

## Transforming Education in Youth Custody

**Evidence for reform** on behalf of professional teaching and training practitioners.

April 2013

## Introduction

The Institute for Learning (IfL) is the professional body for teaching and training professionals in the further education and skills sector. This includes a wide range of professionals from full time lecturers in further education colleges, specialist work based trainers, apprenticeship assessors and community learning tutors.

Primarily, this paper is a response to a consultation from the Ministry of Justice published in February 2013, 'transforming youth custody, putting education at the heart of the detention' but we hope that the evidence we have drawn on from our members and consequent analysis can be of use to a wider audience.

The case for reform could not be simpler - reoffending rates as they currently stand are far too high. Figures published by the Ministry of Justice (2013) show that in all three sectors of the youth secure estate; young offender institutions, secure training centres and secure children's homes, more than 70 per cent of young people reoffend within 12 months.

This paper focusses exclusively on what we believe to be the greatest determining factor in reducing reoffending – the quality of teaching and learning. It has been produced in consultation with IfL members who are specialist teaching and training professionals working with young offenders and whose commitment and experience should contribute enormously to the development of secure colleges and improvements across the youth secure estate.

Working with young offenders as a teaching and training professional is a highly specialised role. It requires a great amount of personal fortitude, resilience, empathy and understanding as well as skill.

IfL wishes to pay a tribute to its members, and others, who work to transform the lives of young people who have committed crimes into engaged and included members of society, able to make positive contributions to the economy.

## Executive summary

Research conducted by IfL with a specialist group of teachers and trainers with an interest in offender learning from the further education and skills sector, more than 80 per cent of whom have direct experience working in offender learning has drawn the following conclusions for the reform of education in youth custody:

- **The young person's identity in education and detention should be distinct.**  
Young people in custody should be students when in learning. Successful outcomes are enhanced when there is mutual respect between students and teachers and trainers.
- There are currently **wide and significant barriers holding back improvement** in education and training in youth secure estates. These range from inflexible funding and programme policy to access to the internet.
- Young offenders should experience **accurate and robust initial and continuing assessment of needs** which should inform an evolving and progressive individual learning plan.
- There needs to be a **joined up approach to funding** which encompasses the desired outcomes of a holistic individual learning plan which could involve sourcing funding from multiple agencies.
- Providing **payments to providers on an outcome-incentive system would be problematic** and detrimental to resource available to be directed at high quality teaching and training.
- Working with young offenders is **highly specialised**. All staff, particularly teaching and training practitioners need to be highly trained, dual qualified as subject and teaching/training experts and in environments properly equipped and resourced.
- By involving themselves in the education and training of young offenders, **businesses and employers can have a significant positive impact** on successful outcomes for learners.

## Methodology

During 8 – 29 April 2013, the Institute for Learning has hosted a consultation for members in the form of an online survey. Members who declared ‘offender learning’ as their primary employment context were contacted by direct email and invited to take part in the survey. In addition, members who might have had previous experience in offender learning were reached through a feature on the survey in one of IfL’s e-newsletters.

The survey consisted of 14 questions in total including a mixture of qualitative and quantitative, open and closed questions. Members took, on average, 16 minutes to complete the survey.

In total, 93 responses were received. Two thirds of responses were received from members currently practising in offender learning and specialising in young offenders, current practitioners in 19+ offender learning, alternative provision and pupil referral units. The remaining responses were received from various sectors within further education and skills.

In terms of subject specialisms, the majority of respondents were specialists in functional skills and preparation for life and work curriculum areas.

## Starting from scratch: Principles

The journey from being a young person to a young offender is unique and complicated for every individual; but what most young offender will share is a sense of displacement. It is impossible to separate the causes of this feeling of displacement from the route that is required to become a law-abiding and contributing member of society. To that end, every journey needs to be unique to be effective.

The secure youth estate, whether in the form of secure colleges or the current combination of secure training centres, secure children's homes and youth offending institutions should deliver programmes of learning that are wholly responsive to the needs of the individual young person. We will revisit what that might look like later in this response.

The intention of the Ministry of Justice to introduce secure colleges to the youth secure estate provides an opportunity to examine the effective and ineffective processes and practices that are contributing factors to the quality of education and training on offer.

**Table 1: If you were to redesign the current arrangements for youth custody and education from scratch, indicate the extent to which you believe the principles below are important.**

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Not Important</b>	<b>Not at All Important</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Secure colleges are seen as places of learning and rehabilitation rather than as places of youth custody.	41%	38%	11%	5%	3%	1%
Every young person in custody should receive a tailored learning programme alongside detention.	67%	27%	3%	0%	3%	0%
New providers of youth custody, such as secure colleges, should have a proportion of their funding withheld until a young person has been successfully rehabilitated.	6%	19%	30%	23%	21%	1%
Local companies have a stake and should contribute in some way, such as providing equipment, trainers and/or work placements.	28%	39%	24%	5%	4%	0%
Secure colleges should have the same autonomy as academies and free schools in terms of being able to determine their own curriculum.	24%	34%	18%	11%	8%	5%
Secure colleges should not have the same autonomy as academies and free	15%	16%	22%	26%	18%	3%

schools and should be required to follow national frameworks.						
Secure colleges should be held to account against a set of locally and/or nationally determined standards.	31%	32%	17%	8%	10%	3%
Teachers and trainers involved in youth offender learning need specialist skills and training.	67%	22%	5%	4%	3%	0%
Secure colleges should be able to provide a diverse range of both academic and vocational subjects.	78%	17%	3%	0%	3%	0%

There are some very clear principles that that should underpin reforms to youth custody and, more specifically, reforms to the provision of education and training in youth custody.

Overall, there is support for autonomous institutions with a similar independent status to academies and free schools but with clear accountabilities to local and national standards. Secure colleges should provide a diverse range of subjects and should employ staff with specialist skills and training. In principle, secure colleges should not be subject to outcome-incentive payments. There are contentions here about what would constitute the successful outcomes secure colleges would be paid against and the extent to which additional factors, such as employment and housing, can influence successful outcomes for young offenders. Furthermore, there is a fear that withholding funding prevents much needed resource from reaching where it will have the most impact – high quality teaching and learning.

“In the current economic climate I think it is unrealistic for provider's income to be determined by whether ex-offenders get a job when other qualified candidates who have never been in prison cannot find work. Do we really think employers will choose an offender over a similarly qualified non-offender? How is it the provider's fault if they don't?”

**Offender learning tutor (business, administration and law).**

IfL recommends that secure colleges, and education and training provision across the youth secure estate, are not subject to an outcome incentive payment

Just short of 80 per cent of respondents said that secure colleges should be viewed as places of learning rather than a place of youth custody. A common feature of the feedback that we received from teaching and training professionals alongside this was the need for education and training provision in secure youth estates to stand out from the experience a young person would have received at school. Being accorded the identity and status of being a student can be key to rehabilitation and forging a new and positive identity which aids transition.

“[young offenders] need to be treated individually ... They tend to have lower literacy levels and their attention span is low so a variety of teaching methods are required.”

“Barriers can be removed by making the learning environment less ‘school based’ and treating young people as students. If working with a local colleges, emphasise that they are a students of that college rather than ‘just a prisoner.’ This really builds up their self-esteem and heightens the rapport between staff and students.” **Vocational trainer, HMP.**

Fundamentally, separating the experience of young offenders between being a student or learner and a detainee appeared in our research as one of the factors that enhances the quality of teaching and training. Young offenders engage in learning better when the experience is not a repeat of the kind of teaching they have already experienced and

probably disengaged from. Ways that the learning experience in a secure college should stand out from the learning experience at school might include smaller class sizes, more one to one tuition, perhaps a less formal environment and a variety of assessment methods.

As a principle, the breadth of provision secure colleges would be able to offer is incredibly important. In fact, 95 per cent of respondents said that this was important or very important. When leaving the secure youth estate, a young person should be ambitious and focused. Secure colleges can better serve young offenders by being in a better position to deliver a wider range of subjects. The element of choice on offer to the young person be that for a focused programme in a particular area, or being provided with an opportunity to try different subjects should be a feature which differentiates the learning experience from that with which the young person is already familiar. .

“Quite clearly, the programme needs to be tailored yet it is equally important that it addresses known local and national priorities. It should not address the crime. Offender learning is not about teaching right from wrong, but hope from despair. The factors that set young people on the road to crime are well known and what they need is an escape from poverty and hopelessness. Yet no teacher should bear that burden, in that sense some form of structure or shape to the curriculum is essential, so long as the teacher retains the freedom to bespoke learning for the individual.” **Former offender learning tutor.**

Throughout this paper, we will use the evidence we have obtained from specialist IfL members to discuss teaching and training approaches and innovations that make a difference, barriers to improvement and staff skills and competencies.

## Education and training – what makes a difference?

Education and training in youth custody can easily go wrong. Bringing young people from a position of resistance to forming relationships with others, let alone a resistance to learning, to a position of defining themselves as a learner or a student required specialist skills, understanding and empathy. There is a wealth of evidence waiting to be shared of practices and innovations that are effective in supporting young people on that journey.

Strong teaching and training practitioners form relationships with other professionals as well as with young people in custody. They work to an individual learning plan that takes account of the holistic needs of the young person so that they gain maximum benefit from their time in learning.

“It is virtually impossible to establish good teaching and learning without establishing professional relationships with students in a holistic way. Many who have been let down by the school system need to feel that they are looked upon as an individual with specific needs. These will very often include behavioural instruction, social interaction in a guided context and emotional support in changing behaviour patterns.” **Functional skills tutor, HMP & YOI.**

A thread throughout our research was on the qualities of an effective individual learning plan. For secure colleges and education provision across the secure youth estate to be effective, functional relationships need to exist which are centred around the teaching or training practitioner. Our evidence suggests that the most important professional relationships that teaching and training practitioners need to secure and maintain are careers and guidance professionals, counselling and mental health services and further education colleges.

Almost 70 per cent of the teachers and trainers IfL consulted said that working with counselling and mental health services was “extremely important” in supporting teachers and trainers to deliver successful outcomes for young offenders. In total, 88 per cent of respondents said relationships with counselling and mental health services was “very important” or “extremely important.” This was by far the greatest proportion of responses in responses for “extremely important”. The most important relationships to form, according the research, was –narrowly - with careers and guidance professionals which 89 per cent of respondents said was either “extremely important or “very important”.

**Table 2: In your experience of working with young offenders, how important is it to have effective working relationships with these organisations in order to support you to deliver successful outcomes?**

Organisations	Responses “very important” + “extremely important” (%)
Careers and guidance professionals.	89
Counselling and health services.	88
Further education colleges.	87
Employers and local businesses.	80
Training providers.	77
Third sector education providers.	65
Local authorities.	63
Faith and religious organisations.	50
Schools	49

This table shows the wide range of professionals and services that teaching and training practitioners work with to ensure successful outcomes in teaching and learning. The Ministry of Justice hopes that secure colleges will be run through collaboration and

partnership. What this table demonstrates is that teaching and training practitioners already act collaboratively in their practice.

One of the best ways to demonstrate the value of supporting collaborative practice is through the process of initial and continuing assessment of the needs of young offenders as learners. Initial assessment is a two way process between a teaching or training practitioner and a learner which establishes the kind of professional relationship they will have throughout the learning programme. This usually includes discussions about expectations of the course from both parties and diagnostic activities to ascertain the need for additional learning support. This often takes the form of a one to one discussion between the learning and the teacher or trainer which informs the individual learning plan, scheme of delivery and lesson planning processes.

In terms of impact, 83 per cent of specialist teachers and trainers IfL has consulted said that an extensive and robust initial assessment has a “very strong” or “strong” positive impact on young people in custody and 72 per cent shared this view for regular diagnostic assessment as part of the individual learning plan. Arguably, the integrity and potential impact of the former depends on the commitment to the latter.

“Whilst initial and diagnostic assessment IS very important, because it is easy to evidence, it has, in my opinion been carried out almost to the exclusion of the follow up ILP and actual learning opportunities provided!” **Vocational trainer. HMYOI**

Our evidence points to the need for the individual learning plan to be far more robust than learners in regular provision get which goes beyond performance targets and learning outcomes. Given the importance of collaborative working environment when working with young offenders, we believe that the formation of the individual learning plan, scheme of work, session plans etc should happen collaboratively too so that the social, behavioural

and emotional needs of the learner are met in addition to their learning needs. Just short of 90 per cent of respondents (89 per cent) told us that specialist pastoral support, such as counselling and behaviour coaching, being included in the individual learning plan has a “very strong” or “strong” positive impact on young people in custody. Additionally, 93 per cent told us that including social and behavioural outcomes in provision makes a strong or very strong positive impact. All of this again demonstrates the benefits of collaborative practice as a teaching and training practitioner and highlights the benefits and potential of a holistic approach to individual planning.

## Education and training – where improvements can be made.

Pring et al (2009) opened, 'Education for All: the future of education and training for 14-19 year olds' by offering the question, "what counts as an educated 19 year old today?" This fundamental question forces us to examine the very purpose of education and the attributes that make a good education.

In implementing secure colleges and wider reform of education and training in the secure youth estate, the Ministry of Justice and others should consider strongly the attributes of an educated reformed young offender. At the moment, there is a feeling that a focusing the definition of successful education outcomes on the attainment of qualifications is too narrow and is problematic.

IfL's research highlighted a number of barriers that teaching and training practitioners believe prevents innovation and improvement in teaching and learning with young offenders in custody:

- **Proper equipment and facilities.** For new secure colleges, and the existing secure youth estate, to provide the most effective education and training possible for young offenders they must be equipped with up to date equipment and facilities. Again, almost all (98 per cent) reported that this was a barrier to innovation and improving teaching and learning outcomes. In fact, 69 per cent of teachers and trainers we consulted said that poor equipment and facilities was a significant barrier to the improvement of teaching and training with young offenders in custody.
- **Access to work.** Almost every specialist teacher and trainer that took part in our consultation (96 per cent) reported that difficulty in accessing work experience,

shadowing and placement opportunities was a barrier to innovation and improvement in teaching and learning. Opportunities to contribute to a real life working environment can not only contextualise learning, but can also make it more effective by allowing the teacher or training to diversify their assessment techniques. Clearly, there are issues that need to be carefully addressed, most notably safety and security concerns.

Practice does exist however where work based learning can be accessible which might be a model the Ministry of Justice considers for some young offenders.

“A work placement need not be outside of a secure establishment but could be the end point of a transition between using a properly equipped workshop within a secure establishment. Productive workshop activity engages learners and is effective.” **Teacher trainer with experience with young offenders.**

Given that our research has also shown that 80 per cent of teaching and training professionals believe that relationships with local employers and businesses is an important part of collaborative practice, the Ministry of Justice could consider how businesses could incentivised to work closely with secure colleges of other youth secure institutions to provide these kinds of opportunities.

- **Proper support for learners with learning difficulties is not currently in place.** This barrier was reported by a huge proportion of specialist teachers and trainers involved in this consultation. The fact that 69 per cent have report to IfL that the proper support is not in place for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities should cause the Ministry of Justice, and education and training providers within the secure youth estate, grave concern.
- **Lack of access to the internet.** What is taken for granted by almost of all of is not a luxury afforded to young offenders. A debate clearly needs to be had over what is and is not acceptable in terms of using the internet when in youth custody. IfL would argue against an outright ban on young offenders having access to the internet especially for

learning purposes. Researching a topic, watching a how-to video on YouTube or taking part in interactive activities online is common place in learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clearly, it also provides young offenders with the skills they need when they are released.

“The lack of internet access is a big problem and I think it relates directly to re-offending as they are not equipped to live in the modern world.” **Offender learning tutor (basic skills).**

Half of the specialist teachers and trainers that IfL has consulted for this paper reported that a lack of access to the internet in youth secure estates is a significant barrier to improving outcomes in education and training. This rises to 88 per cent when those who reported that a lack of internet access is sometimes a barrier are included. The Ministry of Justice should support secure college bids that promote a progressive approach to teaching and training and favour providers with a properly considered acceptable usage policy in relation to IT and access to the internet for learning. This might involve the use of virtual learning environments and more ready access to the virtual campus facilities in secure institutions.

“Better library facilities and access to learning material - controlled access to the internet via the Virtual Campus. The jobs advertised on the Virtual Campus should be "live jobs" and relevant to the local area.” **Offender learning tutor (preparation for life and work).**

## Skills and Competencies of Staff

This paper began with a tribute to the staff who work with young offenders to help them turn their lives around. Going forward, reforms to the secure youth estate, and the education and training provision available within the secure youth estate, will need to take into account the skills and specialisms of teaching and training staff as the provision that is on offer evolves.

IfL would strongly encourage the Ministry of Justice to examine closely the proposals and bids they receive to manage contracts for secure colleges, assuming they go ahead, and the proposed requirements for experience and qualifications for teaching and training roles. Even if this paper provides a sense of the breadth and depth of the responsibilities placed on teaching and training professionals working with young offenders it is still understated.

Traditionally, IfL advocates a model of dual professionalism in further and vocational education whereby teachers and trainers who are experts in their subject specialism then become expert teachers and trainers beginning pre or in-service initial teacher training. We don't believe that model, as it stands, is entirely appropriate for teachers and trainers working with young offenders as it does not go far enough, and should include a specialism in offender learning. Teaching and training professionals have made clear to us that high level specialist teacher training qualifications and significant experience working with vulnerable young people should be essential requirements. When asked, over 60 per cent of the teaching and training professionals we consulted that teaching / training qualifications at post-graduate level (level 5) are essential with a further 25 per cent saying they should be desirable. The role of teacher or trainer in a secure college is exceptionally important and challenging. Upfront investment in qualified teachers and trainers and effective practice is a low cost option compared with the price of cycles of youth reoffending subsequently.

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