

**The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science discussion on the Ireland Prison
Education Strategy 2019 – 2022.**

**Opening Statement by Stephen O'Connor, on Behalf of Education and Training
Boards Ireland (ETBI)**



etbi

Education and Training
Boards Ireland
*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*

On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, and the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in relation to the current and future education provision in Irish prisons.

Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is the national representative body for our member Education & Training Boards (ETB) and negotiates on behalf of the ETB sector at various forums both within the education sector, the wider public service and at EU level. Our mission is to harness the collective strength of Education and Training Boards to advance the development of education, training, and youth work in Ireland. Our vision is for a lifelong learning society, where people have access to the education and training required to fulfil their potential and to meet their personal, social, cultural, economic, and civic needs. ETBI is guided by the principles of **people, partnership, and potential** in all its activities.

Education & Training Boards are Ireland's leading statutory providers of Education and Training and are unique in providing **whole of life education and training to all**. Collectively, the sixteen Education and Training Boards have responsibility for 27 Community National Schools and 246 Post-Primary Schools with over 110,000 students. ETB Post-Primary Schools are the largest provider of education through the medium of Irish with 47 schools. ETBs deliver Further Education and Training to 200,000+ unique FET learners each year across over 200 FET colleges and Training Centres and play a central role in the delivery of apprenticeships and traineeships in partnership with employers. The ETB Sector employs over 32,000 people and has a combined annual spend in excess of €2bn. It is this expertise and tradition of service which ETBI brings to its work in the Irish prison education service.

The Prison Education Service

Prison Education in Ireland is delivered through a partnership between the Irish Prison Service, Education and Training Boards Ireland and other organisations such as the Arts Council, Open University, and Gaisce. A joint strategy statement details the strategic objectives for the prison education service and the high-level actions to be undertaken to deliver on the agreed objectives over the 2019-2022 period.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science provides through SOLAS, an allocation of 220 whole time equivalent teachers to the to the ETB prison education centres across the country. There are 13 such education centres, each overseen by an ETB Head Teacher.

The aim of the Prison Education Service is to deliver a Quality assured, broad, flexible programme of education that helps people in custody cope with their sentence, achieve personal development, prepare for life after release and establish an appetite and capacity for life-long learning. The service seeks to deliver relevant programmes that

cater for a wide variety of needs, ensures broad access, and prioritises those with basic education needs.

Education in Irish Prisons: Educational Profile of Prisoners

Many of the learners attending education centres in Irish prisons have suffered extreme levels of social, economic, and educational disadvantage. According to the Irish Prison Service, the majority of persons in custody (70.1%) on 31st December 2019 were early school leavers. 65.5% of women fell into this category and 70.3% of men. Overall, 4.6% of people in custody were recorded as having literacy issues and a further 17% did not progress beyond primary school. In a sociological profile of Mountjoy prisoners in 1997, Paul O'Mahony found that 80 per cent of the prisoners in his study had left school before the age of 16 years. Again, the Irish Penal Reform Trust has drawn our attention to research which suggests that the prevalence of people in prison with severe mental illness is four times that of the general population while an estimated one in two prisoners present with substance misuse / dependence issues. Anecdotally, there is evidence that many of the prison population report having experienced several Adverse Childhood Experiences. (ACE's)

For these reasons, a priority for our education centres is to create a warm, welcoming environment for our learners. In recent inspections of four CDET B prison education centres carried out by the Department of Education Inspectorate, it was remarked that the teaching staff enjoy a very positive relationship with their learners. The emphasis is on building the confidence of learners who often have had negative experiences of education characterised by feelings of failure, so that they re-engage with the world of lifelong learning.

The Curriculum

A broad flexible curriculum is offered so that learners have the best opportunity to study subjects they have an interest in. In this respect the visual arts play a central role, particularly for those who struggle with literacy issues. They function as 'gateway subjects' to other areas of the curriculum as well having an immense value for learners in helping them to cope with their sentences and allowing them to reflect on issues which impact on their lives.

The approach adopted to the teaching of literacy skills is eclectic and follows an adult education model. One-to-one classes are available as well as peer to peer programmes such as Toe to Toe. Family literacy projects such as Story Book Mums & Dads recognise that literacy can often be a generational issue within families and these projects play an important role in consolidating links between prisoners and their loved ones at home. The key priority of our literacy strategy however, is to ensure that literacy work is integrated into all parts of the curriculum.

Digital literacy is seen by the prison education service as being of vital importance if learners are to be equipped with the competencies necessary to adapt to the needs and demands of society on release while at the same time accessing knowledge for personal development. In common with ETB teachers, IPS is concerned that a digital divide will further disadvantage learners in prison education centres. The teaching of IT based skills in a custodial setting of

course, presents unique challenges to educators and prison management alike. For this reason, there has been an increased level of collaboration between prison management and the ETB education providers to ensure solutions are arrived at which give learners access to digital education while at the same time minimising security risks.

Progression

While engagement with the ETB education centres can, be in many cases transformative for learners, there is a need for support structures to help learners pursue progression routes post release. To this end, prison education centres provide pre-release courses and guidance counsellors. In Dublin for example, the **Pathways Centre** provides a range of supports including counselling and peer support to scaffold learners as they negotiate the complex challenges that they face as they continue their learning journey in FE colleges, at Third Level and other places of learning.

Accreditation

For those re-engaging with education the prospect of undertaking courses leading to formal examinations can be daunting and off-putting. Therefore, ETB prison education centres across the country offer a range of non-accredited courses alongside courses which offer learners the opportunity to pursue accredited learning.

The state second-level (Junior and Leaving Certificate) courses are available but increasing numbers of people in custody require a more flexible curriculum which has multiple entry and exit points. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) - accreditation is therefore widely used with assessment by portfolio compilation. All Prison Education Centres meet the quality assurance standards demanded by QQI and for many learners this is their chosen route to accredited learning. The Open University has had a long relationship with the Irish Prison Service and the ETB prison education centres. Just two weeks ago, I attended the first Open University graduations held in a Dublin prison since the ending of lockdown, when two students were conferred with degrees in Environmental Science.

The Travelling Community

While the prison population as a whole can be seen to suffer significant disadvantage across a range of indicators, there are a number of discrete groups for whom disadvantage is particularly acute. The Travelling Community is one obvious example of this

According to the 2016 census, 57.2 per cent of male travellers had only primary school education, a figure four times higher than the general population.

Only 13 per cent of Traveller girls completed second level education. For the settled community, the figure is 69 per cent.

For the last number of years, the various ETB education services have joined with IPS and the Traveller Justice Initiative to help improve outcomes for members of the Travelling Community. Teachers have received training in diversity and inclusion issues. Traveller champions have been appointed in each education centre to ensure traveller culture is

recognised within the curriculum. In this regard, Traveller pride events have been organised in prison education centres which celebrate the cultural contribution of the Travelling Community to Irish society.

Challenges

In terms of the challenges facing the prison education service, a shortage of prison staff in some prisons to ensure learners can access the education centres is the most frustrating for prison management and education staff alike. Access to education for the increasing number of segregated prisoners in some prisons is also a concern. In an attempt to remedy these situations, IPS, together with ETB education centres are developing a system of in-cell delivery by which educational courses are delivered to learners through the Prison TV channel. Already, 150 video courses and accompanying activity booklets have been produced by CDETB teachers who are at present working with IPS staff to have the TV channel ready for the next academic year.



etbi

Education and Training
Boards Ireland
*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*

Piper's Hill, Kilcullen Road
Naas, Co Kildare
W91K729

www.etbi.ie



Registered Charity Number (RCN): 20021092

