

[Launching our prison education review](#)

Five years have passed since [Dame Sally Coates' independent review of education in prisons was published](#). The review made the case for putting education at the very heart of the prison regime, and for making prison governors both accountable for and able to choose the education that best serves their prisoners' needs.

Since that landmark review, little improvement has been made in the quality of prison education. Although there are small pockets of excellent practice, the overall quality of prison education remains extremely poor. Over the last 5 years, around 60% of prisons have been graded inadequate or requires improvement for education, skills and work. This compares with just 20% of provision in other parts of the further education landscape that we inspect, as we reported in our [latest Annual Report](#).

The pandemic has undoubtedly made the situation worse. Most prisons have been in a [system of lockdowns](#) for the majority of the pandemic. Indeed, almost two fifths of prisoners responding to [HMIP's survey](#) between late July and December said that they were in their cell for more than 23 hours a day. Most prisoners used the short time they were allowed out of their cell for exercise, phone calls, showers and other domestic tasks. No classroom education took place for at least 5 months. While it is now allowed in many prisons, it remains limited.

In this commentary, we report on what has been happening to adult education in prisons during the pandemic. The evidence is from 25 remote interim visits to adult prisons that took place between January and May 2021 and 10 in-person progress monitoring visits that took place between 17 May and 31 July. All but one of the progress monitoring visits were to prisons graded requires improvement or inadequate for education, skills and work.

The visits paint a stark picture of what remote education looks like in prisons. In most cases, it is limited to giving prisoners in-cell work packs with little opportunity to talk to or receive help and regular feedback from teachers. This has had a negative impact on most prisoners, and many are struggling to read and requiring closer support.

The pandemic has also affected vocational education. Closures of workshops and other places of work and training have significantly limited prisoners' ability to develop vocational and employment skills and their enjoyment of practical activities. Information, advice and guidance (IAG) services have been disrupted, which has hindered prisoners' progress towards finding work after release.

Sadly, prison education is in a very poor state. It is time to give it the attention it deserves. As a result of what we have found, we are setting up a review into prison education over the next year. This will start with a focus on reading in prisons as we return to full inspection in September. We will look at how reading is taught in prisons, how it is assessed and what

progress prisoners make.

The place of education in prisons

It is well documented that prison education serves some of the most educationally disadvantaged in our society. The [Prisoner Learning Alliance has reported](#) that, on entering custody, 47% of prisoners have no formal qualifications. The [Ministry of Justice \(MoJ\) also reports that](#) 42% have previously been expelled or permanently excluded from school. Prisoners have much lower levels of literacy than the general population. The [most recent data](#) published by the MoJ shows that 57% of adult prisoners taking initial assessments had literacy levels below that expected of an 11-year-old.

In a welcome development since Dame Sally Coates' report, prison education providers now screen all prisoners that want to participate in education courses for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The most recent data shows that around 30% of those assessed were confirmed to have SEND. More broadly, it has [been estimated](#) that up to half of prisoners have some form of neurodivergent condition that would require additional support, which was also [reported by the Prison Reform Trust](#).

[Research has shown](#) that taking part in learning is more important than qualifications in terms of reducing reoffending. Given the poor educational experience many prisoners have had earlier in life, it is essential that education within prisons is of a high quality. Prisoners' education needs to avoid bringing back memories of past educational 'problems'. It should help them build confidence and a sense of achievement. Teachers and those around prisoners need to inspire them in their subject or vocation and motivate them to learn.

Whatever society believes a prison's core purpose is – a rehabilitative journey, a deterrent to prevent crime or simply a form of punishment – it is an opportunity to turn lives around through education. There is much [evidence to show that prison education can increase the chance of employment](#) on release and reduces the likelihood of reoffending.

The challenges of remote teaching in prisons

Yet, while keeping schools and colleges open during COVID-19 has become a priority, education in prisons has not. In March 2020, classroom education in prisons stopped and teachers were not allowed into prisons, following [Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service \(HMPSS\) guidance](#). Teachers were not able to return for at least 4 months and then only to provide limited one-to-one support. Classroom education largely did not resume for much longer.

In response, prison education providers adapted their courses for remote delivery. Paper-based educational packs, designed for learners to complete in their cells, were gradually introduced. Initially, these were produced for maths and English, though the range of subjects they covered increased over time, including for theoretical elements of vocational courses. However, in some prisons, there was no face-to-face education for 6 months after the

first national lockdown started in March 2020. This means that some prisoners had little to no education until September 2020.

In addition, often the packs were not targeted to prisoners' specific educational needs. In [a survey carried out by HMIP](#), less than half of prisoners who had received an in-cell education pack said that they found them helpful. This may be due in part to the limited opportunities for prisoners to receive feedback and support. Some prisoners waited several weeks to receive written feedback. This was because it took time for prison staff to collect packs, send them to teachers and return them to prisoners, as well as quarantining the packs between each stage. While this process happened, prisoners had no educational materials.

Opportunities to use technology for in-cell learning have also been missed. Most prisoners have access to a telephone on their wing or, less frequently, in their cells. When they were not able to enter prisons, some teachers made regular telephone calls to talk through written feedback they had provided on prisoners' packs. Some education providers set up a phone hotline for educational support, but learners were not always aware this service was available. In at least one prison, prisoners communicated with their teachers by writing letters.

During our progress monitoring visits, we observed that some prisons have begun reintroducing face-to-face education, and more prisoners are now receiving support from teachers. However, the number of learners able to attend vocational workshops and classrooms remains limited. This means that education is still primarily being delivered through in-cell packs.

The importance of face-to-face teaching in prisons

Ofsted has [previously commented](#) on the challenges of delivering remote education in schools and colleges during COVID-19, particularly to those with SEND. These learners often require close supervision and support in lessons, particularly with reading. This is not possible to provide remotely without the very close involvement of parents or carers.

Given the large number of prisoners with suspected SEND, and prisoners' reading levels being similar to those of primary-age children, it is highly likely that remote education is not suitable for prisoners in the same way as for pupils with SEND. Arguably, it is less suitable, given the much lower levels of interaction that teachers have with prisoners compared with pupils in schools and colleges.

Until recently, tutors provided face-to-face support much less frequently than before the pandemic. During our visits, we heard how the lack of face-to-face teaching had affected prisoners. Some prisoners told us that, without a tutor to help them while completing the packs, they had to 'turn the page' if they came across something they struggled with. They found this a frustrating and demotivating experience. However, some more advanced learners preferred learning independently in the relative privacy of their cells. Combined with the lack of alternative activities, this gave them an opportunity to catch up on English and mathematics.

Remote learning in prisons was particularly challenging for the high proportion of prisoners with low levels of literacy or SEND, or who speak English as an additional language. We observed some examples of teachers taking steps to personalise work packs to cater for learners' individual needs. For example, they did this by simplifying the language used or making work packs more accessible for learners with dyslexia. However, without direct support while completing the packs, many struggled to use them. We spoke to several of these learners in multiple prisons who did not even have a dictionary they could access. One prisoner with dyslexia said he had simply been told he could not learn English or mathematics until face-to-face teaching resumed.

We know that, in some prisons, teachers have worked together to support prisoners who speak English as an additional language. In one prison, mathematics and English teachers worked with English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) colleagues to put in place more visual resources and additional support packs to help learners understand key concepts. For example, staff in one women's prison produced short video clips on techniques prisoners will use when they return to practical areas, such as how to froth milk for those training to be baristas. A few prisons we visited had made efforts to implement peer-support 'buddy' systems. It is unclear whether buddies had been trained or whether this was an effective way to support these learners.

Education managers in prisons were aware of these challenges. They recognise the detrimental impact that remote learning has had on prisoners' learning outcomes. Senior leaders acknowledged that the work packs were often too hard for learners who needed additional support with reading and writing. One manager told us it was difficult to identify the appropriate educational level for each learner remotely. This did become easier to establish once teachers could return to the accommodation units.

Prison leaders and education providers must use assessments to identify gaps in learning and help learners back into the classroom effectively and as quickly as possible.

Vocational education and work

Since the start of the pandemic, most prisoners have not had access to vocational education. This has prevented them from developing the practical skills they need for employment on release. It's also prevented them benefiting from the enjoyment of mastering a skill. Before the pandemic, prisoners could engage in practical activities through employment or in workshops as part of vocational training courses. Both avenues have been severely limited by national and local restrictions.

Between July and December 2020, HMIP found that between 10% and 44% of prisoners remained in essential work, such as in the kitchen, wing cleaning and serving meals, and in some 'essential workshops', including textiles, recycling and food packaging. However, in a high number of cases, many prisoners who carried out essential work in the prison did not have their

employment skills recognised.

Non-essential workshops have been closed for most of the past year due to COVID-19 restrictions. This has meant learners on vocational courses have not been able to complete practical elements of the curriculum. However, there were some rare cases where courses, such as horticulture, were taught outside or with social distancing.

Some prison education providers adapted workshop activity into theory-based in-cell packs. This was in preparation for when workshops could reopen. In one prison, staff had converted a barista course from a 3-week practical course to a 6-week in-cell pack. This was to prepare learners for quick progression onto practical skills once restrictions were lifted. However, the provision of packs was not consistent across vocational courses.

There is some evidence that the number of prisoners learning English and maths increased. This could be due to the lack of practical vocational training courses, which tend to be popular.

Prisoners are keen to get back to in-person trade-based training that they could use to find work on release. They are also frustrated that in-cell alternatives to vocational courses were often unaccredited. One prisoner explained that he wanted to work for a prison reform charity and felt that obtaining a qualification would make him more credible.

Following the Prime Minister's announcement on July 19, most COVID-19 restrictions have now been lifted in England. However, this is not the case for prisoners. Most prisons remain under some form of lockdown restrictions. As restrictions ease and practical, vocational training resumes, social distancing guidelines mean that capacity will remain lower than usual. Prison leaders and education providers must make sure that there are as many vocational training opportunities and places as possible.

Preparation for next steps on release

Our evidence is that prisoners have lost work experience opportunities and some prisons have struggled to maintain links with employers. Some businesses that regularly employ prisoners face increased financial uncertainty. There is a risk that this will result in businesses being less likely to invest in ex-offender employment programs or to hire prisoners, who are perceived to be higher risk candidates. This risk may be mitigated by [increases in job vacancies](#) in industries such as hospitality, due to a lack of labour supply from immigration.

In addition to increased uncertainty, prisoners have been unable to attend work placements outside prison when non-essential businesses have re-opened. The lack of work experience that prisoners would normally gain from these placements could mean that they lose out on job opportunities available to those outside prisons. These economic factors underline the importance of ensuring that vocational courses are well targeted to gaps in the job market.

Prisoners have also suffered from disruption to IAG services throughout the

pandemic. Several of the prisons visited have significant backlogs of prisoner inductions that they have yet to complete. This means that leaders do not know the educational starting points for too many prisoners. Furthermore, there are likely to be a high number of prisoners with undisclosed SEND that leaders do not know about.

Even when prisoners have received inductions, the advice that follows has often been too vague and not helpful enough. In some cases, this has led to prisoners making poor educational choices. For example, a prisoner with a degree in history chose the history in-cell learning pack but found it too easy. Another, quite understandably, chose to work in laundry and avoid education because he didn't want to be in his cell all day.

Prison leaders must work with IAG providers to clear induction backlogs as a priority. All prisoners should receive a timely and effective induction to education, skills and work when they join the prison. This is so that even prisoners on shorter sentences can make the best use of their time in prison to prepare for release.

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We are grateful to the hard-working prison and education staff who have supported prisoners and kept them safe throughout the pandemic. The risk of COVID-19 transmission was especially high in prison environments compared with the wider community. Yet, we must ask, both of prison leaders and of government, whether the wider risk to prisoners' chances of resettlement has been sufficiently weighed.

Over the next year, Ofsted and HMIP will be taking a closer look at education in prisons. This will start with research visits to prisons over the autumn term to examine reading. We will investigate how prisons assess reading ability on arrival and throughout their stay, how the whole prison works together to improve prisoners' reading and what this means in terms of prisoners' educational progress and well-being. The standard of prison education needs to improve.