Prisoners’ Basic Skills and Subsequent Education Involvement
An Analysis of Individualised Learner Records Data in England

Olga Cara, Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK
Brian Creese, Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System (CECJS) at UCL Institute of Education recognises that, in order to design a coherent prison education system, it is necessary to have an informed understanding of the current educational levels of the learners. Until recently, information available on the levels of literacy and numeracy skills of the prison population was considerably out of date, and therefore unhelpful to the current context. However, from this current and ongoing work we are beginning to gain an updated picture of skill levels. In November 2015, CECJS released an initial analysis into prisoners’ basic skills levels based on the ‘mandatory assessments’ in English and maths in 2014/15. This paper builds on that analysis using the official data gleaned from the 2014/15 Individualised Learning Record database, which is both consistent with, and supplements, the information from the prison education providers. The paper is structured to first validate the overall findings of the initial report regarding skills level of the incoming prison population. It examines how the assessment data is used by providers to inform placement of prisoners on appropriate basic skill courses, and analyses the progression trajectories of prisoners. It then details the performance of prisoners on basic English and maths courses, including their progression and achievement. The findings suggest a system that is failing to deliver education to its most vulnerable learners in prison. The majority of prisoners, including those with the lowest skills levels of English and maths, do not progress to higher levels and are insufficiently challenged. Of those prisoners enrolled on courses of study, only half complete and often only at levels lower than their previously assessed levels. The conclusion provides recommendations for policy makers and urgently calls for more research.

KEYWORDS
Literacy, Mandatory Assessments, Numeracy, OLASS 4, Prison Education

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace for the media to talk of the crisis in England’s prisons.1 Years of austerity policies have seen prison staff numbers decline steeply, leading to a rise in negative data including an increase in suicides of inmates, and of violent assaults between inmates and between inmates and staff (Howard League, 2014).

The education record is equally poor; in 2016 only 35 percent of prison education services were rated as ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding.’ The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) annual report for
2016 notes that: ‘For too long, education and training in prisons and young offender institutions have not been effective enough in giving prisoners the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they need to remain out of prison after release. Around 60% of prisoners leave prison without going on to employment, education or training (Ofsted, 2016, p. 103).’

In England and Wales, prisoners lose the rights of citizenship, such as their right to vote, and education is not seen as a fundamental right (Hawley, Murphy, & Souto-Otero, 2013). The availability and type of education for prisoners varies as political agendas change, with the focus currently on education for employability. Funding for education which does not immediately fit this criterion, such as courses designed to promote personal or social skills, has become more difficult to obtain, particularly for those on long sentences or who already have higher levels of education. Prisoners are expected to take out loans for higher level education (above English Level 2/international Level 3), and these are not available to support any degree-level education for a prisoner with more than six years left to serve (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

Professionals working in prison education were enthused in 2016 by the results of Dame Sally Coates’ review (Coates, 2016), which sought to put education at the heart of prison regimes, and give prison governors responsibility for education in their prisons. David Cameron’s government accepted these proposals, but days later the government changed leadership after the European Union referendum, the Minister for Justice resigned, and the Coates agenda has since been quietly dropped. The current difficulties in staffing appear to have led to problems in providing education. Prison education is, in general, provided in facilities away from the prisoners’ cells, and so they need to be accompanied to education by officers. Education providers report that there are often insufficient officers to do this, meaning prisoners are not able to attend class. This leads to many frustrating hours where education staff sit in empty rooms with no one to teach. The Prison Inspectorate Report on Wandsworth prison conducted in 2015 noted: ‘Severe staff shortages across the prison resulted in too many men being unable to attend scheduled purposeful activities, or attend them on time, because there were too few staff to escort them to learning and skills and work activities (H.M. Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2015, p. 50).’ This remains a common theme in prison inspection reports.

Surprisingly, despite the English education system being highly focused on data, it is not at all clear what the educational profile is for the prisons sector. It is assumed that large numbers of prisoners have low literacy and numeracy skills, and high numbers have learning difficulties or disabilities, but accurate statistics are difficult to find (see, for example, Alm & Andersson, 1997). The prison system has great difficulty in identifying these prisoners, does not routinely use screening processes, and is overly dependent on self-report by prisoners (see HM Inspectorate of Prisons and HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2015). Before the Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System started its work on establishing the literacy and numeracy skills levels of prisoners in 2014, the most recent figures for England originated from a flawed comparative exercise in 2002 and, despite the weaknesses of that survey being well known, these figures are produced regularly to support policy initiatives (see Brooks et al., 2001, pp. 22-24 and the citation of Brooks’s later findings in Creese, 2016, pp. 14-15 for a full discussion).

BACKGROUND

While it is widely agreed that education can be an important element in reducing recidivism, the exact ways in which this works are still not clear. As in many fields of social studies, it is difficult to eliminate all the other potential factors which might affect a prisoner’s future path on release, and so most studies showing the effects of education are general rather than specific. Nonetheless, an analysis by the Centre for Economic Performance (Machin, Marie, & Vujić, 2010), supports the idea that improving the educational attainment of marginalised individuals can help reduce crime, and Schuller (2009) identified economic, social and moral rationales for improving lifelong learning for offenders. Behan (2014), working with Irish prisoners, concludes that educational spaces which
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