. It takes on the characteristic of a domestic row between warring parents – the egalitarian father and the authoritarian mother – whose children have gone off the rails. As each blames the other for their offspring's transgressions, for being too harsh or too soft, the children either sneak out of the house or struggle to concentrate on their homework amidst the din.

We wanted to occupy the middle ground between those who oppose the use of prison other than for the minority of dangerous offenders and those who believe that taking away someone's liberty is not sufficient: prison conditions should in themselves be part of the punishment. Neither of these views reflects what the majority of the public seem to think. The egalitarian position at its purest believes that admitting that prisons should be the 'school of last resort' is a form of defeat; while the authoritarian believes only in punitive measures whether they 'work' or not. The danger is the triumph of fatalism.

These polemics too often get boiled down to whether or not we should have more or fewer prison places, rather than what kind of prisons we need. They are often driven by those working outside the system, mediated by a press that likes to stoke its readers into a state of fear and fury. Unlike schools policy or debates about health reform, we rarely get to hear from prison governors and staff.

At the heart of this debate are different conceptions of the prisoner. On the one hand we have a human being who is a victim of circumstance, whose crimes would have been prevented with early intervention and who has the potential for

change. On the other hand is the criminal who has transgressed society's rules and needs simply to be punished and contained. In the second version of events long sentences serve at best as an individual and social deterrent but at their most basic level reduce crime simply by removing people from society. There is truth on both sides: yes, prevention is better than crime and punishment. No, the prison population does not conveniently represent a cross section of society: it is largely made up of the most disadvantaged. Of course people cannot commit crimes in their community when locked away.

None of this would matter as much as it does if the relationship between prison policy and political capital were not so fragile. In this mix, public opinion really matters. Without improved access to what takes place inside prisons and evidence to show whether or not those schemes work to reduce crime, we are left 'off the hook', without the knowledge and confidence to support particular policy choices. In this context we will grab the short-term fix, not the longer-term solutions.

With prisons overcrowded and evidence that custody can increase the severity of offending, greater emphasis and political leadership is needed on the effective alternatives to custody and – for those in prison – on in-custody interventions that reduce reoffending. It is tempting for government to take a “just say nothing” approach. We argue there needs to be much more noise about prison learning based on strong evidence which allows practitioners to be confident about the specific link between interventions and crime reduction. This means being clear with the public that without significant changes to sentencing or to rehabilitation, there will continue to be an exponential demand for prison places. It means emphasising that public safety and value for money depends on knowing and doing what works, not debates about the relative harshness of interventions. It means engaging people in the realities of what needs to be done if prisoners are to secure work and maintain family contact, and the costs of not doing so.

We have set out a vision for what we call 'a learning prison', which we hope suggests a far broader and dynamic system, which can effectively prove, expand and share what works. We have taken the role of narrative seriously: the story we are able to tell about prisons matters and the language and tools we deploy will make a difference to the policy space we inherit. We have made some concrete suggestions about how some of these changes could take place and are aware that these are not costed and that public services are facing hard times. However, the public care deeply about crime and want our communities to be safer. Without a more balanced and informed public conversation about the role that prison plays in serving us in this respect, there can be no transformative shift in policy or in the politics of prison.

'At an important political moment, **The Learning Prison** argues for considerable political courage, leadership and inspiration to complement the willingness of practitioners to innovate and to secure greater public support.'

MALCOLM GRANT
President and Provost, UCL
Chair, RSA Prison Learning Network

Cover picture: supplied to the RSA via Pictora, an social enterprise created by a partnership of staff from Kalyx, Koestler Trust, Leaf Systems and Cementaprise. Pictora brings the therapeutic value of offender art together with the practical creativity of entrepreneurship and business enterprise skills in order to support offenders in prison and back into society. Pictora uses the money raised from sales of art by offenders for a range of work including Victim Support, The Koester Trust and training in prisons aimed at supporting social enterprise.

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