



Policy name: Distance Learning for Adult Prisons in England and Wales Policy Framework

Reference: N/A

Issue Date: 15 October 2026

Implementation Date: 15 October 2026

Replaces the following documents (e.g. PSIs, PSOs, Custodial Service Specs) which are hereby cancelled: PSI 32/2012: Open University, Higher Education and Distance Learning

Introduces amendments to the following documents: Prison Education and Library Services Policy Framework

Action required by:

X	HMPPS HQ	X	Governors
X	Public Sector Prisons	X	Heads of Group
X	Contracted Prisons	X	The Probation Service
	Under 18 Young Offender Institutions		Other providers of Probation and Community Services
X	HMPPS Rehabilitation Contract Services Team		

Mandatory Actions: All groups referenced above must adhere to the Requirements section of this Policy Framework, which contains all mandatory actions.

For Information: Governors must ensure that any new local policies that they develop because of this Policy Framework are compliant with relevant legislation, including the Public-Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act, 2010).

In this document the term Governor also applies to Directors of Contracted Prisons

How will this Policy Framework be audited or monitored:

Governors are accountable for ensuring compliance with the mandatory actions set out in this policy framework.

Resource Impact: The processes and requirements contained within this policy framework are deliverable within the existing resource allocation for education in prisons and do not need further resources.

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Deputy/Group Director sign-off: Prisoner Education Service SRO Board

Approved by OPS for publication: Helen Judge, Chair, Operational Policy Sub-board, July 2026

CONTENTS

Section	Title	Page
1	Purpose	3
2	Evidence	3
3	Outcomes	3
4	Requirements	4-8

1. **Purpose**

- 1.1 Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) in prisons aims to give individuals the skills they need to unlock their potential, gain employment and become assets to their communities. It should also build social capital and improve the wellbeing of prisoners during their sentences and once released.
- 1.2 Distance learning enables prisoners to access further and higher education courses that helps them to build advanced skills and acquire formal qualifications that can lead to employment or further study following release. Distance learning courses range from basic skills development, personal development, vocational and technical training, ICT and digital skills, creative courses including arts and writing, and university level programmes including degrees. This range allows prisoners with varying levels of prior attainment to engage with programmes that are appropriately challenging and supports them to achieve their academic or career ambitions.

2. **Evidence**

- 2.1 Justice Data Lab's (JDL) "[Re-offending Analysis of the Prisoners' Education Trust](#)" showed that receiving a grant to undertake an Open University course in custody led to a reduction in re-offending of between 4 and 8 percentage points. To build on this research, in July 2018 PET collaborated with MoJ statisticians to produce their first experimental statistics looking at the employment outcomes of a voluntary sector programme.
- 2.2 JDL's "[Reoffending Behaviour after support from the Open University](#)" found evidence that support from the OU may decrease the number of proven reoffenders within a year of release – 14 of 100 people studying with OU vs 18 of 100 people not studying with OU. It also found that fewer offences were committed within a year of release– 33 per 100 people studying with the OU vs 47 per 100 people not studying with the OU.
- 2.3 FE and HE qualifications improve prisoners' employability upon release, and dependent on level, can increase their earning potential significantly. Research into [Higher Education in prisons: access, benefits and challenges](#) by Nottingham Trent University shows that achieving HE qualifications can contribute towards reducing reoffending rates, with recidivism rates decreasing more as learners achieve higher level qualifications.

3. **Outcomes**

- 3.1 The high-level service outcomes for this Policy Framework are:
 - There is an understanding in prisons of how to promote the distance learning offer to appropriate prisoners in a safe and secure way.
 - Prisoners are engaged and supported to access appropriate distance learning opportunities that best meet their needs and enable them to attain their personal, learning and employment aspirations and enhance their ability to get and keep employment on release.
 - Prisoners are able and encouraged to develop in a way that will:
 - Build social capital
 - Improve their employability
 - Improve their life skills and wellbeing (both inside and outside of prison)
 - Support a reduction in reoffending, see the National Framework for Interventions for information on activities which are not to be delivered by prison education

4. **Requirements**

4.1 Under Rule 32 of the Prison Rules 1999¹.

- (1) Every prisoner able to profit from the education facilities provided at a prison shall be encouraged to do so.
- (2) Educational classes shall be arranged at every prison and, subject to any directions of the Secretary of State, reasonable facilities shall be afforded to prisoners who wish to do so to improve their education by training by distance learning, private study and recreational classes, in their spare time.
- (3) Special attention shall be paid to the education and training of prisoners with special education needs, and if necessary, they shall be taught within the hours normally allotted to work.

4.2 Under Rule 38 of the Young Offender Institution Rules 2000².

- (1) Provision shall be made at a young offender institution for the education of inmates by means of programmes of class teaching or private study within the normal working week and, so far as practicable, programmes of evening and weekend educational classes or private study. The educational activities shall, so far as practicable, be such as will foster personal responsibility and an inmate's interests and skills and help him to prepare for his return to the community.
- (2) In the case of an inmate of compulsory school age, arrangements shall be made for his participation in education or training courses for at least 15 hours a week within the normal working week.
- (3) In the case of an inmate aged 17 or over who has special educational needs, arrangements shall be made for education appropriate to his needs, if necessary within the normal working week.
- (4) In the case of a female inmate aged 21 or over who is serving a sentence of imprisonment or who has been committed to prison for default and who is detained in a young offender institution instead of a prison, reasonable facilities shall be afforded if she wishes to improve her education, by class teaching or private study.

4.3 Under Rule 39 of the Young Offender Institution Rules 2000³.

- (1) Provision shall be made at a young offender institution for the training of inmates by means of training courses, in accordance with directions of the Secretary of State.
- (2) Training courses shall be such as will foster personal responsibility and an inmate's interests and skills and improve his prospects of finding suitable employment after release.
- (3) Training courses shall, so far as practicable, be such as to enable inmates to acquire suitable qualifications.

¹ The Prison Rules 1999

² The Young Offender Institution Rules 2000

³ The Young Offender Institution Rules 2000

- 4.4 FE includes any study after secondary education that is not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree. Courses range from basic English and maths to level 5 qualifications such as Higher National Diplomas (HND) and are typically offered by FE colleges and training providers.
- 4.5 HE includes any study taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree. This includes Level 4 Certificates of HE (CertHE), Level 5 Diplomas of HE (DipHE), Level 6 undergraduate degrees, Level 7 Masters degrees and Level 8 Doctorates offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEI) such as Universities.
- 4.6 Distance learning can be an important contribution towards a prisoner's resettlement and integration back into society. It can also be a way to assist prisoners to positively engage with regimes and take part in purposeful activity as they progress through their sentence.
- 4.7 Enabling access to distance learning opportunities involves partnership between Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) providers (in England); education providers; the prison; external providers of the distance learning course; and their student support services. Establishment staff should support prisoners who aspire to undertake distance learning courses to explore their course and provider options and offer advice on the nature and rigours of self-directed study. Establishments should also consider the advice provided within the Advancing Equality Policy Framework to ensure that we meet our obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- 4.8 Prisoners have the option to study with providers funded by HMPPS, or with other external providers arranged at a local level. HMPPS currently grant funds the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) and has a contract with the Open University (OU) to deliver a range of distance courses across England and Wales. Further details, including course prospectuses can be found on the [PET](#) website and the Open University's [Supporting Students in Secure Environments](#) website.
- 4.9 **Education and security sifting of prisoners:** Establishments must have local education and security sift procedures in place to ensure that the prisoner has the aptitude, ability and motivation to successfully complete their chosen course of study, and that their chosen course is appropriate considering the nature of their conviction. The sifting process must contain a declaration signed by the prison Governor or Director (or their appointed representative) confirming that the applicant has their support to study their chosen course. This is also a requirement for prisoners applying for a tuition fee loan from the Student Loans Company.
- 4.10 Prisoner suitability must be assessed on a case-by-case basis considering the nature of their offence or offences, the subject matter and content of a course, prior academic achievement, behaviours and attitudes, and other relevant intelligence gathered at a local level. Establishments must consult all relevant and current HMPPS guidance and tools when assessing course suitability.
- 4.11 When assessing the suitability of a prisoner to study establishments must consider:
- If the subject matter connects to the prisoner's current or past offending behaviour.
 - If it risks encouraging or enabling further criminal activity by developing inappropriate skills or knowledge, or provides access to materials that could be used to facilitate criminal activity related to current and previous offending behaviour.
 - If the level or focus of the course opens up areas of knowledge or requires activities or/and resources which may be inappropriate for the individual prisoner.
 - If the course and subject matter enhances employability and/or rehabilitation through personal and social development.

- If the course has links to the prisoner's sentence plan and/or Learning and Work Progress (LWP) plan.
- If the course is focused on an employment area from which the individual prisoner is definitively and permanently barred from working.

- 4.12 Prisoners who pass the internal approvals (sift) process should be encouraged to pay for their course if they have the funds to do so. For prisoners applying for funding from the government, such as tuition fee loans, or charities, they should be encouraged to make a personal contribution towards the cost of their course from their prison wages or savings. If a prisoner uses private funds or receives funding via a third party, for example relatives or a charity, the Governor or Director (or their appointed representative) must satisfy themselves that the funds are derived from a legitimate source. Establishments should refer to PSI 01/2012 – Managing Prisoners' Money where prisoners courses will be self-funded in full, or partially funded.
- 4.13 HMPPS is required to provide information to Student Finance England or Student Finance Wales so that it can ensure that prisoner applications for student support comply with statutory regulations. When applying for funding from Student Finance England or Student Finance Wales, it is the responsibility of the Governor or Director to ensure that all regulations are adhered to ensuring that prisoners do not apply to access funding they are not eligible to receive.
- 4.14 **Student Finance eligibility rules:** The Governor must comply with regulations on prisoner eligibility for tuition fee loans for higher level study (level 3 and above). In addition to meeting the standard eligibility conditions that the general population needs to satisfy, a prisoner applying for a tuition fee loan must meet specific 'prisoner eligibility' conditions. To be eligible for financial support a prisoner must:
- be serving a sentence of imprisonment
 - be within a specified period of their earliest release date on the first day of the academic year of the course or part-time course (detailed below)
 - have settled status – can live in the UK without any Home Office restriction, or; be ordinarily a resident of England, or; have been living in England for three years immediately prior to this date
 - have authorisation from the Prison Governor or Director, or other appropriate authority to study the current course
- 4.15 For prisoners with indeterminate sentences, the minimum period of imprisonment set at trial (the sentence tariff) should be treated as the earliest release date.
- 4.16 Prisoners of other nationalities or those with a different residency status may be eligible for student finance. Establishments should seek advice from the education provider offering the distance learning course; or the website for [Student Finance England](#) or [Student Finance Wales](#).
- 4.17 **Advanced Learner Loans:** (England) A prisoner must be aged 19 or older and be within 6 years of their earliest release date on the first day of the first academic year of the course. The course must be a level 3, 4, 5 or 6 qualification and offered by an approved college or training provider in England, however some Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) may require undergraduate student finance. Prisoners meeting the criteria are eligible to apply for an Advanced Learner Loan capped at the cost of tuition fees from Student Finance England. For full eligibility requirements, see the regulations: [The Further Education Loans Regulations 2012](#)

- 4.18 **Welsh Government Learning Grant (FE):** Welsh Government Learning Grants provide funding for adults aged 19 or older and must be taking an approved course of study, eligible courses include GCSEs, A levels, BTECs, GNVQs, NVQs. Courses at level 4 or above are not eligible for an FE grant. For further details, see: [Welsh Government Learning Grant \(FE\)](#)
- 4.19 **Undergraduate Tuition Fee Loan:** A prisoner must be within 6 years of their earliest release date on the first day of the first academic year of the course. The course must be a qualifying course that is officially recognised. In England a degree will be officially recognised if: the higher education institute can award degrees – you can check on the Office for Students [Register](#); it is on the list of [recognised awards](#); or it is awarded by the Royal College of Nursing or the Archbishop of Canterbury. In Wales a degree will be officially recognised if: it is awarded by an institution on the list of [recognised bodies](#) in Wales; or on the list of [recognised awards](#). Prisoners meeting the criteria are eligible to apply for a tuition fee loan capped at the cost of tuition fees from Student Finance England or Student Finance Wales. For full eligibility requirements, see the regulations for: England: [The Education \(Student Support\) Regulations 2011](#) Wales: [The Education \(Student Support\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2018](#)
- 4.20 **Master's Loan:** A prisoner must be under 60 years of age and be within 4 years of their earliest release date on the first day of the first academic year of their course. The course must be a full, standalone master's course (not a top up course), be worth at least 180 credits, and be provided by an eligible university or college in the UK. Prisoners meeting the criteria are eligible to apply for a [master's loan](#) capped at the cost of tuition fees from Student Finance England or Student Finance Wales. For full eligibility requirements, see the regulations for: England: [The Education \(Postgraduate Master's Degree Loans\) Regulations 2016](#) Wales: [The Education \(Student Support\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2018](#)
- 4.21 **Doctoral Loan:** A prisoner must be under 60 years of age and be within 8 years of their earliest release date on the first day of the first academic year of their course. The course must be a full, standalone doctoral course (not a top up course), last between 3 to 8 academic years, and be provided by a university in the UK with research degree awarding powers. Prisoners meeting the criteria are eligible to apply for a [Doctoral Loan](#) capped at the cost of tuition fees from Student Finance England or Student Finance Wales. For full eligibility requirements, see the regulations for: England: [The Education \(Postgraduate Doctoral Degree Loans and the Education \(Student Loans\) \(Repayment\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 2\) etc.\) Regulations 2018](#) Wales: [The Education \(Student Support\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2018](#)
- 4.22 The education provider delivering the distance learning course should provide practical on-course support to prisoners. Governors or Directors should seek agreement from the provider as to what support they want them to provide, this could include, but not limited to:
- provision and delivery of course materials and resources physically or digitally
 - assisting with the submission of assignments
 - arranging and facilitating examinations and assessments
 - the provision of, and access to information, advice, and guidance for prisoners and establishment staff
 - arranging peer support or mentoring where appropriate
 - agreeing communication routes for prisoners to engage with tutors
- 4.23 Prisoner transfers and withdrawals: The provider of the distance learning course must be notified by the Head of Education, Skills and Work or the designated Distance Learning Lead that the prisoner has been transferred to another prison.
- 4.24 Where prisoners are transferred mid-course, they should be allowed, where possible to continue with their course. The provider should ensure timely transfer of course materials

and resources to enable the prisoner to continue with their studies. Continued study must be dependent on passing any education and security sift procedures within the receiving establishment.

- 4.25 Recognising differences in digital access across the prison estate, and differences between digital infrastructure in England and Wales, the receiving prison should confirm with the provider if they require physical or digital learning materials and resources, or if the transfer has been between nations.
- 4.26 The establishment transferring the prisoner must move any residual financial balance of funds sponsored by a third party via Inter Unit Charge (IUC) to the receiving establishment upon the transfer of the prisoner. See the [HMPPS Finance Manual](#) for further details.
- 4.27 Should a prisoner withdraw from a distance learning course, refer to the course providers individual procedures for details on any fee liabilities or potential reimbursements.
- 4.28 For prisoners sponsored by a third party who subsequently withdraw from a course will not benefit from any refund. Governors or Directors, on receipt of any refund, must return it to the original sponsor with an appropriate explanation.
- 4.29 **Prisoners being released during study:** Establishments should notify the distance learning course provider in advance of a prisoner's release date and confirm the date upon release.
- 4.30 When a prisoner is released under supervision, the Probation Officer must be notified via the prison's Offender Manager. Following release, a record of learning activity must be placed on the Learning Records Service (LRS) system for access by the learning provider. Establishments must also inform the Student Loans Company that the prisoner has been released.