

Review of Education in Prisons

Unlock Response

About Unlock

- We are an independent award-winning charity, providing trusted information, advice and advocacy for people with criminal convictions.
- Our staff and volunteers combine professional training with personal experience to help others overcome the long-term problems that having a conviction can cause.
- Our expertise, knowledge and insight helps us work with government, employers and others to change policies and practices so that together we can create a fairer and more inclusive society.

Our response

- Unlock as a charity focuses on the problems that people face as a result of their criminal record.
- We do not provide education in prisons or in the community to individuals.
- However, we run a Helpline that deals with over 5,000 people with convictions each year.
- We also run training for practitioners, including prison education providers, on criminal record disclosure.
- As a result of this work, we believe we have some valuable comments to make to this consultation process, particularly in ensuring that people leaving prison are properly prepared for life with a criminal record through improved education in prison.

Educating individuals in understanding criminal records and disclosure

- There is one factor that everyone leaving prison at the end of the prison-part of their sentence has in common – they have a criminal record.
- Only 29% of prison leavers receive advice on dealing with their criminal record from the Work Programme.¹
- 70% of the calls we receive to our Helpline are about disclosure in employment.

¹ Recommendation of Evaluation of day mandation of prison leavers for the Work Programme (2014) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/399519/rr897-evaluation-day-one-mandation.pdf

- In research we carried out in 2010,² we found that only 2% of people interviewed in prison could demonstrate an accurate understanding of what the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act meant.
- 60% of those surveyed stated that they did not understand the Act.
- Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC's) are responsible for providing resettlement services to people in prison only in the last three months of their sentence. This does not appear to be translating in practice to properly preparing people with criminal record disclosure issues, and the window of opportunity in a 'resettlement' context is too narrow for individuals to be properly prepared on this subject.
- There remains **no comprehensive education course** available in prisons which is accredited and properly prepares people for "life with a criminal record".
- We regularly get feedback that in 'employability' courses there is a short section which simply looks briefly at "the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act" and then takes individuals through writing a disclosure letter. This is not, in our view, sufficient provision.
- Common feedback we get on our Helpline is that "I was never told this in prison". That can often mean people lose education or job opportunities because they have either over-disclosed or under-disclosed their criminal record.
- There is confusion in prisons about whose job 'criminal record disclosure' is. Education providers tend to assume it's 'probation' (CRC's). CRC's tend to assume education providers cover disclosure in depth as part of their 'employability' courses.
- People in prison are unaware about the implications of their criminal record on any house or car insurance policies that they hold.
- Self-employment courses rarely cover the difficulties (and solutions) for people with convictions to find public liability insurance.
- The education choices that people in prison make should be well-informed by self-awareness of their realistic chances of further education and/or employment in the future once they are released. To do this, a clear understanding on if and/or how their criminal record might play a part in this is of the utmost importance.

Recommendation: Commissioners of prison education providers should attach significant importance on education focused at improving awareness of criminal record disclosure issues.

Recommendation: Ensure that education providers in prisons have an accredited education course that could be delivered to people in prison which covers a range of 'criminal record disclosure'

² Unlock & Prison Reform Trust (2010) *Time is Money* - <http://www.unlock.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Time-is-Moneysmall.pdf>

issues, including employment, disclosure and criminal record checks, but also insurance, housing, travel and other areas of life where criminal records can come up, and how to deal with these.

Recommendation: Education on criminal record disclosure should be provided as a core part of education provision, to ensure that individuals are self-aware of the impact that their criminal record might have on their future plans.

Recommendation: Commissioners and providers of education in prison should work alongside CRC's and careers advice provision in prison to understand and map their respective roles in 'criminal record disclosure' to ensure the issue is looked at comprehensively, with each respective provider playing their role and understand the role and responsibilities of the others.

Educating the providers in understanding criminal records and disclosure

- We regularly find that tutors and education providers are delivering courses on disclosure which they have never been trained to deliver – they have 'self-taught' themselves and recognise this has its limitations.
- Criminal record disclosure legislation has significantly changed in recent years. In 2013, a whole new 'filtering' regime for DBS checks was introduced. In 2014, the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act was significantly reformed. In 2015, a criminal offence of accessing criminal records came into force. Awareness of these changes is low within prisons, both amongst individuals and practitioners.
- In one example we came across recently, an individual paid out of their own pocket to attend one of our training courses because their employer didn't have the training budget to cover the cost but they felt they were unable to do their job properly otherwise.
- As is shown in the comments below, there is a demand amongst front-line practitioners for education providers to work alongside experts like Unlock to ensure that the education provision that they provide in prisons is accurate, reliable and informative. However, Unlock is not directly funded to provide this support and education providers do not seem to have the resources or mandate to develop strong relationships with subject-matter experts.

Comment One

"I am employed by the [Removed] as an Employability Tutor at HMP [Removed]. I have subscribed to your newsletters, updates, etc and seek permission to use your materials in the classroom when teaching learners with convictions. Your information is most helpful during the course I run and it greatly helps me in assisting learners to be positive about securing work upon their release. If I could give them copies of your material to insert into their portfolios this would serve as a reminder of the work completed during the course."

Comment Two

"I am a part time tutor at HMP [Removed] and teach a unit on Applying for a Job. We spend quite a lot of time on Disclosure as part of the unit (I attended one of your masterclasses last year) and I find one of the main barriers I face is convincing the men that there are employers out there who won't simply bin their application because they disclose a conviction. I had previously found some information on the Unlock hub and elsewhere on the web about employers who are known to have employed people who disclose convictions but nothing nearly as comprehensive as the recent Unlock update on Friendly Employers."

Recommendation: Prison education providers should invest in the skills and knowledge of their staff, and in the materials and resources that they use, to ensure that they properly understand criminal record disclosure.

Recommendation: Commissioners should ensure that providers have sufficient resources to work alongside subject-matter experts to develop their education provision so that it is tailored to needs of people in prison.

Educators with convictions

- The use of 'peer mentors' in the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' agenda has been seen as an important way of achieving strong rehabilitation outcomes.
- The use of people with convictions as teachers in prisons is, likewise, an important concept that should be looked at more seriously.
- There is a wealth of talented people with convictions in the community who have turned their lives around. These are individuals that are suitably qualified and would like to help others make the changes in their lives that they've made themselves.

Recommendation: Prison education providers should be much more open and inclusive towards recruiting prison educators who have a criminal record.

Recommendation: Prison security vetting should be more transparent in the way that it treats people with convictions, with a view to not unnecessarily discouraging applicants that have a criminal record.

Education and employment progression in the community

- Prison education tends to fail in recognising that education in prison is often a stepping stone into education in the community.
- Too often, good work done by individuals to educate themselves in prison comes crumbling down due to the attitudes and practices of further education and higher education providers in the community towards people who have been to prison.
- Too often, people leaving prison find employers fairly judge them because of their criminal record. Prison education providers should, alongside CRC's, build strong links with employers who are willing to employ people leaving prison if they have the right skills and qualifications.

Recommendation: Prison education providers should establish strong local and regional relationships with further education and higher education providers, as well as employers, to ensure that people leaving prison are able to transition into further educational and employment opportunities either before they are released or once they are in the community.

Increased use of technology

- Access to information is vital. We believe that an effective way to help people with convictions overcome stigma and discrimination is to empower them with the information, advice and guidance they need to help themselves.
- To put this philosophy into practice we have produced an online Information Hub which is the country's most comprehensive source of online self-help information on a wide range of issues that are relevant to those with criminal convictions. It is used by **over 50,000 individuals every month**. We have also developed an online disclosure calculator to help people work out for themselves if and when their convictions become 'spent'. This is used by **over 48,000 individuals every year**.
- Genuine access for people in prison to websites such as Unlock (instead of 'copies' uploaded to an intranet, which is not workable for small organisations like Unlock) is a necessity.

Recommendation: People in prison should have 'real-time' access to websites such as our information site (hub.unlock.org.uk) and disclosure calculator (www.disclosurecalculator.org.uk)

More information

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