

LIFELONG LEARNING INQUIRY

Call for evidence on lifelong learning, crime and social exclusion

OCR is a leading UK awarding body offering qualifications to learners of all ages through 13,000 schools, colleges and other institutions, including extensive provision for offenders both in prisons and in community settings. Our broad portfolio includes GCSEs, A Levels, OCR Nationals, NVQs and a range of vocationally related qualifications. From September this year we shall offer the new Diplomas for 14-18s. OCR is part of Cambridge Assessment, Europe's largest assessment agency including three examination boards.

In the past, OCR has provided written and oral evidence on offender learning to the Education and Skills Committee and the relevant All-Party Parliamentary Group in order to improve the range and quality of provision.

OCR's role in relation to prisons and offender learning more generally is to provide qualifications which offenders can achieve and to support those who deliver the learning programmes leading to the qualifications. This submission, therefore, mainly addresses the relationship between education underachievement and offending, and the activities which appear to have positive outcomes against this backdrop. We are not able to provide the sociological and psychological analysis that others are better placed to supply.

The statistical evidence showing the correlation between poor school-age participation and achievement and a future life in crime is incontestable. For example there are 1% school exclusions in the general population compared with 49% for offenders, and 3% truancy in general population compared with 30% for offenders. I would invite detailed consideration of the recent National Audit Office report (*Meeting Needs? The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service*, March 2008) to confirm this correlation. Many future offenders are identifiable at school.

Equally, there is little evidence that adults in mid-life with no previous criminal record are likely to turn to crime later, with the relatively occasional exception of crimes of passion, white-collar fraud and suchlike. If a young person reaches 30 without a criminal record, they are unlikely to embark on repeated crime thereafter.

Similarly there is already persuasive statistical evidence of reduced recidivism and increased employability rates for offenders who have followed specific work-related programmes.

- For example, the employment programme led by National Grid and including around 100 companies across a range of construction, engineering, manufacturing and service sectors claims a recidivism rate of 7% against a national average of 70%.
- Rail trackwork and telephone line projects based in prisons, although they have a smaller sample to draw on, make similar claims.
- The Prince's Trust works with 59 prisons, and can provide good evidence on both its individual successes but also the current prison regime's deterrents to offenders' participation in education and employment programmes.

- As a small-scale example, Camden Garden Centre offers placements to local prisoners nearing the end of their sentence leading to employment, and has been pleased with the results and the commitment of the new employees.
- Research organisations such as the Prison Reform Trust have produced substantial information on the types of initiative which yield better results than general provision.

Secondly, there is a host of highly cost-efficient personal development schemes, often initiated by charitable and voluntary organisations and operating on a shoestring, which have secured the undying gratitude of prisoners who have benefited from them. These schemes are characterised by one-to-one tuition and mentoring, with a contract of trust between a tutor/mentor, who may be a current or former offender, and the prisoner. Leading examples include St Giles' Trust, The Shannon Trust and Toe to Toe. They will be able to provide evidence of their outcomes and their value for money.

More anecdotally, there have been numerous examples of ex-offenders addressing conferences and official bodies, for example meetings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group and the previous Prison Education Group which it subsumed. Individuals such as Eric Allison, Damien Hewitt and Peter Woolf have provided first-hand accounts of their negative experiences in education and in life in general, and the reasons why they decided to forge a different life based on education gained in prison. Of course, they are individuals who deserve personal credit and would not claim to represent prisoners in general; but what they say has clear lessons, mainly relating to motivation and commitment, for those who design education and training programmes.

There has been evident development in offender learning in recent years, for example in the East of England OLASS Test-Bed where worthwhile initiatives have been encouraged to meet the needs of specific client groups in particular localities. However, as a consequence of serial infrastructural tinkering, the momentum of curriculum development has been regularly disrupted, with fundamental changes virtually every year in government departmental responsibility, offender management services, education funding and contracting arrangements, probation and support services, and information systems policy and practice. As a consequence, because those concerned have been preoccupied with adapting to new procedures and operating structures, system-wide improvement has been impossible while planning and expenditure have achieved unprecedented levels.

Further to this theme of unsatisfactory progress, we would argue that offender learning is a sector hallmarked by extensive research with clear findings followed by at best inconsistent, and in some areas negligible, action. We would go so far as to argue that what needs to be known is already known; and that what is required now is:

- the analysis of pre-existing information to draw focused conclusions on what works and why;
- a resolute plan of action based on these conclusions, to be delivered across the relevant agencies, with a determination to succeed;
- an embargo on structural reform while the focused action plan is implemented;
- an end to the mindset that systemic ineffectiveness is inevitable and success is an occasional localised blip;
- a boost in the contribution of support and resettlement agencies.

The conclusions of this line of argument would include the following:

- Future potential criminals to be identified from key indicators, not social or ethnic prejudice, when they are of school age and specific attention given to personalised learning programme which will reduce their risk of offending. The current and future range of 14-19 options, combined with the announcement that the participation age will be raised to 18, should enable teenagers to pursue a programme which will meet their needs. Once they have become repeat offenders their offending behaviour becomes far more difficult (and expensive) to address.
- A programme to create a network of employment-based initiatives similar to those listed earlier, ranging in scale from National Grid to Camden Garden Centre, to clarify the success factors and establish the blueprints for, say, 2000 more schemes suitable for different locations and offenders.
- A system-wide implementation plan based on existing structures which commits providers and contractors to specific programmes and initiatives based on individual learning plans with target outcomes delivered through a strategy agreed among the relevant agencies.
- A more specific commitment to fund longer-term the successful initiatives which currently operate on an ad hoc, year-by-year basis generating per-participant outcomes which OLASS contractors would envy.

OCR has established 5 principles for the effective delivery of offender learning which, while they fall outside this aspect of the Inquiry, merit repetition wherever the subject is being discussed. In our view, if these five principles are applied across the offender learning sector they will lead to significant improvement in achievement and reduction in recidivism. The five principles are:

- IT facilities and internet access for offenders
- the integration of learning programmes with other prison activities
- relevant training and development for prison officers and other contributors to OLASS programmes
- a service-wide database of transferable offender records
- incentives for offenders to participate in education

In addition, as long as prisoners are moved abruptly from one prison to another, the opportunity for them to accumulate units of achievement with the Qualifications and Credit Framework is even more important than for the population at large. Programmes should warmly embrace the unit and credit framework in order to enable learners whose lives are otherwise unsettled to follow a route to achievement.

OCR hopes the Inquiry finds this submission of interest. As ever, we would be happy to follow up any issue we have raised should the Inquiry wish to do so.

John Brenchley
Regional Stakeholder Manager, and Leader of OCR's Offender Learning Group

john.brenchley@ocr.org.uk
07803 198832