

The Prison Education Service

The Prison Education Service consists of a partnership between the Irish Prison Service and a range of educational agencies from the community. Vocational Education Committees and Public Library Services make the largest contribution to, and are the mainstay of, the Prison Education Service. The Co-ordinator of Education within the IPS has overall responsibility for the education of prisoners. Policy is drawn largely from the Council of Europe Recommendation and Report, *Education in Prison (1990)* and the *Strategy Statement for the Prison Education Service for 2003-2007*.

The Department of Education and Science provided an allocation of 210 whole-time teacher equivalents to the prisons through the VECs in the academic year 2005/06. This enabled education to be offered in all prisons (with the exception of Cloverhill), including provision for the summer months and also special teaching arrangements where prisoners are segregated (e.g. Portlaoise, Mountjoy, Wheatfield, Limerick, Midlands, Castlerea and Cork). The allocation made available to the CDVEC for Cloverhill Prison remained largely unused since new education facilities at the prison were again not allowed to open. In addition, four full-time librarians, employed by Dublin Public Libraries, work in prisons in the Dublin area.

Other agencies also contribute significantly to prison education, for example:

The Open University, which now caters for close to 100 prisoners annually on degree-level distance education courses;

The Arts Council, which provides writers' workshops and artists' workshops;

Other third-level colleges, such as the National College of Art and Design, which is involved in Portlaoise, Midlands and Training Unit prisons.

The Curriculum

Objectives, methods and course content are largely those of adult education. Set courses and examination work are but a part of prison education because of a high level of turnover in the population of most prisons, and because of prisoner's special needs and interests. The emergence of FETAC accreditation has opened up new possibilities which are now widely used in prison education. A high degree of curriculum and teaching material development is essential in prison education. This is facilitated through extensive in-service support, covering internal and external courses, for teachers and via a range of structures, including the Prison Education Council and "development workers" in areas such as the Arts, Literacy development, I.T. and Physical Education.

Full details of what is taught in prisons may be found in the Directory of Prison Education (see below). In broad terms, courses may be classified as follows:

Basic Education, including Literacy and Numeracy

General subjects, e.g. English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Languages, Computers

Physical Education, Home Economics and Health Education

The Arts, e.g. Visual arts, Music, Drama, Creative Writing, Photography

Practical subjects, e.g. Woodwork, Metalwork, Horticulture

Courses that address particular problems or needs that prisoners have, e.g. Pre-Release courses, Addiction Awareness, Childcare, Group Skills, Anger Management.

Participation in Education in Prison 5

Participation in education generally varies with factors such as access, facilities, turnover of population and segregation. At the end of 2005, 51% of all prisoners were involved in some education. More than half of these, (i.e. 27% of the total prison population), were intensively involved, i.e. for more than 10 hours per week of classes, so that education was almost certainly their main activity in prison. (This figure was 24% in 2004). Such an overall level of involvement in education whilst in prison is very high by international standards and is commendable in light of considerable disruption in 2005. The pattern of participation for each particular prison may be seen in Table A:

Table A:

Prison	(a) Participation	(b) Population (23/11/05)	(a)÷(b) Percentage Participation	(c) Intensive Participation: No. Involved for 10 Hours or more per week	(c) ÷ (b) Rate of Intensive Participation
Arbour Hill	115	139	83%	66	47%
Castlerea	101	218	46%	64	29%
Cloverhill	0	393	0%	0	0%
Cork	182	258	71%	79	31%
Dochas	71	87	82%	45	52%
Limerick (M&F)	136	273	50%	96	35%
Loughan House	55	90	61%	45	50%
Midlands	241	426	57%	60	14%
Mountjoy (Male)	220	486	45%	145	30%
Portlaoise	88	115	77%	20	17%
Shelton Abbey	44	53	83%	29	55%
St. Patrick's Institution	93	174	53%	46	26%
Training Unit	56	87	64%	18	21%
Wheatfield	207	351	59%	148	42%
TOTAL	1,609	3,150	51%	861	27%
% Participation excluding Cloverhill = 58%					
% Intensive Participation excluding Cloverhill = 31%					
% participation overall: 51%					

Participation in education is counted as involvement in at least one structured class in the sample week. However, most of those taking part in education do so on a daily basis, as may be gauged by the measure of “intensive participation”, which increased in 2005. As may also be seen from Table A, the figures for overall participation would have been considerably higher (58%) if Cloverhill Prison was excluded from calculations, as an Education Unit for that sizeable prison has not yet been opened. A very extensive library, which includes a wide range of material in the various languages and cultures of that prison’s population, is, however, available in Cloverhill.

Other developments in 2005.

The industrial relations dispute between the IPS and the POA led to serious curtailment of educational provision in about half of prisons, largely due to the restriction of movement within prisons; in the other half of prisons, there was little or no negative impact. Library Services and Physical Education were the fields of education most affected by the dispute. However, plans to improve both of these areas post-dispute were significantly advanced during the year, with the preparation of a *Best Practice Handbook* to give guidance for PE in prisons, and the making of agreements with a number of public library services and prison managements for the introduction of further library staff in accordance with the structural plan described in the 2004 report. 6

A major issue for the Prison Education Service in 2005 was dealing with the knock-on effects of the permanent closures of The Curragh and Fort Mitchel prisons, both of which had very strong educational provision. Most of the teachers displaced at The Curragh took up work at the Midlands prison, in a co-operative arrangement between the two different VEC’s, while some of the Fort Mitchel teachers became involved in the HOPE post-release educational project in Cork. However, both of these projects are tentative and more long-standing arrangements need to be secured.

The arts continued to be a dynamic aspect of prison education. A major exhibition of art from prisons around the country was shown in 2005 in Dublin, Cobh and Listowel. Significant original drama was produced in Midlands, Mountjoy and Castlerea prisons. The writing competitions for people in prisons, which has been organised as part of Listowel Writers Week since the early 1980’s, received new impetus in 2005 with writing in Irish, and writing by Irish prisoners overseas, now both included for the first time. By the end of the year, Open University numbers rose to nearly 100 students from among the prison population, a rate of involvement that is far higher than, for example, in prisons in Britain. However, the priority focus of prison education continued to be towards helping those with basic education needs and a number of significant initiatives in relation to this area commenced or were strengthened during the year.

These paralleled efforts to address the adult literacy and similar problems in the community. Among these were the fuller use of negotiated learning plans, involvement with the new FETAC level 1 and level 2 courses, and the introduction of the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA's) assessment framework, *Mapping the learning Journey*.

The professional development support structure for teachers in prison also paid special attention to adult basic education, helping to develop a new tutor training course and new materials appropriate to teaching in prisons. However, other in-service initiatives, addressing issues and needs particular to education in prison, and covering the full range of the curriculum, also took place. A web-site for use by prison educators, but also giving information about prison education in Ireland, had now been introduced - www.pesireland.org.

Publications and further information.

Further information on prison education can be obtained from a number of publications available from the office of the Co-ordinator of Education (Block 5, Belfield Office Park, Beaver Row, Dublin 4, Ireland). Most of these are also available on the website, [pesireland.org](http://www.pesireland.org). Among the key documents, each of which refers to further publications, are the annual *Directory of Prison Education*, *The Strategy Statement of the Prison Education Service 2003-2007*, and *Prison Education in Ireland: a Review of the Curriculum*.

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