

Beyond the classroom

**Strengthening distance learning
provision in prisons**

June 2026



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 1,600 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 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.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Mark O'Mahony, Policy Manager. With thanks to PET's Service Delivery Team and to the many frontline staff we work with in prison education departments across England and Wales. Without their knowledge, insight and passion, PET's policy work would not be possible.

Thanks also to every PET learner whose feedback and experiences have shaped this report.

All illustrations are by Erika Flowers – see more of her work at www.recordedinart.com

The photos on pages 11, 16, 20 and 23 by Rebecca Radmore and Elio Pena for Prisoners' Education Trust. The photo on page 27 is by Ian Cuthbert.

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Foreword

During my time working in prisons, I witnessed the genuine joy that learning can bring to those in custody: from a man who learnt to read sufficiently that he was able to read to his children; to the satisfaction of someone having received a certificate for the successful completion of a course. There is not always a lot of joy in prison, and this is important in that it gives people a purpose, can have a positive effect on mental health and wellbeing and it provides hope for the future.

Education in prison concentrates on the basics, meaning there can be few opportunities through the education department for those who already have skills or qualifications. The range of distance learning courses offered through PET enable these learners to develop their existing knowledge or to choose a new area of study. Many people in prison are keen to make the best of their time; we owe them that possibility. Leaving prison with new skills or qualifications demonstrates a personal commitment and will support access to employment, a crucial step in reducing the risk of reoffending.

I understand the pressures associated with running a prison. The need on a daily basis to juggle the regime according to the available staff and other pressures, to do your best to meet everyone's needs, meet targets and ensure safety. This decision making must put education at its heart by getting learners to classrooms but not forgetting the value that distance learning offers and ensuring these learners have access to appropriate IT, to the library, to peer mentors, or to staff. Only in this way will we do our best by those who want to learn and give themselves a better chance on release.

Judith Feline

PET Trustee

Former Governing Governor, HMP Maidstone

Executive summary

Everyone in prison should have the same access to education as people in the community. In mainstream adult education, distance learning is widely used as a flexible, learner-centred approach. Bringing this breadth of provision into the prison estate is vital because, for many learners, distance learning is the only route to meaningful educational progression. It picks up where core provision ends, offering courses from Level 2 up to Level 5, and ensuring those who arrive with higher prior attainment are not left without opportunities.

Distance learning delivers proven rehabilitative benefits. Ministry of Justice Data Lab research shows that PET courses reduce reoffending by 22% and increase the chance of finding work by 21%. Furthermore, a well-delivered distance learning offer can improve regime stability and support learners' mental wellbeing while also offering an alternative for neurodivergent people who may struggle in noisy classrooms.

However, distance learning provision is under severe strain in many prisons due to recent funding cuts that have led to the loss of 25% of Core Education hours in public sector prisons, and 30% in the women's estate. Compounded by significant cuts to the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) budget, this funding climate has destabilised broader provision, forcing some prisons to reduce the staff time available to support distance learning, place caps on application numbers, or cease offering distance learning altogether.

In this context, this report maps out what good practice in supporting distance learning looks like across six key stages, outlining practical ways for prison leaders to overcome operational challenges. It goes on to outline ten recommendations for prison leaders to strengthen distance learning provision, alongside five recommendations setting out what the government must do to ensure distance learning can thrive in every prison.

Ten recommendations for prison leaders

1) Make it clear to everyone that distance learning is a priority

The Governor and Head of Education, Skills and Work (HoESW) should jointly communicate that distance learning is a high priority across the establishment. Doing so empowers staff to dedicate the necessary resources to making it work and legitimises the effort learners put into their studies.

2) Ensure that there is a Distance Learning Coordinator with sufficient capacity

It is essential that leaders ensure a designated staff member is in place to support distance learning, with enough protected time to meet the demands of the cohort. This time is required to facilitate delivery, securely manage course materials, and provide meaningful support to learners.

3) Approve an equitable pay policy for distance learners

Pay for distance learning should match what is offered for core classroom education or for work. Flexible, equitable pay policies ensure that no learner is structurally or financially penalised for choosing to pursue distance learning.

4) Support learners' access to essential physical and digital resources

Many courses require independent research and the submission of written assignments. Prisons must ensure learners are not blocked by infrastructural barriers by facilitating regular access to the library, basic stationery, and IT with word processing software.

5) Provide flexible, out-of-cell study spaces where possible

Relying exclusively on in-cell study can isolate learners and hinder their progress. Leaders should authorise the use of classrooms, the library, or wing common rooms for independent or group study, adjusting regimes so these spaces are available when the main education department is closed wherever possible.

6) Create the conditions for a community of learners to form

When learners feel they are part of a community, it bolsters motivation and creates a sense of peer support. Prison leaders can foster this by supporting staff to deliver targeted study skills sessions to groups of distance learners or by establishing regular, learner-led distance learning forums.

7) Support the development of a peer mentoring scheme

Distance learning is an ideal space to build on existing peer mentoring structures. Utilising paid or voluntary peer mentors casts a much wider safety net for learners, fosters a supportive environment, and significantly reduces the administrative demands placed on staff.

8) Guarantee access to examinations

To ensure no learner spends years studying only to face a logistical barrier at the end of their course, leaders should proactively register their establishments as approved exam centres with the relevant awarding bodies. This must be accompanied by the allocation of staff time to meet any invigilation requirements.

9) Create systems for celebrating distance learners' achievements

Active celebration is key to sustaining engagement. Where graduation ceremonies are already offered, distance learners should be included on an equal footing with other learners. If ceremonies are not possible, leaders should consider certificates or other privileges.

10) Collect data and track progress

To ensure distance learning is treated with the same strategic importance as core classroom education, senior leadership must actively monitor its delivery. The HoESW and relevant Governor should agree on a locally determined Key Performance Indicator (KPI)—such as application numbers or course completion rates—to report against regularly.

Five recommendations for national government

1) Reverse the cuts to Core Education provision in public sector prisons in England

The government must reverse the cuts to stabilise the wider prison education system and protect broader provision, including distance learning, from acute operational strain.

2) Reverse the cuts to the DPS budget

The government must restore the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) budget to prior levels in real terms. This will provide Governors with the vital flexible funding and autonomy needed to commission tailored provision that meets the specific needs of their local cohort during their establishment's recovery from chronic underfunding.

3) Abolish the six-year rule for student finance

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice must work together to remove the arbitrary restriction that prevents people in prison with more than six years left to serve on their sentence from accessing tuition fee loans for higher education.

4) HMPPS should produce national guidance specifying that distance learning should be made available in every prison, with a clear definition of the Distance Learning Coordinator role

HMPPS should amend the relevant prison policy framework, "Prison Education and Library Services for adult prisons in England," to explicitly require Governors to make distance learning opportunities available. This must be supported by national guidance that clearly defines the purpose, function, and requirements of the Distance Learning Coordinator role to standardise support across the estate.

5) HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice should embed distance learning into a comprehensive, long-term digital strategy

HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice must ensure that future digital infrastructure accommodates distance learning requirements. This includes ensuring stakeholders understand the specifications of digital infrastructure and guaranteeing that learners have secure, whitelisted access to the educational materials required to complete their courses.

Together, these local and national actions will ensure that distance learning remains a resilient, transformative pathway, giving people in prison the skills and qualifications they need to build brighter futures.

Introduction

Prison education is currently operating in an acutely challenging delivery environment, with recent funding cuts adding strain to a system already under unsustainable pressure. Despite this, the fundamental principle remains unchanged: everyone in prison should have the same access to education as people in the community.

Distance learning provides a highly impactful way to expand and complement classroom-based provision, opening an essential route to educational progression. By offering a flexible, self-directed model, it adds opportunities for learners who may struggle in traditional educational settings, delivering proven rehabilitative benefits that reduce reoffending, increase employment, and support wider regime stability.

This report examines the current strengths and challenges of distance learning provision in prisons across England and Wales. Drawing on the insights of frontline staff and the lived experiences of learners, it outlines practical recommendations for local prison leaders to strengthen this provision, alongside the systemic reforms required from national government to ensure it can thrive.

What is distance learning?

Distance learning is a well-established form of adult education in the community. In prison, distance learning offers a flexible model of study that is distinct from traditional classroom-based learning. As an approach, it gives learners a broad choice of relevant courses with clear assessment frameworks and outcomes. The self-directed nature of distance learning courses allows learners to study at their own pace, supported by regular remote feedback from tutors. PET courses generally lead to formal qualifications, meaning that they involve written assessments and, in some instances, formal examinations.

Crucially, distance learning operates outside of centrally commissioned Core Education provision. While the Prisoner Education Service (PES) commissions and funds core provision up to Level 2 (focusing on English, mathematics, ICT, and ESOL), distance learning must be supported separately by each prison in partnership with providers such as PET. As a major provider of courses from Level 2 to Level 5, alongside Open University access courses, PET bridges the gap between foundational skills and higher education. Separately, the Open University directly provides full degree programmes for people in prison via distance learning.

Why should prisons prioritise distance learning?

PET believes that learning opportunities in custody should mirror those available in the community. In mainstream adult education, distance learning is widely used because it is a flexible, learner-centred approach that allows people to build upon their prior knowledge. Bringing this breadth of provision into the prison estate offers a wide range of benefits: it improves learner outcomes, provides an excellent return on investment, expands core provision, and supports regime stability.

Providing a route for progression

Core education provision in prisons rightly focuses on building functional skills for the two-thirds of learners who enter prison with Entry Level English and maths skills.¹ Achieving Level 2 is a major rehabilitative milestone, but that is where centrally commissioned core provision ends, creating an educational cliff edge that can put learners' motivation at risk. PET courses pick up where core provision leaves off, with courses ranging from Level 2 to Level 5, thus providing learners with a structured pathway to build upon their success.

Importantly, for the roughly 1 in 10 people who enter prison already at or above Level 2 in English, core provision alone is unlikely to meet their needs.² Distance learning provides an essential route to educational progression, ensuring this cohort is not left without meaningful opportunities.

“All courses I’ve attempted to complete through the PET challenge me academically whilst pushing me further towards my aims. Without the PET I don’t know where I’d be as most prisons only offer up to level 2 maths and English.”

PET learner

1 Ministry of Justice and HM Prison & Probation Service (2025) Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2024 – 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2024-to-2025/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2024-2025>

2 Ibid.

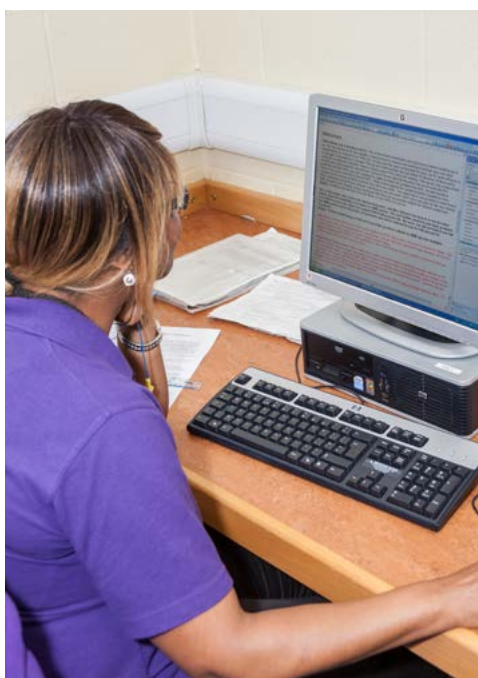
Rehabilitative outcomes

Robust domestic and international evidence shows that participating in prison education reduces reoffending and increases post-release employment.^{3 4 5} Distance learning with PET clearly reflects this: Ministry of Justice Data Lab research shows that our courses reduce reoffending by 22% and increase the chance of finding work by 21%.⁶

Crucially, this breadth of provision empowers people to base their choices on their prior experience and future ambitions. By offering over 100 courses—including GCSEs, A-levels, and professional qualifications—distance learning allows learners to draw on their own internal motivation to either upskill in their current field or successfully pivot to a new one.

“Distance learning with PET gives people the opportunity to change career, to explore new interests. Mainstream education doesn’t offer that here.”

Distance Learning Coordinator



Wellbeing and self-confidence

For people enduring long hours locked in a cell, distance learning provides a positive, purposeful focus that can significantly improve mental health and self-confidence.

“Having reading and assignments to do in my cell benefits my mental health by giving me something purposeful to focus on.”

PET learner

For those who have previously had bad experiences in the classroom, it offers a chance to re-engage with education on their own terms. It can also strengthen relationships with family members—a proven factor in supporting successful resettlement.⁷

- 3 Ministry of Justice and Department for Education (2017) Exploring the outcomes of prisoner learners: Analysis of linked offender records from the Police National Computer and Individualised Learner Records. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81c99840f0b6230269927f/pnc-ilr.pdf>
- 4 Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Sheffield Hallam University and London Economics (2018) Evaluation of prisoner learning: Initial impacts and delivery. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-and-delivery>
- 5 Davis, L., Bozick, R., Steele, J., Saunders, J. and Miles, J. (2013) Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html
- 6 Ministry of Justice (2021) Justice Data Lab Experimental Statistics: Employment and reoffending behaviour after support from Prisoners’ Education Trust (PET) – 4th Analysis. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954465/Prisoners_Education_Trust_PET_4th_analysis_report.pdf
- 7 HMIP (2026) Safety, well-being and hope: The untapped potential of family contact in prisons. Available at: https://hmiprisoners.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/safety-well-being-and-hopethe-untapped-potential-of-family-contact-in-prisons/

“I just want to say thank you for the opportunity to learn and gain an education. I left school at the age of 11 as I was bullied [...] and I was always told I will never amount to nothing. PET has given me hope for a brighter future and a real chance of making something of myself and making my little girl proud of her dad. Thank you so much.”

PET learner

Distance learning can also work well for some neurodivergent people, who may struggle in noisy classrooms.⁸ By broadening how people with additional learning needs can engage with purposeful activity, distance learning can also support prisons’ compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty—a legal duty that applies to every prison.⁹



Regime stability and positive relationships

Successful distance learning provision supports regime stability and fosters positive relationships. Prison staff tell us that learners who have a meaningful focus are happier, calmer, and more engaged. Furthermore, PET course feedback data shows that 81% of learners go on to engage in at least one other form of purposeful activity, which staff report contributes to a sense of stability across the prison.

Well-developed support systems act as a catalyst for these positive dynamics. When dedicated staff and peer mentors are available to support learners, it strengthens relationships and fosters a supportive community of learning.

Portability and adaptability

Approximately 50% of PET learners transfer to another establishment during their course. Unlike classroom education, distance learning travels with them.

A fundamental strength of distance learning is the fact that it can be adapted to the operational realities of different prisons. Our data shows that provision often operates most comprehensively in Category C prisons, which support the highest numbers of learners and can facilitate additional support structures with the least friction. However, the model can be adapted to work across all security categories. Category B prisons maintain strong provision by adapting provision to accommodate their higher churn and more restricted movement. Similarly, we see the lowest disengagement rates in Category A prisons, and many learners finish their studies in Category D prisons, sometimes combining learning with Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL).

8 For more on the impact of sensory overload for neurodivergent people in education and ways of mitigating it, see Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021) Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System: a review of evidence. Available at: <https://ciji.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/inspection-report/neurodiversity-in-the-criminal-justice-system-a-reivew-of-evidence/>

9 HM Government (2023) Public Sector Equality Duty: guidance for public authorities. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty-guidance-for-public-authorities/public-sector-equality-duty-guidance-for-public-authorities>

Excellent return on investment

At a prison level, distance learning with PET offers a high return on investment. Prisons are asked to contribute 10% of each course fee, with PET covering the remainder so that courses remain completely free to the learner.^{10 11} Aside from the contribution to course costs, the primary resource demand placed on an establishment is simply the allocation of a dedicated Distance Learning Coordinator with sufficient protected time.



10 PET funds the remaining 90% of each course fee using a combination of a grant from HMPPS, funding from trusts and foundations, and donations from members of the public.

11 This does not include Open University Access courses, which are fully funded through PET by a grant from HMPPS, meaning no financial contribution is required from individual prisons or learners.

Good practice and challenges:

Distance learning provision in English and Welsh prisons today

Within the current climate of funding constraints, the resilience of dedicated staff and learners ensures that distance learning continues to exhibit many strengths across the estate.

While there are several systemic barriers requiring national policy intervention, which are examined later in this section, there are also significant operational challenges that can be mitigated through good practice at a prison level.

| What good looks like: overcoming challenges across the distance learning journey

Successful support for distance learning can be broken down into six distinct stages. This section outlines the common operational challenges leaders and staff face at each point, alongside the practical, proven good practice that establishments use to overcome them.

Stage 1. Establishing resourcing and processes: Allocating adequate staff capacity and preparing to facilitate applications.

Stage 2. Building staff and learner awareness: Developing staff understanding and visibly promoting courses.

Stage 3. Supporting learner readiness: Getting learners ready for distance learning, including with the use of digital tools to strengthen study skills.

Stage 4. Creating a learning environment: Providing dedicated time and space outside of cells, access to IT and resources, and equitable pay.

Stage 5. Keeping learners engaged: Supporting individual learners, developing peer mentoring schemes, and actively celebrating success.

Stage 6. Ensuring continuity: Preparing for examinations and robustly managing prison transfers and staffing changes.

Stage 1: Establishing resourcing and processes

Without enough protected time, Distance Learning Coordinators cannot operate effectively. Unlike classroom learning, distance learning relies on the continuous, secure movement of physical and digital materials into and out of the establishment. This means that, without enough Coordinator capacity in place, access to course materials and external tutor support can be delayed or, worse, learners can miss assignment deadlines.

Systemic pressures and funding cuts have contributed to capacity pressures for Distance Learning Coordinators—a trend recently flagged by Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs). As one Coordinator warned, some learners are "falling by the wayside" due to these severe time constraints, meaning lost time, effort and investment. To strengthen provision, the first step for prison leaders is ensuring Coordinators are allocated sufficient, ringfenced time to support learners.

Once a Coordinator is in place, leaders must ensure that they are ready to facilitate applications from learners. Our application process assesses applicants' motivations and ensures they have the foundational skills necessary to successfully engage with self-directed study at their chosen level. We also have some eligibility requirements, as set out in our [Distance Learning Handbook](#).

Stage 2: Building staff and learner awareness

Awareness of distance learning varies among prison staff and leaders. Distance Learning Coordinators sometimes report that leaders do not fully grasp what distance learning involves or the extent of its potential benefits.

"There's a lot of confusion between what the Open University is and other forms of distance learning. Some senior staff think distance learning just means Open University degrees. It's much more than that."

Distance Learning Coordinator

Addressing this knowledge gap helps ensure distance learning is not treated as a lower priority than work or core education, thereby reducing the risk of learners' studies being disrupted by regime clashes.

Lastly, distance learning relies on leaders ensuring that their teams actively promote opportunities using PET resources, including our prospectus and other promotional materials.^{12 13} Our whitelisted website serves as a key hub for information, hosting a digital version of our [prospectus](#) and a set of learner stories, so people can easily explore what is on offer.

Stage 3: Supporting learner readiness

It can be difficult to know if distance learning is the right fit without trying it and, when someone is returning to education, they often benefit from rebuilding their study skills first.

12 Every prison may request a limited number of print copies of our prospectus. Please contact us for more information.

13 Promotional materials and guidance on our application process can be found on the [prison staff resources](#) section of PET's website.

To address this, PET has developed a suite of digital and printable resources for people to try distance learning out while developing their digital literacy and study skills. These resources are completely free and open to all, with no application requirements. They include:

- 1) Ten short courses that learners can access on our [whitelisted website](#). These are designed to give learners a taste of distance learning. They can either be completed digitally or printed out.
- 2) Six courses delivered digitally through the Virtual Campus, also designed to give learners a taste of distance learning.
- 3) Four short courses specifically designed to build learners' study skills in preparation for a full course. Prison staff can access these and print them out for learners from the [Prison Staff Resources](#) area of our website. Printed copies can also be requested through our Advice Line.¹⁴

Leaders can maximise the effectiveness of their prison's distance learning provision by ensuring staff promote PET's short courses to prospective learners.

Stage 4: Creating a learning environment

While in-cell study is a key advantage of distance learning, relying on it exclusively can isolate learners and hinder their progress. This can be mitigated by providing dedicated out-of-cell study spaces, such as scheduled library access, and ensuring wing staff can authorise regime adjustments to allow studying when the education department is closed.



Case study 1.

At one Category A prison, distance learners are allowed weekend access to PCs in the houseblock common rooms. This provides learners with a vital space to study and type up assignments when education is closed. To help with focus and noise, the Distance Learning Coordinator leaves headphones in the Senior's office for learners to sign out.

Access to the right tools is equally critical. Many courses require independent research and typed assignments, yet infrastructural barriers still force some learners to handwrite long assignments for higher-level qualifications. Where IT is restricted, prisons can utilise secure devices such as Coracle laptops or offer bookable "research support" sessions for staff to print out online materials. Addressing the systemic aspects of this digital divide remains a priority for PET, as outlined in our December 2025 report, [Getting Connected](#).

Finally, pay for distance learning must be equitable, matching what is offered for core classroom education or wing work. Unpaid or underpaid distance learning creates a structural barrier and inadvertently signals to staff and learners that the provision is not valued by leadership.

¹⁴ See our [Prospectus](#) for more information, p. 13.

Stage 5: Keeping learners engaged

Human connection and proactive support are key to sustaining motivation. Staff who maintain clear oversight of learners' progress can spot when someone is struggling and intervene before they disengage.

"Seeing the student, sitting with them and providing support is so important... Just that bit of support can be really powerful for keeping people on course. I think it's one of the best parts of the job."

Distance Learning Coordinator

Case study 2.

At one Category C prison, the Distance Learning Coordinator sends learners movement slips to invite them to "progress checks" if they have fallen behind with their course. These supportive conversations focus on identifying barriers and helping the learner restart their studies in a way that works for them.

Combining dedicated staff time with peer support casts a wider safety net, significantly reducing the administrative demands on staff while fostering a supportive community of learning.

Case study 3.

At another Category C prison, paid peer mentors promote courses, interview applicants, and help new distance learners create study plans. In team meetings, the Distance Learning Coordinator thinks strategically with peer mentors about the best approach to supporting each learner.

"I can manage who I haven't seen anything for a while from that way... I tend to send my peer mentors out to re-engage with people. It's easier for people to connect with them when they're in that situation."

Distance Learning Coordinator

Finally, where graduation ceremonies are held, including distance learners can support engagement and confidence. When formal events are not possible, leaders should ensure successes are still recognised through alternative methods, such as issuing certificates.

"Certificates are good... We also have a monthly magazine. A bit of recognition in there would be nice, even if it's anonymous."

Distance Learning Coordinator

Stage 6: Ensuring continuity

Administrative hurdles—such as transfers, staff turnover and exams—can create significant barriers if not proactively mitigated by leaders and staff.

Approximately 50% of our learners experience at least one transfer to another establishment during their studies. Without careful management, this can lead to lost course materials, delayed communication with tutors, and a loss of momentum for the learner. To mitigate this, staff should inform PET promptly of any transfers. Staff may also find that PET's Digital Prison Monitoring (DPM) platform, which provides centralised tracking of prison transfers, course progress and course completion, supports them to identify transferred learners earlier.

Leaders must also plan for staff turnover. Training additional staff and developing strong peer support networks ensures provision does not collapse when a Distance Learning Coordinator leaves their role. Prisons should promptly inform PET of any Distance Learning Coordinator changes so the new post-holder can access our comprehensive support package, which includes a virtual induction and access to our online portal for prison staff.

Finally, many distance learning qualifications culminate in formal examinations, which require secure spaces and formal invigilation. Leaders can proactively register their establishments as approved exam centres with the relevant awarding bodies and explicitly allocate the staff time needed to manage the process, ensuring no learner faces a logistical barrier at the end of their course.

Ensuring inclusive access

When specific groups are under-represented in distance learning, it is rarely due to a lack of interest in education. PET has found that, working together with prisons, it is able to effectively reduce under-representation by improving accessibility, relevance and regime coordination.

As part of work funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, PET developed a strategy to address the under-representation of Muslim people amongst our learners. Feedback we received indicated that our communications weren't reaching Muslim learners as effectively as they could be. By realising that many Muslim men were going to the chapel rather than the education department, PET created a tailored flyer distributed directly during Friday prayers. Across the project, this simple mitigation has so far resulted in a 7% increase in applications from Muslim people. This is still recent work and we hope that these figures will continue to improve.

PET has undertaken similar work focused on other groups. For instance, older people in prison, particularly those past State Pension age, can face challenges in accessing education and work. Despite this, targeted outreach by PET achieved a 70% increase in engagement among over-60s, proving that the demand for lifelong learning remains high if provision is brought to them.

Systemic challenges

Prison education has long faced systemic challenges, to which distance learning is far from immune. While dedicated staff routinely achieve excellent outcomes, they are doing so in an increasingly destabilised system. Resolving these challenges requires intervention from the government.

The climate of cuts

Back in 2022, the Education Select Committee warned that “prison education is in a perilous state due to a continual decline in funding”.¹⁵ This was echoed by core providers such as Novus, who noted that “funding, and in turn resources available to deliver education, are not enough to support the complexity of need,” adding that the system is underfunded compared to mainstream community provision.¹⁶

Since then, the government has implemented a two-phase real-terms funding cut in October 2025 and April 2026. Even before these cuts were fully implemented, the Justice Committee expressed its “alarm” in response to the cuts, concluding that they risked “undermining efforts to reduce reoffending”.¹⁷

These cuts have now resulted in the loss of 25% of all prison education capacity in public sector prisons in England.¹⁸ In the women’s estate, the cut is even steeper, at 30%.¹⁹

As well as having a direct impact on access to Core Education, these cuts have had a destabilising effect on broader prison education provision, including distance learning.²⁰

“For a lot of people, prison is boring. People come to me [for distance learning] because they want something to do, especially once they’ve done their English and maths. And since the cuts, there’s less education otherwise available and the courses we still have run less often. Once they’ve done their maths and English, really the options are solely vocational. There’s barbering, warehousing, and not much else.”

Distance Learning Coordinator

Following the first phase of cuts in October 2025, PET saw a drop in applications from some establishments. One prison stopped supporting distance learning entirely due to overwhelming pressure on education, while others have introduced waiting lists or strict application caps to manage the demand on overstretched staff.

15 Education Select Committee (2022) Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

16 Ibid.

17 Justice Select Committee (2025) Ending the cycle of reoffending – part one: rehabilitation in prisons. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmjust/469/report.html>

18 Prisoners’ Education Trust (2026) Prison education hours cut by 25%: what we know. Available at: <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2026/04/prison-education-hours-cut-by-25-what-we-know/>

19 Inside Time (2026) Exclusive: Women bear the brunt of prison education cuts. Available at: <https://insidetime.org/newsround/exclusive-women-bear-the-brunt-of-prison-education-cuts/>

20 Independent Monitoring Boards (2025) Concerns raised over cuts to real-term prison education budgets. Available at: <https://imb.org.uk/news/concerns-raised-over-cuts-to-real-term-prison-education-budgets/>

Some prisons have reduced their Distance Learning Coordinator's protected time by as much as half, with concerns about the impact of this now being raised in some inspection reports. Committed Distance Learning Coordinators often volunteer extra hours to protect provision, which is entirely unsustainable and threatens long-term stability when staff move on.

"We just recently had a whole shuffle of everything. The education department shrunk a bit. My hours have been reduced. Can I fit in everything I need to in the two days I have? Yes, I can, because I stay late and I work through my lunch break. Would I like to have three days? Yes, absolutely."

Distance Learning Coordinator

Separately, significant annual cuts to the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) budget since 2022/23 have stripped Governors of the flexible funding needed to commission tailored provision.²¹ This parallel squeeze leaves Governors entirely unable to fill the gaps left by the core education cuts.

PET continues to urge the government to reverse these cuts and will continue engaging with ministers about the operational impacts.

Other barriers to progression

Alongside the cuts to Core Education and the DPS budget, two further structural barriers block progression for learners.



Partly driven by recent cuts, some prisons have taken the difficult decision to stop offering Level 2 courses, focusing exclusively on Level 1. For the 69% of people entering prison with Entry Level English and maths, limiting provision to Level 1 creates a structural ceiling. Due to their self-directed nature, all PET courses require Level 2 English ability, and some require Level 2 maths. Failing to fund Level 2 provision renders distance learning permanently unreachable for anyone arriving in prison below that level.

Even when learners can access courses beyond Level 2, those serving long sentences face further structural hurdles. At present, the "six-year rule" blocks people in prison from accessing student finance if they have more than six years left on their sentence. This keeps degree programmes out of reach for years, damaging engagement and severely impacting motivation. We continue to call on the government to abolish the six-year rule for all people in prison.

21 Kim Johnson MP (2025) Written question: Prisons: Education (UIN 78750). UK Parliament. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-10-10/78750>

Strengthening distance learning provision: Ten recommendations for prison leaders

The recommendations below are based directly on our experience and expertise and on what frontline prison staff and learners tell us they need. They are intended to support practical conversations among prison leaders about how to embed and improve distance learning provision within the realities of the current operational climate.

Action is also needed from the government to remove structural barriers and support prison leaders. Specific recommendations for central government and HMPPS are detailed in the next section.

1 Make it clear to everyone that distance learning is a priority

The Governor with responsibility for purposeful activity and the Head of Education, Skills and Work (HoESW) should jointly take steps to consistently communicate that distance learning is a high priority across the establishment. Doing so empowers staff, sending a clear message that they should dedicate time and resources to making it work. For learners, it legitimises and validates the effort they put into their studies.

Case study 4.

At one Category C men's training and resettlement prison PET works with, the Distance Learning Coordinator explained that leaders at the prison had taken the conscious decision to prioritise distance learning, and that this was key to the success of the provision there. This clear priority-setting empowered the Distance Learning Coordinator to strengthen the support on offer and increase the number of learners taking part. As they put it:

“Don't be tricked into thinking there isn't the demand in your prison. The more students do distance learning, the more students want to do distance learning. There's so much potential in it, for prisons and for learners, but there has to be a deliberate decision and plan.”

Distance Learning Coordinator

2

Ensure that there is a Distance Learning Coordinator with sufficient capacity

It is essential that leaders ensure a designated staff member is in place to support distance learning, with enough protected time to meet the demands of the cohort. This time is required to facilitate delivery, securely manage course materials, and provide meaningful support to learners.

3

Approve an equitable pay policy for distance learners

Approving an equitable pay policy is perhaps the clearest cultural signal leaders can send that distance learning is a valued form of purposeful activity. Equitable pay policies work best when they allow for flexibility, ensuring no one is financially penalised for choosing distance learning.

“If someone is studying with the Open University or PET at our prison, they can opt to do this full-time as education and they’re paid accordingly, or they can work part-time or even work full-time, and do distance learning in their own time.”

Distance Learning Coordinator

4

Support learners’ access to essential physical and digital resources

Prisons must ensure that learners have access to basic stationery, such as pens and note paper, which are not included in provided course materials.

Wherever possible, prisons should also support access to IT. This requires that staff understand the need for distance learners’ access to IT and that reasonable allowances are made to make this possible.

5

Provide flexible, out-of-cell study spaces where possible

Where possible, prison leaders should authorise the use of classrooms, the library, or other appropriate spaces for distance learners to use for individual or group study. It is especially useful if spaces can be made available when the education department is closed. Depending on the prison, this might include facilitating evening and weekend access to quiet spaces, authorising wing-based study spaces within split regimes, or providing evening access to the library for distance learners who work during the day.

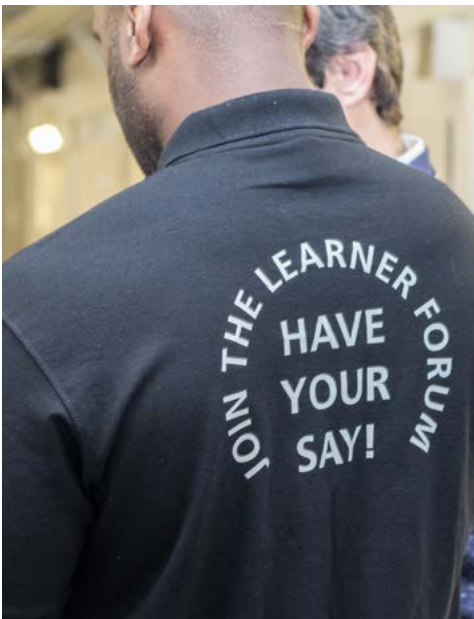
Providing these shared spaces is also particularly valuable for some neurodivergent people. For example, learners with ADHD often find “body doubling”—working alongside someone else who is also focused on a task—to be a highly effective way to maintain focus and momentum.²²

6

Create the conditions for a community of learners to form

When learners feel they are part of a community, it can bolster motivation, create a sense of peer support, and lead to stronger relationships.

In addition to making flexible out-of-cell study spaces available, prison leaders can create the conditions for a community of learners to form by supporting staff to deliver targeted study skills sessions to groups of distance learners and establishing a regular distance learning forum.



Case study 5.

At a Category B prison, learners have established a distance learning forum once a quarter, led by learners, where people come together to give feedback on support structures and processes, and to suggest improvements.

22 Mental Health Matters. Body Doubling: What it is, why it helps, and how I use it. Accessed 29/05/26. Available at: <https://www.mhm.org.uk/body-doubling-what-it-is-why-it-helps-and-how-i-use-it>

7

Support the development of a peer mentoring scheme

While not suitable in every setting, peer mentoring is a highly effective approach in many prisons. Distance learning is an ideal space to build on peer mentoring structures used elsewhere in the establishment.

Peer mentoring schemes for distance learning can work well independently or they can be integrated into structures for education more broadly. Whatever shape the scheme takes, an essential ingredient is that wing officers and other key staff understand what the scheme is and actively support it.

“We try to integrate peer mentoring for distance learning with peer mentoring for wider education provision... What really helps is that wing officers understand why they want to do that and make allowances to enable them to meet and study together. Without that, it wouldn't be feasible.”

Distance Learning Coordinator

Peer mentors should be supported by the Distance Learning Coordinator, with their roles clearly defined. The role can be paid or voluntary, but rates of pay should reflect the level of commitment required, and peer mentors should be encouraged to study a relevant course with PET to further develop their skillset and confidence in the role.²³

Case study 6.

At a Category B prison, a peer mentoring scheme was founded a few years ago following a business case that a learner developed and presented to the Senior Leadership Team. Since then, the scheme has grown with the prison now delivering most aspects of its distance learning provision through learners in paid roles. The Distance Learning Coordinator there maintains oversight of the scheme. They told us that, rather than adding to their responsibilities, the scheme had significantly reduced their workload:

“All I do now are the things those prisoners can't do: send the applications off, receive the assessment outcomes from course providers, that's about it.”

²³ See our [Prospectus](#) for more information.

8

Guarantee access to examinations

Many distance learning courses culminate in formal examinations. If learners are studying distance learning courses that require exams, leaders should proactively register their establishments as approved exam centres with the relevant awarding bodies.

This administrative step must be backed by resourcing. Leaders must ensure staff have the time required to manage the exam process and act as invigilators.

Finally, leaders must ensure that regime structures and communication with wing staff guarantee that learners are unlocked and moved in time to sit scheduled examinations.

9

Create systems for celebrating distance learners' achievements

Leaders should ensure that distance learners' efforts and achievements are actively celebrated. Where graduation ceremonies are already offered, leaders should ensure these include distance learners, and not only those engaged with core classroom provision. If ceremonies are not possible, leaders might suggest a system based on certificates or other incentives and privileges.



“For leaders to see the community that had been built around distance learning [through the graduation ceremony] was really great. We had a lot of good feedback.”

Distance Learning Coordinator

10

Collect data and track progress

To ensure distance learning is treated with the same strategic importance as core classroom education, senior leadership must actively monitor its delivery. The HoESW and the Governor should agree on a locally determined Key Performance Indicator (KPI)—such as course completion rates, or the number of successful applications—to report against regularly.

Strengthening distance learning in prisons: Five recommendations for national government

Systemic reform is essential to unlock the full rehabilitative potential of prison education. PET's case for the reform of prison education is detailed in our report, [Getting Prison Education Right: priorities for the new government](#).

More specifically, the government must take targeted action to dismantle the policy and funding barriers that disadvantage distance learners in prison today.

The recommendations below set out exactly what the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS must do to support distance learning provision, alongside the vital role the Department for Education must play in reforming student finance.

For central government

1 Reverse the cuts to Core Education provision in public sector prisons in England

Following a two-phase real-terms funding cut in October 2025 and April 2026, the prison education system has lost 25% of its capacity in public sector prisons in England (and 30% in the women's estate). These cuts have had a severely destabilising effect on broader provision, including distance learning. Reversing these cuts is key to ensuring that impactful distance learning provision can be delivered in every prison. In the longer term, a full review of prison education funding is needed, and this should begin early enough to meaningfully shape future provision when current contracts end.

2 Reverse the cuts to the DPS budget

The pressure on prison education departments is now acute. In addition to reversing core cuts, the government must reverse the significant cuts to the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) budget that have been implemented each year since at least 2022/23.²⁴

24 Kim Johnson MP (2025) Written question: Prisons: Education (UIN 78750). UK Parliament. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-10-10/78750>

The purpose of the DPS budget is to provide Governors with flexible funding to commission additional, tailored provision that meets the needs of their specific cohort. Restoring this budget to prior levels in real terms would provide a much-needed injection of funds, giving Governors the autonomy to target spending where it is most needed and support their establishment's recovery from chronic underfunding. In turn, this added stability would give prison staff the capacity to protect and strengthen distance learning.

For the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education

3 Abolish the six-year rule for student finance

Even when distance learning is highly successful for people in prison, national policy can arbitrarily block further progression. Under current student finance rules, people in prison who have more than six years left to serve on their sentence are not eligible to access tuition fee loans for higher education. For learners serving long sentences who have successfully progressed through distance learning courses and are ready for degree-level study, this rule presents a hard, structural stop.

The Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice must work together to abolish the six-year rule so that ambition is not penalised.



For HMPPS

4

Produce national guidance specifying that distance learning should be made available in every prison, with a clear definition of the Distance Learning Coordinator role

HMPPS should amend the relevant prison policy framework, “Prison Education and Library Services for adult prisons in England,” to explicitly require Governors to ensure that distance learning opportunities are made available and promoted to people in their prison.

Distance Learning Coordinators fulfil an essential role in delivering all forms of distance learning provision, including PET courses and Open University degrees. HMPPS should produce guidance that clearly defines the purpose and function of this role, outlining its key requirements so that effective support for provision is standardised across the estate.

For HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice

5

Embed distance learning into a comprehensive, long-term digital strategy

Distance learners are structurally disadvantaged by a lack of digital access, creating severe logistical barriers for independent research and higher-level assessment. In our December 2025 report, [Getting Connected: Digital provision and education in prison](#), we called on the Ministry of Justice to publish a long-term strategy that clearly articulates their vision for digital learning, alongside HMPPS producing clear specifications for making digital content available. As part of this wider strategy, HMPPS should ensure that the rollout of future digital infrastructure explicitly accommodates distance learning requirements. This must include ensuring stakeholders understand the specifications of digital infrastructure, and guaranteeing that learners have secure, whitelisted access to the necessary educational materials required to complete their courses.

Conclusion

Distance learning is far more than a supplementary educational offer. As well as being clearly rehabilitative, for many people in prison, it is the only route to meaningful progression, higher-level study, and the realisation of their full academic potential.

As this report highlights, the dedication of learners and the frontline staff who support them is undeniable, yet they are operating in an increasingly fragile environment. The overarching climate of funding cuts has placed unprecedented pressure on core education, with knock-on impacts on other forms of provision, including distance learning.

Navigating these challenges requires a dual approach.

Locally, Governors and education leaders have the power to protect and strengthen provision by deliberately prioritising distance learning, protecting the vital capacity of Distance Learning Coordinators, and creating the conditions for an inclusive, fully resourced community of learning.

However, local leadership can only mitigate so much. To truly secure the future of distance learning in prisons and to unlock its full value, the government must take decisive action to stabilise the wider system by reversing chronic underfunding. It should also abolish arbitrary policy blocks such as the six-year rule and integrate distance learning into a comprehensive national digital strategy fit for the future.

How is your distance learning course benefitting you?

It gives me confidence in achieving my goals of learning and using the time wisely.

It's been a challenge to get into a routine. But the challenge of progressing, keeps the flame alive.

Since 1989, PET has been helping people to transform their lives through learning.

Artwork by Erika Flowers - www.recordedinart.com



Feedback postcard
received from a PET
learner, 2026

Support and resources from PET

There are a number of ways that PET can support distance learners and prison staff.

For learners

Our prospectus sets out all the courses we offer, from GCSEs and A-levels to Open University Access modules, professional qualifications and general interest courses. Copies are made available to every prison we work with, and a PDF is available on [our website](#).

PET provides a [Freephone Advice Line](#) on 0800 048 7520, which is universally accessible across the prison estate. The line exists to support current and prospective learners, as well as to answer questions from prison staff and from learners' families and friends. Learners can phone us to:

- Discover more about our courses
- Find out how to apply
- Get support with their studies
- Discuss their next steps

Opening hours for the Advice Line can be found on [our website](#) and are available on posters in prison and in copies of our Prospectus.

We also operate a whitelisted website for people in prison, with information about what we offer as well as a number of digital short courses available to all.

Beyond course administration, we provide a range of practical, learner-focused resources including study planning tips, FAQs, printable short courses, and a regular column in Inside Time featuring examples of our courses.

We continue to explore new ways of enabling learners to access fully accredited distance learning courses digitally in the future.

For staff


The main source of support and guidance for prison staff is the [prison staff resources](#) area of our website. Staff can register for a login using their work email. Once approved, they can access all key PET resources and guidance. This includes our prospectus, course information and our Distance Learning Handbook—a comprehensive guide on how to support distance learning provision at an operational level. We have also recently produced a short training video for prison staff.

Crucially, we do not expect new staff to learn the role in isolation. We provide virtual training and inductions for new Distance Learning Coordinators, face-to-face prison visits where needed, and staff are always welcome to use our freephone Advice Line for immediate guidance.





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