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ORIGINAL PAPER

# Bridging the gap: Evaluating the divide between legal obligations, policy and practice in adult prison education in England

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## Abstract

With legal rights to prison education for adults well-established under domestic and international standards, this narrative review explores the historical and contemporary policy frameworks and legal obligations guiding provision in public prisons in England. Addressing an international readership of practitioners, academics and policymakers, it scrutinises the implementation and delivery of prison education following years of government and parliamentary reviews reporting poor outcomes. It draws on publicly available documents to identify key issues, including chronic under-resourcing, insufficient digital infrastructure, inadequate systems for identifying and monitoring learning needs, poor basic skills outcomes and insufficient support for prisoners with additional educational needs and learning disabilities. The analysis reveals persistent access inequalities compared to community further education, deficits in legal entitlements and systemic challenges faced by education providers and prison governors. It notes that difficulties in enacting effective change are compounded by limited empirical research exploring the mechanisms and conditions that enable meaningful learning outcomes. A case for reform is presented, advocating for a holistic approach that aligns with international guidance on values-based approaches to prison education, and elevating the value of education as fundamental to the prison regime.

**Keywords** Prison education · Policy review · Legislation · England · Learning disabilities · Basic skills

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**Résumé**
Combler le fossé : Une évaluation du décalage entre obligations légales, politiques et pratiques dans l'éducation des adultes dans le milieu carcéral en Angleterre – Alors que le droit des détenus adultes à accéder à l'éducation en prison est solidement établi par les normes nationales et internationales, la présente revue narrative explore les cadres politiques historiques et contemporains ainsi que les obligations légales qui régissent la prestation de services éducatifs dans les établissements pénitentiaires publics en Angleterre. S'adressant à un lectorat international de praticiens, d'universitaires et de décideurs politiques, elle examine la mise en œuvre et la prestation des services éducatifs en milieu carcéral, après que des rapports gouvernementaux et parlementaires soulignant des résultats médiocres soient parus pendant des années. S'appuyant sur des documents accessibles au public, cette revue narrative met en évidence plusieurs enjeux majeurs, notamment un sous-financement chronique, une infrastructure numérique insuffisante, des dispositifs inadéquats d'identification et de suivi des besoins d'apprentissage, de mauvais résultats en matière de compétences de base et un soutien insuffisant aux détenus présentant des besoins éducatifs spécifiques ou des troubles de l'apprentissage. L'analyse révèle des inégalités d'accès persistantes par rapport à la formation continue communautaire, des lacunes concernant les droits légaux et des défis systémiques auxquels les prestataires d'éducation et les directeurs de prison se trouvent confrontés. Elle souligne par ailleurs que le nombre limité de recherches empiriques consacrées aux mécanismes et conditions susceptibles de favoriser l'obtention de résultats d'apprentissage significatifs exacerbe les difficultés à mettre en œuvre des changements efficaces. Enfin, cette revue narrative plaide en faveur d'une réforme, prônant une approche globale alignée sur les orientations internationales relatives aux approches de l'éducation en prison fondées sur des valeurs, et soulignant le rôle fondamental de l'éducation au sein du régime pénitentiaire.

## Introduction

The global prison population is in excess of 11 million and continues to rise, with a growing proportion of women and girls. While many countries claim to adhere to international prison education standards (e.g. CoE 2006; UNGA 2010, 2015) in practice, most fail to implement them fully. Provision varies extensively worldwide, often impacted by inconsistent or absent legal frameworks, shortages of qualified educators, a reliance on volunteers, and prison overcrowding. Notably, investment in prison education is lower in countries with more punitive penal systems; in contrast to rights-based, rehabilitative models in countries like Norway – an international exemplar of progressive prison education – England's exclusionary law-and-order-driven ideology establishes the foundational context for policy approaches (GHK Consulting 2012; PRI 2024; Behan 2021).

The academic literature on prison education has largely focused on links with recidivism and post-release employment outcomes (Berglund et al. 2025). Recent meta-analyses report mixed findings. Although they indicate substantial recidivism reductions of between 28 to 43 per cent, improvements in employment outcomes vary from negligible to a 24 per cent increase in the odds of securing work (Bozick

et al. 2018; Davis et al. 2013; Ellison et al. 2017). Differences are influenced by the structure and quality of study design and varying outcome definitions. However, the evidence base remains small (Newton et al. 2018; Nur and Nguyen 2023).

Research indicates that Level 3 of England's Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF) equivalent attainment and Higher Education (HE) study are associated with the strongest impact on measured outcomes, while economic evaluations highlight the substantial cost benefits of all prison education – particularly significant given the scale of prison populations (Duwe 2017; Aos et al. 2001; Gaes 2008; Kim and Clark 2013). However, as much of this research originates from the United States, international relevance is limited (Berglund et al. 2025; Ellison et al. 2017).

Beyond estimating long-term outcomes, a small proportion of prison education research explores topics such as subject-specific results, the perspectives of inmates and teachers, and its transformative potential. Findings suggest that prison education can foster positive self-perception and reduce feelings of loneliness, with impact closely tied to teachers' skillsets and motivation (Behan 2014; Berglund et al. 2025). Yet significant evidence gaps remain regarding the mechanisms by which education exerts influence, and best practices for implementation. As such, more rigorous, context-sensitive research is needed that focuses on proximal outcomes and accounts for the complexity of the topic and its human dimensions (Lipsey and Cullen 2007; Duwe 2017; Reed 2015).

The present review explores adult prison education provision in the English context as a means of unfolding comparative perspectives on its implementation within a specific national justice system. By doing so, it seeks to probe much-needed research areas critical to informing policy and practice for meaningful change, resonating with the issues affecting adult prison education worldwide.

Education as a fundamental human right (Article 26, United Nations Declaration of Human Rights; UN 1948) is safeguarded in England under Protocol 1, Article 2 on the right to education in the Human Rights Act 1998 of the United Kingdom (UK) (GovUK 1998) and legislated for under sections 86–90 of the UK's Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (GovUK 2009). Additionally, the UK's Equality Act 2010 (GovUK 2010) safeguards equitable access for those with learning disabilities and neurodiversity. These rights extend to individuals in all settings, including the incarcerated, with provision set out in *The Prison Rules 1999* (GovUK 1999) for England and Wales. Table 1 details legislation relevant to adult prison education in England.

Rooted in correctional ideologies, prison education provides pathways essential for positive social functioning (Muñoz 2009). In England, however, its quality is consistently assessed as poor (Coates 2016; HoCEC 2022a). Of the 45 English prisons inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in 2022–2023, 91 per cent of educational provision was deemed either inadequate or in need of improvement; none was judged to be outstanding (Ofsted 2023). Bold changes to "put education at the heart of the regime" (Coates 2016, p. 6) remain unrealised, compounded by impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (HoCEC 2022b). Instead, overcrowding and staffing crises intensify delivery pressures (Justice Committee 2022a; Sturge 2024).

**Table 1** Legislation and standards relevant to adult prison education in England

| Legislation/standard | Relevant sections | Relevance |
|---|---|---|
| UK Legislation | | |
| Prison Act 1952 (UK) (GovUK 1952) | Section 47 | Makes provision for the creation of prison rules. |
| *Prison Rules 1999* (England and Wales) (GovUK 1999) | Section 1 | Provides context for prison education: "The purpose of training and treatment of convicted prisoners shall be to encourage and assist them to lead a good and useful life". |
| | Section 32: Education | "Every prisoner able to profit from educational facilities at a prison [should] be encouraged to do so." Subsequent subclauses stipulate that educational classes should be arranged at every prison. Reasonable resources should be provided and particular attention paid to prisoners with special educational needs (SEN). |
| Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (UK) (GovUK 2009) | Sections 86 and 90 | Stipulate the provision of suitable facilities for education and training, and support for engagement with education whilst in detention. |
| Equality Act 2010 (UK) (GovUK 2010) | | Applies as within community settings, legislating for fair and equal access to education and protection against discrimination for individuals with a protected disability characteristic. |
| International standards | | |
| *European Prison Rules* (CoE 2006) | Rules 1, 2 and 4 | Are integral to guiding principles underpinning the interpretation of subsequent rules for the governance of prisons. Describe the need to maintain, protect and respect human rights whilst in prison, despite potential restrictions and a lack of resources. |
| | Rule 5 | Guiding principle focusing on normalisation – "Life in prison shall approximate as closely as possible the positive aspects of life in the community" – indicating a right to education comparable to that offered in community settings. |
| | Rule 6 | Guiding principle describing the prison's key aim of social reintegration, thus establishing the context for prison education. |
| | Rule 25.1 | Pertains to the prison regime, stating that a balanced programme of activities should be offered to prisoners, thus implying fair access to education and skills training. |
| | Rule 26.16 | Work-related requirements, stipulating that prisoners should have sufficient time for education. |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Legislation/standard | Relevant sections | Relevance |
|---|---|---|
| | Rule 28 (from 28.1 to 28.7) | Pertains to education, specifically describing prisons' obligation to provide comprehensive educational programmes to all prisoners, focusing on literacy, numeracy and vocational training that both meets individual needs and accounts for learners' aspirations. Special attention should be paid to prisoners with SEN. Education is deemed as important as work in the prison context, and participation in education should not financially disadvantage prisoners. Prisons must have well-stocked libraries, ideally run in collaboration with services from the wider community, and education should be aligned with national systems in order to facilitate continued learning post-release. Educational programmes should aim to improve prisoners' overall education and prepare them for a responsible, crime-free life. |
| | Rule 106 | Pertains to education for sentenced prisoners. In conjunction with Rule 26, it emphasises the essential role of education for sentenced prisoners and underlines the duty of governing authorities to encourage educational endeavours and provide appropriate educational programmes. |
| *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (Nelson Mandela Rules) (UNGA 2015) | Rule 4 | Highlights the relevance of education. Describes a primary goal of imprisonment sentence to reduce reoffending, achieved by focusing on reintegration of offenders into society through education and vocational training, tailored to individual needs to ensure prisoners can lead law-abiding and self-sufficient lives upon release. |
| | Rules 91 and 92 | Covers the treatment of prisoners. Defines the purpose of a prison sentence as the establishment of a desire to live a law-abiding, self-supporting life. Prisoners' self-respect and sense of responsibility should be fostered, including by means of education. |
| | Rule 102 | Pertains to work, specifying that sufficient time should be factored in for the provision of education. |
| | Rule 104 | Pertains to education. Stipulates that further education provision should be made available to all prisoners capable of profiting from it. States that the education of illiterate prisoners should be compulsory and special attention be paid to it by the prison administration. Prison education should be integrated with community equiveillance to support continuing education post-release. |

The adult prison estate in England consists of 113 prisons (including young offender institutions [YOIs] that also hold 18-to-21-year-olds). They are predominantly (88%) state-run. Only 14 operate independently under three private providers (HMPPS, HMPS and Probation Service 2024). As of June 2025, 87,334 individuals were incarcerated in England and Wales, representing approximately 99 per cent total prison capacity (MoJ and HMPPS 2025a).

A comprehensive UK parliamentary inquiry into prison education resulted in 37 wide-ranging recommendations (HoCEC 2022a). Of these, 78 per cent were accepted by the government, either fully or in principle, and 22 per cent were rejected (HoCEC 2022b). Concurrently, government-initiated reviews focused on reading in prisons and pandemic recovery (Ofsted 2022; Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022; Spielman and Taylor 2021). However, these reviews lack comprehensive evaluation against legal and policy benchmarks, underscoring the need for an integrated and contextualised analysis.

This narrative review meets that need by establishing a foundational context of historical and current legal obligations, policy and practice through which to support an exploration of the structural conditions that enable or hinder effective prison education. While focused on provision in England, the present review remains framed within the obligations of international prison education standards, providing broader relevance. The objective is to evaluate legal obligations and policy approaches for prisons in England regarding:

(i) the aims and objectives of adult prison education; and
(ii) the delivery and implementation of adult prison education.

The evaluations made here may not apply to private prisons, which operate independently; nor do they apply to Welsh prisons, where governance and inspection falls under the Welsh Assembly and Estyn (HMPPS in Wales 2019).

## Methodology

Publicly available publications provide the foundation for this review. Although this is a narrative rather than a systematic review, efforts were made to capture all relevant documents that:

(i) were published from 1999 onwards (the year that *The Prison Rules 1999* for England and Wales were introduced [GovUK 1999]);
(ii) were published by government and parliamentary departments;
(iii) were national in scope, rather than limited to individual prisons or region;
(iv) were accessible to the public; and/or
(v) were published by official prison and prison education-related national bodies, such as charities and educational organisations.

A search for the term "prison education" was carried out via www.gov.uk and www.parliament.uk. The results were screened for relevance, identifying 16 relevant documents. A further five documents were found by manually browsing the education, justice and crime sections of the House of Commons Library (HoCL) page. Notable prison charities, including the Prisoners' Education Trust, the Prisoners' Learning Alliance, Clinks, the Prison Reform Trust and the Howard League for Penal Reform, were identified via a Google search for "prison education" and subsequently filtered manually, yielding 18 documents. Ancestry screening and in-text referencing checks produced a further 53 documents, all traced via Google searches. Recent annual reports from Ofsted and HMI Prisons were located on their respective websites, and relevant legislation was checked on the UK Government's dedicated legislation website.[1] In total, 111 source documents, three government press releases, eight pieces of legislation and 14 documents relating to wider education and legal rights were reviewed.

## Policy approaches to adult prison education in England: aims and objectives

This section provides context for adult prison education policy in England as an element of purposeful activity, and frames policy aims in relation to (i) research evidence, (ii) measured outcomes and (iii) values-based approaches.

### Prison education within the context of purposeful activity

In England, prison education forms a component of "purposeful activity", one of four key measures of a healthy prison (HMI Prisons 2023; Ofsted 2023). This aligns with Council of Europe (CoE 2006) principles that require the provision of a balanced programme of activities to meaningfully occupy prisoners.

However, insufficient purposeful activity is repeatedly reported (CSJ 2009; HMCIP 2023, 2024). Long-held ambitions for 50 per cent prisoner participation in education appear unmet. Significant numbers of prisoners have reported no involvement in education or vocational training, and historic claims of data manipulation cast doubt on official activity figures (CSJ 2009; HMPPS and MoJ 2020a, MoJ 2010). With no legal entitlement to minimum hours of purposeful activity, prison rules, guidance and intended normalisation principles are undermined. Historically, targets for minimum hours of purposeful activity have proven elusive, leading to their dissolution amid assertions that increasing prison populations have eroded gains in activity offerings (HoCHAC 2005). In recent years, efforts have been further hampered by rising prisoner numbers (frequently exceeding individual prison capacity), staffing challenges and hangovers from COVID-19 restrictions enforcing prolonged cell confinement (HMI Prisons 2021; Justice Committee 2022a, 2022b).

[1] See www.legislation.gov.uk.

Thus, significant barriers to education exist, conflicting with prisoners' rights to education and official policy intentions (HMCIP 2023; Ofsted 2022). This also reflects a broader systemic issue relating to the priority and value accorded to education within the prison regime, and indicates resource limitations.

### Policy aims in relation to empirical evidence

Policy aims for adult prison education in England principally serve objectives of (i) reducing reoffending and (ii) increasing prisoners' employability (ALIN et al. 2019; MoJ 2018a, 2018b). These long-term outcomes align with the predominant focus of prison education research (Berglund et al. 2025), seemingly a circular dynamic, whereby policy appears simultaneously informed by and directive of the research agenda. Government documents cite a range of UK and international studies to justify these objectives, detailed in Tables 2 and 3. However, the appropriateness of these long-term measures has been questioned due to the wide-ranging definitions and time limits applied in studies, and the complexity of confounding variables (Nur and Ngunen 2023; Reed 2015; Gehring 2000). The multifactorial nature of reoffending and employability hinders the challenge of isolation for causal analysis, highlighting the need to shift focus in prison education research towards proximal outcomes in order to inform decision-making. Hence, in practice, despite broad evidence that participation in prison education produces these desired outcomes, the specific mechanisms involved are still unknown.

### Policy objectives in relation to outcome measures

Analysis shows that prison education contracts in England have contributed to reduced reoffending, with a 7.5 per cent one-year reduction noted (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018). Impacts on employment have, however, remained consistently weak. A 1996 Home Office evaluation cited by Hilary Metcalf et al. (2001) found no improvement in employment prospects; the skills acquired were either at too low a level or were misaligned with labour market needs. Similarly, the first national prison education contracts achieved a mere 1.8 per cent increase in employment, despite this being a primary objective (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018). Recent prison performance data reveal that only 34 per cent of prisons (41 establishments) scored at level three ("good performance") or higher for measures of post-release employment, with 66 per cent categorised as concerning or seriously concerning (MoJ 2016, 2023a, 2023b). While education is not the sole determinant of post-release employment, these results point to a clear need for improved educational provision if policy goals around employability are to be realised.

### Values-based prison education

Reviews, however, have criticised an overemphasis on employability, stressing that the wider benefits of learning should be promoted (Coates 2016; HoCESC 2005).

**Table 2** Studies cited in government documents evidencing the impact of prison education on reduced reoffending

| Reference | Demographic | Details |
|---|---|---|
| Social Exclusions Unit (SEU 2002) | Ex-prisoners with low levels of attainment | UK study showing that prisoners who had not participated in prison education or training were three times more likely to reoffend than those who had. |
| Ministry of Justice & Department for Education (MoJ and DfE 2017) | UK prisoners released in 2010 | Prisoners who took part in any form of learning activity had significantly lower reoffending rates than their peers who had not; the former had a one-year reoffending rate of 34% compared to 43% for the latter.<br>A propensity-score matching analysis of 10,000 prisoners determined that learning achievement rates had little impact compared to participation in learning. |
| Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. (2018) | Prisoners participating in prison education under OLASS 3 UK government contract | Participation resulted in re-offending rates of 32.6% compared to 40.2% for non-learners. |

**Table 3** Studies and data cited in government documents linking increased employability to reduced reoffending

| Reference | Details |
|---|---|
| Social Exclusion Unit (SEU 2002) | Reported a 76% unemployment rate prior to entering prison compared with 5% of the general population. |
| Baron (2008), cited in Hopkins (2012) | Identified a direct relationship between unemployment and property crime in Canada. |
| Kapuscinski et al. (1998), cited in Hopkins (2012) | Demonstrated a (complex) relationship between rising unemployment and rising crime in Australia. |
| Hopkins (2012) | Survey outcomes of 1,435 newly sentenced prisoners surveyed in 2005–2006:<br>68% were unemployed in the four weeks prior to entering custody;<br>68% agreed that having a job would stop them reoffending;<br>40% reported needing help with work-related skills;<br>41% reported needing help with education.<br>Summary: employment in the year prior to custody resulted in a lower likelihood of reconviction one year post-release at 40% for those employed compared to 65% without employment. |

In recent years, there has been a notable shift towards actively championing the holistic benefits of prison education, with official reviews extolling prison education as a valuable driver for emotional wellbeing, self-confidence, conflict reduction and improved behaviour, also acknowledging the potentially negative prior experiences among prisoners (Coates 2016; HoCEC 2022a; Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022; Spielman and Taylor 2021). This resonates with the United Nations' call for values-based guiding principles (Muñoz 2009) and, encouragingly, snippets of policy wording also embrace a wider approach that views prison education as a means of unlocking potential, building social capital and improving wellbeing (MoJ and HMPPS 2019a). Unfortunately, however, recent calls for the development of policy reflecting a holistic approach to prison education have not been addressed by government (HoCEC 2022a, 2022b) and, in practice, prison education has yet to be structured to reflect a more human-focused approach.

### Summary: insights into policy aims and objectives for adult prison education in England

Identifying and aligning educational offerings with prisoners' needs and aspirations is essential for fostering genuine personal development and improving long-term outcomes for individuals post-release, thereby fulfilling both policy aims in England and United Nations (UN) values-based ambitions. As a first step towards diversifying the focus of prison education research, it would be helpful to measure how prison education helps to unlock prisoners' goals and potential. Furthermore,

current benchmarks' inability to effectively capture the long-term impact of prison education, coupled with persistently poor employment outcomes, indicate that policy aims may require reconsideration to better reflect the potential outcomes that prison education can achieve.

## Policy approaches to adult prison education in England: operational delivery

This section provides a synopsis of the operational delivery processes affected by prison education policy, specifically reviewing: (i) prison education contracts and funding, (ii) remuneration schemes that pay prisoners to participate in education, and (iii) access to technology for learning.

### Prison education contracts and funding

Oversight of prison education in England has undergone significant shifts over the past two decades. Initially, management transitioned from local to national control under a now-defunct Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) (SEU 2002; NAO 2008) led by the Department for Education. Funding peaks in 2005–2006 coincided with a nationwide basic skills improvement agenda, before subsequent budget cuts led to a prolonged period of stagnation despite rising prison populations (Home Office et al. 2005). Reforms sought consistency and efficiency, with core education provider numbers falling from a high of 28 (HMPS et al. 2004) to just four in 2012 (Coates 2016). However, with each provider covering multiple geographical prison areas, structures were criticised for constraining flexibility and limiting responsiveness to local needs (ibid.).

In 2019, OLASS provision was replaced by a new Prison Education Framework (PEF). This returned governance responsibility to the justice department, and reintroduced limited local influence by allowing prison governors to manage certain aspects of education aligned with labour-market needs (MoJ and HMPPS 2019a). A core, provider-delivered curriculum comprising basic skills, literacy, numeracy, ICT and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), was delivered through Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs), with vocational training in areas such as hospitality, construction and facilities management commissioned according to local need (ALIN et al. 2019; LTE Group 2021). Supplementary, short-term contracted programmes could be procured via a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS). These often involved charities such as the Shannon Trust and the Prisoners' Education Trust (Clinks 2022; MoJ 2018a, 2018b).

Under the PEF, prison education funding remained limited, comprising around one third of the equivalent community adult education budget per learner with no additional funding for learners with special needs. Delivery was further compromised by poor teacher retention rates and providers' reliance on prison officers to facilitate turnout, coupled with financial penalties for low attendance (AOC 2022; HoCEC 2022a; UCU and PLA 2021). Despite PEF changes designed to

address rigid contract structure concerns, calls for greater flexibility and local links remained, as did criticism that some governors' lack of contract-management experience hindered provision (HoCEC 2022a, 2022b).

As of October 2025, the PEF has been replaced by a newly branded Prisoner Education Service (PES), while the number of education providers has been reduced to three: Milton Keynes College, the LTE Group (Novus) and the PeoplePlus Group Ltd (MoJ 2025; PET 2025). Once heralded as a means of transforming outcomes (MoJ et al. 2023), the PES has instead brought further budgetary cuts of up to 60 per cent, prompting an outcry (HMI Prisons 2025). The implications of these cuts are yet to be fully realised; however, significant reductions in offerings are inevitable. PES' strategic priority of improving literacy and numeracy to support employment (MoJ 2021) echoes historic OLASS intentions. Yet without a wider evidence base establishing the mechanisms and conditions under which skills development can best be improved, there appears to be little foundation for meaningful change.

Questions also remain as to whether education or justice departments are best suited for prison education oversight. There is a need to balance central accountability and adaptability against local and learner-specific needs whilst avoiding the transactional, service-type processes that have recently been reported (AOC 2022; Coates 2016). This raises the fundamental question: should participants in prison education be viewed primarily as prisoners or as learners?

#### Remuneration for prisoner participation in education

Prisoners are financially remunerated for participating in education. However, contrary to the published rules and guidance (CoE 2006; HMPPS and MoJ 2020b), they are often paid less than they would earn from prison work (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2023). This issue is repeatedly raised as a disincentive to participation, particularly as prisoners often have long-held negative views of education (HMI Prisons 2016; HoCEC 2022a; HoCESC 2005; NAO 2008). The government recently rejected a recommendation for parity contingent on educational progress, claiming that prison governors already have the autonomy required to adjust local prisoner pay rates (HoCEC 2022a, 2022b). This enduring issue adds a further, seemingly unnecessary obstacle to the already significant barriers impeding access to prison education.

#### Access to technology for learning

As early as 2003, there was an expectation that secure internet access would be provided in order to facilitate education for prisoners (DfES and HMPS 2003). To date, however, progress has been slow and remains severely limited (DfBIS and MoJ 2011; HoCESC 2005; HoCEC 2022a; MoJ 2021). Although the virtual campus (VC), a controlled, intranet-based ICT platform, is available in most prisons, major accessibility and capability restrictions, along with low-quality resources, have resulted in low user numbers: only around 6 per cent of the prison population used the platform (HoCEC 2022a; Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018; PLA 2020).

The lack of digital services significantly limits prisoners' educational opportunities, already hampered by frequent extended confinement. In-cell technology could significantly enhance educational offerings but has been slow to progress: in 2021, it was available in just three adult prisons, with unclear timelines for planned expansion to a further eleven institutions (MoJ 2021). In part, this has been attributed to restrictions on long-term resourcing (HoCEC 2022b). Yet in a world increasingly reliant on digital skills for essential services, restricting access contradicts the principle that prisons should, as far as possible, mirror community life and prepare prisoners for community reintegration (CoE 2006). This deficiency undermines positive re-engagement outcomes, potentially increasing the risk of recidivism, particularly among long-term prisoners facing substantial reintegration challenges.

#### Summary: insights into the operational delivery of adult prison education in England

Major structural challenges undermine the intended effectiveness of educational policies. Despite attempts to enhance local governance and adaptability through successive contract frameworks, persistent funding constraints, limited flexibility and insufficient technological access hamper intended delivery mechanisms. Additionally, the ongoing disparity in remuneration for participation in education compared to prison work acts as a further disincentive.

A much-needed re-evaluation of contract frameworks has produced the recently introduced PES. While a reduction in the number of education providers has arguably facilitated greater consistency across delivery processes, it may at the same time be hindering innovative, dynamic practice, and standing in the way of closer community education links and their potential benefits to prisons. Further improvements in resource allocation, including funding, and a commitment to integrating technology into prison education are equally essential if policy delivery intentions are to be supported effectively.

## Policy approaches to adult prison education in England: implementation

This section describes the historical and current processes that support the implementation of policy relating to prison education, specifically reviewing: (i) the screening and assessment of basic skills, (ii) education support for prisoners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD), (iii) individual learning plans, (iv) measures to improve basic skills and (v) wider employability skills (arts, vocational skills, higher education).

### Screening and assessing basic skills

Prisoners' basic skills levels have long been assessed within their first few days of arrival, yet effective implementation of an accurate tool of value has been

challenging. Historically, inconsistent processes and a lack of data-sharing systems across providers resulted in repeated testing; this in turn fostered apathy among prisoners, and yielded inconsistent and unreliable outcomes (Coates 2016; HMIPP 2001; HoCESC 2005). The results of early tests can furthermore potentially be hampered by drug and alcohol withdrawal and transition adjustments (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018; NOMS 2005; LSC 2007).

Screening has been mandatory since 2014 and, by 2015, the Basic Key Skills Builder (BKSB) became the consistent tool used. Despite established procedures, however, outdated data and information-sharing system deficits persist. Consequently, the need for repeated assessments remains an issue. Moreover, there have been instances of prisoners deliberately providing incorrect information so as to be prioritised for teaching and thereby reduce their isolated in-cell time (Coates 2016; Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018).

Learning needs across low levels of basic skills vary immensely. At pre-entry level of England's RQF (Ofqual 2015; GovUK 2026), learners may struggle to recognise letter names or count to 20, whereas at Level 1 – still considered a low level – competence is expected in grammar and punctuation, and fractions, percentages and decimals are taught (DfE 2025, 2024 [2018]). Table 4 details the qualification levels and respective equivalences (NAO 2008). To date, screening mechanisms have often failed to identify specific learning needs or knowledge gaps. It was not until March 2023 that an assessment tool for reading skills was piloted, following an identified lack of routine phonics screening. However, the tool is only used with prisoners opting to participate in education, training or work; as a result, the reading needs of a large proportion of the prison population remain unknown (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2023). Without a clear understanding of skills gaps, teaching is compromised, potentially starting from inappropriate points or omitting vital component skills needed for progression and thus jeopardising prisoners' engagement in education.

Progress has been made. However, the initial assessment's primary function is to determine current working skill levels and not to obtain a comprehensive understanding of prisoners' individual skills needs. Moreover, adult prisoners are likely to possess uneven skill profiles, developed over their lifetimes, that are inconsistent

**Table 4** Detail of England's qualification framework levels and equivalences (NAO 2008)

| Reference | Qualification/approximate age equivalence |
|---|---|
| Level 4+ | Higher education (HE) (degree level and above) |
| Level 3 | A-level (generally taken at age 18) |
| Level 2 | GCSE (generally taken at age 16) |
| Level 1 | Age 11 (expected age on leaving primary school) |
| Entry 3 | Age 9 |
| Entry 2 | Age 7 |
| Entry 1 | Age 5 |
| Pre-entry | Pre-primary school |

with a single specific assessment level. More nuanced diagnostic tools are therefore needed to ensure that the screening process has value.

## Educational support for prisoners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD)

### Legal and policy foundations

Section 32 (3) of *The Prison Rules 1999* for England and Wales mandates that "special attention be paid to prisoners with special educational needs" – a significant stipulation in light of the high proportion of the prison population with special educational needs (SEN) (MoJ 2024a; Taylor et al. 2021). These encompass a wide range of conditions, including learning disabilities with a measured IQ of less than 70; neurodivergence such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); acquired conditions such as traumatic brain injury and post-stroke conditions; and learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyscalculia. Under prison policy guidance, these are generally categorised as LDD (DfE and DfH 2015).

Despite these legal provisions, systemic failures have been noted in identifying prisoners with learning disabilities, for whom local authorities have a duty of social care under the UK Care Act 2014 (GovUK 2014). In their *Joint inspection of the treatment of offenders with learning disabilities within the criminal justice system* (HMIPP 2015), the Inspectorates of Probation and Prisons have noted that reasonable adjustments have often not been made for this demographic, and equality measures have been neglected. Furthermore, a legal disparity, potentially contravening the UK Equality Act 2010 (GovUK 2010), exists: legally binding UK Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for individuals up to the age of 25 with complex SEN and LDD no longer apply when adults enter custody, at which point they lose their statutory support entitlements (DfE and DfH 2015). In these cases, the legal basis for access to support then ironically falls to the same Equality Act (GovUK 2010) that is potentially been breached when EHCPs cease on entry to prison.

### Identification and support

The systems used thus far to identify and support prisoners with LDD have been heavily criticised. Despite long-standing expectations that comprehensive LDD screening arrangements are in place (HMPS et al. 2004), inadequate tools and recording processes have persistently obscured a clear understanding of prisoners' needs among providers (Taylor et al. 2021; HoCESC 2005; LSC 2007). Despite monitoring requirements, providers have historically lacked progress-reporting processes, leading to wide variation in how well they have met their obligations. Pockets of innovative practice have been acknowledged. However, Ofsted noted a persistent dearth of learning support assistants, and observed that prisoners were not automatically offered assistance following an LDD diagnosis (Ofsted 2009a).

The introduction of the UK Equality Act 2010 (GovUK 2010) marked a policy shift away from the implicitly rejecting support entitlements (DfES 2005; HoCESC 2005) towards ensuring both that LDD needs are met and that assessment outcomes

inform sentence planning (DfBIS and MoJ 2011). LDD screening is now a contractual obligation and thus mandatory on arrival in prison. It comprises a series of checklists and brief questions followed, if relevant, by an in-depth 45-minute discussion (LTE Group 2021; Ofsted 2022). Nonetheless, the screening process remains problematic due to its dependence on self-reporting, which requires prisoners to be aware of their own needs, be willing to disclose potentially embarrassing information, and to trust staff they may have only recently met (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018; Ofsted 2022).

#### Prevalence and data

The overall prevalence of LDD among prisoners remains unclear, as evidenced by a significant variance across data sources. Thus, reported LDD rates among those screened in 2019–2020 range from 29 per cent overall (MoJ 2021) to 36 per cent for men and 39 per cent for women (Taylor et al. 2021). The most recent data, meanwhile, show LDD rates of 57 per cent for prisoners enrolling on courses in 2024–2025 (MoJ and HMPPS 2025a). However, screening inconsistencies and limitations are evident across recording systems. Moreover, levels of co-morbidity are particularly unclear, and estimates suggest that up to 80 per cent of prisoners may have additional speech, language or communication needs (Taylor et al. 2021).

Poor oversight of prisoners' LDD needs has been acknowledged through the establishment of a cross-governmental working group focusing on outcomes, and a commissioned review of LDD screening tools. Concurrently, recent policy has described a ten-year vision to capture a thorough understanding of each prisoner's profile and needs (HoCEC 2022b; MoJ 2021, 2022).

#### LDD support delivery

Even in the case of identified LDD needs, shortages of specialised staff and inadequate learning resources have hindered support delivery (HoCEC 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, no additional funding is available for those with identified needs, thereby limiting targeted assistance – an issue which is likely to be compounded by the latest PES cuts.

Contracted education providers are obliged to provide necessary support. However, this does not extend to programmes outside the core curriculum. Thus, for any DPS-funded programme, prisoners are reliant on the quality of their provider-maintained records to communicate support needs, potentially impacting the consistency and effectiveness of support received (ALIN et al. 2019; HoCEC 2022a; Taylor et al. 2021; MoJ and HMPPS 2019a, 2019b).

Every prison in England now has a neurodiversity support manager. However, these positions are not directly linked to education. Nonetheless, their remit includes the provision of reasonable environmental adjustments to better support neurodivergent needs and track LDD prisoners' progress (HoCEC 2022b; MoJ and Chalk 2024). Encouragingly, MoJ (2023c) reports that four prisons have achieved autism-accredited status, with a further 14 working towards it, thereby supporting the latest national autism strategy's aim of achieving demonstrable progress across all areas

of the criminal justice system in addressing the needs of autistic prisoners (DfE and DfSC 2021).

#### Summary: LDD support

The strategic aim of LDD screening and support is to ensure that LDD learners' progress is equivalent to that of learners without LDD (ALIN et al. 2019) and the most recently published data indicate increasing parity in rates of qualification achievement (MoJ and HMPPS 2025b). However, screening barriers continue to impact outcome reliability, hindering providers' understanding of learner needs and formal diagnoses. Moreover, it is unrealistic to depend exclusively on neurodiversity support managers to provide cross-prison support for large LDD populations without assistance from additional LDD specialist teams (in dyslexia, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and behavioural support). There is a clear argument to be made that far more LDD funding and specialists are needed in every prison, and that these should be integrated with education services as is the norm in the wider community.

### Individual learning plans

Individual learning plans (ILPs) have been mandatory since the first national prison education contracts became fully operational in 2006. They are designed to place learners at the centre of the educational process. The expectation was that an ILP would be developed for each prisoner within seven days of joining a course, and that it would comprise initial screening assessments, personal goals and achievements, and potential progression routes with incremental goals and long-term aims. Key workers responsible for overseeing education provision were expected to deliver monthly one-on-one progress reviews. Additionally, if prisoners were transferred to another institution, ILPs were expected to move with them within seven days of their relocation (HMPS et al. 2004).

Despite clear guidance and the comprehensive scope of ILPs, they have attracted considerable criticism. A report by the House of Commons Education Committee described ILP delivery as shambolic, haphazard, lacking a reliable record transfer system and necessitating urgent improvement in order to support better and more person-centred prison education (HoCESC 2005). In response, the initial guidance was simply highlighted as means of remedy (DfES 2005). Yet, in 2008, the National Audit Office again found consistent systems for learner planning to be severely lacking: 33 per cent of ILPs reviewed lacked specified courses, and fewer than 50 per cent recorded progress. Furthermore, prisoners often did not enrol in or attend the courses outlined in their ILPs (NAO 2008), and similar deficiencies were reported by Ofsted (2009a). The absence of a national prison database for recording educational progress and achievements further disrupted the continuity of ILPs aggravated by issues of mass prisoner mobility (CSJ 2009; Ofsted 2009a).

Where effective, ILPs have involved learners and employed standardised practices. Dame Sally Coates has advocated for ILPs to be central to sentence planning,

with prisoners actively involved and plans maintained in a consistent, digital passport-style format (Coates 2016). The latest policy and guidelines reinforce a commitment to ILPs, echoing previous expectations (MoJ and HMPPS 2019a; MoJ 2021). Although the issues detailed above persist (HoCEC 2022), efforts to improve the system are ongoing: a commitment to developing the digital infrastructure necessary for effective record-keeping has been made, and a renewed call for quality ILP implementation has been accepted (HoCEC 2022b).

### Improving basic skills

Since the early 2000s, prison education policy has prioritised basic skills literacy and numeracy, initially driven by employer surveys identifying literacy as a highly valued attribute, and job advert analyses suggesting that low literacy levels excluded applicants from up to 80 per cent of vacancies (Metcalf et al.2001; SEU 2002). At the same time, critics have argued that this narrow focus neglects broader education needs, inhibiting imaginative and flexible learning; moreover, they cite a lack of evidence linking basic skills to lower reoffending rates (DfES and HMPS 2003; Home Office et al. 2005).

#### Overview of prisoner needs

The learning needs of prisoners are substantial and have changed little over the past decades. Of the 51,727 prisoners taking initial assessments in 2024–2025, primary-school working level equivalence (RQF Entry level 1–3) was identified for 69 per cent of those assessed in maths and 65 per cent in English (MoJ and HMPPS 2025c). Table 4 provides a breakdown of qualification level equivalences, and Table 5 lists reported rates for the prison population as a whole since 2001.

#### Historical progress

Early initiatives, under a nationwide skills-for-life strategy, considered prisoners to be a priority target demographic for skills improvement (DfEE 2001), with government-defined qualification targets (SEU 2002). Notable progress was recorded and celebrated as qualification attainment rose sharply (Carter 2003; DfES and HMPS 2003), with the Department for Education and Skills lauding "the first large-scale systematic introduction of nationally recognised skills training for offenders" (DfES 2005, p. 1). However, these targets were criticised for adjusting provision to match desired outcomes rather than learning needs, thereby encouraging prisoners to take unsuitable classes and enabling only a small proportion (25%) to acquire basic skills qualifications (HoCESC 2005). Further, the National Audit Office noted that 80 per cent of offenders working at Entry-level 3 English/maths or lower were not enrolled on any courses (NAO 2008). Early calls to remove targets were disregarded, and they remained integral indicators for OLASS contract accountability measures and PEF contracts, despite the risk that provision steered by outcome-oriented targets

**Table 5** Reported rates of prisoners with no qualifications or sub-L1 English/maths

| Reference | Reported % of prisoners with no qualifications (cf. general population) | Reported % of prisoners with sub-L1 English (cf. general population) | Reported % of prisoners with sub-L1 maths (cf. general population) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Metcalf, Anderson & Rolfe (2001) | 43% (17%) | Reading: 27%<br>Writing: 35% | 39% |
| HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Probation (HMIPP 2001) | Males: 52%<br>Females: 72% | Reading: 31%<br>Spelling: 49% | 37% |
| House of Commons Education Select Committee (HoCESC 2005) | 52% (15%) | 48% (23%) | 65% (23%) |
| Ministry of Justice (MoJ 2018a, 2018b) | 47% (15%) | | |
| Ministry of Justice (MoJ 2021) | 42% | 51% | 61% |
| Ministry of Justice (MoJ 2024b) | – | 71% | 73% |

*Note:* Where reported, figures relating to the general population are provided in parentheses. Levels refer to England's RQF levels.

potentially privileges those most likely to achieve those targets (HMPPS and MoJ 2018a, 2018b; HoCEC 2022b).

#### Implications for practice

The fourth iteration of OLASS contracts required prisoners to hold Level 2 (RQF) literacy and numeracy qualifications in order to access work-based opportunities, in part to encourage historically disengaged prisoners to embrace the benefits of education (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018). The current iteration typically requires only a Level 1 qualification; a requirement that has been criticised for skewing focus away from essential skills teaching to potentially unsuitable course enrolments, particularly as many prisoners are enrolled in courses that exceed their reading capabilities, leaving them unable to comprehend course requirements or materials (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022).

#### Lesson structure

Prison days and timetables are centrally imposed and dictated by a regime largely tailored to staffing requirements. Within this structure, basic skills have historically been taught as discrete lessons lasting approximately 3 to 3.5 hours, which have been persistently criticised as exceeding learners' ability to focus (HoCESC 2005; HoCEC 2022a; Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018). Ongoing calls have been made to embed basic skills within vocational teaching, which is seen as a more effective way of supporting learning and engagement. However, this poses challenges for vocational staff without specialist training in teaching literacy and numeracy, and efficacy evidence to support the approach is thus far lacking (Coates 2016; DfES 2005; HoCEC 2022a; Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018). Nonetheless, it has received support from the government and numerous other stakeholders in Coates' review of education in prison (Coates 2016), resulting in governors being directed to ensure greater flexibility with regard to the delivery of provision (MoJ 2021; MoJ and HMPPS 2019a).

#### Participation, achievement and data limitations

Approximately 27 per cent (23,294 prisoners) of the total prison population for June 2025 participated in a functional skills course in 2024–2025, with 17,876 achieving a full or partial grade. It must be noted, however, that participation refers here to course registration rather than attendance (MoJ 2024a; MoJ and HMPPS 2025c), and thus potentially translates to lower than reported engagement rates. Moreover, only 2.6 per cent (2,232 prisoners) of the June 2025 prison population achieved Level 2 FSQ English, and just 1.4 per cent (1,264 prisoners) achieved Level 2 FSQ maths (MoJ and HMPPS 2025c), suggesting that a significant need to improve outcomes remains. It should be noted, too, that the prison population is dynamic, with 70,828 first receptions and 48,301 prisoners released in 2022–2023 (MoJ and HMPPS 2024). This distorts real-term annual population figures and inflates reported participation and achievement percentages calculated from a single population figure.

### Reading education

Although English is part of the core prison education curriculum, reading instruction is not. Alarmingly, only some prison teachers possess the requisite expertise (e.g. in systematic synthetic phonics) to teach reading effectively. Consequently, prisoners who cannot read must often rely on input from charitable organisations (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022, 2023).

The Shannon Trust's Turning Pages reading programme has demonstrated significant success in improving prisoners' reading scores and self-rated reading confidence (Hopkins and Kendall 2017). The programme operates independently of the core English curriculum, relying on trained peer mentors and DPS-funded coordinators (Shannon Trust 2023). As a result, the programme is not always accessible to all who might benefit from it due to restrictions on prisoner movement and inadequate study spaces (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022). Although the literature points to increased collaboration with the Shannon Trust, education providers lack robust progress tracking and follow-up support to advance reading skills once Shannon Trust programmes have been completed (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2023). Consequently, very few prisoners learn to read while in prison, with many leaving without having improved their reading ability (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022). Although a prison reading action plan exists, severe staffing shortages and difficulties in recruiting qualified English teachers have stymied progress (HMPPS 2022; Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2023). In sum, over the past decades, analysis shows that most prisons have neglected to prioritise prisoners' basic reading skill needs (Ofsted 2009b; Ofsted 2022).

### Maths

In contrast to reading (Ofsted and HMI Prisons 2022, 2023), maths teaching and progress in prisons have not yet been subject to government review. Promisingly, however, the Shannon Trust now also offers a dedicated programme, Count Me In, to promote the acquisition of basic maths skills in much the same way as the Trust's Turning Pages programme supports reading (Shannon Trust 2023).

### Summary: improving basic skills

Considering the prominence and substantial funding accorded to basic skills education within national prison education contracts, the poor outcomes detailed above are concerning. The high proportion of prisoners with low levels of basic skills is doubtless symptomatic of a broader systemic education issue; nonetheless, the fact that many prisoners remain unable to read even after years in prison, alongside persistently poor literacy and numeracy outcomes, and an overreliance on the voluntary sector, indicates that significant changes are needed to improve basic skills education in prisons (HMI Prisons 2024; Ofsted 2022). Literacy and numeracy are crucial for obtaining and sustaining employment. However, the current system places a greater emphasis on employability outcomes than on the extent to which prisoners' skills themselves are developed, despite a limited evidence base supporting this

approach. At the same time, while there is broad consensus on the value of integrating basic skills into vocational training, evidence of its effectiveness again remains scant. The promising outcomes demonstrated by the Shannon Trust's peer-led Turning Pages programme further highlight this broader issue of insufficient evidence-based practice within prison education: despite its success in developing reading skills, the Turning Pages model has yet to be replicated or integrated within core prison education provision.

### Wider education (arts, vocational skills, higher education)

#### The arts

The arts have long been recognised by the prison service as having a significant part to play in prison education (HMPS et al. 2004), deemed beneficial to self-esteem, employment opportunities and wider learning. Whilst commitments have historically been made to a broader arts curriculum, only scant details were given, and provision has largely continued to emphasise basic and vocational employment skills (DfES 2005). Coates' advocacy for enhanced creative arts provision cites benefits for personal development and reduced reoffending rates (Coates 2016). Yet although the government has acknowledged the need to broaden access, arts education is deemed deliverable only "where feasible" and, although accessible via DPS funding, it remains absent from the core prison education curriculum (HoCEC 2022a, 2022b).

#### Vocational training

Calls have been made for an increased focus on vocational skills and work-based learning to go hand in hand with a wider national workforce skills strategy prioritising employability in prison education. Accordingly, intentions were set to broaden the range of Level 2 training available, and align training with workforce demands (HoCESC 2005; HMPS et al. 2004; Home Office 2006). However, issues relating to planning and accountability emerged, including a blurred distinction between purposeful activity and vocational learning, particularly in areas such as catering and physical education (Ofsted 2009a). Inappropriate planning measures included the introduction of long-term vocational programmes in a prison where over 85 per cent of prisoners had stays of only six to eight weeks. Post-Level 2 opportunities remained scarce, with learners further deterred by the need for tuition loans, exacerbating frustrations among those keen to progress (Coates 2016; Ofsted 2009b).

European guidelines and Prison Service Instruction (PSI) requirements stipulate that prisoners be afforded access to industry-recognised qualifications (CoE 2006; HMPPS and MoJ 2020c), and most prisons operating under PEF contracts offered a range of vocational programmes. However, COVID-19 severely curtailed access, with significant limitations remaining post-pandemic (Spielman and Taylor 2021). Concerns remain regarding programme quality and relevance to employment market needs, with reports of outdated qualifications delivered. Moreover,

gender stereotyping persists, and women prisoners have frequently been limited to industries such as hairdressing and beauty, with fields such as construction overlooked (HoCEC 2022a). Further calls for enhanced vocational offerings have been accepted, and commitments made to legislative changes and an employability innovation fund designed to enable wider-ranging prisoner apprenticeships. The new PES contracts are expected to include sector-specific training initiatives and work experience opportunities, as are new key performance indicators (KPIs) aimed at increasing vocational attainment; however, recent and substantial budget cuts may jeopardise such provision (HoCEC 2022b; MoJ 2021).

#### Higher education

Higher education (HE) is available to prisoners on a case-by-case basis through the Open University (OU). Early initiatives to increase prisoners' participation in HE in line with national goals resulted in 1,300 prisoners receiving funding to attend HE courses in 2005–2006 (DfES 2005) and a stated intention to enable higher-level progression pathways (Home Office 2006). However, participation dropped significantly following the introduction of student loans in 2012 (Coates 2016).

Tuition fees, which are now also required for Level 3 qualifications and some Level 2 courses, have been justified through arguments for parity between prison education and community adult education, as well as a national political shift that reframed adult education as a personal investment (Coates 2016; DfBIS and MoJ 2011). Yet parity is unattainable; prisoners face limited subject choices, and restricted access to materials and teaching support. Many are furthermore deterred from taking out student loans due to low confidence in their job prospects and concerns regarding access to course materials (Coates 2016; Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute et al. 2018).

What is more, student loan eligibility requirements effectively exclude longer-term prisoners: loan applicants must be within six years of their earliest possible release date to study at undergraduate level, and within four years for postgraduate study (MoJ and HMPPS 2019a). Despite the benefits of increasing educational engagement among prisoners and evidence linking HE participation to lower reoffending rates, calls for the six-year rule to be scrapped have to date been ignored, with the government claiming a need to ensure that taxpayers can reasonably expect loans to be repaid (HoCEC 2022a, 2022b).

#### Summary: insights into the implementation of adult prison education in England

The implementation of prison education policies in England reveals pervasive challenges that impede effective delivery and meaningful outcomes. While there have been advancements in screening and assessment protocols, they remain rudimentary, lacking the mechanisms needed to significantly impact teaching and learning. Meanwhile, inadequate data-recording systems force participants to engage in repetitive processes, leading to learner frustration and unreliable outcomes. Furthermore, despite stipulations mandating special attention to prisoners with LDD, insufficient funding and a lack of specialist support remain a significant concern, flagging up a

critical service gap, particularly given the substantial proportion of the prison population affected. The challenge is further exacerbated by unclear prevalence rates for LDD type and comorbidities. Similarly, despite clear ILP structures designed to foster meaningful educational engagement, and track progress and support needs, these plans remain inconsistent. Substantive improvements have yet to be implemented, which further undermines ILPs' ability to support educational engagement.

Despite criticisms of curricula that focus overwhelmingly on basic skills, evidence to support a more effective alternative roadmap is deficient. A clear empirical understanding of prisoner needs and the resultant benefits of different teaching and learning programmes is desperately needed in order to foster a truly enriched prison education curriculum that develops skills that both support rehabilitation and enrich wellbeing. What is more, there is an urgent need to reappraise and reduce the barriers surrounding vocational training, higher education and arts access – potentially by removing tuition fees or reducing requirements for student loans, especially in HE – in view of the net cost benefits of prisoner education. This in turn would support success and redress what appears an ideological rather than a pragmatic, outcome-focused approach to adult prison education.

## Review summary

The implementation of prison education policy in England is shaped by political ideologies and changes in government that directly influence its alignment with legal and human rights obligations. Prisoners' rights to prison education are bolstered by international standards, requiring education responsive to individual needs and aspirations and supporting the UN's advocacy for dignity-driven prison education (Muñoz 2009). Encouragingly, recent shifts in policy, including the partial adoption of recommendations presented by the House of Commons Education Committee (HoCEC 2022a), suggest that policy and practice are nudging towards a more human-centric approach where negative prior experiences of education can be reset, and prisoner wellbeing prioritised.

By reviewing historical and current practices from a policy and legal perspective, framed within international standards, alongside governmental and parliamentary inspection reports, this article provides a unique insight into the persistent tensions between the economic, political and humanistic factors shaping education in prison. The interplay between these factors is complex, and a comprehensive evaluation of current practices only possible when placed within the context of surrounding influences such as policy aims, contract structures and funding.

Conclusions regarding the changes needed to improve outcomes generally align with existing reviews. Significant additional funding is required in order to improve access to digital technology and information-sharing services, minimum entitlements to purposeful activity time, and LDD support on a par with community services. However, other potentially impactful shifts are more ideological, values-based or procedural in nature. These, underpinned by valuing education as integral to the prison regime, include: developing clear and transparent definitions of procedural terminology; establishing clear lines of accountability for ILP quality; reporting

vocational and arts-based participation rates; providing real-terms pay parity for those participating in prison education; improving community education links; and facilitating greater collaboration across different providers.

Crucially, the field lacks an applied evidence base to inform targeted reforms. Future policy change will only be possible if urgent research questions are addressed: what are LDD support needs; what measures to improve basic skills work in practice; what barriers impede access to prison education; what impact does prison education have on wider wellbeing; how effective is vocationally embedded basic skills teaching; how effective are existing screening and assessment tools; and what employability skills are the most impactful? Without answers to these research questions, subjective ideology will continue to drive change, and ultimately limit improvements. In any other setting, the consistently inadequate provision of a public service over decades, without demonstrable improvements, would be unlikely to be publicly tolerated. It speaks to the hidden nature of prison that poor outcomes have been endured for so long.

In conclusion, while policy intent is evolving and ongoing issues are being acknowledged, persistent systemic barriers still hinder effective implementation and equitable access. Any meaningful, productive change that will positively affect adult learners' lives in and beyond prison demands a significant shift in values, resourcing and research-led strategies.

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## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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