# The development of accredited digital higher education distance learning opportunities for prisoners

**Evaluation Report**

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**with contributions from prisoner learners**

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## Abstract

There is clear evidence that prisoners who engage in prison education can: (i) enhance their social, cultural, and economic capital; (ii) increase their economic opportunities; and (iii) demonstrate positive engagement in rehabilitative objectives (Armstrong & Ludlow 2016; Behan, 2014; Costelloe, 2014; O'Grady & Hamilton, 2019).

For prisoners who participate in higher education, the net benefits increase further, with estimates that reoffending rates fall by between 20-40% (PRT 2021; Brown & Blooms, 2018). Indeed, engaging in higher education has been found to increase a prisoner's chances of employment, encourage active citizenship and desistance from crime, and improve general wellbeing – both during and after their sentence.

Whilst there is a growing evidence-base (Champion & Edgar, 2013; Coates 2016) to support the implementation of information technologies in prisons for the purposes of education (amongst other things), there currently appears to be limited knowledge, understanding, or indeed, consensus, about: (a) what technology currently exists that can be utilised to deliver higher education distance learning in prisons; (b) how to deliver high-quality higher education distance learning programmes for prisoners and what they might look like: outcomes; progression; qualifications; or (c) how such an offer might be operationalised: funding, marketing, recruitment, delivery, support, assessments.

This project sought to build an evidence-base to respond to a gap in our knowledge and understanding. The project was designed in consultation with an advisory group of key partners, including prisoners. Throughout, we explored the relative merits, or otherwise, of engaging in digital higher education distance learning for prisoners. Importantly, we wanted to understand, beyond the metric of qualification acquisition, how - or if - engagement in higher education could contribute to social and cultural capital growth.

Our findings demonstrate the diverse value that prison learners placed on higher education and the potential for social/cultural capital growth. The project evaluation also identified the significant benefits – and challenges – of developing digital, distance learning tools of delivery. The detailed evaluation of the project provides key learning, knowledge and understanding for higher education institutions, the prison estate and policy makers.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

In response to Covid-19, this project aimed to explore the feasibility of providing accredited, digital higher education distance learning opportunities for people in prison. This project sought to build an evidence base to develop our knowledge and understanding of higher education in prisons by investigating the relative merits and challenges of providing a digital higher education offer.

In collaboration with a prison partner, and including prisoner representatives, an Advisory Board was established to support the design, development, and implementation of the project. The designed module, titled *Exploring Justice*, was piloted with a small group of prisoners to test its feasibility. In addition to the metric of qualification acquisition, we also wanted to understand what an individual's engagement in higher education could offer in relation to their social and cultural capital growth.

## Project Aims

Three questions framed the project:

(a) What, if any, technology, currently exists within the secure estate that could be utilised to deliver accredited, digital, higher education distance learning in prisons; and what additional technology may be required?
(b) How can high-quality accredited, digital, higher education distance learning programmes for prisoners be provided in prison, and what such an offer might look like, i.e., outcomes, progression, and qualifications?
(c) What is needed, institutionally, to operationalise such an offer, i.e., marketing, recruitment, academic delivery, administrative support, and assessments strategies?

## Literature Review

In many ways, the case for prison education is a case more broadly for the right to education – and by implication, lifelong learning - as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNESCO, 2021). Distinguishing between educational value across different institutional settings, arguably misses the point. Irrespective of the setting, education has the potential to provide an empowering and transformative framework of change for all members of society (Illeris, 2014; Bourdieu, 1977; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Page, 2009). Conceptually, therefore, the case for prison education should be equitable with education in 'mainstream' society (UNODC, 2015).

When thinking about higher education in prison, however, whilst there is clear evidence of the value of higher education for prisoners (Coates, 2016; , PRT, 2021; HC, 2022), there is little support to provide the financial infrastructure required to enable prisoners to access higher education whilst in prison (see HC, 2022a, O'Grady and Machin, 2023). The upshot is that higher education as a component of the prison education offer is limited to those who have the personal financial capacity to fund such level of study, or whom are within an identifiable end-point of their sentence (e.g. Parole Eligibility Date).

Undertaking undergraduate or postgraduate study is challenging enough; doing this without the appropriate IT infrastructure is akin to having one hand tied behind your back. The lack of digital access is problematic across the piece, but this is especially notable for the small number of prisoners engaged in higher education. As the HoC Education Committee (2022:29) recently argued, 'a change in attitude to technology in prisons is long overdue'. Whilst there is now a strong evidence-base to lobby politicians to invest in technology, particularly secure internet services (King 2019), to date there is little

evidence of widespread, consistent and joined-up investment across the estate in England and Wales to provide digital access to prisoners. Where initiatives have been piloted, the resources are restricted, shaped and limited by the criminal justice system, with a focus on what cannot be done, rather than proactively working from a basis of what can be done. This project seeks to challenge this narrative.

## Methodological Approach

Access to the project site was secured through an initial meeting with the Governor of an identified prison in the East Midlands where permission was granted to pursue the project. Funding was obtained to support this project; enabling the project team to work with a single prison with up to 6 prisoners. A project Advisory Board was constructed, designed to ensure representative voices from the project team, the education department of the prison, along with prisoners. Other partners were invited to the Board as the project evolved, including colleagues from Coracle Inside. The project evaluation drew heavily on qualitative data techniques with interviews being carried out with each of the prisoner participants. Thematic analysis of the data was carried out by the researchers and prisoner participants. The project received ethical clearance from NTU and HMPPS, incorporating the prison partner.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings from the evaluation are provided thematically, incorporating the following considerations: (1) the case for education in prison exploring prisoner experiences, perspectives and motivations towards/of education; (2) the case for higher education in prison; with a focus particularly on organisational culture; (3) the case of digital learning in prisons which examines the role of technology as a tool to support higher education provision in prison; and (4) the case for digital higher education in prisons, particularly in relation to understanding the experiences of digital distance learning in practice.

## Conclusions

In concluding this report, the evidence from the evaluation indicates that providing prisoners with professional, accredited digital, higher education learning opportunities, supported with the appropriate digital tools and infrastructure necessary for effective independent study, could help to bolster an open, learning culture across the prison estate.

The findings from this evaluation project will enable prisons and higher education institutions to create similar tailored products, further contributing to the transformational potential of the educational landscape in prisons through partnerships.

# Section 1: Introduction and Context

In 2022 the Rt Hon Robert Halfon, then Chair of the Education Committee, launched the most recent in a long line of prison education inquiries. The inquiry was launched against the backdrop of the difficulties prison education had faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Recognising this in the context of the important contribution of education in enabling a prisoner to successfully re-enter mainstream society, both economically (via employment) and socially (via active citizenship), the inquiry set out to examine:

> …to what degree adults in prison and younger learners in custody can access suitable education that meets their needs, how effective current arrangements are in ensuring prisoners continue in training and employment on release and how this reduces reoffending. It will also look at the opportunities for those serving longer sentences (HC, 2020 (online)).

This inquiry was launched while we, here at NTU, were exploring how to develop our own higher education prison offer for people in prison. Over the preceding five years we had developed partnerships between our higher education institution and several prisons, offering *Learning Together* programmes. These non-accredited programmes provided opportunities for current undergraduate higher education students and prisoners to study alongside each other (see Hamilton & O'Grady, 2019 for further detail of this programme).

Our findings from this work revealed that students valued the opportunity to study at undergraduate level; not something many of the prisoners involved in the programme had previously undertaken. But ultimately students wanted more; they wanted to work towards credits, and they wanted to study in a more flexible way, drawing more widely on technology and digitisation.

In response to both Covid-19, and the experiences mentioned above, we set about designing a project to explore the feasibility of providing accredited, digital higher education distance learning opportunities. This project sought to build an evidence base to develop our knowledge and understanding of higher education in prisons by exploring the relative merits and challenges of such an offer.

In collaboration with a prison partner, and including prisoner representatives, an Advisory Board was established to support the design, development, and implementation of the project. The designed module, titled *Exploring Justice*, was then piloted with a small group of prisoners to test its feasibility. In addition to the metric of qualification acquisition (itself a proxy indicator of economic capital), we also wanted to understand what an individual's engagement in higher education could offer in relation to their social and cultural capital growth.

This report is the evaluation of that project. Through the report we share the journey of developing and providing an accredited, digital prison-based higher education distance learning programme. The background of the project is provided, included the realities of studying and learning without a technological infrastructure, and the current policy landscape in England. An overview of the project is then detailed, including project conception and ethical dilemmas. Following this, the findings from the evaluation are presented and discussed, for example, working in partnership; institutional challenges; the course design and build; the learners; associated pedagogies, assessment, and feedback practice and, of course, technology. We conclude the report with some key lessons learnt and recommendations for the future.

## 1.1 Project Aims

The aim of this project was to explore the feasibility of creating an accredited, digital, higher education distance learning module for use in prisons.

The project sought to gain the views of the prisoners who participated in the piloting of this module by asking them about their experiences and to identify any difficulties and challenges experienced.

There were three questions that framed this project:

(d) What, if any, technology, currently exists within the secure estate that could be utilised to deliver accredited, digital, higher education distance learning in prisons; and what additional technology may be required?

(e) How can high-quality accredited, digital, higher education distance learning programmes for prisoners be provided in prison, and what such an offer might look like, i.e., outcomes, progression, and qualifications?

(f) What is needed, institutionally, to operationalise such an offer, i.e., marketing, recruitment, academic delivery, administrative support, and assessments strategies?

# Section 2: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

Before sharing our reflections about what this project has taught us about the value and mechanics of delivering digital, HE distance learning programmes effectively and efficiently in secure settings, it is important to provide the context in which this project sits. Accordingly, this section provides a brief review of the academic literature across several key areas: firstly, what is the case for prison education; is this a worthwhile enterprise? On the back of this, what is the case for delivering HE programmes in a secure setting and what are the challenges and benefits of digitising this provision. Finally, we will explore the case for – and against – HE digital distance learning in prison.

## 2.2 The Case for (Higher) Education in Prison

Much has been written about the multi-faceted benefits of providing consistently high-quality, imaginative education in prison (Coates, 216; Clark, 2016; HC, 2022). In many ways, the case for prison education is a case more broadly for the right to education – and by implication, lifelong learning - as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNESCO, 2021). Distinguishing between educational value across different institutional settings, arguably misses the point. Irrespective of the setting, education has the potential to provide an empowering and transformative framework of change for all members of society (Illeris, 2014; Bourdieu, 1977; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Page, 2009).

Of course, as we shall see, it would be disingenuous to claim that there do not exist institutionally specific challenges in delivering prison education, whatever form that takes (higher or otherwise). Certainly, when we started out on this project to design and deliver a digitised, HE distance learning programme, we accepted a strong probability that we would face some significant institutional barriers; this proved to be the case, although not necessarily from the expected places.

However, recognising the inevitable institutional hurdles in how prison education gets delivered should not mask the well-documented universal benefits of education and lifelong learning. Conceptually, therefore, the case for prison education should be equitable with education in 'mainstream' society (UNODC, 2015). Time and space constraints do not allow us to explore the plethora of debates related to the overarching benefits of education or discussions relating to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Griffiths, 1998), but for our purposes suffice to say there is a broad consensus that – when done well – education is an important springboard for personal development, growth and wellbeing, as well as being strongly aligned with active citizenship and social cohesion (Coates, 2016; MoJ, 2018; HC, 2022; Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Costello, 2014; Brosens, Croux & De Donger, 2018; Behan, 2021).

Generally, the case for prison education as a mandated legislative requirement of purposeful activity within HMPS (Forster, 1998) has tended to be driven by economic and rehabilitative considerations, rather than through the lens of Universal 'rights' *per se*. In large part this might be seen as symptomatic of the dominance of populist discourses since the 1980s (Pratt and Miao, 2017; Shammas, 2020; Garland, 2021), perhaps even the emergence of the modern prison and its desire to punish, discipline and control (Foucault, 1977; Ignatieff, 1978; O'Donnell, 2016; Morris and Rothman, 1998). Whether we are looking through the wrong end of the telescope is a moot point. Encouragingly, however, as Clinks (2024:4) have acknowledged 'the last few years has seen a welcome focus by the Ministry of Justice, HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Ofsted on how we can improve the provision of education in prisons. Affiliated with this, 'the study of education in prison has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years' (UNESCO, 2021:14), including – but not limited to – the establishment of *The Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry* in 2014 and the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* in 2019.

Historically, however, the case for prison education has been predicated on a 'deficit-based' approach; this is unsurprising given prisoners' well-documented high levels of illiteracy, lack of formal qualifications, poor engagement in school-level education prior to incarceration and disproportionate levels of school exclusions (SEU, 2002; PRT, 2024). This *over*-representation of academic *under*-achievement is significant, when considering the strong correlation between education, unemployment and (re)offending (Lochner and Moretti, 2004; Ellison *et al*, 2017; Hjalmarsson *et al*, 2015; Bell, Costa and Machin, 2018; MoJ, 2011 & 2018a; HMGov 2005 & 2006).

Understandably, a key concern of successive Governments is how to break this cycle; prison education is accordingly positioned as a key tool to empower individuals to become more employable on release and to support their social reintegration into society (Little, 2015). The economic imperative whereby globalisation demands 'a more educated and continually [re-] educated workforce' (Jarvis, 2007:63) has therefore been very much front and centre of prison education policy in England and Wales. This is not to say that arguments for prison education as a facilitator of 'active citizenship', social justice (Griffiths, 1998) and transformative (social) responsibilisation - or indeed as a universal fundamental right - are entirely absent from official discourse/policy documents. Nevertheless, their presence tends to be fleeting – or indirect - at best. Instead, these broader perspectives tend to get subsumed by the prioritisation of education as a mechanism to enhance potential post-release employability (SEU, 2002; HMGov, 2005 & 2006; DBIS, 2011; MOJ 2018b & 2021) and rehabilitation (Bozick *et al*, 2018). As UNESCO (2021:42) point out, 'this approach tends to prioritize education in prison not as a right, but as a means to an end, the goal being rehabilitation'.

### 2.3 Beware the gap: putting policy into practice and the case for Higher Education

Against this 'economic imperative' backdrop, it is easy to see the implications for prisoners, particularly those serving longer determinate or indeterminate sentences. Rather than see education as a value in its own right, in the absence of economic meaning, prisoners may choose to disengage (Illeris, 2004). This is likely compounded if prison staff do not 'buy-in' to the concept of education as a transformative enterprise, or as a universal right (McTaggart, 2023; PLA, 2023). Moreover, funding streams are likely to be prioritised towards those educational programmes with an employability focus (Hodgson and Spours, 1999; Farley and Pike, 2018). In this environment, we should not be surprised that undergraduate or postgraduate learning has been squeezed out.

Worse still, even when measured against the arguably narrow criteria of rehabilitation and employability, the track record of delivering consistently high-quality, engaging prison education is not a strong one (CLINKS, 2024; Ellison *et al*, 2017; HC, 2022). There is little evidence that prison education in England and Wales has done much to improve employment or recidivism outcomes.

Articulating different iterations of the types of educational provision, its focus, funding and curricula is beyond the scope of this brief literature review. However, it is worth noting that whatever the funding model used (most recently, the Offender and Learning Skills Service (OLASS)), a recurring theme is the dominance of a limited suite of courses – English, Maths and computing – largely at GCSE-equivalent level. This is not to say that these courses have no value; we know that engaging in these courses provide an important role in developing the skills required to address low levels of post-release employment (Schmitt and Warner, 2010). But equally there is a growing evidence base that employers are increasingly seeking employees who can demonstrate diverse 'social learning' skills that are synonymous with adult learning (UIL, 2014; UNESCO, 2022). Needless to say, whatever form prison education takes, its delivery rarely matches the rhetoric contained within the multitude of Government-sponsored policy papers (Braggins and Talbot, 2003). As the recent Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22 observes, 'every year we

report that it [prison education] is the worst performing sector we inspect. If anything, it has become worse still," while Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, has said that "education is a fundamental part of successful rehabilitation and yet it continues to be nowhere near good enough' (HMIP, 2023).

Evidently, the aspirations for prison education have not been matched by appropriate levels of resource commitment, an imaginative curriculum, or a coherent, joined-up model of implementation. Our own research (O'Grady and Hamilton, 2017) highlighted the limited value, and largely negative view, of the generic education offer experienced by both prisoners and the wider prison staff. Data revealed examples of chaotic timetable delivery, cancellation of provision, lower-level curriculum offer, didactic pedagogic approach, and a meaningless qualification offer.

Several high-profile Government-sponsored reports have picked up similar themes. Most obviously, the Coates (2016) review of prison education highlighted the perpetual woeful state of prison education in England and Wales, but importantly, provided a "blueprint" for the reinvigoration of provision and delivery of education in prisons for the future. Her 31 recommendations provided a strong argument for education in prisons to be the axis upon which all other activities within a prison are crafted. As Champion and Noble (2016) argue, what is fundamentally required is a 'theory of change' in prison education, which amongst other things requires the development of a whole-person approach, in addition to the aforementioned commitment to a prison culture that promotes rehabilitation and sustained employment or self-employment.

Responding to Coates, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ, 2018b: 3) drafted a detailed reform plan that aimed 'to ensure prison [education] can prove to be a pivotal, positive and permanent turning point in their [prisoners] lives'. As it stands, much of this policy has yet to be actualised as envisaged. Most notably for the purposes of this report, whilst several recommendations in the 2018 MoJ Action Plan referenced the importance of providing education opportunities for prisons that were Level 3 and above, there remains limited opportunities – or funding – to these levels of education. By way of illustration, it remains that prisoners who are unable to self-fund higher education study – or have been unsuccessful in the competitive funding routes via the Prison Education Trust (PET) - are unable to apply to, and access, student loan funding for higher education study until they are within 6 years from release of their sentence (HC, 2022), despite significant representation to remove these restrictions. This is perhaps even more surprising when one considers that for prisoners who engage in HE, reoffending rates are reduced by up to 40% (PRT, 2021).

## 2.4 Engaging in Distance (HE) Learning in Prison: Benefits and Barriers

As noted elsewhere, the lack of IT infrastructure in prison has meant that prison based HE learners have a notably different experience to that of HE students in mainstream society (and with other prisoners engaged in prison education below Level 4). For distance learning HE prison-based learners, the lack of digitalisation outlined below compounds some other pre-existing differences, although the literature in this area is not as comprehensive as one might expect given the distance learning activity that goes on in HMPS.

Hughes (2012) explores the unique benefits and challenges afforded to prisoners who seek to, or do, undertake distance learning programmes, particularly those associated with learning at Level 3 or above (generally limited or not available via the standard prison education offer). Whilst distance learning is primarily considered by Hughes as an opportunity for continuing education beyond level 2, she does make some comparisons between classroom-based prison education with distance learning opportunities. The 'learning space' features as a point of exploration where learning primarily is undertaken in a non-traditional space: one's prison cell rather than a dedicated education space; and

the associated implications of prison life and prison culture i.e., distractions of other prisoners; view from prison staff; day-to-day prison regime requirements. Hughes (*ibid*) give a considered account of the value of distance learning education for prisoners, drawing on her research with prisoners to evidence both the opportunities and challenges faced, personally and institutionally.

Hughes (*ibid*) provides a detailed discussion of the various reasons why students engage in distance learning whilst in prison, from self-development to purposeful ambitions for their future. However, there are a myriad of reasons why prisoners, even when motivated, do not pursue higher education and, as evidenced by Hughes (*ibid*) can include institutional barriers (i.e. access to funding; range of course; staff ambiguity (prison staff and education staff); lack of information ; transient nature of prisons meaning movement without notice) as well as personal limitations (reduced income for engaging in education rather than other employment activities in prison; fear of failure; lack of confidence).

However, as evidenced by Hughes (*ibid*), the opportunity to engage in higher education distance learning go far beyond the actual acquisition of a qualification, or the potential to gain employment (economic capital outcomes) but to the growth in confidence, a sense of personal achievement, the construction of an identity other than that of prisoner (social capital outcomes). Indeed, a sense of empowerment. This of course brings us full circle to the overarching question we first asked: why engage in education? In turn, this raises important questions about what distance learning higher education in prison could and should look like.

### 2.5 The case for – and challenges of – digitising prison (higher) education

Evidently the poor outcomes associated with prison education in England and Wales can be attributed to a series of interconnected problems including: 1) a chronic under-investment in services; 2) a lack of buy-in from prison staff (and beyond); 3) prisoner disengagement; 4) theoretical limitations about what prison education is for; 4) implementation gap between policy and practice; 5) an unimaginative and narrow curriculum; 6) limited learner support from prison education providers; 7) disjointed approach to delivery and funding; 8) issues with accountability and governance. Whilst this list is not exhaustive, it provides a template of understanding of the previous observation from OFSTED, HMIP (and a plethora of other stakeholders) about the parlous state of prison education in this country.

However, absent from our discussion so far is a recognition of the mechanics by which distance-learning prison education is delivered. On closer inspection, it is apparent that prison education simply does not reflect the reality of how education is experienced in mainstream society. Most notably, in prison environments the capacity to develop the digital skills that are so ubiquitous in everyday life (Barros *et al*, 2020) are compromised by limited, if any, access, use or participation in digital environments. Such digital exclusion, compounds prisoners already social and economic exclusion, adding further layers of difficulty when preparing to return to mainstream society, for active citizenship and social reintegration.

Whilst there is now a strong evidence-base to lobby politicians to invest in technology, particularly secure internet services (King 2019), with several projects being supported across Europe, funded by the Lifelong Learning European Programme, to date there is little evidence of investment across the estate in England and Wales to provide digital access to prisoners. Where initiatives have been piloted, the resources are restricted, shaped and limited by the criminal justice system, with a focus on what cannot be done, rather than proactively working from a basis of what can be done.

Whilst there is a growing evidence-base (Champion & Edgar 2013; Coates 2016; CSJ, 2021) to support the implementation of IT in prisons, there currently appears to be limited knowledge, understanding,

or indeed, consensus, about: (a) what technology currently exists that can be utilised to deliver digital higher education distance learning in prisons, and what additional technology may be required; (b) how to deliver high-quality digital higher education distance learning and (c) how such an offer might be operationalised.

The lack of digital access is problematic across the piece, but this is especially notable for the small number of prisoners engaged in higher education. For example, Farley *et al* (2016) discuss the challenges of enabling the delivery of higher education in prisons; particularly when access to the internet is limited or not available at all. In the UK, the biggest provider of higher education distance learning is the Open University who provide their courses to approximately 1800 incarcerated students across the UK (OU, 2020). However, there is a continued heavy reliance of paper-based solutions, alongside the provision of some CD-Rom resources. The challenge here is that prison(er)s may not have compatible in-cell technology to play these resources, and there is also a heavy reliance on prison staff/education staff to receive and deliver paper-resources. Access to personal tutorial support can also be difficult because of the limited communication channels available to prisoners.

This reliance on paper-based solutions (or at best, CD-ROMS) is clearly incompatible with the shift to the digitisation of previously paper-based resources in the HE sector. It is also notably out of kilter with the facilitation of face-to-face teaching with links to the worldwide web and flexible models of delivery, including synchronous online and asynchronous activities (Ritzema and Harris, 2008). Increasingly, students in HE institutions are required to submit assessments, access online interactive content and engage with peers and academic staff through a 'virtual learning environment (VLE)'. Despite it being widely acknowledged that 'access to information and technology resources' are critical to supporting student success (Tanaka and Cooper, 2020), VLE-access is not an option for prison-based HE learners, due to the current restrictions on prisoners accessing the internet. As Tanaka and Cooper (*ibid*) go on to point out, 'higher education programs that teach in prisons take on a near impossible task: to provide their students with a high-quality education … while working under strict constraints' (online)'.

Undertaking undergraduate or postgraduate study is challenging enough; doing this without the appropriate IT infrastructure is akin to having one hand tied behind your back. In this context, any educational success becomes that more impressive. Understandably, a concern with security has tended to dominate the discussion; clearly it is unrealistic to think that the IT-infrastructure could ever replicate that experienced by campus-based students. Unfettered access to the internet is not an option. The reality is that whilst there will always be limits of how the prison service delivers a digital infrastructure, the technology does exist for 'white-listing' that could conceivably balance critical security/risk management priorities with the academic requirements of prison-based HE learners. By way of illustration, a secure digital service called 'PrisonCloud' has been trialled in Belgian prisons, offering 'web access through different categories like healthcare, job search, e-learning and others, where security is key' (CSJ, 2021: 9). Furthermore:

> '…several of Denmark's open prisons operate "internet cafes" that allow prisoners expanded access to the internet, primarily for educational purposes and job applications and other communication. There is monitoring of prisoners' use and inappropriate content is blocked. Denmark operates a tiered approach with prisoners granted different levels of access based on their individual risk profile. The Danish model operates three tiers: communal internet cafes, tightly controlled classroom use through a secure network, and "fairly unrestricted" access, including use of email. In-cell access is determined on a case-by-case basis and is only for educational and work purposes, and for communication' (CSJ, 2021: *ibid*).

A key question, therefore, is if the technology exists, why is this rollout – even if piloted on a small-scale in the closed estate - not happening in HMPS? The answer in part can seemingly be attributed to cultural paradigms; there remains a resistance from some prison leaders and other prison staff that the digitisation of the prison estate is the right way forward. As the HoC Education Committee (HC) (2022:29) recently argued, 'a change in attitude to technology in prisons is long overdue'.

That said, in recent years there have been glimpses of a shift in attitude towards digitisation. Currently, in England and Wales, 'Coracle Inside' are working with the MoJ and HMPPs to provide secure mobile tablets – Chromebooks. Working as a third-party intermediary, they are able to take material from higher education institutions (or elsewhere) and upload the material on to the Chromebook which have had been specifically adapted for use in prisons. The Chromebooks can then be taken into the prison and distributed to prisoners who are able to access the materials for study. Alongside the materials, they have the ability to make notes alongside pdfs, and write documents in preparation for assessment. Whilst this in no way replicates the diversity of materials that are available to mainstream students, for example access to library resources, student support services, chat functions, virtual learning environments and so much more; they are certainly the first step in providing a prison with the opportunity to learn without the need to access printed materials.

This is similar to the US model where tablets are provided to eligible prisoners (Tanaka and Cooper, 2020). Through this model tablets are synced at the kiosk via a 'local area network'. Like Coracle inside, a supporting package of support – a 'managed solution' is required to ensure functionality, licencing adherences. A further advantage of introducing Chromebooks as the preferred hardware is its transferability to mainstream society as many employers use this technology within their industries. Aside from the many benefits of education, a key transferable skill beyond knowledge acquisition is the softer skills often associated with employment, including digital literacy, time management (independent study), working to deadlines (assignments). In England Chromebooks are becoming the principal educational device for digital in-cell learning, but for this to work, there needs to be a recognition that many prison-based learners will need to be upskilled (Farley and Hopkins, 2015).

### 2.6 A review of the literature: key takeaways

The case for Higher Education is compelling, both from the perspective of engendering personal growth and agency and – related to this – the potential to drive down reoffending rates. Yet, access to Higher Education is patchy and riddled with inconsistencies. Moreover, the digital infrastructure in prison is insufficient to the needs of prison learners and therefore distance learning is potentially compromised. There are glimpses of good practice and an enhanced digitisation of the prison estate has clearly moved up the policy agenda. We wait to see if this enhanced digitisation is realised 'on the ground' and whether ultimately risk paradigms end up trumping the much-needed reform of digital, distance HE learning in prison.

# Section 3: Methodological Approach

## 3.1 Project Access

Access to the project site was secured through an initial meeting with the Governor of an identified prison in the East Midlands where permission was granted to pursue the project.

In seeking to explore the feasibility of designing and delivering accredited, digital, distance learning higher education opportunities, the project team were focussed on ensuring the design allowed democratic participation for all. Therefore, a model of project co-construction was implemented, through the introduction of a Project Advisory Board. The Board was designed to ensure representation from the project team, the education department of the prison, along with prisoners. Other partners were invited to the Board as the project evolved, including colleagues from Coracle Inside. This approach allowed for focussed, constructive dialogue through which ideas were considered and explored; for example, module accreditation, design and content, assessment practices, use of digital platform; funding applications; ethical considerations.

## 3.2 Project Sampling

The funding obtained to support this feasibility project allowed the project team to work with a single prison with up to 6 prisoners. As a prerequisite, participating prisoners needed to be able to demonstrate achievement of Level 2 in English. This pre-requisite was designed to ensure participants had the skills to access the academic materials created for this Level 5 module. This inevitably reduced the sample population when considering the substantial evidence that only ~40% of prisoners accessing education are working towards qualifications of Level 3 and above (MoJ, 2021).

Drawing on the principles of purposive sampling, the education team at the identified prison, spoke to several prisoners and invited them to apply to be part of the project. An application form was drafted and submitted to the project team for consideration. Six prisoners were accepted onto the project, although one later withdrew from the project and another prisoner was subsequently replaced. Once students were accepted onto the project, they then completed an application form to register as an NTU student so that they could undertake the module that had been developed.

## 3.3 Data Collection

This evaluation drew heavily on qualitative data techniques. Interviews were carried out with each of the prisoner participants. Project field notes also supported the project evaluation. Interviews were recorded with permission using audio recording software and then transcribed. Any identifiable information was removed from the interview transcripts, and recordings of interviews were kept on a secure drive. Participant's anonymity has been protected by using an identity number on all documents used in this project and in any resulting outputs.

Additionally, anonymised data collected by Coracle Inside was also requested to provide information regarding which digital resources were being accessed and in what capacity they were used (e.g., duration, frequency). The project team were interested to understand how prisoners engaged with the digital technology, such as time of day, type, and range of resources (i.e., module journal articles, PowerPoints, recorded lectures, other software). At the time of writing this report, we have been unable to draw down this information.

### 3.4 Ethics and Risk Assessment

The nature of this project meant that any in-depth interviews would take place with people who are serving a long-term prison sentence, focussing on education in prison. These are potentially emotive topics and therefore the emotional risks to the prisoners and researchers alike were considered within an ethical framework. Both University and HMPPS ethical applications were submitted with favourable ethical opinions being granted by both institutions prior to commencement of the module delivery.

The project team acknowledged that participating in the project, and potentially evaluation interviews, could impact a participant's emotional well-being. Therefore, participants were informed that taking part was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Throughout the project, including evaluation interviews, we were alert to the sensitivities of participants; and interview schedule were designed to minimise any risk to participants.

Regarding researcher safety, we followed the prison's normal security proceedings. We were in close communication with the HMP Education Lead with whom we considered any potential threats or hazards that they feel were pertinent.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews in accordance with principles set out by Braun & Clarke (2021). This approach was chosen as it allowed us to capture, "both semantic (surface) meaning within the data and latent (underlying) meaning" (Clarke & Braun, 2014: 1948). Importantly, thematic analysis was conducted with the prisoner participants where, following first level analysis by the project team, the data was brought back to the prisoners for further discussion, reflection and development. This allowed for a much more thorough awareness of the key findings from the data to be reported in this project.

Whilst this approached allowed for inductive, sophisticated exploration of an under-researched area within prison education, we recognise that interpretation of this data is subjective in nature; the researcher interprets the participants own interpretation of their experience in what amounts to a double hermeneutic approach (Giddens, 1984). Given the complexity of the topic, this deemed not only an acceptable limitation, but a necessary one.

# Section 4: Findings and Discussion

This section provides thematic findings from this feasibility project evaluation to explore whether accredited, digital, distance learning higher education could be provided for prisoners in a secure estate. It is important to note that throughout this discussion we draw on the voice of the prisoners, as a mechanism to ensure an undertaking of the analysis alongside those who participated in the project.

What is not discussed in any detail are the structural challenges faced by the project team in trying to establish this project in a knowledge economy fundamentally immersed in digital connectivity. Interestingly, and perhaps understandably, because the prison landscape is attuned to minimising the risk to the public associated with prisoner access to the word-wide web, they were able to circumnavigate or find alternatives to internet censure. The HEi however, struggled – particularly as all communications are managed through emails and virtual learning platforms manage the pedagogic content of a module, along with assessment activities. Furthermore, within the HEi infrastructure, all policies are available for scrutiny via online web pages.

The detail associated with the development of the module, the module content, and the limited capacity of dynamic change of resources is not discussed in detail in this report. Suffice to say that even through these glimpses of 'alternative ways of working', the project team got a small taste of the frustrations and barriers faced by prison learners.

Informed by the literature, the four main themes discussed in this findings and discussion relate to the following::

| Theme | Focus | Areas of Discussion |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **The Case for Education in Prison** | Motivation: Personal Perspectives, Attitude |
| 2 | **The Case for Higher Education in Prison** | Organisational Culture |
| 3 | **The Case of Digital Learning in Prisons** | Technology |
| 4 | **The Case for Digital Higher Education Distance Learning in Prison** | Digital distance learning in practice |

## 4.1 The Case for Education in Prison

The case for education in prisons is well documented across academic literature and policy discourse, globally (see UNESCO, 2021). Indeed, as we know, the provision of education in prisons in England is a legal requirement imposed on prison regimes (as per Prison Rules, 1999). However, we also know that participation in prison education can be challenging – both in terms of providing the type of curriculum offer that would motivate an individual to attending, but also in terms of enabling prisoners to gain access to education provision (see for example, Coates, 2016). Challenges can include, for example, prisoners not being able to get to the 'learning space' because of other factors related to the prison regime in the prison estate (typically, so-called 'lock downs' due to security concerns/disorder or a lack of prison staff to escort) (OfstedTalks, 2021).

Having participated in this project, we were interested to understand what prisoners' perspectives of education were. It would have been easy to assume the participants in this study already had a sense of the relative merits of education – after all, they volunteered to be part of an education project. We

would certainly not make any claims that the cohort for this project were in any way 'typical' and therefore that the results could be generalised to the wider population. Nevertheless, understanding these perspectives was seen to be invaluable to understanding the dynamics by which prison (higher) education can still be seen to be transformative (for some, if not necessarily all; Illeris, 2014; Bourdieu, 1977; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Page, 2009).

Acknowledging these caveats, we first explored with participants how they valued education. As can be seen from the excerpts below, the participants demonstrated a range of perspectives in relation to how they valued prison:

> **Learner 1** (110-115)
> So, education shifted from being an asset to get a job- because obviously, in my circumstances, my level of logic differs anyway from my employability. But it's something to be valued in of itself…

> **Learner 2** (81-88)
> I have a lot of confidence and it shows me that the potential was always there. I have been an underachiever all my life basically.

> **Learner 5** (238-245)
> Well, one, it engages the brain. I need a lot of... If I go into a sort of stupor where I'm not doing something mentally, I do feel it in myself. I find my anger flares up a lot more. I get more irritable, whether that's my personal disposition or whether that's just a general human reaction. I think it's a bit of both, because I have had anger issues in the past, and growing up, I've learned a lot of different ways of venting it and managing it, and education, just mental engagement.

What seems clear is the recognition of education beyond employment possibilities (PET, 2021); evidently education was also perceived to be a space where these prison-based learners could achieve personal growth and demonstrate achievement through engagement in education.

So, having established education as valuable, both economically and socially (Behan, 2021; Coates, 2016, MoJ, 2018; HC, 2022), we were interested to understand participants' motivation to engage, particularly given the limited curriculum offer and the potential challenges associated with attending education programmes. The excerpts below demonstrate, in fact, that the curriculum offer appears to be of little importance, but rather the opportunity to engage in any learning opportunity at all is welcomed:

> **Learner 3** (78-79)
> "I just love learning. I'm not overly fussed on what it is I'm learning. It's just something that stretches my mind. If I can pick up new information along the way all the better. […515] "I'm not fussy. I'll study anything."

Indeed, by engaging in education, participants in this study articulated quite clearly how education had the capacity of influence them, their thinking, and their actions beyond the boundaries of the topic being studied (Champion and Noble, 2016). In the excerpts below, it is evident that by embracing education beyond a narrow employability paradigm, they were able to reflect on how it had informed their thinking and actions in a range of ways – not just for them intrinsically and an internal narrative (Maruna, 2001), but in the way they perceived others viewed them. As has been argued elsewhere ,

there is considerable transformative potential in not only these 'looking-glass self-concept' (Maruna *et al*, 2004), but also in the implications for trust (Ugelvik, 2021):

> **Learner 1** (72-76)
> "I think it changes the way you view everything in life. Not just of education, but decisions and how people think and how you talk to people and how people receive it. Just having simple things of trying to break down- one of the basic things of philosophy was what is knowledge. It's a simple thing- but trying to break down and how complicated and how simple it is at the same time."
>
> **Learner 1** (130)
> "So, education is changing my viewpoint, not just for me, but for other people."
>
> **Learner 4** (885-890)
> "Well, I still struggle to get my head around why I'm doing it. I'm very much aware that I do benefit from it, and I look at things- I am far more educated now than I was 14 years ago. And it makes me read things in a different manner. It makes me watch the news in a different manner. And I analyse things that I said, whereas at one time I used to just take it on, take it where they say. And that's something that, I think the vast majority of the public just take on the board what they're told and don't really question it."

Undoubtedly, as evidence across literature and policy discussion indicates (e.g. Institute for Employment Studies, 2024; Department for Education, 2021), an individual who develops their knowledge, skills and understanding, by whatever means, will be more equipped to obtain and maintain employment. This is further enhanced by achieving qualifications to demonstrate competency at a particular level of learning. The qualification metric is widely used by employers when seeking employees, at least as a first stage of application prior to interview.

In this project, we had purposefully ensured that the module being studied (*Exploring Justice*) was accredited at Level 5 of the qualification framework – equivalent to year 2 study of an undergraduate programme in England. So, we wanted to understand from participants how they felt about the relationship between education and employment. As can be seen in the excerpts below, there was recognition that undoubtedly, education would enhance employment prospects:

> **Learner 1** (163-167)
> "I'm hoping my qualifications allow me to get to somebody who gives me an opportunity to do something. Before I was talking about being an asset- oh look, this person seems half sensible, we'll give him the chance. So I'm hoping it opens the door to a chance, and then if, once I do the job, I'll get to another person, I'll be, actually, all that will carry on and it may give me a chance to restart or begin a life as such, because I've been in prison since I was quite young."
>
> **Learner 4** (217-218)
> "Education is a bonus to getting a better job. There is no doubt about it."

There is clear evidence, on analysis of the data for this study, that participants valued education, were motivated to participate and could identify benefits both to them individually, including their future potential employability. We were interested to explore with participants if this had always been the case. As can be seen in the examples below, there is sense of reflective sadness amongst the

participants that if only they could have valued education a little more, earlier, then their lives might have played out differently.

> **Learner 4** (197-198)
> "I understand now it's so much more important than what I, when I was a 15, 16 year old, it was something you had to do and you didn't really get the most out of it."

> **Learner 4** (868-877)
> In fairness to my mum, going back to when I was at school, she knew education to be important, but it didn't seem to brush off on me. She (thought) having the class environment is important. No. It didn't rub off on me, so I never went anywhere at that time, educationally. And this is a little bit to say that nowadays, I probably could have gone further.

As previously noted, the overarching strategic vision and delivery of prison education has been much criticised (Coates, 2016; HC, 2022). Given this, it was interesting that, education seems, for these participants, to be something they 'fell' into whilst incarcerated, merely to pass the time, but became much more valuable to them than perhaps they could have anticipated:

> **Learner 1** (38-39)
> "I did quite like the fact that I was working towards something, and it felt like I was actually doing something useful with my time rather than just sitting around doing nothing."

> **Learner 4** (243-246).
> "And it's been a great, it's been very good for me just to get through the sentence. The education and doing the job that I've been doing has given me focus and doing the different courses, numerous courses while I'm still working, has helped me have something else to focus on."

## 4.2 The Case for Higher Education in Prison

Providing the opportunity for prisoners to engage in Higher Education is, unquestionably, contentious. Even though the evidence (see, for example, HC, 2022; O'Grady and Tadgh, 2023) demonstrates the benefits of higher education, socially and economically, there remain continued challenges to offering a comprehensive higher education offer in prison. Such challenges include restricted financial support for studying at this level through access to the English student loan system (HC, 2022), as well as organisational ambition for prisoners. In this section of our discussion, we explored with participants their experiences of engaging in higher education whilst in prison.

### 4.2.1 Initial Assessment

We discussed with participants how they came to be involved in education whilst in prison, which often started with them reflecting on their experience of an 'initial assessment' of their skill level in relation to literacy and numeracy when they arrived at prison. As exemplified in the excerpts below, participants held little regard for these assessments and, in some instances, felt they were ignored by the institution when stating evidence for pre-existing evidence of higher qualifications. This chimes with the findings from the House of Commons Education Committee (HC, 2022:20) in which there persists an 'ineffective transfer of educational records between prisons when prisoners [were] moved' and prisoners having to repeat initial assessments (*ibid*).

Compounding this, there also appears to be underlying frustration at the lack of agency given to prisoners to choose to participate in these assessments, and additional frustration when asked to repeat this due to organisational chaos:

> **Learner 1** (337-341)
> I: So you've been in four institutions.
> R: No, I've done it four times, and I've been in two institutions. That's twice in the same place, because you'd pass it, and then they'd go, oh, we don't have your results, we've lost them. So, I've done them again, twice.

> **Learner 3** (167-172)
> "You're forced basically to do maths and English at a very basic level when you come to prison. I did my, I can't remember, it was either [my] maths, I think it was [my] maths to level one and two I did. And I was assessed for the level two English and I was told I don't need it, but every now and again I get a letter threatening me that I've got to have this level two. And you say like you have done a degree, you know, surely that proves I can actually read and write. No, still get the threats, but yeah."

### 4.2.2 Inaccessibility of HE

As mentioned previously, access to higher education in prisons is problematic. Rather than benefitting from a single point of contact (SPOC) for their educational needs, prisoners must increasingly rely on communication with – and buy-in from – a range of prison and education staff to support their learning (for example, providing guidance with completing and processing documents and a range of other affiliated activities). Not only is there generally an absence of a dedicated SPOC to facilitate discussions or promote opportunities to engage in education beyond the current prison education offer, there appears to be a level of resistance from prison staff to act as enablers for prisoners to access higher levels of education provision. Regrettably, these findings are not uncommon; as the PLA (2023) noted in their response to the recent prison operational workforce inquiry, 'buy-in from officers is also key to delivering high quality education in prison, but prison officers do not always understand the importance of education or the impact it can have on reducing reoffending'.

As noted previously (CSJ, 2021), prisons (and prisoners) have limited access to the internet, phone calls and emails; it is therefore unsurprising that correspondence appears 'clunky' at best, with prisoners becoming quickly disillusioned with the experience. As exemplified in the excerpts below, prisoners routinely get caught in the crossfire of these organisational deficiencies and have to navigate significant hurdles if they want to access any type of higher education programme. Compounding this, they struggle to find any meaningful educational opportunities in the current prison education curriculum offer.

> **Learner 1** (204-207)
> "I asked about an open university (doctoral course). They kept saying there would be options available, and they kept inquiring, and they couldn't find a new way to put me on. They kept saying, oh, we've only got this many slots. What can you do in prison?"

> **Learner 1** (232-234)
> "I did philosophy, because it was realistically the only thing I could do in complete closed conditions, all the way to the end of my Masters, because a lot of them- there was a lot of independent research and other stuff. Since philosophy is merely ideas, and it's reading..."

**Learner 3** (196-199)
"Prison education, i.e., prison education department is obviously geared up for the masses, which means it's way below anything I'd really want to study, so it's of no use to me and quite a few of the other lads. But I understand these necessities. Like I said, there's a lot of lads and they can't read and write? But I think it needs to expand what it offers."

**Learner 3** (203-207)
"That's the problem. If I was outside, I'd just go on the internet and I'd research to see what I've got an interest in. Whereas in here, we don't have anything like that. I'm totally blind. If I want a book, I haven't got a clue what the title is. Perhaps if you ask in the library, they may have got the time to look it up for you or whatever, but everything's up, it will struggle. Things you just take for granted, not so here."

### 4.2.3 Curriculum Offer

The current prison education contract, funded by government, requires that education is provided to enable prisoners to achieve the skills necessary to support their employability, post-release. This approach is designed to support a rehabilitative climate, although the precise mechanics for how education in prison might promote desistance and social capital is not yet fully understood (Cleere, 2022). Moreover, there are challenges with such a limited focus. Whilst the research literature offers clear evidence that more than half of prisoners have limited literacy and numeracy skills (PET, 2024), it remains that a significant percentage of prisoners have higher levels of pre-existing education prior to entering prison. As exemplified in the excerpt below, in these circumstances prisoners, perhaps understandably, feel that the education curriculum offer does not meet their needs – either socially or economically, when exploring post release possibilities:

**Learner 1** (434-438)
"No, you could do everything in 12 months comfortably. And then there's nothing in the prison system.

## 4.3 The Case for Digital Learning in Prison

In exploring our participants perception of education whilst in prison, we have considered the educational offer available to prisoners and the extent to which agency and power are held by prisoners in their attempt at being able to secure the education they seek. As Freire (1970) argues, the real value of education exists when it is constructed with a focus on emancipation and freedom; having agency to shape one's own educational journey is clearly part of this 'liberation'. Notions of agency are contextualised against the challenges associated with organisational culture and structure.

Although the principles of emancipation and freedom still hold, Freire (1970) was of course writing at a very different time. In the twenty-first century, a key mechanism through which education can routinely be accessed in mainstream society is virtually. Alongside this we know that much employment now requires some degree of digital competency; as the Government recognised themselves in the 2018 'education and employment strategy', key is ensuring that we implement the 'infrastructure to make sure that prisoners leave prison with the skills that employers are looking for' (MoJ, 2018: 25) including digital literacy. Currently, there is limited access to technology for people who are incarcerated, and certainly limited capacity for prisoners to have access to their own internet-disabled computers, including Chromebooks (HC, 2022; Clinks, 2024; CSJ, 2021).

Having participated in this project to explore the feasibility of offering accredited, digital distance learning higher education, we were therefore keen to explore with participants their experiences of engaging with the technology, in terms of its functionality and their responsibility for the technology.

### 4.3.1. Technology: strengths

The flexibility afforded by having a Chromebook that an individual owned was highly valued by participants. This chimes with the findings from Palmer *et al* (2020:5) who found that the use of digital technology not only 'results in feelings of agency and autonomy amongst prisoners', but that ultimately it 'contributed to an improvement in the psychological wellbeing of prisoners'.

Unpacking this further, participants valued the range of resources available to them on the Chromebook, as well as the capacity to engage with the resources at a time of their choosing. The engagement with a wide range of activities arguably demonstrates a prisoner's desire to become more digitally competent, and at least informally, develop more digital confidence and awareness. This is important when considering findings from elsewhere which consistently demonstrate how engaging with digital technology in prison results in prisoners feeling more confident in coping with technology on their release (McDougall *et al*, 2017; Palmer *et al*, 2020). These findings are exemplified below:

> **Learner 1 (651-657)**
> "It was useful, the fact that I could read lots of different things. I didn't have lots of different books. I liked additional content. Was quite good. Because the thing, oh wow, look at this. It allows you to have little breaks. If I had breaks on a book, it would be me watching TV or doing something else and I probably wouldn't go back to the book. But on that I go, oh, I'm going to play that puzzle game for 10 minutes sitting here and do the puzzle game. Then I go straight back to it because I was using the device, which probably wouldn't if it had a book and I go on and do something between it."

> **Learner 5 (542-549)**
> "… normally I'd wake up about six or seven in the morning, but if I woke up at five, I didn't want to get out of bed … I liked that because it likes all the information contained and it's lit as well, so I don't have to do it in the dark, essentially."

As noted above, participants respondent positively to engaging with the technology provided. Arguably, this was to some extent due to the 'novelty value' of having access to resources not previously allowed or readily available. In referencing the impact of prison technology on staff workloads, Palmer *et al* (2020:49) note that where technology is implemented for the first time, there appears to be a short-term, temporary spike in uptake due to the 'novelty factor'. Once this subsides, what appeared more important for the participants in our study, was the value placed on the freedom to choose what resources to engage with, and when.

Beyond the specific longer-term resettlement benefits of 'closing the digital gap' (PLA, 2020), there are also some specific practical benefits of the chosen technology for this distance learning module that should not be under-estimated. For example, the longevity of the Chromebook battery life was extremely important to the learners. Having the Chromebooks accessible to them at all times resulted, for some, in a gradual entry into the academic material uploaded onto the Chromebook and for others the chance to re-engage with learning. This flexibility meant that individuals could learn at their own pace, as demonstrated in the excerpts below:

**Learner 1 (661-663)**
"The battery was quite good. I mean it just disappeared occasionally. The numbers seemed a bit off. I was surprised how quickly it charged. Like two hours and it charged you for like 15 or 20 hours."

**Learner 3 (327-329)**
"Yeah, but you've got to bear in mind we get banged up like 6 o'clock in the evening. We're there till 8 o'clock [until] eight the next day. So, it's a long time with the type of TV we've got access to. I'd much rather be reading something on a Chromebook than watching the TV."

**Learner 4 (447-451)**
"Right. Initially, for the first couple of weeks, quite literally about 14 days, two weeks, I did not really engage with the reading. I'd glance at the titles, I'd look at the first paragraph, and I'd go back to the chess or something, and I'd play the other chess, and I got used to using the machine just playing the chess. And that brought a little bit of a smile to my face, being able to play the chess."

**Learner 5 (332-335)**
"I know there's nothing to do with you, but Coracle inside Chromebook was quite good, I thought, because that was the first thing that was sort of very relatively new, obviously I'd used a laptop before, but I did think, well, how's this going to work? How in-depth will it be? So I found the Coracle Inside people quite good."

### 4.3.2 Technology: challenges

All the prisoners were, without exception, grateful for the access to a Chromebook and to challenge themselves with new and unfamiliar technology; for most this was their first engagement with this type of technology owing to their incarceration for 10+ years. However, having had the opportunity to really 'use' the technology they, perhaps unsurprisingly cited some challenges and limitations with the technology, as the excerpts below indicate:

**Learner 3 (288-291)**
"Truthfully […]. I've had more impressive calculators…it's very lacking in basic facilities, what it could be. It was good to have it in so far as I could use it rather than have to write it on paper and then type it up at work or come into the library to type it up. But yeah, there's a lot that it could be improved by."

**Learner 4 (386-389)**
"I was quite... 'Oh, a new toy to play with'. I was taken in by that and I thought, oh, give that a whirl. And that's new technology to me. I know it's quite limited. When I actually got to be able to use it and manipulate the mouse properly, I thought to myself it's probably- I'm used to computers that [have] probably got a little bit more usability about them."

A particular challenge for prisoners was the adapted software available to them. The Chromebooks were, in line with HMPPS requirements, not connected to the internet and had restricted functionality. This appears to be a common theme in the (limited) research undertaken evaluating prison technology (whether used in an educational capacity or not), with prisoners in Palmer *et al's* (2020) research commenting on the impact of limited software functionality and the frustrations of devices not being intuitive to use. This is exemplified below, with participants indicating a similar frustration with these limitations when trying to draft pieces of academic work, or to annotate documents:

**Learner 1 (626-628)**
"Having no windows was a bit annoying. Because I've only ever been used to windows where I can click something up type, read something type. I tried not to write, but it would have been a lot easier with a notepad for me to write quotes down to open a new page up and type it in."

**Learner 1 (633-637)**
"And the thing that really annoyed me is I think I did the big one about four times and at the end of it, that would do. Because I kept clicking it quit the page. [Oh my gosh]. Because you had to click the button. [The save button.] Just off the screen, which is fine when I was typing because I remember, but when I'm going back and forwards all the time to copy and paste. I do that and I go, I've lost half the bibliography again. I'll do it tomorrow."

**Learner 3 (296-299)**
"The multi-page is so that you can have it pad open and numerous documents at the same time. Able to copy and paste from one to the other rather than have to type. You know, you're reading out of a PDF document and then you have to type it into notes. Then you have to copy that and put it into a... It's just so clunky."

**Learner 4 (714-722)**
R: I would say one thing, and I've been thinking this through since, because I did make a suggestion, that I like, especially if you're reading something, that you could not cut and paste.
I: Yes. I've heard that before.
R: You can't cut and paste. And also, if I'm writing something, I would like, not so that you're copying it, not so you're plagiarising it, or like that, but it's like to be able to read something, and want to make it fit into what you've got. So, you've got two pages open at once, two different programs, and you can't do that on there.

Having had the Chromebook throughout the duration of the pilot project, participants suggested several ways in which the devices could be improved, from how to manipulate the software, to having printing capability, as noted below:

### 4.3.3 Applications

**Learner 1 (783-786)**
"I wouldn't mind the audio thing on when you could do other things on the computer. Because you couldn't, you had to be on that screen. Hence why I did it when I was trying to put it down and I was listening to my headphones. If I could have gone, well I'm just going to do the puzzle game and listen to your talk."

**Learner 4 (731-733)**
"Minimize it. You can just minimize, and you can have two or three programs running at the same time. So, you can quickly go from one to the other. That's not... It's not something that's enabled on the Chromebook."

### 4.3.4 Printing

**Learner 2 (445-448)**
"Yeah, the laptop. I enjoyed using the laptop, yeah. I like- I like to write everything anyway but I enjoyed the laptop. The only thing I found wrong with the laptop was the um printing the

page; trying to figure out the formatting for the pages. I still can't get that right now with my other one."

### 4.3.5 Internet Connectivity

Each of the participants who engaged with the pilot project comprehensively engaged with the academic materials provided – including PowerPoints, audio recordings and readings, but it remained that the resources provided were administered to Coracle Inside and pre-uploaded onto the machines. We, as the academic team, needed to ensure all hyperlinks were removed from materials, and had to be selective about the source materials provided. In contemporary higher education, it is more usual, for students to have access to a much wider range of materials, including library resources and virtual lectures. As the CSJ (2021:24) point out, 'access to online content is now a foundational part of most people's daily lives' and whilst many of these functions are not relevant to prisoners' lives, it remains that teachers - as reported to Dame Coates (2016) - cite that being unable to utilise online resources makes teaching much more difficult.

Whilst the participants engaged in the materials, it was clear that they would have liked to have had the opportunity to read more widely, or deeply about certain topics, all of which is made more difficult by the lack of internet-enabled, real-time access:

> **Learner 5 (478-486)**
> R: Yeah. It depends how interactive the Coracle Inside could become. But if you could, in theory put sort of hyperlinks into it, so I could go right, Anne's talking about that.
> I: That's not going to be possible.
> R: I want to click on it. And then it takes me to another video and it becomes more interactive. But then that's a little bit too far. Yeah. But other than that, like I say, it's more just, yeah, I mean, if it was the case, right, you have the video there and you can watch it in front of us and then ask questions.

### 4.3.6 Technology: ownership; secrecy; normalisation

The maintenance of the Chromebooks is a key requirement of the contract between the provider (Coracle Inside) and HMPPS. This requires that a member of staff visits the prison on a weekly basis to check each of the Chromebooks' viability and of course that none of the devices have been tampered with (despite it being recognised that the misuse of technology in prisons being rare; Palmer *et al,* 2020). Whilst this process was accepted – and adhered to - by the participants, they found this challenging for a variety of reasons. Firstly, this appeared to be associated with a lack of trust to look after the technology in line with the identified expectations, but perhaps more importantly, participants noted that this meant that; 1) they were required to carry the Chromebook with them at all times and; 2) to reveal that they had the Chromebook at all.

As has been noted elsewhere in the literature (see CSJ, 2021; Palmer *et al,* 2020), the mistrust that exists between prisoners and prison staff more generally, can lead to prisoner concerns about even having a device in a prison setting due to a lack of confidence in 'due process' should anything go wrong. The upshot is that for some participants, they felt uncomfortable letting other people in the prison, particularly prisoners, know that they had this technology as this could lead to behaviours or actions that were unwelcome, as exemplified below:

**Learner 1 (667-670 and 698-703)**
“It's fine I think outside off the wing. You don't particularly want one on the wing, especially when the new one's shining. Someone goes, let me look it or not because you're not meant to touch it. But let me, and then picking it up and dropping it. Especially when you have to sign a (compact of like) £550. When I look on TV and I can buy a thing for £100 […].
I think very few people on the wing knew I had one.
I: Right. Was that a purposeful act on your part?
R: Yeah I think so. Plus they'd only know I'd have one if I went on the wing- if I walked around on the wing on it, because I’m sat in my cell with it on.”

**Learner 2 (470-476)**
R: Just because nobody on the wing knew I’d got a laptop why not because I’d get pinched off me.
I: Was it, was that a real-
R: Yes. A reality, yes. Yes people would pinch a bag of sugar if they know you’ve got it so certainly. Yes, the laptop would go.
Learner 2 (484-489)
I: Okay so you’re worried about having a Chromebook because for you, you know we had the compact you had all this sort of stuff saying if this happened-
R: Yeah that’s what I was worried about I wasn’t worried about um me personally I was just worried about- I didn’t want anything to come to the laptop I didn’t want to go missing then after trying to explain that I lost it all things like that yeah.

**Learner 4 (651-654, 658-661)**
“The wing I'm on. I didn't have any on the wing. But when I was wandering around the prison with it, or when I was using it in a class, which occasionally happened, or when [Coracle employee] came to look at it, on those days initially, I thought, I'm trying to keep this pretty much quiet. I'm not telling people I've got it. I'm not broadcasting this […]. And then [Coracle employee] comes in, everyone looks around and says, who on Earth is this woman we don't know. Next thing, I'm pulling a laptop out of a bag that's been hidden between two or three pieces of paper. And then it's on view to everyone. So, word did get out.
I can imagine it being more of a prison problem in other places. This is quite a stable prison. But don't get me wrong. I'm sure this, if I weren't on the wing I were on, even though I only ever used it pretty much behind my door, you can get drawn in- something like that, something new. Everything has got a value in here. Even this would have a value. I feel sure the bag would have a value of something. And consequently, people wanted to trade it for something. And that's why you don't want to get it.

**Learner 5 (551-558)**
I: Did you feel very happy about having ownership of the Chromebook in this environment?
R: I feel, I'll be honest, I'm quite lucky, I'm on quite a tame wing, all the lads are quite laid back and some of them asked me what it was, but most of them, when they asked me, didn't really care, they kind of went oh right. So I did feel sorry for some of the other lads who are on rougher wings and felt the need, well, they needed to conceal it a lot more and I think if I was on their wings, I'd have the same experience of, well, this is a bit of a task to do this, but I’d still be willing to do it, so I got quite lucky in that sense that I didn't need to conceal it as much.

### 4.4 The Case for Digital Higher Education Distance Learning in Prison

The evidence from the data collected as part of this project evaluation, has demonstrated the contribution of education to an individual's experience of education. This manifests itself in supporting self-confidence, self-growth and personal development, as well as other indicators which support a rehabilitative climate (Jewkes and Reisdorf, 2016; Warr, 2016). Whilst cognisant of not just seeing prison education through the lens of an economic imperative (UNESCO, 2021), it is equally important to recognise the leverage that education can provide in securing meaningful and high-skilled work (MoJ, 2018; CSJ, 2021; HC, 2022; Coates, 2016).

It was therefore significant that prisoners saw the value of education for economic prosperity through the development of employability skills, both tangibly through the acquisition of qualifications but so more tacitly through their capacity to: 1) communicate with different audiences; 2) undertake work both independently and collectively and; 3) completing tasks to deadlines successfully. Indeed, this was perhaps demonstrated most effectively on completion of the module.

Students were invited, along with colleagues from the HEi and HMP and representative family members (for those wanting to invite external guests), to a celebration event to recognise student's achievement of their accredited learning. Each student separately and collectively, advocated to our senior team for more opportunities to engage in higher education learning. Such advocacy required students to have a degree of self-confidence, to be able to articulate why they had engaged in the course and why they felt more opportunities would be valuable to them. Whilst funding for such activity is still being sought; the value of such activities clearly cannot be measured by qualification outcome alone.

In exploring the feasibility of providing accredited, digital distance learning higher education, it is probably fair to say that we did not anticipate the number of challenges that we would face. We knew that we would be designing and delivering the module with no internet connectivity within the prison and worked with Coracle Inside on that basis (i.e. the material was pre-loaded with learning material and supporting resources that was devoid of URLs), but we had not anticipated the significant and seemingly at times, insurmountable challenges with trying to navigate on behalf of these students through the university systems and process. For example, communication without email; access to university policies without access to the university website, ensuring equality of access to support; mechanisms for pastoral and tutorial support; as well as type of assessment, uploading of submissions and marking of submissions all without access to the world wide web and virtual learning environments – all now embedded standard practice within contemporary education landscapes (e.g. Tanaka and Cooper, 2020; HC, 2022).

To that end, we were keen to evaluate with participants how they experienced each aspect of the module as designed. This would allow us to draw on best practice examples for future module designs.

In recognising the logistical challenges noted above, we designed a series of in-person tutorials as part of the module. These were undertaken every 4-6 weeks, their aim being to offer pastoral support and academic feedback on the learning activities undertaken as each participant progressed through the module. It was interesting that, despite the ambition to design a wholly on-line module, the participants in this project seemed to very much value the contribution of in-person activity, as indicated in the excerpts below:

**Learner 2 (562-566)**
…no, I think I think the face-to-face things are a lot better I enjoyed them.

**Learner 5 (355-360)**
" I think maybe someone could come into it less motivated. I think you did quite a good job at engaging us with the whole, can you tell me what this word means before we ever learn it. And I thought that was quite good. And that engaged me. And from my perspective, I kind of went right, I've now got an idea, a sort of forecast of what I'll be learning."

It may well have been that due to the unique setting of the students, the participants valued any interaction beyond those they encountered on a day-to-day basis. Simultaneously, there was some recognition (see Learner 1 excerpt below) that the module could have been readily completed by some without any face-to-face contact as entirely 'independent learners'. Although, interestingly, in the same excerpt the participant notes that, independently – but with the permission of the Learning and Skills Manager – the cohort had formed a 'study group' where participants met regularly to discuss the topics of the module:

**Learner 1 (820-825)**
"I think the tutorials helped massively. I think if just the people [learners] working never met you [teachers], I think I could have done the course. Some of them [learners] probably would have done the course because there was a meeting on a Monday's. If we had done it all individually and they wouldn't have spoken to anyone, I think they would have been a lot more panicky of "what I'm meant to be doing because I don't know,". I read the assessment criteria ... "this is excellent, this is good, this is very good" ...that's all the same, I don't understand what that means..."

We also took the opportunity to discuss the mechanisms we had established to provide and garner formative feedback on any aspects of the module assessment participants were working on, or more generally to provide feedback on areas such as referencing, citing and academic writing. Once again, whilst it is more usually with mainstream higher education students to refer them to a range of online resources through our library services, we had had to consider alternative strategies to getting such material to students. We had anticipated this by making some documents available as part of the 'standalone' module offer, but we did find ourselves bringing along paper-based materials to tutorials – for several reasons, most obviously the logistics of removing the Chromebooks from the students, taking them off site and uploading materials was considered time-consuming, inefficient and 'clunky'. It was interesting to note that whilst participants enjoyed the tutorials, and did find the discussion useful, some found them more important than others - they were not universally deemed a necessary component of the module (or indeed of any learning for some). This demonstrates that, going forward, more authentic, accredited, digital higher education distance learning could be designed with nominal face-to-face activity; as identified in the extracts below:

**Learner 2 (542-566)**
R: Yeah very because I needed the feedback that's what I needed I needed to be-
I: Did you need that in person, sorry to talk across you did you need that in person if we'd have given you some written feedback so it'd been all distance and you'd put something in and we'd written some feedback and you'd got some written feedback did it need to be in person?
R: No but I enjoyed it.
I: What was it what was it you enjoyed? I mean I enjoyed it too but
R: Because I enjoyed getting together I enjoyed looking I look forward to the sessions

I: Yeah me too.
R: That's what I enjoyed.
I: So if you were designing a distance learning module and I would you be saying actually the induction needs to be face-to-face there needs to be built in face-to-face tutorials periodically you know are those or ditch them just have it all online.
R: No, I think I think the face-to-face things are a lot better I enjoyed them.

**Learner 3 (281-284)**
"I think you covered everything during that that we needed to. So, if that had been on the Chromebook, it would have been just as handy. I didn't need it to be person-to-person. But the other side is, if you had left something out and I needed to ask it, I wouldn't have been able to."

**Learner 4 (794-797)**
R: I think it would, especially in this environment, without your mid-term tutorials, I think you may have had one or two guys fall by the wayside. Probably not with this group that we've just had.
I: No.
R: Because this group that you've just had are fairly, they are quite disciplined and want to do, if they take something on, they want to complete it. But I do think for any future groups, that you would, you coming in would offer encouragement. And I think your success rate or your submissions at the end would suffer if that was not there.

**Learner 5 (853-876)**
R: Definitely keep the face-to-face up, that is good and that did add a different dimension, quite a necessary dimension to the educational thing.
I: Why necessary?
R: Because I think when you're just reading a piece of prose, if you don't have that passion there in yourself, it's not passionate, the other lads had trouble reading for it and I'm reading and I'm just fascinated and I'm finding it so interesting and they're going, it's talking about statistics of crime imprisonment. And I'm like, yeah, but I find that interesting. I read that Nigeria has an average age of 13 in prison. That's fascinating, that's amazing, that's not a real statistic by the way, I made that up. But there was something like that, the right age of imprisonment of what age people can go to prison. And I found that fascinating. Other lads were kind of like, oh, it's mildly interesting but wouldn't say it was fascinating. So I think that one-to-one, I think your passion that you bring comes across more and that keeps people motivated and it does also give that opportunity to clarify things because that's the other thing.

Interestingly, whilst the study groups (mentioned previously) had been implemented by the participants themselves, reflecting on their contribution to their experience of learning throughout the module, there were mixed views. For some they were a key aspect of the module (even though it was not part of the original module design); for others, they did not find them valuable on a personal level, but were still happy to offer their knowledge and skills – 'informal mentoring' - to the group:

**Learner 2 (348-351)**
"[XXX] was the one that he was like my safety net because I'd gauged the room and figured out the level that everybody was at and [xxx] was like I'm all right with [xxxx]. I'm not, you know- I've got somebody that's the same as me so that kind of made it a bit easier knowing that there was somebody."

**Learner 3 (305-315)**
Not for me personally. I know a couple of the lads did, like I say. [XXX] would have, it's the first one at this level sort of thing. And [XXX} wasn't sure about how to go about it. So they're benefiting without a doubt. And I don't mind giving my time to help people.

The participants in this project clearly valued the opportunity to engage in higher education in and of itself; self-development and personal growth were frequently cited motivations across the cohort. Equally, engaging in an accredited course and obtaining a qualification, affirmed – to themselves, loved ones and potential future employers – that they had the skills, aptitude and resilience to study at this level.

Despite the many strengths cited in the interviews, we were of course keen to understand from participants, following their engagement with the module what areas should be the focus for development to strengthen such an offer.

Going forward it will be important to ensure the sequencing of information provides opportunities for assessment criteria to be provided earlier. We had decided not to provide this information as part of the 'standalone' module information, but rather provide at a tutorial so that we could discuss the assessment, and the associated criteria, face-to-face. This proved invaluable and emphasises the challenges of relying on only providing the assessment criteria within the electronic material pack.

Additionally, students stated they would welcome a mechanism through which they could submit a draft of a piece of work for formative feedback earlier in the module, rather than waiting for a tutorial. This will be important to think about as further modules are designed.

**Learner 2 (600-603)**
"Yeah, for me personally I would like to submit something just to see how I was progressing but that's only me personally I think everybody else like I said because of the not achieving as high as they did or they have they're used to they know how to write things so it's just the things like that basically to know."

**Learner 4 (516-518)**
"Absolutely. Because this is one criticism, I would say, is that had I given to you the thousands of words extra and said, can you give us a bit of direction, a bit of feedback on- here's a pencil, put lines through what I should be submitting or what I should be throwing in the bin."

Interestingly, participants were keen to have further, supplementary material. When we designed the module, we were very keen to limit the amount of material provided for fear of overwhelming participants; this decision was in part driven by student feedback from our Learning Together partnerships delivered at several other HMP institutions between 2016-early 2020. What this evaluation has demonstrated is that, unlike mainstream higher education learners, prison-based students do not have the luxury of accessing a wealth of material should they wish to explore a topic beyond the requirements of a module, which led to frustrations once the material downloaded to the Chromebook had been exhausted:

**Learner 5 (466-469)**
"I make a cup of tea, I sit down, and then I was done. And you're like, oh, okay, I'll watch it again. I'll listen to it again. So again, I wouldn't mind maybe longer lectures or like bonus lectures. So you have to listen to this. This is what we recommend you listen to. And if you want to listen to me on to drone further, this is video two."

A clearly articulated application process will be important going forward. Whilst the Advisory Board (including prisoners) had drafted the application process, the challenges associated with ensuring the requirements of both the HMP (i.e. security checks) and HEi (i.e. application via non-internet means) are visible, perhaps via a process 'flow-chart':

> **Learner 3 (187-188)**
> "To be honest, I can't actually remember the application process. I remember I wrote something about the background, but apart from that I can't remember."

Accreditation was clearly important for the participants in this project. It will be critical, going forward, that academic institutions to clearly demonstrate the authenticity of such accreditation:

> **Learner 1 (868-872)**
> "I think it gives it I don't know, kudos or that approval and it actually makes them believe actually I can write this level and they've not pretended or stamped it through because sometimes you have a course that says if you get- they've made the certificate up it's not a real qualification as such I think it gives worth to people; there's a confidence build and I think it's a useful step"

In discussing whether the participants felt that might want to undertake further accredited, digital higher education distance learning, there is clear evidence that each of the learners gained so much more associated with personal development alongside an accredited qualification – which they valued in its own right. As alluded to earlier, this demonstrated to learners that they could commit to activity and achieve success; which in turn offered them further motivation and encouragement to continue to undertake further learning opportunities:

> **Learner 4 (917-921)**
> "… I've got the capability of doing what's expected to gain a degree."

> **Learner 5 (788-790)**
> "I want to do it again. I want to do another module. It definitely reinforced that wanting to do more and stuff. I guess that's in a nutshell my takeaway from it. It has spurred me on to do further stuff."

We explored with participants whether the celebration event, which we undertook to bring people together to recognise the achievements of the participants, was an important aspect of the module, or just a 'nice to do'. The excerpt below was representative of how this cohort felt about the celebration event; namely that it provided an opportunity for each of the participants' success to be recognised by key personal across the various institutions, but perhaps more importantly, by their families:

> **Learner 1 (918-925)**
> R: Yeah, I think so because again it offers that sense of achievement that you've done something, especially when you invite guests in. Oh wow, other people actually care about what we're doing. This is worth something. You get a lot. We do things and you think is it really important, the grand scheme and things but then seeing my family come, and other people did- they seem quite happy. We're doing something useful or purposeful with our lives in what we can do if that makes sense.

The findings and discussion presented above offer a number of important insights into how prisoners perceive, receive, and engage with accredited, digital, distance learning higher education. Moreover, it substantiates the findings from the literature of the value to delivering a more diverse and engaging suite of higher education opportunities for prison learners (Coates, 2016; MoJ, 2018a; O'Grady and Hamilton, 2019; HC, 2022).

The next section of this report outlines the conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence gathered as part of this evaluation and makes some recommendations for those who are developing prison education policy, for those supporting higher education in prison and for those who which to undertake further research in this field.

# Section 5: Conclusions

In drawing this evaluation report to a conclusion, we revisit the project aims, and ask whether the evidence from the evaluation data demonstrates that it is feasible to develop and implement accredited digital higher education distance learning in prison. More importantly perhaps, is whether the evidence can support the argument for accessible, accredited higher education for prisoners to support economic, social, and cultural capital growth, contributing to individual rehabilitation of societal prosperity.

Dame Sally Coate's 2016 review of prison education for the Ministry of Justice came to several significant findings regarding prison education. Of salience to this project:

- One fifth of prisoners say they would have preferred to be studying at a higher level than they currently were.

- Three fifths of prisoners leave prison without an identified employment or education or training outcome.

## 5.1 The Case for Digital Higher Education Distance Learning in Prison

We initially wanted to understand why the participants in this project wanted to engage with higher education. The quotes below provide an indication of the importance of providing a higher education offer for people in prison. These include the importance of external recognition from potential future employers, but also the value to individual self-esteem and growth in self-confidence that achieving at this level established.

**Learner 1 (900-904)**
"That's the main reason I wanted to do it; because I hope that if you can get degrees in prison that - if your university runs, like a HE certificate and it's successful and you get published reports - somewhere else might do it in […] the country because reading all the government reports and about the links to re-offending rates and other stuff"

**Learner 2 (244-249)**
"To have that recognition- [Yeah]. because apart from my mum who always knew it was there- anyway yeah it's never surfaced if you know it's never had reason to surface. My life I've never had to use it, I just manual work and driving and things like that so you come in here and then suddenly people start recognising what you can do, 'oh you've done well on that you've done well on that you can do better on that you can get this you can do that I think you should apply for that because you can do that'."

**Learner 3 (517-523)**
For the academic challenge of it. If you don't push yourself, if you've got no sort of target, then yes, it's easy to pick up a book and read it, but you don't have to absorb it if you know you're never going to be questioned on it.

**Learner 2 (334-343)**
Because I didn't think I was up to it. [Never] in a million years I thought I could do it; suddenly I become level five.

In undertaking this project, we wanted to develop an understanding of what, if any, technology, currently existed within the secure estate that could be utilised to deliver accredited, digital, higher education distance learning in prisons; and what additional technology may be required.

The evidence from this report highlights an overwhelming lack of digital offering for people who wish to pursue education in prison. The project team were able to secure access to Chromebooks from Coracle Inside for this project and the introduction of Coracle Inside's Chromebook technology is undeniably a step forward in terms of modernising the way education is delivered throughout prisons. The evidence from the participants in this project highlights how valuable the technology was as a learning tool, enabling participants to learn at a time of their choosing and to be able to engage with the range of materials at their pace and in their preferred order, as indicated below.

> **Learner 2 (55-61 and 571-586)**
> Yeah, so basically put them in [headphones] and I could just listen and then keep going over and over again. Just keep listening to them and listening to them.
> Because I prefer to study like that. I found if I study on my own in the cell, I could do it easily.

That said, the participants articulated the limitations of the technology, for example, the lack of access to the internet which limited more detailed engagement in the subject material and additional resources, such as online library facilities and virtual learning platforms. Participants also cited the limitations associated with restricted versions of standard software, such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. However, as the PLA (2020: 10) contend, ‘‘it is possible to provide safe, secure, restricted, intranet and internet, access to prisoners. Increasing digital literacy and digital access for prisoners is essential.’

As we found, without this access, there are inevitable restrictions on the types of assessment that could be utilised, and the ways in which communications could be undertaken to aid feedback activities, for example.

A further area of focus for this project was to understand what strategies would support the delivery of high-quality accredited, higher education distance learning programmes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the delivery of high-quality learning is situated in both academic expertise and the pedagogic approach. On evaluating this project, the evidence from the data demonstrates that participants valued the range of academic material provided, as well as the different approaches to presenting the material virtually (a selection of audio lectures, alongside PowerPoint slide-decks and reading materials, including book chapters and journal articles).

Discussing the case for accredited digital higher education distance learning in prison, participants strongly advocated the value of learning at this level, both from an economic capital and social capital perspective, as indicated below:

> **Learner 1 (60-62)**
> “It's opened up, especially having different modules, learning about different topics, a skill set – I think my writings improved dramatically. I can argue and put information together and think about things and how to evaluate.”

**Learner 4 (598-600)**

"If they can become a more sociable person, be able to talk with people, be able to have a bit of an argument with a person without resorting to fisticuffs, they've learned a little bit of something. I've always been like that."

In conclusion, providing prisoners with professional, accredited digital, higher education learning opportunities, supported with the appropriate digital tools and infrastructure necessary for effective independent study, could help to bolster an open, learning culture across the prison estate.

The findings from this evaluation project will enable prisons and higher education institutions to create similar products, further contributing to the transformational potential of the educational landscape in prisons through partnerships.

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