

RSA Projects

The Prison Learning Network

Summary

Improving offender learning and skills is critical to reducing re-offending, building a safer society and saving money. Government has recognised this as being fundamental to achieving its ambition to reduce re-offending by 10% by 2010, and for those working on the frontline it has long been one of the central principles of their efforts. Despite this there is virtually no mainstream debate (or recognition) of its achievements. Overcrowding and the severity of sentencing have dominated public discussion, while issues such as learning and skills and rehabilitation have fallen by the wayside.

This is not a niche or new issue; the potential impact for a safer, skilled and sustainable society through a greater development of offender learning and skills is vast. Demonstrably, LSC providers already engage with thousands of individuals who are either serving a sentence or on remand in prison (more than 84,000 were reached between August 2006 – July 2007). Yet this potential seems to be recognised only within the confines of this professional field.

We want to support and acknowledge the innovation, quality of work and leadership taking place within and around the prison, probation services and contracted providers (e.g. FE colleges) that play an essential role in the delivery of learning and rehabilitation. However, any strategy aiming to strengthen offender learning should not underestimate the need to tackle the real challenges facing the criminal justice system, and prisons in particular.

Few would disagree that the current levels of overcrowding, prisoner mobility and governor turnover are undesirable. Most would concur that these conditions can serve to undermine two of the key aims of custody: to rehabilitate and to reduce crime.

Delivery of offender learning and skills has already undergone major changes in the past years. The recognition by government of the importance of this agenda, the creation of OLASS (the offender learning and skills service) and scope for experimentation through the new test bed models are all signs of progress. While the prison service hosts the majority of learning and skills, the LSC has been responsible for its provision in all of England's publicly funded prisons since 2006.

The challenge is to find ways of supporting and enabling those on the front line to build on current work, spread good practice and scale up what works within the current context, while developing a compelling narrative, solid evidence and public support for this agenda.

To this end early this year, the RSA launched the Prison Learning Network led by a high level Advisory Board of senior prison, probation staff and education providers working with key experts drawn from academia and NGOs. The Network will be driven by and aimed at those on the front line - statutory, private sector and non-governmental organisations - having to deliver in exacting circumstances.

The project is ambitious. Its ultimate aim is to improve the quality and consistency of the learning and employment opportunities available to offenders with the objective of reducing crime and improving life within prisons. Working with key players within the criminal justice system and beyond, the Network will help shape practice, policy and public debate, while encouraging wider community engagement in the prison system.

The RSA, as an independent organisation, aims to build on the existing collaborative work of key stakeholders such as the prison service, probation service and LSC to bring about sustainable reform. These aims are realistic and will provide a pragmatic and manageable way for key players to:

- Build a coalition of interest and expertise for governors, Heads of Learning and Skills and chief probation officers to draw upon;
- Draw upon relevant experience and expertise from outside the prison and probation service;
- Share ideas, evidence of good practice (UK and international) in relation to provision of learning, skills and employment;
- Create new and build on existing national, regional and local networks in and outside the criminal justice system focused on partnerships and shared learning;
- Demonstrate and disseminate information about what works;
- Prove a positive example of wider community engagement and
- Influence policy makers and mobilise public support.

Our ambitions for the reform of the offender learning and skills service are shared with the LSC/OLSU (from August 2009), and are articulated in the LSC's Prospectus – a consultation document published in September 2007.

Activities

1. Advisory Board: the majority will be serving or former governors, Heads of Learning and Skills or chief probation officers. The board will also include experts drawn from academia, NGOs and educationalists. The RSA will take an active part in the board and act as secretariat.

2. Network Groups and Papers will be commissioned, and in some cases written by, the members of 6 themed working groups (see below). Each network group will aim to involve and ideally be led by at least one or two senior people from within the prison and probation services. Final themes will be decided in discussion with the Advisory Board. Additional papers may need to be commissioned on specific areas.

Offenders

From capabilities to qualifications

- building 'soft skills' and basic capabilities
- motivating prison learners
- engaging hard to reach offenders

Ex-prisoners as providers

- the role of peer to peer learning, relay mentoring and "co-production"

Prisons

The Role of Technology

- open learning in a closed environment
- tracking prisoner movements, transfer of records and continuity of learning
- take up of learning opportunities

Structure, culture and management

- the status and motivation of educators
- incentives for innovation and leadership on learning
- the role of local partnership
- overcoming staff and governor churn

Community

The first 6 months after release

- continuity of learning and progression to employment
- offender led social enterprise

Breaking down barriers

- engaging employers
- community links
- changing public attitudes

(Our concentration will be on adult offender learning and skills due to differences in policy and delivery structures for different age groups. However, we will draw on expertise from the different estates and look at common challenges and approaches.)

3. A Stakeholder group will draw together a wider range of people with experience or expertise of the criminal justice system, education provision and training, technological innovation, business, politics and the wide range of voluntary/community sector organisations involved.

4. Deliberative work may be commissioned. Possible topics include public attitudes towards offender learning and skills and its contribution to community safety but will be decided by the Advisory Board.

5. Public lectures: designed as part of the RSA's broader public events programme to engage wider audiences including RSA Fellows.

6. A one-day learning conference towards the end of the project aimed specifically at practitioners.

7. Communication and information resources will be delivered through the activities above and by developing a network of interested parties with something to offer, including RSA Fellows with expertise in related areas.

8. Publication: The RSA will edit and publish all papers towards the end of year one drawing out key recommendations, policy implications and findings.

9. Dissemination and profile: the RSA will work with the Prison Learning Network to identify broader public audiences and aim to secure wide dissemination of seminar papers and speeches throughout the programme and for the final publication.

10. Evaluation and development of next steps.

The full proposal was developed with input from a range of people within government, the prison and probation service, the voluntary and private sector. The RSA has sampled support for this proposal and is confident that the project can secure the backing needed to maximise the participation of governors, Heads of Learning and Skills, chief probation officers and the wider prison service. Jack Straw, the Secretary of State for Justice, spoke at a high profile event on the subject in March this year, and announced the new programme. The budget for the RSA Prison Learning Network is approximately £300k and we aim to conclude this work at a final one-day conference in March 2009.

The Network aims to support policy development and mainstream debate by mobilising key stakeholders, opinion formers, clients and the public. The project will be dynamic in its working and includes a range of outputs throughout. This change model is based on a desire to take ideas to government when they have been tested, when we are confident about what can work and that the public can be persuaded to support them.

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