Advantages of digital technology for prison education – a literature review

The use of digital technology in prisons in England was summarised in a report for the Education and Training Foundation (Sanders, 2017) and while this provides examples of pockets of good practice, it also highlights the lack of a consistent national policy on this issue. Detailed research on the effective use of digital technology is similarly limited, partly due to the lack of any substantial practice in this area and due to the challenges of carrying out ethically approved research in prisons.

This summary draws attention to key academic papers which document current research on the benefits of allowing prisoner access to internet-enabled digital technology. Dr Anne Pike (The Open University), Professor Yvonne Jewkes (Bath University) and Dr Bianca Reisdorf (Michigan State University) are important contributors to the research into effective use of digital technology in prisons and have all written extensively on this topic. Dr Vic Knight (De Montfort University) surveys and analyses public opinion on prison related issues and offers useful guidance to decision makers.

Employability

In their US based study, Reisdorf and Rikard (2018, p. 1278) cite labour force trends which project that approximately 8% of jobs were in the manufacturing industry in 2014, and another 4% were in other goods-producing industries—neither of which require digital skills. Most jobs, however, were in the services sectors (80%), which do require at least some digital skills. According to Helsper (2017, p. 230), "in a world where digital skills and engagement are fundamental for employment, it is not the absolute level but the relative level of skill and engagement that will make the difference for a person getting a job." Accordingly, higher levels of digital skills will be an advantage in acquiring a job, with Reisdorf and Rikard concluding that the chances of employment at a living wage are low for those who do not possess digital skills, especially when this low level of skills is coupled with a criminal record.

Ex-prisoners with "spoiled" pasts have significant difficulty in gaining employment upon release (Farrall, Bottoms, & Shapland, 2010). People with convictions are highly likely to be excluded by employers, with 75% of employers using a disclosed conviction to reject an applicant or discriminate against them (Working Links, 2010). However, there is evidence that higher education can enhance a prisoner's employment prospects and rates of pay in employment upon release (Costelloe, 2014; Duwe & Clark, 2014). There is a clear chronological evidence-based link that shows this assertion of the importance of lowering re-offending rates through education must be supported by the provision of Higher Education (HE) in secure environments.

Resettlement

ICT deprivation must be considered equivalent to other social deprivations, such as low income, unemployment, low education, poor health, and social isolation. Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) question whether the very simple digital skills that prisoners are able to pick up in IT classes can alleviate digital exclusion upon release. And several prisoners

they spoke to reported that the omnipresence of new media technologies constantly reinforced feelings of stupidity, difference, and marginalization from the outside world and even within their own families.

This situation is described as a paradox of balancing security concerns and penal power on the one hand, and enabling prisoners to lead a somewhat normal life and expand their basic (digital) skills to increase the chances of successful rehabilitation, finding employment upon release, and generally finding a way back into a society that is moving at a technological pace that may lead to challenges even for people serving relatively short sentences (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016).

Education

The importance of education for lowering reoffending rates is emphasised by many including Adams and Pike (2008), Gillies et al (2014) and confirmed by recent reports from the Justice Data Lab (2019).

Helsper and Reisdorf (2017, p. 1267) identify a situation of "entrenched exclusion" arising from "compound levels of disadvantage" among certain vulnerable groups, who may not be typical university students, but who might be encouraged by the open nature of Open University study, in particular the free short courses offered on Open Learn (The Open University, 2018). This definition certainly applies to many prison learners, who capitalise on their incarceration to benefit from educational support which has often been lacking in their childhood (Farley & Pike, 2016). However, these students often have only very limited access to technology, typically being allowed a maximum of two sessions per week on very slow computers with no internet access (Pike & Adams, 2012). Increasing digital access for education would enable more people to engage at all levels of study.

As Munro (2018, p. 1) states, "[d]igital technologies have become an accepted part of the contemporary Higher Education (HE) landscape… [and] national strategies play a crucial role in framing how digital technologies are enacted in HE". With this in mind, and as we consider the "Instrumentality of HE, which is the idea that HE serves a mainly utilitarian purpose and is primarily concerned with advancing a country's economic growth and individuals' monetary wealth", the lack of opportunity for full digital access to HE study in prison presents a clear disadvantage. Without appropriate digital access, the gap between prison learners and typical university students' ability to access HE study and complete a degree successfully will continue to widen.

Reducing social isolation

Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) examined the use of Skype in three prisons with a system which allowed prisoners to list a limited number of Skype contacts, linked to phone numbers already registered with the prison, so that prison staff could ensure that only approved family members and close friends could be contacted. This was intended to expand the opportunities of remaining in contact with family, however in practice it was interpreted as being a substitute for real visits, which deterred people from using it. All those involved agreed that the idea of Skype for prisoners was an innovative, humane, and well-meaning intervention by senior management, which required a clearer policy on its implementation. If issues of implementation can be overcome, making Skype available to

a larger population of prisoners may contribute to decreasing social isolation and stronger family-connections.

Operating efficiencies

Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016, p. 540) note that requiring prisoners to take responsibility for aspects of their lives previously administrated by officers potentially frees up significant periods of staff time formerly spent on form-filling. In theory, this newly acquired time can be spent on more meaningful interactions with prisoners and, for many prisoners, innovations such as digital kiosks reduce some of the stresses and tensions of life inside by offering a greater degree of agency.

Fears around the use of online media are deeply entrenched and Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016) observed that many new initiatives were vetoed by security officers because of the claim that "you'll always find some bright spark who can take an iPod or games console and convert it to watch pornography or contact people outside that they shouldn't." They posit that this underlines current rationales for punishment and belies an overt risk-aversion. It is rarely, however, balanced by a desire among prison service personnel to exploit the full capacity of the digital prison. As a means of communication, accessing public services, research, education, banking and employment, the potential of digital technology is simply not even being systematically or strategically addressed (Champion & Edgar, 2013). Further, the 'inarguable' justifications for limiting prisoners' use of new media and the refusal of security managers to countenance ways in which technology could be made safe (for example, allowing Wi-Fi connections and then 'white-listing' approved sites) only exacerbates the inequality.

International approaches

An analysis of the use of digital technology in different countries has been carried out by Kerr and Willis (2018, p. 11) comparing approaches in Australia and the rest of the world. In particular they highlight the use of the PrisonCloud in Belgium, a secure platform which enables prisoners to "access services relating to all aspects of life such as employment, education, leisure, healthcare, finances and legal matters. It aims to improve offender reintegration into society by normalising the use of technology and responsibility for such matters through a 'seamless' linking of classroom-style and in-cell learning". This approach of "normalising" use of technology is also being adopted in Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands.

In the HE context, Norway has created an ICT infrastructure called the IFI (Internet for Inmates) which encourages prisoners to become e-citizens. Student-inmates in Norwegian prisons can access university learning platforms outside the prison, communicate with teachers, upload assignments and research online (Pike & Adams, 2012).

Managing public opinion

Public attitudes on prisoners' access to digital technology have had the effect of stifling development in this area. Knight and Hadlington's survey (2017) offers "contemporary evidence to help policy makers to achieve the confidence they require to satisfy public opinion and make informed decisions about the implementation of digital technologies in

prisons". They note that while there is an initial nervousness from the general public on this topic, people tend to be more accepting of the use of technology when appropriate monitoring is in place and when the use has a clear link to resettlement and employment.

On a similar theme, Jewkes (2008, p. 184) argues for the benefits to be reframed stating that "for as long as prisoners' access to the Internet is framed as a security issue, the repercussions are likely to involve greater insecurity for the community at large, as prisoners are released back into the community with significant skills deficits". Accordingly, we need to observe these transitions and examine them carefully as well as the possibilities and opportunities that (limited) access may present to prisoners' successful rehabilitation, involvement in children's lives, etc.

Nick Hardwick quoted in Champion and Edgar (2013) concluded :

> *"Of course, there are security issues that need to be managed but the technology itself allows every key stroke to be monitored and access can be risk-assessed. Perhaps there are some who will say computers and the internet are luxuries prisoners should do without. There was probably some grumbling when they first put telephones on the wings too and if we want prisons to rehabilitate those they hold, we have to give them the tools to do so.*
>
> *A couple of years ago I visited the British military detention centre in Camp Bastion, Afghanistan. The army had fixed it so the detainees held there could use Skype to communicate with their families in Kabul. If the army can do it for their enemies in a desert in Afghanistan, it's hard to see why we can't do it with low risk prisoners here."*

References

Adams, A., & Pike, A. (2008). Security issues within prison and health open and distance learning programmes. *The Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning*. London.

Champion, N., & Edgar, K. (2013). *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation*. Retrieved from Prison Reform Trust website: www.prisonerseducation.org.uk

Costelloe, A. (2014). Learning for liberation, teaching for transformation: Can education in prison prepare prisoners for active citizenship? *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*, *14*(1), 29–36. Retrieved from http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=5554eaf9-77d8-44d3-98bf-85cdb69a498b%40pdc-v-sessmgr05

Duwe, G., & Clark, V. (2014). The Effects of Prison-Based Educational Programming on Recidivism and Employment. *The Prison Journal*, *94*(4), 454–478. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885514548009

Farley, H., & Pike, A. (2016). Engaging Prisoners in Education: Reducing Risk and Recidivism. *Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association*, *1*, 65–73. Retrieved from http://icpa.ca/1st-edition-of-advancing-corrections-journal/?utm

Farrall, S., Bottoms, A., & Shapland, J. (2010). Social structures and desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, *7*(6), 546–570. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370810376574

Gillies, R., Carroll, A., Swabey, K., Pullen, D., Fluck, A., & Yu, J. (2014). The Role of Post Secondary Education Among Ex-Inmates Living Crime-Free. *Joint AARE-NZARE 2014 Conference*. Retrieved from https://www.aare.edu.au/publications-database.php/9346/-The-role-of-post-secondary-education-among-ex-inmates-living-crime-free. (accessed 21 April 2017)

Helsper, E. J., & Reisdorf, B. C. (2017). The emergence of a "digital underclass" in Great Britain and Sweden: Changing reasons for digital exclusion. *New Media & Society*, *19*(8), 1253–1270. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816634676

Jewkes, Y. (2008). The role of the Internet in the twenty-first-century prison: Insecure technologies in secure spaces. In & M. L. H. (Eds. . Aas, K.F., Oppen Gundhus, H. (Ed.), *Technologies of InSecurity: The Surveillance of Everyday Life*. (pp. 171–188). Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.

Jewkes, Y., & Reisdorf, B. C. (2016). A brave new world: The problems and opportunities presented by new media technologies in prisons. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, *16*(5), 534–551. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895816654953

Justice Data Lab. (2019). *Reoffending behaviour after support from The Open University July 2019*. London.

Kerr, A., & Willis, M. (2018). Prisoner use of information and communications technology. *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*. Retrieved from https://aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi560

Knight, V., & Hadlington, L. (2017). Public Acceptability Survey on the Prisoners' Access to Digital Technology: Emerging Results. Retrieved March 2, 2018, from ICPA website: https://icpa.ca/public-acceptability-survey-on-the-prisoners-access-to-digital-technology-emerging-results/

Munro, M. (2018). The complicity of digital technologies in the marketisation of UK higher education: exploring the implications of a critical discourse analysis of thirteen national digital teaching and learning strategies. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 15*(1), 11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-018-0093-2

Pike, A., & Adams, A. (2012). Digital exclusion or learning exclusion? An ethnographic study of adult male distance learners in English prisons. *Research in Learning Technology, 20*(4), 363–376. https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v20i0.18620

Reisdorf, B. C., & Jewkes, Y. (2016). (B) Locked sites : cases of Internet use in three British prisons. *Information, Communication and Society, 4462*(April), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1153124

Reisdorf, B. C., & Rikard, R. V. (2018). Digital Rehabilitation: A Model of Reentry Into the Digital Age. *American Behavioral Scientist, 62*(9), 1273–1290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218773817

Sanders, A. (2017). *Successfully Using ICT To Support Learning in the Secure Estate*. Retrieved from https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/news/successfully-using-ict-support-learning-secure-estate/

The Open University. (2018). OpenLearn - Free Learning from the Open University. Retrieved September 14, 2018, from http://www.open.edu/openlearn/

Working Links. (2010). *Prejudiced: Tagged for life – A research report into employer attitudes towards ex-offenders*. London: Working Links.