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Special Edition
**The Transformational Potential
of Prison Education**

How education transforms:

Evidence from the experience of Prisoners' Education Trust on how education supports prisoner journeys¹

Rod Clark, the Chief Executive of Prisoners' Education Trust (PET).

Background on the role and history of PET

PET is a charity (registered charity number: 1084718) that has been operating for over 25 years.² The main service that it provides is as the principal funder of distance learning courses for prisoners in England and Wales. PET has given over 32,000 packages of support (currently over 2,000 a year) to prisoners who apply to study while in prison. PET considers any request for education, subject to Governor approval that the study would not raise any security issue. PET does give advice to prisoners if there is reason to believe that an alternative course would better fit an individual prisoner's aspirations or current level of educational attainment. Subject to that however, PET awards help with a very wide range of distance learning courses, from relatively low level NVQs or non-accredited learning to embarking on degree level study with the Open University. Courses range from those pursued purely for personal interest to academic courses or some aimed very closely at acquiring skills and knowledge for a particular vocational route.

PET also funds applications for arts and hobby materials (up to a maximum of £60 a year) for prisoners to make art or to pursue hobbies while in cell.

More recently, over the last few years, PET has come to realise that, for its approach to be effective, the system supporting education within the prison regime needs to be effective. PET has therefore developed work to champion the case for prisoner learning, advocate the importance of prisoner learner voices and work to influence and change policy and practice in prison education for the better. As part of this, PET has brought together a group of organisations from across the sector to form the Prisoner Learning Alliance to bring prison education issues to the attention of policy makers. PET has also actively engaged to promote, develop and disseminate research evidence on prison education.

PET's experience of impact on prisoners' lives through contact with prisoners

PET has had extensive contact with many prisoner learners over many years. This is evidenced by many hundreds of letters received from prisoners recounting the difference education has made to their lives and to what they have achieved. We know of a number of case studies of ex-prisoner learners who have attributed their success on release to the education that PET has funded.³

For example, one ex-prisoner Francis described the impact of support on his life:

'When I received the letter from PET agreeing to fund me it made me the happiest young man in the prison. It really helped my self-esteem, which had been at an all time low. It felt amazing that somebody was giving me a second chance and not just 'shutting the door' on me and my future. I went on to complete the Open University course that PET funded, before graduating with an Honours Degree in Health and Social Care in 2010, just in time for my release from prison.'

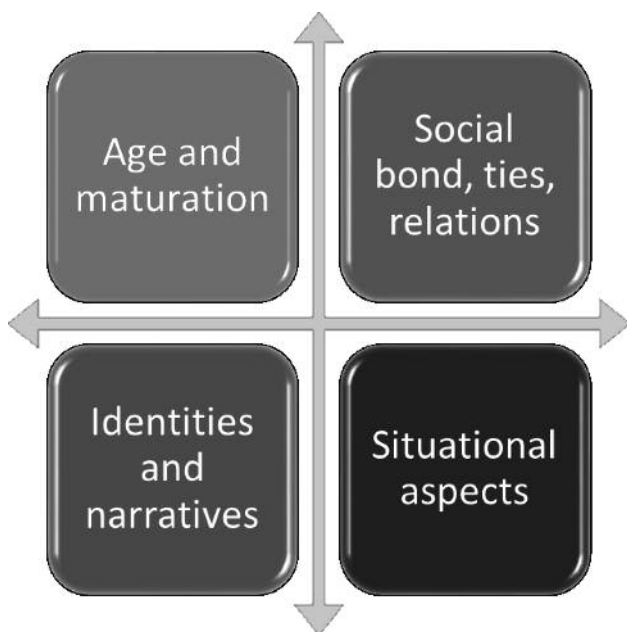
Francis has gone on to develop a successful career as a manager in social care and also look to give back to society having founded a charity to help young people to see a better way of living their lives, to learn from the mistakes he made and to do well at school. This evidence from individual cases is supported by evidence of the theory for how prisoners come to change their lives.

The theoretical basis for impact based on desistance theory

Theoretical models for how people come to desist from crime are generally brought under the heading of

1. This article is based on a presentation by Rod Clark, the Chief Executive of Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) given to prisoners, staff and invited guests at HMP Grendon on 17 July 2015.
2. Further information about Prisoners' Education Trust including its history is available on their website at www.prisonerseducation.org.uk
3. Case studies are available at: <http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/stories>

'desistance theory'.⁴ The diagram below is taken from Professor Fergus McNeill of the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research and one of the leading proponents of desistance theory. It formed part of his presentation to the Prisoner Learning Alliance conference in Milton Keynes on 25 April 2014.



Professor McNeill drew attention to these four factors which have been found to be important in a desistance journey. He made the point that in respect of all of them prison is in itself damaging:

- ❑ although prison of course removes the prisoner from a situation in which there are opportunities to commit many offences, the prison environment itself does not present any positive alternative and simply brings the prisoner into association with others with an offending background;
- ❑ prison tends to make it difficult to maintain the social and family bonds that are known to have a positive desistance impact;
- ❑ although aging does of course continue while in prison, the environment tends to put an individual's life on hold rather than encouraging a process of maturation; and
- ❑ the identities and narratives in prison reinforce a prisoner's criminal identity (the term 'offender', a prison number, the subject of a narrative around risks of offending and its mitigation) rather than promoting any pro-social positive alternatives.

Education represents one of the few environments and opportunities for addressing these issues in a custodial setting:

- ❑ educational and library environments often represent some of the few positive settings for a prisoner in which they can experience a constructive forward looking ethos and the prospect of continuing in educational settings on release has the potential for drawing individuals into positive and away from negative settings associated with criminal activity;
- ❑ the relationships with educators and fellow students has the potential for building positive ties to support an individual constructively; education can also support prisoners in maintaining links with families and children with studying as a shared bond and help develop an individual's empathy and understanding of relationships and how to maintain them;
- ❑ the broadening of experience, empathy and thinking skills associated with education can support a genuine development and maturing of outlook; and, most importantly
- ❑ learning offers a prisoner a positive identity as for example a student, artist, skilled technician with a narrative of hope for the future.

The experience of PET, as by letters from learners would strongly support a belief that these features of education are strongly positive in supporting prisoners in making changes in their lives. This includes some strong messages about how education helps a prisoner acquire a more positive identity. We have collected some first hand evidence on this point for the film 'more than just a prisoner'⁵ which is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALiDrZ1YwmU> includes this quote from one former prisoner:

'I am more than just a prisoner. I am an Oxford Graduate, a professional actor, a screen writer and a teacher.'

In addition to help in forming a positive identity, prisoners report to us a number of other benefits from education that feature in the desistance literature:

- ❑ Agency: the ability to take control of this aspect of their lives when of its nature a prison is an environment in which prisoners

4. See for example: Maruna, S. (2001) Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives, Washington DC: APA Books; and McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C. & Maruna, S. (2012) How and why people stop offending: discovering desistance. Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services.
5. Made with the help and support of the Media Trust 2012.

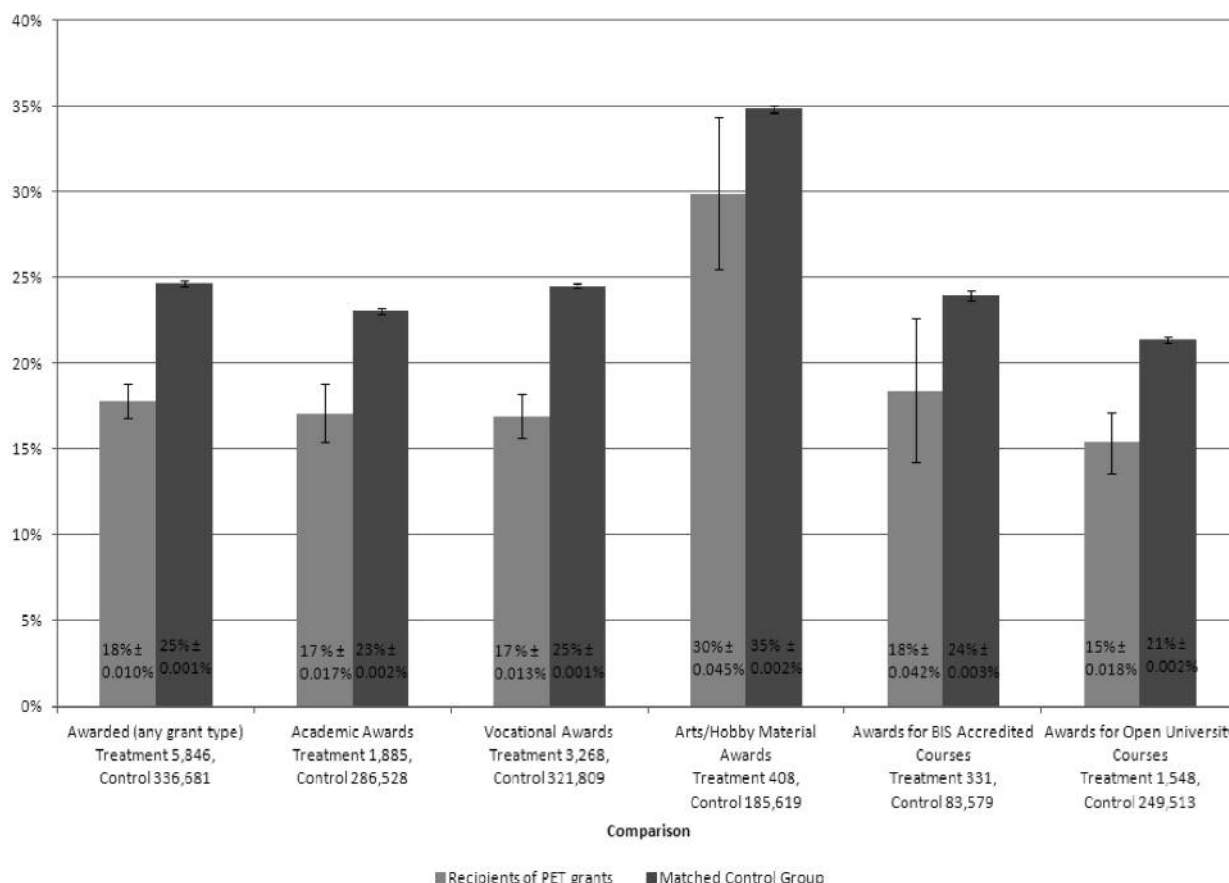
are necessarily disempowered from having authority or control;

- ❑ Resilience: developing the ability to overcome the challenges of the study process;
- ❑ Thinking skills: broadening and developing a way to consider and think about problems and issues;
- ❑ Employability: developing knowledge and skills which may help in securing employment on release which is an important proven pathway for prisoners to succeed in moving away from crime;
- ❑ Mental health and wellbeing: for example in this typical quote from a prisoner's letter, 'Thank you so very much, this means so much to me and have really lifted me up and given me something to look forward to. I've been finding it very hard to cope recently and it has seemed like everything in the world has been going wrong for me, and life had become really quite hard.'

Statistical evidence of impact

Qualitative evidence of the positive effect of prison education is backed by a number of quantitative studies. A longitudinal study of UK prisoners⁶ found that prisoners with a qualification were 15 per cent less likely to be reconvicted. A major meta-analysis of a number of studies in the US⁷ found a 13 per cent reduction in reoffending from educational programmes.

A statistical analysis of those that have applied to PET for support with learning also provides strong evidence of the power of education to influence outcomes for prisoners post release. Details of 5,846 prisoners who had received PET help were submitted to Ministry of Justice statisticians who gathered information on whether they had gone on to reoffend. They compared the outcomes for the PET sample with a sample of prisoners matched on observable characteristics such as age and offence type to provide a control group for comparison purposes. Some key results of the latest analysis from September 2015 are shown in the graph below:⁸



6. Hopkins, K (2012) The pre-custody employment, training and education status of newly selected prisoners. Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. London: Ministry of Justice.
7. Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, Jeremy N. V. Miles (2013) Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults RAND Corporation.
8. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459470/prisoners-education-trust-report.pdf

The results show a statistically significant reduction in the level of offending compared to the matched control group for all the categories of study. The reduction is considerable with levels of reoffending over a quarter lower. The study also looked at applicants who, for various reasons, had not been given support. Their levels of reoffending were also lower than a matched control group suggesting that the aspiration and motivation to take advantage of educational opportunities is important in avoiding a return to crime on release.

Evidence of latent demand from the prisoner population

Given compelling evidence of the positive impact of distance learning there must be a question of whether prisoners are taking these opportunities or whether more could be done to bring out latent demand from prisoners. There is certainly ample evidence that prisoners have high levels of educational disadvantage:⁹

- ❑ 47 per cent of prisoners reported having no qualifications (which compares with 15 per cent of the general adult population);

- ❑ 42 per cent reported having been permanently excluded from school;
- ❑ 21 per cent reported needing help with reading, writing or numeracy.

On the other hand, the same study also showed a significant proportion of prisoners well placed to take advantage of higher levels of education. It showed that around 5 per cent were educated beyond A level and about 3 per cent having a degree (which compares with 16 per cent of the adult working age population). Just as significantly, the survey revealed remarkably positive attitudes towards learning. Only one in ten prisoners identified with the statement, 'learning is not for people like me'.

It is clear that demand for higher levels of learning is being poorly met by the prison Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) contracts. The table below contains information on course completions through the OLASS contracts over the academic years 2010/11 to 2013/14 given by the Skills Minister in an answer to a Parliamentary question on 10 February 2015. This shows that learning at level 3 and above (equivalent to beyond GCSE) formed a very small and falling proportion of the education offered (especially considering the scale of the prison population of around 86,000).

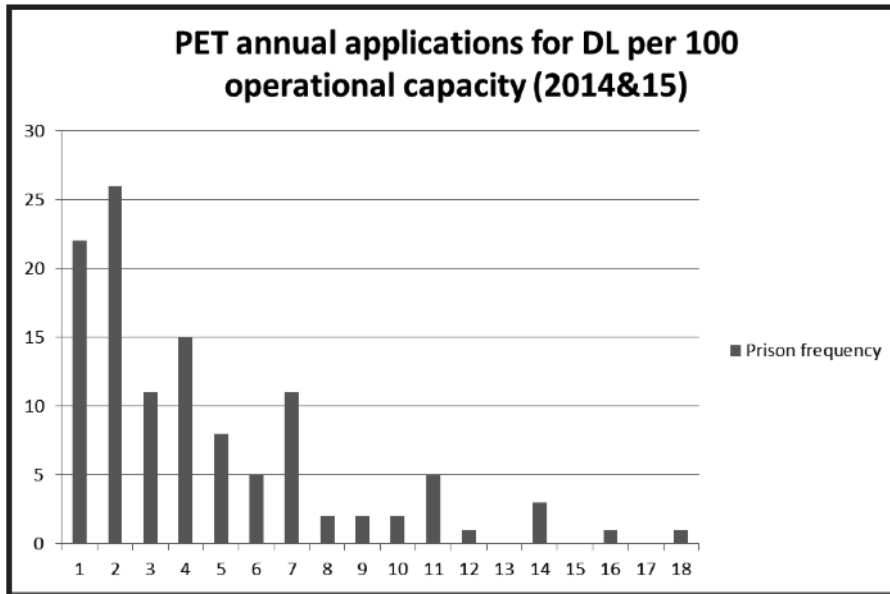
Academic Year	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Achievements	70,300	71,900	68,400	79,700
of which:				
Level 3	1,200	1,200	1,400	600
A Levels	-	-	-	-
AS Levels	10	-	-	10

This suggests that access to higher levels of learning through Distance Learning and funded not as part of the OLASS contract but via PET represents a very important route for higher level learning in the adult prison system. PET's experience is that demand from prisoners for distance learning is heavily dependent on whether within individual establishments the support exists to encourage and enable the application and study process. In many instances this amounts to there being one passionate and committed member of staff (whether employed by the prison, the education provider the careers service provider or the library). This means that in some establishments a high proportion of the demand for distance learning may be being met,

but in others there may be a significant level of latent unmet demand.

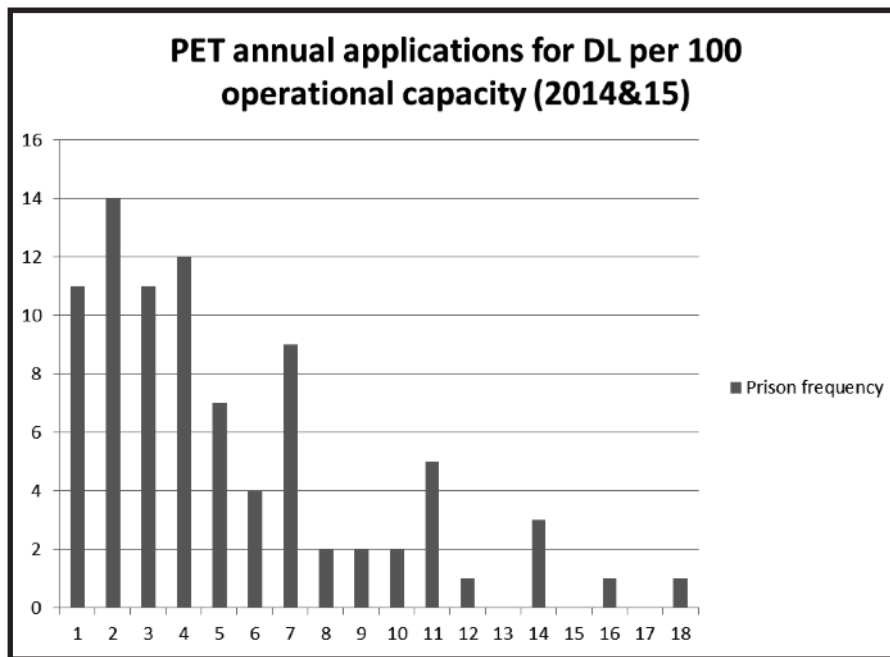
This perception based on operational experience is borne out by an analysis of PET's administrative data. The graphic below shows the distribution of prisons according to the number of applications to PET for distance learning per 100 of operational capacity. The majority of prisons make very few applications for the size of their population — twenty two prisons for example submitted fewer than one application per 100 prisoners. On the other hand there are other establishments where the level of applications are much higher — equating to over ten for every 100 operational capacity.

9. Hopkins, K (2012) The pre-custody employment, training and education status of newly selected prisoners. Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. London: Ministry of Justice.



Of course much of this variation can be explained and expected from the varying population in different prisons. Following a distance learning course requires time and so we would expect there to be more uptake among prisons holding prisoners with longer sentences.

The second graph below addresses this by excluding from the analysis local prisons (as defined by the MoJ prison finder website)¹⁰ that typically have a high churn short-term population:



The effect of excluding the locals does reduce the heavy weighting of the distribution towards lower levels of applications. But it is still striking that some establishments make much more use of distance learning opportunities offered. If all prisons were to submit a level of applications relative to the size of their population at the level of the upper quartile of prisons, there would be considerably higher demand

nationally. When that information is linked with the evidence that shows that prisoners who do pursue such learning have significantly lower levels of reoffending on release, there is a strong case for promoting such opportunities more actively (even though that would set the charitable sector a challenge to fund more courses).

10. <http://www.justice.gov.uk/contacts/prison-finder>

Some suggestions for prison education policy building on the evidence

This article has presented a case for promoting education as a central part of prison regimes. Prison makes successful reintegration to society very hard. Education is one of the few positive things that can be offered over a prison sentence to help. Many prisoners have untapped potential for learning. And purposeful activity is vital for wellbeing in custody.

One argument in support of prison education is that of equity. As for example with standards of healthcare, it is argued that prisoners should have access to the same level of educational opportunities available for adults in wider society. However, there is a strong case for going beyond simple parity. All too often prisoners have failed or been unable to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered earlier in life and, having taken the decision to incarcerate them, it is arguable that society has both an obligation and self interest in looking to mitigate the adverse effects of imprisonment and assist former prisoners to re-enter the community equipped and empowered to contribute fully and constructively to it.

In this context it is unfortunate that, despite many examples of excellent and dedicated good practice, the overall assessment of the quality of prison education from Ofsted is consistently poor. As reported in the 2014/15 Ofsted annual report:

*'Learning and skills and work in prisons have been the worst performing elements of the FE and skills sector for some time, and Ofsted has long been critical of this failure. Last year, there was a small degree of improvement in inspection outcomes. This year, the outcomes are very poor and considerably worse. Of the 50 prisons with inspection reports published this year, fewer than a third (28 per cent) were judged good or outstanding for their learning and skills and work activities. Standards were markedly worse compared with last year.'*¹¹

Against this background PET and the Prisoner Learning Alliance¹² (which PET convenes and supports) argues that improvements to prison education require it to:

- Be developed and designed towards the fundamental goal of achieving better outcomes for prisoners and their prospects for reintegration back into society:

- This implies that education needs to be a genuine priority for the prison regime and the culture of establishments — which means a priority for the prison's No1 Governor; and that the way that it is offered should take account of the evidence of desistance theory on how education can promote the development of more positive identities and a sense of personal control and responsibility.
- Engage prisoners to inspire and motivate them:
 - Literacy and numeracy are clearly important but the evidence suggests the importance of inspiring aspiration and motivation. This implies that education should look to embed learning on literacy, numeracy and basic ICT skills in other activities, including creative activities, that prisoners are inspired and motivated to take up. And the learning should address deeper personal and social development needs (themselves essential to gaining employment) rather than simply focusing on job skills relating to any specific employment route.
- Offer routes to positive futures:
 - This implies, providing access to a ladder of genuine educational progression including connecting with continuing learning opportunities in the community while released on temporary licence or after the end of a prison sentence.
- Use the opportunities offered by technology:
 - The prison service has invested heavily in providing an IT platform for learning that is genuinely safe and secure; but current constraints on access for prisoners mean that it is massively underused.
- Build on all the resources available to support the quality of education. This implies:
 - using prisoner volunteers — who generally make the most effective advocates and champions for education and listening to the voice of learners about how services can be improved;
 - using the Voluntary and Community Sector such as the help offered by organisations such as PET and others; and
 - Building excellence in prison teachers through supporting their development.

11. Para. 117, Ofsted Annual Report 2014/15: Education and Skills, December 2015.

12. See Nina Champion, Smart Rehabilitation: Learning how to get better outcomes, Prisoner Learning Alliance, December 2013 and The Future of Prison Education Contracts: Delivering Better Outcomes, Prisoner Learning Alliance, May 2015.