Getting connected

Digital provision and education in prison

December 2025

About Prisoners' Education Trust

At Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) we believe that everyone in prison, wherever they are and whatever their background, should have access to education.

We offer distance learning courses, advice and guidance and help around 1,500 learners each year to study, giving them the skills and qualifications to build brighter futures. We offer 120 different courses including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University (OU) Access modules and a wide range of professional courses.

We use our policy and advocacy work to improve prison education and show prisons, policymakers and the public the impact it can have — for people in prison, their families and society.

We believe that people with lived experience of prison education should be at the centre of our work. We aim to work co-productively and ensure that people with lived experience inform our thinking in all that we do.

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Executive summary

In today's world, digital access is essential to education, communication and everyday life.

In prisons, digital provision has the potential to promote effective learning and to support the development of digital skills that are key to life and work after release. It is no longer an optional extra.

However, across the prison estate, access remains inconsistent, with some prisons offering few opportunities for digital learning or skill development.

Despite this, there is no clear national vision or shared long-term strategy for digital provision in prisons, leaving progress fragmented across the estate.

This briefing explores the current landscape and makes the following recommendations, which we believe would help to address the challenges currently facing digital learning in prison and to improve provision for learners across England and Wales.

For the Ministry of Justice

1. **The Ministry of Justice should publish a long-term strategy for digital provision in prison which clearly articulates their vision for digital learning.**
The Ministry of Justice should publish a strategy within a year which articulates their long-term vision for digital learning. Ultimately this should ensure that learners have continuous access to a digital device in and out of their cell. Secure access to the internet should also be available and used across the prison estate. In the interim there should be more progress towards standardising good quality provision.

For HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)

2. **HMPPS should ensure all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the scale and quality of digital provision in prison.**
HMPPS should undertake and publish an estate-wide digital audit which captures what is available currently in every prison.

3. **HMPPS should produce clear specifications for making digital content available in prison.**

HMPPS should work with digital providers to develop and make available clear specifications for creating whitelisted (security-approved) websites and for producing educational materials for existing digital platforms in prison.

4. **HMPPS should improve training, guidance and knowledge-sharing for prison staff.**

Prison staff should be supported to develop a better understanding of what is available in their prison and how they and learners can access it.

5. **HMPPS should continue to develop ways of connecting learners and the providers of digital educational materials.**

This is important for all providers, whether they are based in prisons or in the community. It includes enabling prompt marking and feedback to learners, capturing learner progression, and enabling the sharing of progression and access data with providers.

6. **HMPPS should continue to fund the development of high-quality educational resources for learners.**

Building on the recent Digital Content Innovation Fund,[1] HMPPS should continue to fund the development of high-quality educational resources that are compatible with the digital devices and platforms available in prison.

For prison governors and senior leadership teams

7. **Prison governors and senior leadership teams should commit to prioritising purposeful activity, education and digital learning in their regimes.**

Senior leadership teams should work with HMPPS centrally to ensure effective digital provision is available across their establishments. The provision in their establishment should be accurately mapped, with access protocols made clear and available to relevant staff. Senior leadership teams should champion digital provision in their prisons.

For HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), Ofsted and Estyn

8. **HMIP, Ofsted and Estyn should ensure better accountability for the scale and quality of digital provision in prison.**

HMIP should undertake a thematic review of digital provision in prison. HMIP, Ofsted and Estyn should explore how they can apply a more consistent approach to capturing how digital technology is used in the establishments they inspect.

Introduction

PET has long recognised the potential of digital provision in prisons to support education, both to improve access to high quality learning and to enable people in prison to develop digital skills needed for release. We have produced digital short courses and a whitelisted (security-approved) website which are accessible to people in prison. We are now exploring how we can enable learners to access full distance learning courses digitally via our whitelisted website.

This briefing explores current digital provision in prisons more broadly, with a focus on platforms and devices (laptops, tablets or desktop computer terminals) which are relevant to education and learning. It makes recommendations for next steps which build on the work already undertaken over the past few years by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the Ministry of Justice.

The briefing draws on PET's experience of our expanding digital work in prisons, insight gathered on prison visits, along with interviews with course providers and education providers.

Why is digital access important for prison education?

Digital skills are critical to successfully navigating most aspects of life – from job and accommodation searches, to booking health appointments or paying bills. With the increasing prevalence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), people also need to be aware of new tools available and be able to make informed judgements about the digital content in front of them.

Research shows the positive impact that access to digital technology can have in prison and on release. One study evidenced that people in prison with digital access "felt much more in control of their lives in prison and much more confident in coping with technology in the outside world" which resulted in a reduction in disciplinary offences in prison and a reduction in reoffending on release.[2]

Increasing digital literacy is a priority for the government but their 'Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps',[3] published in 2025, does not reference people in prison, a group who are falling further behind as the pace of technological change increases. It is imperative that this gap is addressed. As the Action Plan says, "Access to technology and the skills to use it effectively will, in turn, become an ever more powerful factor in shaping the life chances of our citizens."[4]

The contrast between education provision in prisons and in the community (at schools and further or higher education institutions) is stark. Though it is important to note that digital access has improved in prisons (including a roll out of in-cell technology in some prisons, alongside wi-fi access in prison education departments[5]), the majority of people still lack access to a digital device and the internet. As well as the impact on digital skills, this also means they do not have access to online support, interactive digital learning tools, or the vast array of digital educational resources that are available in the community.

It presents specific challenges for the provision of distance learning too. While PET continues to provide paper-based courses for people in prison, distance learning in the community is now largely provided online.[6] Each iteration of our prospectus sees the removal of a small number of courses which can no longer be provided in prison. Each year the immediate impact is small, but over time if digital provision in prisons does not improve, the opportunities for learners to progress will severely diminish.

Current digital provision for education and learning in prisons

The current key platforms and devices used in education departments or in-cell are outlined below. It should be acknowledged that it may be an incomplete picture due to:

– The lack of clear information about what is available where.
– The range of approaches, platforms and devices across the prison estate.
– The disconnect between what may be technically available and the awareness of prison education staff who may not know what is available or how to access it.
– Bespoke approaches in some prisons, for example in private prisons.

These issues, along with the siloed nature of how prisons work, the physical infrastructure, practical constraints and a risk-averse culture, mean the experience for learners varies hugely from prison to prison.

a) Whitelisted websites and the Virtual Campus

A number of platforms and devices we outline below use whitelisted websites or enable access to the Virtual Campus.

Whitelisted websites
Whitelisted websites are security-approved websites. Any links to external sources and material are removed but the sites broaden the scope of the educational content which learners can access. Each site goes through an approval process before it can be accessed by people in prison. Currently there is no published standardised specification available for a whitelisted website and the approval process varies.

> **"The whitelisted website seems like a smart improvement."**
>
> **Feedback from a learner about the PET whitelisted website**

The Virtual Campus
The Virtual Campus is a secure platform which gives people in prison access to a range of educational information and whitelisted websites.[7] The functionality is limited, but it does have some interactivity "through the ability to submit assignments digitally; communicate with tutors via messaging; save files which they can retrieve at other establishments or in the community."[8] However not all functionality is used in all prisons. The Virtual Campus can be accessed on devices in education departments, workshops and libraries, and on in-cell devices. Though probably the most universal platform, due to factors such as the number of devices, where these are located, password issues or regime changes, access to the Virtual Campus can be limited.

b) Digital access in education departments

Digital Education Platform (DEP)

The DEP aims to standardise the primary digital education platform in prisons. It has been rolled out in parallel with the implementation of new prison education contracts in place in England from October 2025. As such, the DEP is in all public sector prisons in England and a small number of private prisons.

The DEP is a cloud-based learning environment accessible on desktop devices in prison education departments. It aims to provide a consistent platform for prison staff to work with, enable smoother sharing of information (for example when learners transfer between prisons) and introduce standardised assessments so people do not need to repeat them. Learners can access the Virtual Campus and whitelisted websites on the DEP. One critical element of the platform is the planned introduction of the Learning and Work Progress service which should collate and track an individual's education and work history and progress.

There has been positive feedback on the DEP's functionality and quicker login process, however as the real improvements are in the "back-end" of the system (which should make future system developments easier and better) it is too soon to see the full impact.

What this means for learners in prison:
- A quicker login process and access to materials and whitelisted websites.
- A learner record that will track their progress and move with them to other prisons.
- A reduction in the number of repeated assessments as that information will be captured on their learner record.
- A transition period as prison staff familiarise themselves with the new platform.
- Potential challenges to progression as some existing learning materials and courses do not work on the DEP.

Open Borders

Open Borders uses category-based web browsing. This is a way of controlling access to websites based on their type – for example, "news" and "education" – rather than by individual site. As such it can allow access to a broader range of websites and resources than is available through other platforms. Open Borders is available across the prison estate, but tends to be used in category D (open) prisons to support employability and distance learning.[9] It enables people to research jobs and careers and keep up to date with good practice in certain professions – for example at HMP Styal, women used Open Borders to research video clips about current cutting techniques in hairdressing.[10]

What this means for learners in prison:
- Better preparation for release with access to up-to-date information about their chosen job or career path.
- A digital experience close to release which better reflects how they will use online access and resources in the community.
- Unlikely to have access earlier on in their sentence, so opportunities to maximise the benefits of the platform are limited.

c) Digital access in-cell

> **"I recently completed an E-commerce distance learning course related to setting up a digital business. I've also obtained a laptop from the education department which in turn will make distance learning easier and more practical."**
>
> **Feedback from a PET learner**

Launchpad

Launchpad is an HMPPS in-cell tech programme launched in 2024. It gives people in prison secure "self-contained" laptops with digital services in their cells to support their rehabilitation.[11] It comprises a single sign-on and a home page with access to resources including the Virtual Campus.[12] The platform's technology is such that it provides potential to access more complex externally sourced content. As of May 2025, Launchpad was live in 19 prisons and almost 13,000 people have access to the secure laptops.[13]

What this means for learners in prison:
- In-cell access to the Virtual Campus.
- Builds familiarity with using a laptop.
- Potential to access a more diverse range of learning resources, though currently the content is not as extensive as it could be.
- It is unclear how Launchpad in cells and the Digital Education Platform in prison education departments will function alongside each other.

Coracle Inside

Coracle Inside have over 2,600 laptops in 94 prisons in England and Wales. A recent evaluation by Crest Advisory found that the Coracle Inside system is cost effective, with £16 returned for every £1 spent, and has a positive impact on employment post-release.[14] The laptops are specifically intended to enable access to educational content, with a range of resources and courses. Materials are added to the device which is given to a specific individual, who then returns the device once the relevant work is complete. The devices are very secure – to the extent that prisons rely on Coracle Inside staff to visit, gather laptops, download completed work and upload new work.

What this means for learners in prison:
- In-cell access to more interactive, higher-level content with better functionality.
- Builds familiarity with using a laptop.
- Access is reliant on decisions made by prison staff.
- Coracle Inside staff need to be available to take completed work off the devices and add new content on, which can lead to delays.

> "Along with being accepted by Prisoners' Education Trust, I've also been very fortunate to have been given the personal use of a laptop from Coracle Inside supplied by the resettlement services within the prison. This has made completing the course much easier, enjoyable and highly useful, as it makes for a much more favourable way of writing and reading Word documents."
>
> **Feedback from PET learner[15]**

Socrates 360

Socrates 360 is a platform which enables access to a range of education and training materials.[16] It is designed to be accessed on a tablet (or smartphone) and work on wi-fi inside prison. Socrates 360 enables people in prison to access the Virtual Campus and whitelisted websites. Tablets are used in-cell at HMP Five Wells and HMP Millsike, though they are also used at other establishments to supplement classroom learning (for example HMP Swaleside and HMP Ford).[17] The devices also allow direct messaging to approved phone numbers. This could mean there is potential to use this functionality to support learning, for example for direct contact with tutors.

What this means for the learner:
- Better access to materials and whitelisted websites.
- Device functionality makes it easier for content on the tablets to be updated by prison staff.
- Messaging functionality brings the potential to contact tutors directly.

The challenges facing digital learning in prison

a) For learners

Access to devices

Access to devices (laptops, tablets or desktop computer terminals) is inconsistent across the prison estate. Out of cell, learners are reliant on staff to facilitate access to the education department, library or other spaces where they might be able to access a digital device. This presents challenges in establishments where prison staff are overstretched and prison movements are limited and/or time consuming.

Even in education departments, access can be inconsistent. At one prison, HMIP noted "The virtual campus was not well used. It was not used during induction for assessment purposes or within the employment hub for job search activities and it was not available throughout most education."[18] In some prisons, sessions are cancelled at short notice due to staff shortages and attendance in education generally needs to improve. As HMIP noted in their thematic review 'Just passing time: A review of work and training provision in adult prisons', attendance in education was at "an average of 67% – a level that would get any school or college closed down."[19]

> **"I would have finished sooner if the prison provided access to a computer sooner to type up my work."**
>
> **Feedback from a PET learner**

Though there are now a reasonable number of portable devices available across the estate which could be used in-cell, relative to the prison population the numbers are still limited. We know prison staff would like more devices for a wider reach, and this would also help to address claims from some people in prison of favouritism or lack of fairness in allocation.

Inconsistent access creates issues for prison transfers as what is accessible and permitted in one establishment, may not be the same in another. If someone had regular access to a device in one prison and is moved somewhere where that is not available, or where the security protocols are different, their learning will stop and they may not be able to restart.

Access to the internet

Progress has been made in broadening access to whitelisted websites available on various digital platforms. However, with the exception of those who have access to Open Borders, there is no wider access to the internet. This approach limits access to good quality, up-to-date courses and means learners are unable to access materials or research relevant to

their studies. Significantly, it also reduces the opportunity for learners to develop relevant digital skills, not only in how to use a device and the applications on it, but also to develop media and information literacy skills. As one interviewee for this briefing said, "As society increasingly demands the ability to critically evaluate online content and assess the provenance of information, those leaving prison without these embedded skills face a significant disadvantage. Without the tools to judge content effectively, they are more vulnerable to misinformation and less prepared to participate fully and safely in digital, educational and civic life upon release."

> "Sometimes it was difficult to get further material to support the course, like internet information from links provided."
>
> "The only issue I have is I don't have access to the internet, therefore unable to go on any links that are mentioned in course workbook. There is only limited information/research I can obtain from our prison library."
>
> **Feedback from PET learners**

Quality and relevance of available resources

With no internet access and limited functionality, learning inevitably does not have the same level of interactivity as in the community. Courses need to be "retrofitted" to work on prison platforms and this can lead to poorer quality material. In addition, due to security concerns and controls on devices, it can be difficult to ensure learners are able to access relevant content on the right device in a timely manner. This reduces the options available to learners and diminishes the learning experience.

Progression

This is an issue for learners both while they are studying a course and in tracking their progression overall. Courses may be available to view on a digital device but due to the limited functionality, assignments or coursework may still need to be submitted on paper. This – in addition to security restrictions around user data – means there is no consistent way to track learner progress. Moving forward the new DEP system should address this with learner progression plans, but it may take time to embed and may not capture all learning activity.

Accessibility and inclusion

Support around accessibility and inclusion has improved in some ways for some groups with additional needs in prison – for example the introduction of Neurodiversity Support Managers to help neurodivergent people. However, there is still a lot of progress that could be made for learners, by making more digital tools (software, hardware and applications[20]) available and ensuring educational content is accessible to everyone.

b) For people who work in prison

Education contracts

Information and Communication Technology is taught via prison education contracts, but participation is low. With a prison population throughout the year of over 85,000, the number of people who participated in 2024-25 was just 2,428, with only 1,977 making measurable progress.[21] This was a decrease from the year before, when 3,096 people participated, and 2,422 made measurable progress.[22] This decline could become a trend. In October 2025 new education contracts started and, though the providers have stayed the same in many establishments, changes to contract budgets have resulted in disruption across the estate with redundancies and cuts to provision. This is deeply concerning for prison education broadly. While some of the budget has been redistributed to HMPPS centrally to fund some estate-wide digital developments,[23] this investment will be futile if there are not sufficient staff to facilitate and support digital access.

Staff changes and multiple platforms

The turbulence in the prison system broadly, along with the impact of the new prison education contracts, has resulted in many staffing changes as roles are altered and people redeployed. Staff churn and absences, challenges with training, plus a mix of new and legacy systems, mean those working in prison education may not know what resources are available on which platform or which learners can access them. In addition, the platforms and devices which are available vary from prison to prison, and some are used in multiple ways. For example, Coracle Inside laptops are usually allocated to a single learner but they are also used in some settings by multiple users, such as in induction.

Combined, these issues mean prison staff can feel less confident in supporting digital learning. In some prisons this, along with concerns about making mistakes, have resulted in prison staff not wanting to be responsible for allocating devices or helping learners to access platforms. This means learners are missing out on vital opportunities.

Regime priorities

It often seems that senior management are unable to prioritise purposeful activity and ensuring learners have access to education departments and computers, often due to reasons outside of their control (for example staff absence). This undermines the ability of a prison community to develop a culture of learning which can contribute to a more positive environment for people living and working in prison, and help to ensure better employment outcomes and reductions in reoffending on release.[24] On a more practical level, when access to prison education departments is restricted, especially at short notice, this can put frontline prison staff in a difficult position managing frustrated and demotivated learners.

Unreliable infrastructure

There have been improvements in the digital infrastructure across the prison estate but various challenges still exist in some establishments. For example, at one prison "regular interruptions to the digital infrastructure affected assessments, teachers' delivery of lessons and learners' access to digital resources."[25] In some prisons, wi-fi has been implemented, usually in prison education departments. This is a positive development, but with regular issues in people being able to visit education departments, the benefits will only be felt by some people and many will miss out entirely.

c)   For course providers

No available specifications and inconsistent provision

There are no clear specifications available for those developing digital resources for people in prison, for example the requirements for a whitelisted website. This may be a result of security concerns but makes it challenging to develop resources which will work in prison. The inconsistent digital infrastructure across the prison estate also has an impact. Together these issues result in course providers choosing the technically simplest option to ensure as many people as possible can access course materials. This can mean a less interactive learning experience, with courses restructured to reflect the limitations in prison. This prevents learners in prison from accessing content similar to that in the community and it is frustrating for providers who need to use their resources to restructure courses.

Learner progression data

Due to technological and security-related limitations, data related to course access, progression and completion is limited and often unavailable entirely, especially to providers who sit outside HMPPS. Even with whitelisted websites, the usual metrics that might be used through Google Analytics (which monitors how websites are being used) are not possible. This makes it difficult to support learners in real time, and to track the impact of the provision. This is a particular challenge for voluntary sector providers whose funding often relies on demonstration of impact. There is scope for improvement with the DEP and learner progression plans, but it remains an issue for those using other platforms.

Challenges in prompt feedback

Some learners in prison are studying courses with tutor support based in the community. Tutor feedback is sometimes possible over the phone and occasionally via the Email a Prisoner scheme (where an email is printed and included in prison post), but typically assignments are submitted and marks received by post. With delays in processing post in prison, this can mean there is a significant wait between submitting an assignment and receiving the mark and feedback. We also routinely hear of correspondence between learners and tutors going missing completely. This is frustrating for the learner and can also affect the quality of subsequent submissions, or their progression entirely, if feedback is not received before the next assignment is due.

d)   For the system

No clearly articulated vision

The Ministry of Justice has a 2025 Digital Strategy with a stated outcome of "increased educational and rehabilitation opportunities for prisoners."[26] The strategy focuses on improving efficiencies and data management and enabling people in prison to do their own administrative tasks. There does not seem to be a clear vision for what digital provision could mean for learning in prison. Elsewhere there is an interest in exploring digital innovations in relation to security measures[27] but not education. Without a clear agreed vision, there are several risks: that there is a clash between the aims of learners, education providers, prisons and HMPPS centrally; that digital tools are not used to their full potential in prison education departments; and that digital tools are used as an excuse to keep people in their cell for longer and as a substitute for human contact.

No external accountability

Challenges related to digital provision can happen in any prison, even those where education provision is rated positively in inspections. For example, at one prison, where education provision was rated as good by Ofsted, many people "did not have sufficient access to Virtual Campus or laptops to research information for their course work or to explore suitable employment opportunities. Prisoners did not have access to digital devices to use in prison for selecting courses or for ordering personal use items. Consequently, they did not develop their digital skills and felt anxious about being able to cope with technologies in daily life on release."[28]

Conversely, good practice can be found in prisons where Ofsted rated the education provision as inadequate. At one such establishment, the inspection report stated "Prisoners were allocated in-cell laptops which provided them with access to a good range of information and resources, including from the Virtual Campus… Mentors supported prisoners to develop their digital skills, preparing them well to use digital technologies when released."[29]

Inspection reports such as these offer helpful insights, but currently HMIP, Ofsted and Estyn do not have a consistent approach to capturing how digital technology is used in the establishments they inspect. Other publicly available information also misses digital provision. For example, HMPPS prison information web pages provide information such as phone availability, but they do not mention access to digital devices.

Recommendations to improve provision

In implementing the recommendations outlined below, we propose three guiding principles that all those involved should adhere to:
  – Use of technology should not replace face-to-face contact but should be used to enhance and support the learning experience of people in prison.
  – Use of technology should not replace teaching expertise but should be used to enhance and support the teaching experience in prison.
  – Digital tools, platforms and content should be accessible and inclusive.

For the Ministry of Justice

1. **The Ministry of Justice should publish a long-term strategy for digital provision in prison which clearly articulates their vision for digital learning.**
The Ministry of Justice should publish a strategy within the next year which articulates their long-term vision for digital learning. Ultimately this should ensure that learners have continuous access to a digital device in and out of their cell. Secure access to the internet should also be available across the prison estate.[30] In-cell access to digital devices should be available where possible (this is particularly important for people who cannot make it to education departments), and there also needs to be better access to digital devices in education departments, libraries and on wings for people to study and to improve their digital skills.

The strategy should include a clear timetable for implementation and align providers of digital platforms, devices and content. The DEP and the roll out of Launchpad will bring some consistency across the estate but with the range of devices and legacy systems still available, clarity of purpose now is key. In the interim there should be more progress towards standardising good quality provision.

For HMPPS

2. **HMPPS should ensure all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the scale and quality of digital provision in prison.**
HMPPS should undertake and publish an estate wide digital audit which captures what is available currently in every prison. The digital audit should be clearly defined in scope and be repeated regularly to identify improvements in the system and where work still needs to be done. A version of this audit should be available publicly.

3. HMPPS should produce clear specifications for making digital content available in prison.

HMPPS should work with digital providers to develop and make available clear specifications for creating whitelisted websites and for producing educational materials for existing digital platforms in prison. Knowing exactly what is and is not possible, in a consistent way across the prison estate, ensures resources, expertise and time are focused effectively. These specifications should cover both technical and security requirements.

4. HMPPS should improve training, guidance and knowledge-sharing for prison staff.

A long-term strategy may streamline provision, but in the meantime prison staff should be supported to develop a better understanding of what is available in their prison and how they and learners can access it. Knowledge should not sit with a single member of staff. HMPPS should ensure training materials and guidance are clear and easily accessible in prison – for example if training videos are being used, that they are accessible via the systems available to staff in prison.

Prison education staff and prison officers should also be given opportunities to develop their own digital skills. This will help to improve their confidence, in turn meaning they feel more able to help learners. The most effective organisations we have spoken to have ensured their staff are upskilled first, helping to embed a digital culture, before then focusing on developing learners. We know from our visits that prison staff would welcome such opportunities.[31]

5. HMPPS should continue to develop ways of connecting learners and the providers of digital educational materials.

This is important for all providers, whether they are based in prisons or in the community. It includes enabling prompt marking and feedback to learners, capturing learner progression, and enabling the sharing of progression and access data with providers.

Though improvements in capturing learner progression are expected through the DEP, this will only capture activity in prison education departments. It is important that wherever a learner is studying and whatever platform they are using, their progression can be recorded and providers are able to support them in a timely and effective way. This will also benefit prison staff who will not need to facilitate communications between learners and providers to the same degree.

6. HMPPS should continue to fund the development of high-quality educational resources for learners.

Building on the Digital Content Innovation Fund[32] (an initiative by HMPPS to procure new and innovative digital learning content for people in prison), HMPPS should continue to fund the development of high-quality educational resources that are compatible with the digital devices and platforms available in prison. Content needs to cover different educational levels, recognising differing levels of attainment within the prison population, and also meet the specific needs of particular groups (for example those who speak English as a second language).[33] Unnecessary duplication of content should be avoided.

HMPPS should ensure people in prison learn about digital security issues which may affect them when they return to the community, for example issues such as cybersecurity, ethics, scams and interrogating AI-generated content.

Longer term, HMPPS may want to explore greater use of digital innovation, for example through virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR). VR can be used to provide people in prison with an idea of working in different settings and where practical training is not possible. The New Futures Network used a VR training session to enable attendees to experience the construction industry,[34] HMP Fosse Way has an excavation work simulator,[35] and Novus is delivering immersive, vocational training via VR in two prisons.[36] VR has also been used to support wellbeing in prison: at HMP Warren Hill, people could access VR mindfulness through headsets used in their cells.[37] This shows that VR and AR can be used creatively, and has potential to become a tool which could be used to support more learning and training.

For prison governors and senior leadership teams

7. Prison governors and senior leadership teams should commit to prioritising purposeful activity, education and digital learning in their regimes.
Senior leadership teams should work with HMPPS centrally to ensure effective digital provision is available across their establishments. The provision in their establishment should be accurately mapped, with access protocols made clear and available to relevant staff.

Senior leadership teams should champion digital provision in their prisons and be seen to familiarise themselves with digital tools too. They should ensure that staff in their establishments have access to good quality digital training and have protected time to complete that training. Senior leadership teams should also facilitate ways in which their staff can share good practices with peers in other establishments, including those with different contracted education providers.

For HMIP, Ofsted and Estyn

8. HMIP, Ofsted and Estyn should ensure better accountability for the scale and quality of digital provision in prison.
HMIP should undertake a thematic review of digital provision in prison. HMIP, Ofsted and Estyn should explore how they can apply a more consistent approach to capturing how digital technology is used in the establishments they inspect.

Conclusion

While digital provision should never be a replacement for face-to-face contact, it has huge potential to help people develop their skills and knowledge and prepare for release. A clear vision for the future alongside a clear picture of what is available now is essential. Ensuring the prison education experience is comparable to what is available in the community will ensure learners maximise their potential - benefitting them, those around them in prison, and ultimately the communities to which they will return.

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Prisoners' Education Trust

Prisoners' Education Trust,
The Foundry, 17 Oval Way
London, SE11 5RR

☎ 020 3752 5680

✉ info@prisonerseducation.org.uk

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