

Prison education: Mapping of key data

Annex 6 - Case study: The Learning Centre, Sweden

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1 Introduction

The Swedish Learning Centre model, which funds and delivers all formal general education in Swedish prisons, was introduced in 2003. It is a national project, funded by the Swedish Prison Service and Probation Administration and in 2010, SEK 71 million (EUR 7 million) was allocated to the project.

The Learning Centre model delivers formal general education (such as maths, sciences. Swedish language) but vocational education is funded and delivered by the national Labour Market Agency. Funding and delivery arrangements non-formal learning are at the discretion of individual prisons. As such the provision of vocational education and non-formal learning varies from one prison facility to another. In addition a small percentage[1] of the prison population accesses higher education programmes.

There is one Learning Centre in every Swedish prison and both prisoners serving sentences and those on remand are entitled to take part in provision offered by the Centres. Each Learning Centre has one or more teachers employed by the Prison Service and Probation Administration, who are qualified to teach at upper secondary school as well as at more basic levels. The key tool to support prison education is a computerised platform called the 'Net Centre' allowing all prisoners to study their chosen subject. The Net Centre provides prisoners with access to over 130 subjects/areas of learning from basic skills to upper-secondary level and to teaching competence beyond what is available in the prison where they are located. Communication between teaching staff and prisoners is carried out via the Net Centre.

The Net Centre contains the InIT facility, which is essentially an IT intranet designed for prisoners participating in Learning Centre provision. This allows teaching staff and career counsellors employed by the Learning Centre, together with prisoners, to communicate through a virtual study room. For security reasons all communication is recorded and only one student and one teacher/counsellor are permitted in each virtual study room at any one time. In addition, prisoners can liaise with their teachers by telephone and via postal contact and have continuous access to teaching staff and general education support.

Learning Centre facilities are also used to enable prisoners to continue with their studies even when they have been transferred to a different prison facility to serve part of their sentence or once they have been released. The equivalence between general education in prison and general education offered through municipal adult education means that prisoners can continue with their qualifications upon release. As qualifications in Sweden are unit-based, prisoners have the opportunity to complete units towards full qualification achievement. To avoid duplication of learning and to support prisoners in their continued education, teaching staff issue a certificate to record achievement to date.

The structure of the Learning Centre approach therefore means that prisoners have continuous access to teaching staff at all times. The distance learning approach is believed to increase access to education and attainment and to improve motivation and rates of participation. Moreover, it presents a true opportunity for the prisoner to be seen as a ‘learner’, rather than a ‘prisoner’, due to the distance learning approach taken.

[1] Approximately 4% (Source: Nordic Cooperation, Nordic Prison Education - A lifelong Learning Perspective, 2009 - http://www.norden.org/en/publications/publikationer/2009-536)

2 Context

Qualitative research carried out by Linköping University in 2005[2] investigated the effects of prison education in terms of prisoners' reading and writing skills. The research found that prisoners are in a substantially weaker position than others in terms of both education and on the labour market and highlighted the importance of literacy skills as particular prerequisites for an individual to learn, both in the classroom situation and in working life. Other research carried out by Linköping University in 2001[3] explored what motivated prisoners to participate in educational activities. The research findings showed that prisoners wanted to participate in education activities that lead to recognised achievements, both in qualification terms and recognition of the achievement of something positive - probably for the first time in a long time and as an opportunity to better themselves.

In Sweden every adult learner is seen and respected as a unique individual with individual learning needs. As such, previous formal attainment together with individual personal circumstances is taken into consideration when determining the learning pathway for each prisoner. Within the current policy context, all prisoners in Sweden have the right to access educational activities offered by the Learning Centre, though limited funding means that demand outweighs supply and priority is given to some prisoners over others. Prisoners with low levels of prior attainment and/or low levels of literacy and numeracy would always be given priority over a prisoner who has previously attained an upper-secondary level qualification, for example.

A significant change to prison education in Sweden took place in 2007, when the Ministry of Education issued a regulation 'on education in correctional care in prisons'. According to this regulation it became possible for the Prison Service and Probation Administration to offer educational activities corresponding to municipal adult education, as well as Swedish language courses for immigrants. According to the regulation, such educational activities must follow the relevant curricula for municipal adult education (Nordic Cooperation, 2009). More recently, national policy changes in the area of adult education in 2011 stipulate that prison education must be considered equal to municipal adult education.

With the exception of a small number of prisoners participating in higher education programmes, prisoners in Sweden do not have the right to access the Internet. It is however acknowledged that restricting access to the Internet limits opportunities for learning, raises questions about the pedagogic value of distance learning and curtails teaching methods employed by teachers. It is also acknowledged that restricting access to the Internet denies prisoners the opportunity to develop ICT skills that will be necessary for their rehabilitation. As such, a pilot study due to begin shortly will test the possibility of allowing all prisoners access to the Internet using secured websites. The aim is to develop e-citizenship among prisoners and to encourage prisoners to develop and use ICT skills.

Collaboration between stakeholders is well established and works well at national level. This follows the historic collaboration between the Prison Service and Probation Administration, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education at the time the Learning Centre model was first established, all of which were in support of the newly proposed distance learning approach across all prisons in Sweden. Some years on, both the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education continue to be involved in prison education. The Ministry of Justice channels funding through the Prison Service and Probation Administration on an annual basis. The Prison Service and Probation Administration allocate the funding according to the

[2] Herkner and Samuelsson, 2005, In Swedish, English equivalent title: Education under the auspices of the Prison and Probation Service – effects on prisoner literacy cited in Nordic Cooperation, Nordic Prison Education - A lifelong Learning Perspective, 2009 - http://www.norden.org/en/publications/publikationer/2009-536

[3] Herkner Birgitta, Hur vanligt är det med dysleksi bland intagna på svenska fängelser? D-uppsats, Institutionen för Beteendevetenskap, Linköpings universitet, 2001 cited in Nordic Cooperation, Nordic Prison Education - A lifelong Learning Perspective, 2009.

annual directives from the Ministry of Justice and fund the provision of general education in all learning centres and prisoner participation in learning. The Ministry of Education is responsible for regulating and inspecting the education offer delivered in prisons and has overall responsibility for teacher education.

Collaboration between the Prison Service and Probation Administration and the Swedish Labour Market Agency is also relatively well established. In collaboration with the Prison Service and Probation Administration, the Labour Market Agency determines what vocational training will be offered. Both organisations have individual briefs, funding sources, structures and lines of accountability. It would appear that there is an understanding between both organisations that the education offer is further strengthened by the provision of both general education and vocational education. In the future there may be potential opportunities for both organisations to share resources and collaborate on the provision of education in prisons. Though collaboration between other stakeholders at national level is relatively well established, the Learning Centre recognises that much more work could be done with colleagues working in the area of probation services for example, particularly in supporting prisoners in their transition to the community and continued education in municipal adult education establishments.

Collaboration between partners at regional level is also reported to be good, though at local level collaboration is variable and largely depends on the structure and approach of individual prisons. For example, the extent to which prisons in Sweden work with charities varies from one prison to another and again largely reflects the nature of the prison. It is reported that at least one female-only prison works with local charities to support women in their rehabilitation in the community.

3 Aims, objectives and activities

The overall aim of the project was to create a system to allow prisoners to access a wide range of subjects and continue their learning pathways as they moved around the prison estate and after leaving prison.

Prior to this project, the quality, cost and level of provision of general education for prisoners varied across the country. A government report published in 1993 found that both national and municipal level procurement of educational services failed to follow public procurement rules[4]. As a result educational services were procured from 21 education providers without being open for competition. The delivery of education provision across the prison estate, the range of subjects/areas of learning offered and the type of education offered in terms of general, vocational, higher and non-formal education varied significantly.

General education was often limited to subjects such as Swedish, Mathematics and Physics and the availability of vocational and non-formal education largely reflected the nature of the education provider rather than the needs of the prison or the prison population. As a result each prison offered a ‘mixed bag’ of provision that failed to meet the needs of the prison population and had few if any visible outcomes in terms of qualification attainment and positive engagement of prisoners. With limited resources in terms of qualified teachers, there were few opportunities for learners to obtain recognised qualifications. Variations in the education offer from one prison to the next also meant there was a lack of continuity for those prisoners who were transferred from one institution to another. Prisoners were either forced to abandon their programmes of learning or start again from the beginning once they were transferred to a new prison facility.

[4] Crowning Knowledge (Swedish government commission report 1993:23)

Following a review commissioned by the Prison Service and Probation Administration[5], the Prison Service and Probation Administration worked in partnership with the former Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning (CFL), which at the time specialised in distance learning for adults. A pilot project was established in 2001 and set out to improve the quality of education for prisoners, to ensure its equivalence with the national education system and to promote continuity in learning pathways for prisoners. The model was initially tested in 7-8 prisons and involved approximately 15 teachers. Following the success of the pilot project, the Learning Centre model was applied across the entire prison estate in 2003.

The current management structure of the Learning Centre is as follows. One principal is employed in each of the six Swedish regions, who is responsible for the teachers and the educational provision within that region. The regional principal has a key role to play in supporting teachers across the region in terms of their professional development and in supporting collaboration between teachers by encouraging a regional peer review/support network. Regional principals are pedagogically qualified and also have a key role to play in developing and maintaining working relationships between regional governors[6], prison governors, prison staff and prisoners themselves. Their role is to understand the learning environment for teachers and prisoners within the context of the prison environment. There is also a national prison education manager who has responsibility to coordinate the education into one national, equivalent system. In addition there are national guidance counsellors to support the inmates in their study planning.

When the Learning Centre was first established there were mixed views about the pedagogic value of distance learning applied to the prison population. Generally speaking there were concerns from stakeholders and the wider population that distance learning is an approach primarily used in higher education and an approach that is not necessarily suited to the prison environment. But based on the experience of the CFL, the Prison Service and Probation Administration were convinced a distance, or 'blended', learning approach could be applied to the prison environment as it provided a flexible and consistent approach to all prisoners in supporting them continue their learning pathways.

Since its inception, the Learning Centre model has been targeted at all prisoners. As indicated above, because prison education is one aspect of the national educational policy ambitions, priority is given to individuals who have not completed compulsory school or the equivalent form of adult education. In all cases, individuals with less prior education have priority. If a prisoner is not able to access education from the Learning Centre they are encouraged to participate in work experience or other activities (such as yoga) offered in some prisons. There is a view that ideally provision should be available for all, though there is an acknowledgement that funds are limited.

In addition, young people in Sweden between the ages of 18 and 21 are considered as a priority group. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service has been issued a mission from the Ministry of Justice to ensure special measures are in place to support young people to enhance their opportunities for success upon their release from the prison environment. As such there is a Learning Centre in each of the three biggest prisons - Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö - with dedicated areas for young prisoners.

[5] The findings of this analysis are outlined in a report published by the Prison Service and Probation Administration - it is available in Swedish only.

[6] In every region one regional governor has been appointed - they are responsible for all prison regimes including that of education

4 Results, outcomes and impact

It is reported that there is now relatively widespread support for the Learning Centre model and a view that the distance learning approach applied to the prison population has proved to be highly innovative. For the first time in the history of Swedish prison education, the distance learning approach now means that prisoners have access to a wide range of subjects, can access learning in a flexible and supportive manner and can continue with their learning as they move across the prison estate.

Statistical information and publicly available research on the results, outcomes and impact of the Learning Centre model is however limited. In terms of outcomes for participants, one of the main objectives underpinning the introduction of Learning Centres was for prisoners to be able to complete studies they began, to accumulate credit points and to achieve qualifications. Since its inception the number of prisoners participating in education provision has increased, as has the number of qualifications awarded. For example, **140 prisoners achieved 197 courses in 2005**, **870 prisoners finished 1,363 courses in 2008**, and **in 2011, 1,212 prisoners achieved 2,045 courses** (prisoners can study up to three courses at any one time). Due to issues of data protection, there is no statistical information available on the extent to which participation in education activities and qualification achievement has improved levels of employability or reduced re-offending rates - there is no tracking of individual prisoners in terms of their destination once they have been released from prison.

Interviewees for this case study noted that there is clear evidence of prisoners developing their self-esteem, improved self-confidence and that they have developed a more positive outlook towards education and life in general, particularly amongst the female prison population. There are also some examples of prisoners starting university programmes and other prisoners enjoying the learning space (in a physical sense) that the Learning Centres offer.

There are a number of factors that have influenced the implementation of the project. From a pedagogic perspective, literature on distance learning as a method of teaching has questioned the impact and pedagogic value of this approach. A positive and arguably innovative aspect of the Learning Centre model is said to reflect a key benefit of distance learning - in that by its very nature, the distance learning approach allows for a focus on the quality of the work provided rather than a focus on the perception of the individual prisoner that is potentially influenced by pre-determined judgements and assumptions about the individual. The point here is that to a certain extent the identity of the individual learner is of secondary importance and what matters is that prisoners have the opportunity to access education provision at their own pace, as an individual learner and in a way that is positive, supportive and different to how many prisoners have experienced education in the past.

Though the pedagogic benefits of the approach employed by the Learning Centre are recognised and valued, it is reported that there have been some complaints from prisoners about the lack of face-to-face contact with their allocated teacher. If a prisoner has been moved to another prison facility most communication with their allocated teacher is carried out over the telephone and via the Net Centre/email where teachers generally forward educational materials to the prisoner and then follow up with a telephone discussion. Some prisoners however are immediately apprehensive about this approach as they have limited ICT skills and are nervous about using computers. Dedicated ICT support to prisoners from locally based staff and advances in technology through the introduction and use of web cameras are thought to be one way of improving communication channels, though it is recognised that funding is limited and resources are scarce. It is also reported that some prisoners require immediate help and if this has not been provided, they have lost interest and dropped out of their programme.

From a teaching and learning perspective, teachers have also raised some concerns about the pedagogic limitations of the distance learning approach, by the very nature of distance

learning applied to the prison environment. For example, teachers are restricted in how they can teach and grade communication skills with prisoners. Though it is possible for prisoners to record speech and send sound and images via the InIT, there is a concern that limitations in technological equipment mean that teachers cannot view live recordings and therefore appropriately grade a prisoner on their presentation skills and may in turn unfairly disadvantage the prisoner.

There are also reports that teachers are restricted by the type of online materials they can use for educational purposes in prisons due to tight security rules and regulations. As such there is a view that this situation creates a heavier workload for teachers, as they are required to spend time locating suitable materials that can be used by prisoners. For this reason there is a general view amongst staff within prison education (teachers, principals) that prisoners should be permitted to access the Internet for educational purposes.

In terms of the necessary conditions that need to be in place for the project to be successful, there are important systemic aspects to consider and aspects of good practice to draw from in the Swedish Learning Centre model. Given that a management structure is in place at national, regional and local levels, clear lines of responsibility, strong leadership and a collective understanding of the policy aims and purpose of prison education are considered essential.

An important condition for the success of the project relates to the educational requirements of the teaching staff. The Prison Service and Probation Administration insist that all teachers must be qualified to teach at upper-secondary level and experienced and qualified in their own subject matters. All new employees of the Learning Centre are required to undergo an induction programme of three weeks. It entails knowledge about the prison and probation service, the management structure of the organisation, laws and regulations and so on. The Prison Service and Probation Administration also encourage continued professional development by inviting external guest speakers, for example an expert from the Swedish National Agency for Education or the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Staff are also encouraged to participate in conferences related to adult education.

Though teachers are encouraged to participate in the same kind of continuing training opportunities as teachers from the municipal education system, the reality is that opportunities and resources to support professional development are generally limited across the entire prison estate. This is primarily to do with resources within the Learning Centre and teacher/prisoner ratio. In some Learning Centres employing only one or two teachers, participation in conferences or other forms of continued professional development may leave the Learning Centre under-staffed. Furthermore, though there is a requirement for teaching staff to undergo continued professional development, the allocated budgets for staff training within each prison not only includes teachers but other prison staff. As such budgets for professional development are widely stretched.

In terms of the educational requirements of teaching staff, it has been noted that the distance learning pedagogy is now an important method of teaching and should be embedded in teacher education. Ensuring teachers are experienced in the application of distance learning is considered highly important so as to avoid prisoners encountering difficulties with the lack of face-to-face contact.

To date no formal evaluation of the Learning Centre model has been commissioned by the Prison Service and Probation Administration, Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Education, though certain aspects of prison education in Sweden have been the focus of research carried out by the Nordic Cooperation.

Adult education in prison is subject to the same inspection as adult education in the community and is carried out by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Recently a number of prisons in every region have undergone inspection the results of which were due May 2012. Preliminary findings suggest that the inspection has focused more on the systemic nature of

the Learning Centre model at national level and the role of the regional principal rather than aspects of teaching and learning in individual prisons for example.

There is an ongoing theoretical debate in Sweden about how the results of the Learning Centre model can be evaluated. There are concerns about prioritising learning opportunities for those with low levels of prior educational achievement. There is also some debate about what is the most appropriate measure of success. There are concerns that current measures of success focus too much on the number of prisoners participating in learning and/or the number of teaching hours delivered rather than measures of positive engagement, improved self-esteem and self-confidence for example.

5 Success factors

The nature of prison education activities has changed significantly since the Learning Centres model was introduced and a number of success factors can be reported. As indicated above, in the past prisoners could only choose subjects the local teachers were qualified to teach, while now they can, in principle, be in contact with the teachers who have the qualifications that best suit their own needs, irrespective of where both the prisoner and the teacher are located. For an individual student, this means that prisoners have access to over 130 subjects. The flexible approach offered by the Learning Centre through the use of the computerised platform also means that prisoners can access learning in a flexible and supportive manner and can continue with their learning as they move across the prison estate. The way in which the bank of teaching staff are used in their capacity as locally based teachers, instructors and mentors and as teachers of distance learning is also considered to be good value for money and a key success factor.

It has been proposed that there are a number of factors that are key to the success of the Learning Centre model and these include:

- Undertaking an individual needs assessment of each prisoner before they start learning;
- Making sure each prisoner participating in general education is allocated a teacher who will then support them for the duration of their learning pathway;
- Teaching staff are embedded within the prison structure and relationships between all prison staff are supported and developed. Prison staff and teaching staff each have a role to play in supporting, motivating and encouraging prisoners to participate in educational activities.

There is potential scope to apply the distance learning approach to other countries. The flexibility of the model means that the Learning Centre approach could be transferred to other countries regardless of the size of the country or the size or type of the prison estate. It has been suggested that if the notion of the Learning Centre approach (in its broadest sense) were to be developed and applied across Member States, prisoners from other countries could access the education provision of their home countries or indeed continue their learning pathway in their home countries following their release.

6 Challenges encountered and lessons learned

There was initial reluctance and resistance to the Learning Centre approach from stakeholders, the wider public and from prison staff, particularly in relation to the application of distance learning to the prison environment. There was also considerable reluctance from other prison staff – it was believed that they felt threatened and intimidated by the distance learning approach. The understanding here was that prison staff with low levels of educational attainment themselves felt insecure and therefore resisted the whole idea.

A key challenge in Sweden today is an increase in the number of prisoners with low levels of prior attainment and low levels of basic skills. The diversity of their needs together with the diversity of the prison population itself is said to be a key challenge for the organisation, funding and delivery of prison education. The structure of the Learning Centre and the

introduction of the distance learning approach mean that some prisoners with limited ICT skills and low levels of self-esteem and motivation struggle with their programmes of learning and would benefit from more face-face contact.

The majority of education available to prisoners in Sweden is general education. There is a view that many prisoners would benefit significantly from non-formal, vocational education and indeed higher education. However the organisation, funding and delivery of these other forms of education are not consistent across all prisons.

Restrictions to the Internet have also added to the workload of teaching staff. Teaching staff must locate resources, prepare resources in a format that can be emailed and ensure safety. This adds to the teachers' workloads and there is a general view that preventing access to the Internet also restricts the prisoner and their potential opportunities to engage in learning and remain motivated and interested. More generally, more resources and support is needed to encourage continued professional development both in terms of their subject area, developing and enhancing their expertise in distance learning and in the context of the prison environment.

7 Conclusions

The Learning Centre model in Sweden can be highlighted as an innovate approach to prison education. It has succeeded in implementing an approach to learning that reflects the needs of the individual, offers quality, choice, flexibility and support for continued learning following transition from the prison environment to the community. The use of a computerised learning platform and virtual study room together with a pool of qualified teaching staff means that prisoners are fully supported in their learning journey.

Though the Learning Centre has been considered highly innovative, it is noted that restricted access to the Internet limits the success of the model and the extent to which it can be truly innovative or enable teachers to work to the best of their ability and encourage prisoners to achieve their highest potential.

Furthermore, the pedagogic value of distance learning is a debated issue, in particular in relation to the specific needs of prisoner learners (many of whom have previous negative experience of education and need face-to-face support to maintain their confidence and motivation). The Learning Centre model overcomes issues related to lack of face-to-face contact by ensuring prisoners have access to teaching staff at all times. Teaching staff are there to support prisoners in the educational activities and to assist in any ICT problems they encounter.

As a distance-learning model, it is essential that advances in technology be reflected in the design and structure of the Learning Centre facilities. This is about improving channels of communication, facilitating teaching and learning and enhancing the learning experience from the perspective of the prisoner. These aspects would need to be fully explored if the transferability of the Learning Centre to other countries/contexts were to be considered.

8 Sources

- Crowning Knowledge (Swedish government commission report 1993:23)
- Nordic Cooperation, Nordic Prison Education - A lifelong Learning Perspective, 2009 - http://www.norden.org/en/publications/publikationer/2009-536
- Interviews with Swedish Prison Education Manager and a teacher working in a prison Learning Centre