

## Making the Case for Prison Education in a Lifelong Learning Society

### Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change

by Paul Downes

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Reviewed by CORMAC BEHAN

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In *Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change*, Paul Downes examines the barriers to accessing education using reports from 12 different countries in Europe, ranging from Ireland to Russia and from Scotland to Slovenia. It covers a wide variety of subjects, from conceptual frameworks, to a macro-level analysis of barriers preventing individuals accessing education. The study is part of the European Commission Sixth Framework Project, *Towards a lifelong learning society: The contribution of the education system*.

At first glance, it may sound like, and could have been a dry analysis of various reports. But it is nothing of the sort. The book draws on Downes' research interests in psychology, education, law, philosophy and social policy and offers a very readable and challenging critique of the barriers to accessing education in Europe that will be of particular interest to educators in prison worldwide.

The central focus of this study", according to Downes, "is on socio-economic disadvantage, social inclusion, social exclusion and social class with respect to increased access to education opportunities" (p.5). As research in education has tended to neglect a systemic approach, the key purpose is to "develop a system level scrutiny to promote access to higher education and lifelong learning for socio-economically excluded groups in Europe" (p. 2). It examines why some groups are disproportionately put off from participating in education. Some of these deterrents are situational – beyond the control of the individual; dispositional – those based on personal attitudes or dispositions towards education; and institutional – red tape and procedural problems with registration, and scheduling or location problems.

In developing an agenda for social inclusion, this study interrogates the system of access to higher education, non-formal education and prison education. It argues for a "phasing out of language such as 'educational disadvantage' and the term 'disadvantaged'" because it is "negative labelling, offering a pejorative, deficit model of working class communities" (p.11).

Of particular interest to those working in prison education are two chapters (10 and 11) examining indicators at macro-exo and micro-meso levels. However, as prison education in Europe is based on adult education principles set out in the Council of Europe document *Education in Prison* (1990) there is much else that will interest those who teach and learn behind bars.

Downes outlines some of the challenges in accessing education in prison which will be familiar to prison educators. These barriers vary across countries and indeed jurisdictions, but if one were to generalise, it is safe to say that the barriers to prisoners accessing education are considerable. He begins by setting out the European policy on life-long learning and prison education and then asks if there are adequate strategies at national level to facilitate education in prison. Downes emphasises that there must be sufficient funding so that strategies do not exist merely on paper and concludes that it is "evident from a number of national reports that prison education is completely lacking in strategic focus and intervention at national level in some countries" (p.202).

There are a number of challenges unique to education in prison, including access to the internet; high turn-over in classes, especially in remand centres where prisoners might only spend a short period of time; transfer of prisoners during educational programmes; education of long-term prisoners and attitudes of prison staff and management, all of which can facilitate or stymie educational opportunities.

Other challenges facing education in prison is the attempt to redefine education in some jurisdictions as training. Adult education is much more than merely the acquisition of skills or the accumulation of knowledge (although these are valid objectives in their own right). In England, for example, while there is a national strategic plan to allow access for prisoners to education, “it nevertheless remains a concern that the goal of employment subordinates other legitimate goals of lifelong learning - such as active citizenship, social cohesion and personal fulfilment” (p.196).

Access to the internet for prisoners remains an issue in many jurisdictions and there is an urgent need for internet access to remove barriers to digital literacy. As one prison educator in Ireland remarked: “I personally think there shouldn’t be any obstacles because...it’s a literacy...digitally literacy...it’s essential”. (p.198). Downes rightly concludes that this is not merely about access to the internet, “what is being presented as a technological problem is de facto more a lack of political will to access the appropriate technology for this limited external communication” (p. 199).

Downes examines a number of indicators of barriers to access in prison education which will be familiar to prison educators internationally. These include structural indicators, such as whether prison education is based on a principle of normality which is a rights-based approach that operates in Norway, for example. Another structural indicator is the utilisation of individual learning plans for students in prison. This is not always as clear cut as may seem at first glance and locating prison education in the adult education environment, Downes argues that it is “important to emphasise that an individual education plan needs to be a democratic process operating against a backdrop of good relations between the prisoner and the tutor” (pp. 207-208). There are a variety of initial assessment approaches but whatever one is used it must treat prison learners as adults. The approach “must be part of a wider relational strategy to engage prisoners in education” and must be a “dialogical approach rather than a social control” method (p.209). Prisoners, like adults on the outside, engage in education for a variety of reasons, some to learn a skill, others to reflect on their lives and some out of boredom. Some to use their time inside to undertake a more transformational process and education can be central to that. Therefore, one size will not, and indeed should not, fit all.

In a number of jurisdictions prison educators and learners lack adequate or appropriate space to undertake learning and teaching. Reflecting the sometimes chaotic natures of prison regimes, education can take place at various times and different places. Some classes/courses are peer to peer, others have education on wings and others still have centralised classrooms in a designated education centre. Downes recognises the importance of a separate educational site, while recognising that a wing-based model in addition to a central school also has advantages. Another challenge is how to build on the good work and motivation of prisoners inside when they are released into the community and he therefore argues that shorter, more focussed, intensive course may be more appropriate for students in prison. This builds on the adult education philosophy of a student-centred approach that meets the needs of learners where they are at in their learning journey

Downes concludes his analysis of prison education arguing for a rights-based approach to access education; a variety of initial assessment approaches to identify a prisoner’s individual learning difficulties, strengths and needs; professional development of prison teachers and peer supports for education. While this review does not have the space to do justice to the breadth and depth of research in this book, there are many other areas that will be of interest to readers of JPER. Prison education has always contributed in an innovative way to the development of methodologies, strategies and resources in adult education. This book while setting out the barriers also calls for a reframing of our approach to eliminate these barriers to education. It is a rigorous analysis using structural indicators to critique social exclusion and remind us of the arguments in favour of life-long learning beyond mere economic advancement. These include building engaged and resilient communities and networks of change that can strive to eliminate

not just the barriers to education, but also seek to reduce and eliminate social exclusion, marginalisation and build a fairer and more just society.

The data indicating the obstacles to education are set out in this book. While Downes acknowledges that “such indicators are not a sufficient condition to open doors for access to higher education and lifelong learning for socio-economically marginalised groups in Europe” he argues that “nevertheless such an agenda of indicators is a key condition for this opening to come to pass” (p.247). Downes has done a superb job nudging the door open by developing a framework and agenda for change. It is now time for action.

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**Cormac Behan** teaches criminology at the Centre for Criminological Research, University of Sheffield. His research interests include penal history, prisoners’ rights, comparative penology and prison education. Prior to taking up this position, he taught politics and history in Irish prisons for 14 years. He is the author of *Citizen convicts: Prisoners, politics and the vote* (Manchester University Press, 2014).