

Education can set you free

Ann Creighton, Director, Prisoners' Education Trust.

'Education can set you free': this chance remark by an Education Manager set an angry and embittered prisoner on a path which sees him ten years later working as a lecturer at a further education college and about to complete his MSc. During his sentence Peter completed a degree, studied computing and worked as a peer mentor in a basic skills class. The majority of Peter's studies were completed through distance learning and some of the fees were met by Prisoners' Education Trust. The Trust aims to enrich and extend the education offered by prison education departments. It does this mainly by meeting fees for academic and vocational distance learning courses — sometime call open learning or correspondence courses.

Distance learning provides an excellent way of extending education in prison for those who have already achieved basic skills or who have done so during their sentence. Prisoners can study at their own pace, and in their own time. They can choose subjects which really interest them. Time can be used constructively, especially during the long lock-up hours and there is the opportunity to gain skills and qualifications in preparation for release. The range of subjects from which to choose is vast, in fact there are few subjects for which we have been unable to find a distance learning course — except for Swahili. Some of the most popular courses are: computer studies, horticulture, navigation, health and fitness, and various transport qualifications. Prisoners who are listeners often take counselling courses. Sometimes we fund tutors to come into the prison. This is especially useful for music courses. Courses can be studied at many levels, NVQs, City and Guilds as well as through GCSEs, 'A' levels and Open University modules.

A great advantage of distance learning is that prisoners can take their course with them when they are transferred between prisons. Kenny was transferred five times in just over two years — one transfer taking place just two weeks before his exams, but he still completed his course. He has been out nearly a year now and working all that time.

Some people, both in the Prison Service and outside, are still heard to say that giving prisoners educational opportunities is a soft option. All educational activities require effort, distance learning being perhaps one of the most difficult ways of learning. It requires hard work, commitment, self-discipline and the ability to study in a difficult, often-noisy environment as well as the ability to manage study time and meet assignment deadlines. Patience is also needed, especially when materials take time to arrive or there is limited access to computers. It would be fair to say that many prisoners have led chaotic lives before coming to prison: skills learned through taking a course can often be transferred to other areas of prison life.

One prison manager wrote to say that just the opportunity to study increases self-esteem. The course qualifications are vital, but the growth in self-esteem is a key additional benefit. Prisoners do not always know where a course will lead. Some years ago Jenny applied for a creative writing course — not an obvious route to a job. However, her success improved her confidence to such a degree that she was able to go on to take some courses in office administration and when she was released had a job to go to managing two shops. Drawing cartoons is another example of a course without an obvious career path. We lost contact with the man to whom we gave the course for several years. He then wrote to say that he had successfully completed the course and was now building a portfolio of work to assist his application to go to art college on release.

It is this kind of progression and flexibility which makes distance learning so valuable at all stages of a prisoner's sentence. James had a long sentence and was assigned to work in the carpentry shop where he found that he had a real talent for furniture making. He became so interested in the woods he used that he then studied arboriculture, funded by the Trust. When he leaves prison he hopes to set up his own furniture making business. The Trust has paid for a further course in how to start your own business and another charity, Business in Prison, is helping him with his business plan.

A change of career is often essential following a prison sentence. Barry chose to take up horticulture. He achieved both the certificate and the diploma from the Royal Horticultural Society. While studying the theory he worked in the prison gardens. Towards the end of his sentence he was able to work voluntarily for the National Trust and begin to build up some garden design work. He wrote to say:

'The positive of obtaining blue chip qualifications whilst in custody is excellent evidence of motivation and self-improvement and goes some way towards reducing the negative effect of a prison record.'

This example of co-operation runs through the Trust's work. We work closely with prison education departments to ensure that the courses we provide are suitable for men and women given their offence, educational standard and the stage in their sentence. Facilitating distance learning in prisons is not always easy and many education managers and their staff provide huge encouragement to prisoners by obtaining materials, attending to the admin, sending off assignments, finding books, and arranging examinations. Without such support, many prisoners would find it difficult to get the education and qualifications they so crave.

The Trust is often asked how far prisoners succeed with their courses and what benefits can follow. We monitor progress in two ways. Prison Managers are asked to complete a short statistical return three times a year. This shows that at any one time around 70 per cent of grant recipients have either completed their courses or are continuing their studies. Universities have a drop out rate of around 18 per cent. Colleges which supply distance learning courses do not publish their drop out figures (the information is considered commercially sensitive), so we are unable to compare our figures with those for non prisoner students. Illness, bereavement, attending offending behaviour courses are all cited as reasons for giving up or postponing completion, though some people do lose interest or find that their chosen course is too difficult.

Our second form of monitoring is more anecdotal. All prisoners who receive an award are asked to let the Trust know how they get on — and many do, telling us of their difficulties as well as their successes. Recently we have introduced a learner feed back form. From these we know that one of the things prisoners value most is the chance to study at their own pace; the difficulties are what one would expect — noise, lack of materials and so on. One of the questions asked is what would you say to someone thinking about starting to study — the

overwhelming response is 'go for it'. One of the best responses was from a previously homeless man who says he cannot now wait to get up in the morning to continue his studies. He said he found his enthusiasm for early rising was very worrying!

Sometimes the benefits of distance learning continue beyond the individual. Some prisoners go on to teach their fellow prisoners what they have learned or find that they have a talent for teaching and become peer group mentors. Occasionally we hear that a previously difficult prisoner's behaviour has changed dramatically once they have begun to study.

Prisoners' Education Trust is a charity. Its main source of funding is charitable donations, but it does work closely with the Prisoners' Learning and Skills Unit which makes an annual grant towards course costs. To receive an award, prisoners must usually have at least six months to serve and the prison must be willing to contribute ten per cent of the course fees.

This article has concentrated on the Trust's main activity, but it also provides small grants for art materials and can meet fees to enable men and women near the end of their sentence to attend college or to take vocational courses outside prison. In addition, the Trustees are interested in research into the effects of prisoner education. In 1993, the Trust commissioned a three-year study into the effects of supported distance learning on re-conviction rates. It was a very small sample, but there were indications that those who had completed their distance learning course were less likely to have been reconvicted two years following their release than those who had not. At present jointly with the University of Central England the Trust is supporting a PhD student who is looking at the motivation of prisoners who opt for education.

Since it was founded just over 12 years ago, the Trust has made over 4,000 awards (over 800 during 2002) and offers its scheme in over 90 prisons. This is, of course, a drop in the ocean compared with the numbers of prisoners in the system. Distance learning is not suitable for all prisoners, but it does open up opportunities for a substantial minority which would otherwise not be available. And it is not expensive. The total average cost of providing a course is around £250. Trustees hope that distance learning will eventually become an integral part of the prison education curriculum — as it is already in some places, alongside basic skills, vocational and creative studies.

For more information please contact Prisoners' Education Trust: Wandle House, Riverside Drive, Mitcham, CR4 7BU. Tel: 020 8648 7760.

Email: ann@prisonerseducation.org.uk