Ministry of Justice

Digital Content Pilot

Exploratory research into self-directed digital learning in prisons

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The authors

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an exploratory pilot of developing and delivering self-directed digital learning in prisons. The pilot aimed to increase engagement with education among learners who are typically disengaged, support flexible study outside classroom settings, and provide interactive content that enables progress tracking and monitoring. In total, 28 standalone digital learning modules were developed by three suppliers. Eleven prisons were selected as testing sites and received implementation support; all other adult prisons had access to the content but did not receive direct support and are referred to as non-testing sites. While the pilot aimed to engage disengaged learners, there was no consistent approach to identifying or targeting this group, and access was largely universal.

The research draws on a literature review, analysis of monitoring and administrative data, qualitative fieldwork with people in prison and staff, and written reflections from stakeholders involved in the pilot. The qualitative sample was limited in scope, monitoring data had constraints (including limited measures of engagement), and the short pilot timeframe did not allow assessment of longer-term outcomes. Findings therefore reflect patterns of access and use within the operational context, and should be used to indicate trends, implementation challenges and areas for improvement rather than causal impacts.

The literature review highlighted the growing recognition of digital education as a tool for rehabilitation and skills development in custodial settings. Evidence suggests that digital learning can complement traditional education, particularly for learners with specific needs such as non-native English speakers or people with dyslexia. Implementation challenges, however, persist, including infrastructure limitations, staff capacity, and varying levels of digital literacy among learners.

Quantitative analysis of monitoring data showed that 5,880 pieces of content were accessed during the pilot period, with an overall completion rate of 39%. Completion rates were higher in testing sites compared with non-testing sites and varied by prison type, sentence length, and learner characteristics. People in prison serving longer sentences

and those convicted of sexual offences were overrepresented among completers, potentially reflecting differences in regime and access to other activities. Engagement was highest among learners aged 30-39, and those with identified employment needs were more likely to interact with the content.

Qualitative fieldwork revealed a strong appetite for digital learning in prisons, particularly when content was seen as purposeful and relevant to life after release. Learners valued the flexibility of self-directed study, especially those with anxiety or negative experiences of classroom learning. Access, however, was inconsistent across sites and often dependent on local procedures, staff support, and infrastructure. Barriers included technical issues, limited awareness, and fragmented systems. Staff engagement emerged as a critical factor in promoting uptake, with calls for clearer communication, training, and access to tutor resources.

Feedback from learners indicated that interactive elements such as quizzes and videos were well received, while overly technical or abstract content was less engaging. Suggestions for improvement included clearer content titles, better navigation, more tailored content for different learning levels, and the inclusion of certificates. Learners also expressed interest in topics linked to employment, wellbeing, and personal development.

Stakeholder reflections highlighted the challenges of delivering content within the constraints of the prison environment and digital infrastructure. Suppliers reported difficulties with platform access, content updates, and data extraction. The lack of a consistent technical framework and quality assurance process affected content delivery and responsiveness. Despite these challenges, the pilot demonstrated strong initial uptake and interest, particularly where promotional efforts were targeted and supported by staff.

The findings suggest that digital learning in prisons holds promise, but its success depends on carefully considered integration into prison regimes, investment in infrastructure and staff capacity, and a clear strategy for targeting and supporting diverse learners. The pilot has provided valuable insights into learner engagement, content design, and implementation challenges, which can inform future digital education initiatives across the prison estate.

2. Introduction

The Prisons Strategy White Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2021) states:

"The aim for every person in prison should be to improve their levels of numeracy, literacy, training and qualifications during the course of their sentence, with a tailored plan developed from entry into prison."

As part of its response, HM Prison and probation services (HMPPS) committed to expanding digital education. This includes more content focused on education, skills, and work, and wider use of secure laptops for in-cell study, with safeguards in place.

Digital learning increases access to education by allowing people in prison to study flexibly and independently. This flexibility can help boost educational engagement, which is key to improving resettlement and reducing reoffending.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for education beyond classrooms. This pilot introduced digital techniques from mainstream Further Education, such as gamification[1], aiming to engage learners who avoid traditional education. The pilot aimed to:

- Increase engagement with education among those who were not already engaged with prison education.
- Support self-directed study in cells, workshops, and other non-classroom spaces.
- Provide interactive content that tracks progress, gives instant feedback, and supports central assessment through analytics.

Ofsted and HMIP (2022) found that many reading resources were unsuitable for adults learning to read. Most free digital content used in prisons was repurposed and not designed for this cohort. To address this gap in the provision of tailored educational

1 Gamification involves incorporating elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, levels, challenges, and feedback loops into educational activities to make learning more interactive and rewarding. Unlike traditional games, the focus remains on achieving educational goals, with game mechanics serving as a motivational tool to reinforce learning objectives.

materials to prisoners, the Digital Content Pilot was commissioned centrally by HMPPS HQ.

The Digital Content Pilot was commissioned centrally by HMPPS HQ to test the commissioning of suppliers to develop prison-specific digital learning content for use on the prison digital learning platform. This content consisted of short, standalone, self-directed digital learning resources (“pieces of content”) on a range of topics. It was not part of a structured learning programme and did not lead to any formal accreditation. The resources were designed to be compatible with, and accessible through, the existing digital learning platform and were made available across all adult prisons.

The pilot also tested approaches to implementation at site level, including raising awareness of the new content, supporting staff to understand its purpose and use, and enabling access for people in prison. While all adult prisons could access the content, the project team worked directly with 11 testing sites to support local implementation. All other establishments had access to the content but did not receive this additional support.

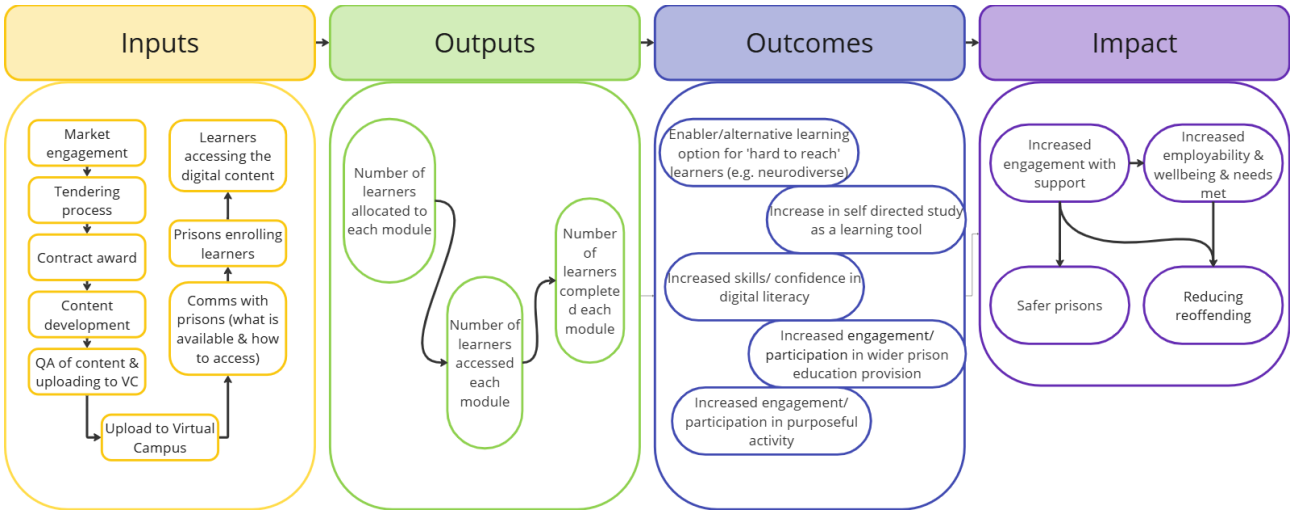
The content was collaboratively designed with input from people with lived experience of custody, education practitioners, and policy and operational stakeholders. Insights from this co-design process informed both the content of the pilot and its delivery model, ensuring that the intervention reflected learner needs, operational realities, and practitioner experience. This context is important for interpreting the findings presented later in the report.

The pilot was delivered via the prison digital learning platform, with content developed by three suppliers. It covered two areas: teaching reading (Lot 1) and broader education and work-related skills (Lot 2). Further detail on the development of the pilot is provided in Appendix A.

Figure 1 presents the intervention logic model for the Digital Content Pilot, illustrating the relationship between the pilot’s aims, activities, and intended outcomes. The primary aims were to test the feasibility and acceptability of digital learning content in custodial settings, explore how learners engage with self-directed digital education, and understand the perceived benefits for learners and education staff. Longer-term outcomes, such as

progression in education or employment-related skills, are included as anticipated impacts rather than outcomes directly assessed within this pilot.

Figure 1. Digital Content intervention logic model



The project team introduced the pilot through a series of calls open to all prisons, inviting them to express interest in participating as test sites. Prisons that opted in were informed of the requirements, which included regular check-ins, facilitating site visits, and providing feedback on the content. Following this process, 11 prisons were selected to serve as testing sites. The rest of the estate still had access to all newly developed content but no tailored engagement from the project team.

Further, there are several forms of digital learning in prisons in England and Wales. Some were independent of the Digital Content Pilot and were not directly linked to its design or delivery. However, they are important contextual factors, as they were referenced by participants during the qualitative fieldwork. Understanding this wider digital learning landscape is therefore necessary to interpret the findings presented in this report, particularly where participants compared or contrasted the pilot content with existing provision. The main provisions we came across in this research are:

- **Virtual Campus**: is the main online platform to access all education related materials. It can be accessed from several location (see Location of Access) and different devices.

- **Moodle**: the integrated Learning Management System (LMS) where the content was hosted (accessed via the Virtual Campus). It was chosen for its additional functionality to capture usage data.
- **Launchpad**: the in-cell device provision available in some sites. One of the sites included in this research was part of a pilot accessing virtual campus via this in-cell laptop.
- **Coracle**: is an offline device available for learners to access specific, pre uploaded content. It was being used in both in-cell and out-of-cell settings.
- **Open borders**: allows learners controlled and supervised access to the internet. It is only available in few sites and part of supervised sessions.

Sites can have any combination of the above-mentioned provisions leading to an inconsistent offer of digital learning across the estate. Further, sites can offer any of the above as part of an educational course, supplementary to a course or entirely independently of the education provision.

This report brings together evidence and insights on digital learning in prisons. It looks beyond the pilot to offer a broader view of the current prison digital education landscape. To do this, it draws on:

- A review of relevant literature,
- Analysis of monitoring and administrative data,
- Qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups with learners and staff,
- And written evidence from the key stakeholders of the Pilot.

3. Research Methodology & Limitations

3.1 Research Design

Ministry of Justice (MoJ) analysts conducted a research project incorporating a literature review, quantitative analysis, and qualitative research to answer key research questions around self-directed digital learning in a prison environment.

Main research questions were:

- What do we know about digital learning in a prison setting?
- To what extent do learners access and complete the pilot content, how do they engage with it, and what are the characteristics of those who participate?
- How do participating sites accommodate the pilot and which restrictions within prison settings can influence its successful implementation?

3.2 Research Methods

Literature Review

The literature review draws on results of a review of published literature on the uses of technology within prisons for the purposes of education. It focused on two strands: the first looked at how outcomes from digitally delivered education compare with outcomes from traditional methods; the second strand focused on understanding how in-cell technology could be used to reach cohorts of people in prison who may be less engaged with classroom-based learning and also the potential for it to be used for distraction purposes in cells. Beyond these outcomes there was also consideration of the wider context in terms of how digital skills benefit resettlement.

EBSCO, ProQuest and the MoJ Evidence library, along with some Google searches, were used to source both national and international academic papers following the criteria that papers must be published in English and no earlier than 2010 (and no later than 2024). Key words/phrases included ‘digital, technology, learning, skill’. Papers were initially

screened by title, and abstract and full texts were then reviewed for papers that matched the inclusion criteria and were relevant to the research questions. A total of 13 papers were included in the full review.

Across the evidence base there were different definitions of key words. For example, some papers included the use of a telephone within digital. There were also differences in implementation, for example whether in-cell laptops were allocated per cell or per person in prison. Where this review looks at evidence outside of the UK, there were also differences in understanding and implementation of technology in prison.

Monitoring & Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative strand of the research aimed to monitor usage, explore patterns of engagement with digital content across the prison estate, and understand the characteristics of those who accessed, interacted with, and completed the pilot materials.

Data Sources and Sample

Monitoring data was provided by the digital content supplier and included anonymised records of learner interactions with each piece of content. These records captured content titles, prison identifiers, and flags indicating progression and completion. Each content item was delivered as a separate monthly file, which was cleaned and merged into a single dataset for analysis. Monthly monitoring reports were produced to track content usage and completion rates across testing and non-testing sites.

To enrich the monitoring data, records were matched to internal administrative datasets. This enabled analysis of learner characteristics such as offence type, sentence length, age, and education/employment history prior to custody. The final sample was structured as one row per individual per prison spell during the pilot period. In lieu of timestamps or variables to indicate engagement, analysts categorised each learner interaction into one of three groups:

- Accessed: Content was opened but no further progress was made.
- Interacted: Some progress was made through the content.
- Completed: All elements of the content were completed.

Analytical Approach

Descriptive statistics were generated to explore engagement patterns by prison type, learner demographics, and content topic. Where appropriate, comparisons were made between the pilot sample (i.e., those who accessed at least one piece of content between June 2024 and April 2025) and the general prison population using chi-square tests at the 0.05 significance level. Comparisons between category average and overall averages have been conducted using z-testing to test for significance. Only statistically significant differences - findings that are not likely to be due to chance - are discussed in the report. Some percentages across the report may not total to 100 due to rounding. Where base sizes are below 30 the findings are presented in brackets and where below five are replaced by asterisk.

General prison population figures were drawn from the latest published Offender Management Statistics (MoJ and HMPPS, 2025), and OASys comparison data was sourced from the most recent Identified offender needs publication (MoJ et al., 2025). It should be noted that OASys data covers people in prison with completed individual's risks and needs assessments and may not represent the entire prison population; this limitation, however, applies equally to the pilot sample and is considered comparable.

Qualitative data collection

The purpose of this strand was to gather perspectives from people in prisons and prison staff on digital learning, with particular emphasis on self-directed digital learning (differentiating it from its use as a supplement to classroom education). It explored the logistical challenges of implementing self-directed digital learning within a prison environment and collected targeted feedback on the digital content developed as part of the pilot.

Sample

Prison sites were selected to capture a variety of prison categories and access to other forms of digital learning. The categories of the prisons in the testing sites and sample are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Prison categories in testing sites and sample

Category	No. of testing sites	No. in sample
Female	1	Withdrew from pilot
Cat B (reception & resettlement)	2	1
Cat C (training & resettlement)	3	1 (+1 non-pilot with in-cell technology)
Cat C (training only)	1	-
Cat C (resettlement only)	1	-
Cat D (resettlement)	3	2

There was one female testing site, however, due to external constraints they had to withdraw. Therefore, no primary data collection took place in a female prison. The female estate is still discussed in the quantitative analysis section.

The people in prison who participated were selected by the prisons themselves using criteria provided by the research team to minimise bias and ensure a range of perspectives were heard. Recruitment decisions were based on having accessed the content, their availability on the day of the visit, and lack of open ACCT or adjudications. Prisons were fully briefed on recruitment procedures and provided with the recruitment materials to enable them to do this.

Staff invited to participate in this research were limited to roles directly linked to education delivery and support within the pilot. This included education managers, teaching staff, and education-related support roles employed either by HMPPS or by contracted education providers. As a result, all staff views presented in this report reflect the perspectives of education-focused roles only.

Fieldwork

Semi-structured qualitative interviews and focus groups were used in this research. Interviews were considered the most appropriate method to answer the key research questions. They allow for flexibility in collecting in-depth insights into people's perceptions of and interactions with the content. Some staff were interviewed in pairs, and some were conducted online. One site requested to amend the methodology to focus groups as individual interviews would be too resource intensive for their regime. The project team

revisited the topic guides to adjust it to focus group setting. All data were analysed together.

Fieldwork took place between September and November 2024. 40 data collection exercises were conducted with 49 participants overall. The table below provides a breakdown of participant types.

Table 2. Breakdown of participant types

Type of participant	Number of participants
Learners	31
HMPPS staff	7
Contractor staff	11
Total	49

The location of interviews varied from prison to prison but were usually conducted in unused classrooms and other training facilities with learners and in offices with staff.

Due to practical and operational constraints within the prison environment, interviews and focus groups were not audio-recorded and transcribed. Instead, detailed contemporaneous notes were taken by a second researcher during all data collection activities. This approach was considered the most proportionate and ethically appropriate option in custodial settings, balancing data quality with participant comfort, safeguarding, and feasibility.

As a result, the report does not include verbatim quotations from transcripts. While this limits the extent to which individual participant voices can be presented directly, efforts were made to retain participant perspective through careful note-taking, immediate post-interview debriefs, and iterative synthesis across researchers. Findings therefore reflect recurring views and themes raised by participants, rather than isolated or anecdotal accounts.

Ethics

This research was conducted in line with the Government Social Research (GSR) ethical principles and HMPPS governance requirements for research in custodial settings. Ethical

assurance was secured through internal departmental processes prior to fieldwork commencing.

All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form and were informed that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any point without consequence. Particular attention was given to the ethical implications of conducting research in a prison environment, including power dynamics, consent, and participant safeguarding.

Some interviews were conducted in pairs and, in one site, focus groups were used instead of individual interviews due to operational constraints. These approaches may have influenced participant responses through reduced anonymity or group dynamics; however, they were considered appropriate and proportionate within the custodial context. Topic guides were adapted for focus group settings to minimise social desirability bias and to reduce the risk of participants being identified or stigmatised by their peers. In particular, prompts relating to prior educational attainment or literacy were removed, as these could have exposed participants to discomfort or inadvertent disclosure in a group setting.

Where a site requested a shift from individual interviews to focus groups, this was assessed against the existing ethical approval and judged to fall within its scope, as the participant group, research aims, consent process, and risk mitigations remained unchanged. Participants were informed in advance of the format and were able to decline participation if they were uncomfortable contributing in a group setting.

During some fieldwork visits, an HMPPS HQ contract manager was present for operational reasons. Participants were informed of their role and given the option to opt out of taking part as a result. No participants withdrew on this basis. This is noted for transparency when interpreting the findings.

Analysis

The interview notes were analysed using thematic framework analysis. This method was chosen to extract key messages from each research theme while preserving the ability to review findings on a case-by-case basis. Each researcher independently coded the interview notes under predefined topics to identify recurring themes. These themes were

then compared and synthesised into a cohesive narrative for the report. Thematic framework analysis was selected due to the tight timeframe of the research and the breadth of insights gathered.

Written Evidence from Stakeholders

In addition to primary data collection, written reflections were gathered from the HMPPS contract manager and the three suppliers involved in the pilot. Each stakeholder was asked to provide feedback on what worked well, what did not work as intended, and what they would have done differently. These responses were collated and analysed thematically to identify common challenges, implementation insights, and opportunities for improvement. This evidence complements the findings from the quantitative and qualitative research and offers a delivery-side perspective on the pilot.

3.3 Limitations

This research combined several methodologies to account for the limitations of each individual one. There were, however, still some limitations to the overall design.

The qualitative data was drawn from a small subset of prison sites, and no female prisons were included in the sample due to withdrawal from the pilot. Qualitative findings therefore may not be representative of the wider prison population or applicable across all regimes.

Participants for qualitative fieldwork were selected by prison staff based on availability and prior engagement, which may have introduced selection bias. Additionally, interviews were not recorded or transcribed, relying instead on researcher notes, which may have affected the depth and accuracy of qualitative insights.

The pilot was conducted over a limited timeframe and did not assess long-term outcomes such as sustained engagement, educational progression, or post-release resettlement impacts.

Monitoring data was provided pre-processed by the digital platform provider, limiting the research team’s control over data completeness and structure. While care was taken to clean and format the data, manual processing introduces the possibility of human error.

Some subgroup analyses involved small numbers and should be interpreted with caution. All groups with fewer than 30 individuals are clearly marked in the report.

Learner engagement was inferred from system interaction data and self-reported feedback, without direct observation nor any metadata (e.g., timestamps). This may limit understanding of how learners interacted with the content in practice.

Finally, recall bias may have affected the findings, as participants could have conflated experiences with other digital content, particularly where topics were similar.

Overall, given the adopted methodologies and the limitations set out in this section, findings should be viewed as indicative.

4. Literature review

Digital education is increasingly recognised as a valuable tool in prison settings, offering opportunities for rehabilitation, skill development, and engagement. As technology becomes more embedded in society, its integration into custodial environments presents both challenges and opportunities. This literature review explores the use of digital content in prisons, focusing on two strands: digital content delivered in classrooms and digital learning accessed in cells. Drawing on national and international evidence published since 2010, the review examines the effectiveness of digital education, the characteristics of learners who engage with it, and the barriers to implementation. It also considers the wider implications of digital learning for resettlement and rehabilitation.

4.1 Digital Content in Classrooms

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in prison education has historically been limited but is gradually expanding. A survey conducted by the Prison Reform Trust revealed that ICT was primarily used for educational purposes, with less frequent application in training, employment, or resettlement (Prison Reform Trust, 2013). The most common tools included the education platform and interactive whiteboards, with 62% of prisons using ICT to support distance learning. Fewer than half of the surveyed institutions, however, used ICT to support learners with additional needs, and none reported using virtual teaching methods or eBooks. In-cell terminals were available in only 5% of prisons at the time. While this data is somewhat outdated, it provides a baseline for understanding the early adoption of digital tools in prison education and highlights the potential for broader implementation.

Comparative studies examining the effectiveness of digital versus traditional teaching methods offer mixed results. A meta-analysis conducted by RAND Corporation reviewed six reading and three mathematics studies involving incarcerated adults. The findings indicated no statistically significant difference in reading outcomes between computer-assisted and traditional instruction but did suggest a potentially meaningful improvement in mathematics, equivalent to approximately three months of learning (Davis et al., 2013).

Despite the study's limitations, including a small sample size and reliance on older data, the authors concluded that computer-assisted learning does not harm educational outcomes and may offer cost-effective, scalable alternatives to traditional teaching. The flexibility and self-paced nature of digital learning, combined with the potential to reduce reliance on licensed teachers, could enable correctional facilities to expand their educational offerings.

Learner characteristics also play a role in engagement with digital education. An evaluation of tablet-based learning in two US state prisons found that users were generally younger (aged 18–35), better educated, and more likely to be first-time offenders (Vaughn-Somervell et al., 2023) These factors are associated with lower levels of reoffending, raising concerns about self-selection bias. The uptake of digital education, if not targeted in the right way, may attract people in prison who were already more confident with technology and engaged in education.

Despite the potential benefits of digital education, experts caution against viewing technology as a replacement for in-person teaching. Lockitt (2011), in a review of digital education in European prisons, emphasised that technology should complement rather than replace traditional instruction. He highlighted the adaptability of digital tools to individual learning styles, the flexibility of access, and the consistency of delivery. He argued, however, that the presence of skilled educators remains essential for effective learning, particularly in environments where learners may face additional challenges.

4.2 Implementation Challenges

The successful implementation of digital education in prisons is influenced by a range of institutional and cultural factors. Access to technology often varies by prison security category, governor priorities, and staff attitudes. Ethnographic research in English prisons suggests that access to learning is uneven and shaped by institutional constraints, with factors such as regime structure, security restrictions and limited digital access influencing prisoners' ability to engage in education (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). As people in prison progress through the system, access to digital resources frequently diminishes, particularly in lower-security institutions focused on work and resettlement. The ethos of the prison

and the collaboration between educational stakeholders were critical to the success of digital initiatives (Min and Yu, 2023).

Technical and logistical challenges also pose significant barriers. Common issues include limited availability of devices, slow resolution of technical problems, lack of staff training, and poor infrastructure (Barkworth et al., 2024). Inconsistent course relevance and difficulty navigating digital platforms can further undermine learner engagement (Min and Yu, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for robust support systems and thoughtful design in the development and delivery of digital education (Farley & Hopkins, 2017).

4.3 Digital Learning Cells

In-cell digital learning offers a flexible alternative to classroom-based education and has the potential to engage cohorts who are typically disengaged, however several barriers to engagement remain. An evaluation by the Ministry of Justice found that both people in prison and staff were hesitant to adopt new technologies such as kiosks and laptops. Reasons included language barriers, lack of confidence due to age or long sentences, fear of being blamed for device damage, and discomfort with technology (Ministry of Justice, 2020). A UK scoping study echoed these findings, noting that younger people in prison with shorter sentences were more comfortable with ICT, while older people in prison and those with longer sentences were more likely to experience digital exclusion (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016).

Evidence from Australia provides insights into the implementation of in-cell digital technology. One study examined the experiences of 20 people in prison in two jails where tablets were assigned per cell rather than per person in prison. This led to conflict and confusion, particularly among those unfamiliar with the devices. Lack of training and fear of technology were common, but informal peer support helped overcome these barriers (Barkworth et al., 2024). Tablets were used for phone calls, administrative tasks, games, and music. Reluctant users often sought help from others to make purchases, suggesting potential for informal learning and peer-led engagement.

Another Australian initiative, the Making the Connections project, focused on improving access to tertiary education for Indigenous people in prison. Windows notebooks were

provided for in-cell use, and six offline courses were adapted for delivery. With dedicated engagement staff, uptake reached 7.2% of the eligible prison population, far above the national average of 1.5% (Farley et al., 2015). Success was attributed to the relevance of the courses and the presence of supportive staff, rather than the technology alone. These findings highlight the importance of culturally relevant content and targeted support in driving engagement.

4.4 Supporting Specific Learning Needs

Digital education has the potential to support learners with specific needs, including those with English as a second language (ESOL) and individuals with dyslexia. Gamified learning and repetition in varied contexts are particularly beneficial for ESOL learners, allowing for individual progression and the ability to revisit difficult language items (Chan and Lo, 2024). For learners with dyslexia, technology offers several advantages including interactive and multi-sensory formats, speech-to-text software, flexible pacing, and improved organisation. McCulley et al. (2014) found that text-to-speech software significantly improved literacy outcomes and engagement among prisoners with low reading ability. A study in HMP Chelmsford demonstrated that specialist software could engage people in prison who avoided traditional education due to fear of revealing illiteracy. Before the intervention, 60% of incoming people in prison opted out of work or training for this reason (Hickmott, 2012). The project showed that technology can serve as a gateway to education for marginalised learners.

Digital education in prisons can be a way to help improve learning outcomes, engage hard-to-reach cohorts, and support rehabilitation (Davis et al, 2013) Its success depends on a range of factors, including learner characteristics, institutional support, course design, and the availability of support mechanisms. In-cell technology offers flexibility and can reach learners who avoid classrooms, including those with dyslexia or ESOL needs (Hewitt-Main, 2012). Nevertheless, without careful targeting, thoughtful design, and robust support, digital education risks reinforcing existing inequalities.

Future interventions should consider how to avoid self-selection bias, link digital learning to qualifications, and integrate support for learners with low literacy. A blended approach that combines digital and traditional methods may be most effective in engaging the widest

variety of people in prison. Ultimately, the success of digital education in prisons will depend on its ability to meet the diverse needs of learners and integrate seamlessly into the broader rehabilitative framework.

5. Quantitative analysis

5.1 Overall Content Usage

During the pilot period from July 2024 to March 2025, a total of 5,880 pieces of educational content were accessed across 28 different topics. Of these, 2,321 were completed, resulting in an overall completion rate of 39%.

The most frequently accessed topic was “Digital Marketing & Social Media”, which was opened by 880 people in prison. This content had the second highest number of completions (177), with a completion rate of 20%.

The topic with the highest number of completions was “Health and Safety”, with 236 completions and a completion rate of 44%. “Protecting Data” had the highest completion rate at 83%, although this figure should be interpreted with caution as access and completion numbers were relatively low, likely due to being added later in the pilot (January 2025), which may explain the lower overall engagement. Further details on the content topics are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Overall content usage, number of pieces of content accessed and completed.

Content	Accessed (N)	Completed (N)	Completed (%)
Digital marketing & social media	880	177	20%
Health and Safety	532	236	44%
Health and fitness	352	95	27%
Green Skills Technology	349	138	40%
Music Production and Industry	310	121	39%
Ethics of AI	292	112	38%
Intro to AI	279	97	35%
How are websites made?	264	95	36%
What is computer code and how does it work?	263	94	36%
Reading for pleasure	230	74	32%

Managing Personal Finances	222	127	57%
Nature Connectedness	216	85	39%
Using Devices	187	61	33%
Creating and Editing Digital Media	184	70	38%
Work stories	178	95	53%
Creating and Editing Documents	141	65	46%
Identifying and Solving Technical Problems	140	74	53%
Communicating and sharing	124	66	53%
Processing Numerical Data	122	63	52%
Finding and evaluating information	108	44	41%
Managing and Storing Information	104	57	55%
Digital wellbeing	77	42	55%
Online responsibility	68	48	71%
Online services	61	42	69%
Online transactions	61	41	67%
Your online identity	54	40	74%
Protecting data	42	35	83%
Protecting privacy	40	27	68%
Total	**5,880**	**2,321**	**39%**

5.2 Usage per Prison Type

Testing sites vs non-testing sites: The 11 prisons that were supported by the project team for the implementation of the pilot achieved a higher completion rate than those that did not. On average, testing sites had a completion rate of 52%, 15 percentage points higher than the average for non-testing sites (37%).

Testing sites also recorded higher engagement overall, with an average of 94 pieces of content accessed and 49 completed per prison. By comparison, non-testing sites averaged 46 pieces accessed and 17 completed.

Within the testing group, two establishments recorded zero completions, representing 18% of the group. Similarly, 20% of non-testing sites (21 establishments) had no completions during the pilot period.

Prisons with vs without in-cell access: Sites with in-cell technology able to access the content[2] showed higher initial engagement but lower completion rates compared with those without. On average, sites with in-cell platform enabled accessed 98 pieces of content and completed 28, while prisons without in-cell access to the platform accessed 43 and completed 18 pieces of content.

Despite the higher volume of activity, the overall completion rate for sites with in-cell technology was 28%, 14 percentage points lower than the rest of the national estate, which had a completion rate of 42%. This pattern holds true also when excluding all testing sites from the comparison (non-testing sites without in cell technology had a completion rate of 39% compared with non-testing sites with in-cell technology which had a completion rate of 28%).

Open vs closed estate: Closed prisons showed higher engagement and completion rates compared with open prisons. On average, open prisons accessed 38 pieces of content, completed 14, and had a completion rate of 36%. In contrast, closed prisons accessed 52 pieces, completed 21, and achieved a higher completion rate of 40%. This pattern also held true when looking at closed and open prisons within the testing group only.

Male prisons vs Female prisons: Male prisons showed higher engagement and completion rates compared with female prisons. On average, individuals in female prisons accessed 36 pieces of content and completed 10, resulting in a completion rate of 28%. In contrast, individuals in male prisons accessed 51 pieces and completed 21, achieving a higher completion rate of 40%. This pattern also holds true when excluding all testing sites from the comparison (male non-testing sites had a completion rate of 38% compared with female non-testing sites of 29%).

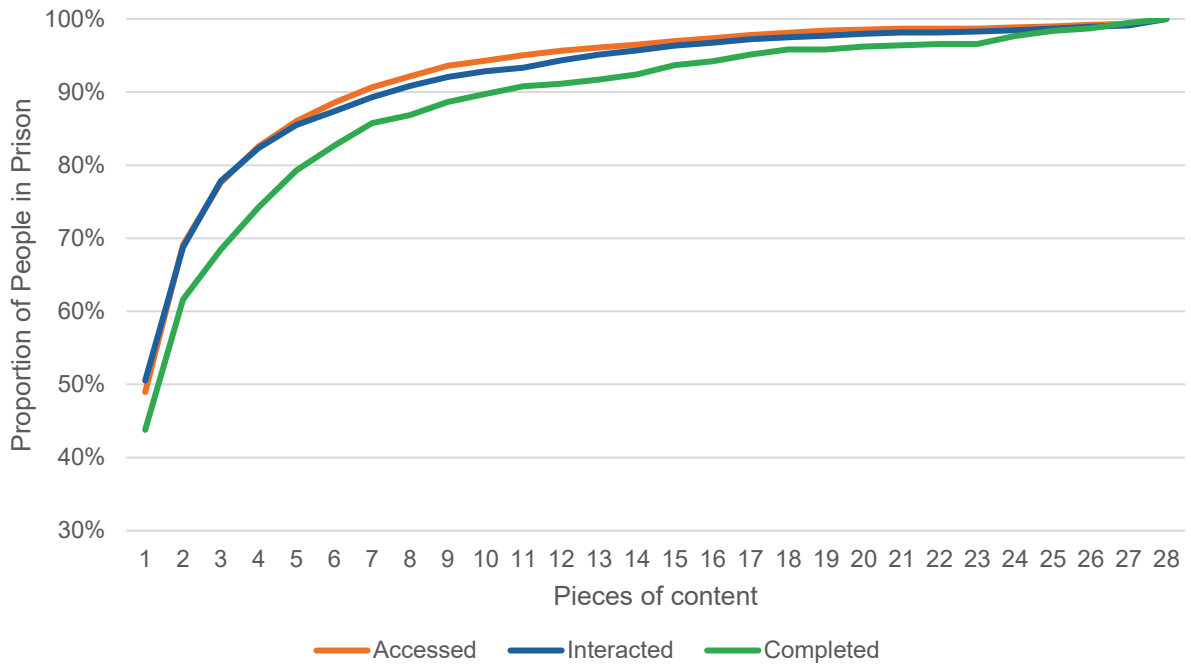
[2] Not all sites with in-cell technology had access to the platform during the pilot. There were three sites that was unclear whether they had access through the duration of the pilot and therefore are excluded from both groups. None of the sites with in-cell access was a testing site.

5.3 Content Engagement Overview

During the pilot period, 1,875 people in prison accessed a total of 5,880 pieces of content, an average of 3.1 pieces per person. Of these, 1,235 people in prison interacted with 4,084 pieces of content, averaging 3.3 interactions per person. Among those who interacted with the content, 555 people in prison went on to complete a total of 2,320 pieces, with an average of 4.2 completions per person.

The higher average for completions compared with access and interaction (4.2 pieces of content versus 3.1 and 3.3 respectively) suggests that people in prison who begin completing content tend to continue and complete further content. Although more individuals access or interact with content than complete it, completion reflects deeper engagement. This pattern is also evident in the distribution of content usage by category shown in the graph below.

Figure 2. Content usage by proportion of person in prison



5.4 Digital Content Learner Characteristics

Offence Type

Seven out of ten (71%) people in prison who accessed at least one piece of content during the pilot were serving sentences for violent (35%), sexual (25%), or drug-related (12%) offences. This pattern was consistent among those who interacted with content (72%) and those who completed it (74%).

Compared with the general prison population, where these three offence groups account for 67% (35% violent, 18% sexual, and 14% drug-related), people in prison convicted of sexual offences were notably overrepresented across all engagement categories.

As discussed later (see below “Learners with limited access to other activities”), this may be linked to the different regimes typically experienced by people in prison convicted of sexual offences, which can affect their access to other forms of purposeful activity.

Table 4. Population proportion by content usage category

Offence type	Opened	Interacted	Completed	National Prison Population†
Violence against the person	35%	31%	30%	35%
Sexual offences	25%	28%	31%	18%
Drug offences	12%	12%	13%	14%
Robbery	6%	5%	[4%]	7%
Theft offences	5%	5%	[4%]	9%
Public order offences	5%	5%	6%	4%
Miscellaneous crimes against society	5%	5%	[5%]	4%
Possession of weapons	4%	3%	[2%]	4%
Fraud offences	2%	[2%]	[2%]	1%
Criminal damage and arson	[1%]	[1%]	*	1%
Summary offences	[1%]	[1%]	[1%]	2%
Other/ missing	[1%]	[1%]	[1%]	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

†*As of 31st December 2024*

The average number of content pieces completed varied slightly by offence type among people in prison who completed at least one piece of content. Those serving a sentence for a violence against the person offence completed a higher average of 4.5 pieces of content.

Table 5. Average number of pieces of content completed by offence type.

Offence type	Average number of pieces of content completed
Violence against the person	4.5
Sexual offences	4.4
Drug offences	3.7
Public order offences	4.9
Miscellaneous crimes against society	[2.3]
Robbery	[3.7]
Theft offences	[3.8]
Fraud offences	[6.5]
Possession of weapons	[4.0]
Criminal damage and arson	*
Summary offences	[1.6]
Other/ missing	[2.2]
Overall	4.2

Sentence Type

People in prison who completed at least one piece of digital content during the pilot were more likely to be serving longer sentences. Over half (54%) of those who completed at least one piece of digital content were serving sentences of four years or more, including life and IPP sentences. This was notably higher than the proportion in the overall prison estate, where 46% were serving sentences of that length (as of 31 December 2024). The second largest group among completers were those serving sentences of one year to less than four years, making up 27% of the cohort. This compares with just 14% of the overall prison population.

Table 6. Content usage by sentence type.

Sentence Band	Opened	Interacted	Completed	National Prison Population†
Remand	17%	17%	14%	20%
Recall	2%	[1%]	*	15%
Sentenced to less than 1 year	5%	5%	[5%]	4%
Sentenced between 1 year and less than 4 years	22%	23%	27%	14%
Sentenced to 4 years or more	47%	48%	48%	36%
Life & IPP	7%	6%	6%	10%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

†*As of 31st December 2024*

People on longer sentences also tended to complete more pieces of content on average, however that was not the case for people serving a Life or IPP sentence.

Table 7. Average number of pieces of content completed by sentence type.

Sentence Band	Average number of pieces of content completed
Remand	3.3
Recall	*
Sentenced to less than 1 year	[3.3]
Sentenced between 1 year and less than 4 years	4.6
Sentenced to 4 years or more	4.5
Life & IPP	2.8
Overall	4.2

Age

The proportion of people in prison in each age band remained broadly consistent across access, interaction, and completion categories, and closely reflected the age distribution of the general prison population.

The 30-39 age group represented the largest share of those who interacted with and completed content. Overall, nearly three out of five (57%) people in prison who completed at least one piece of content were aged between 30 and 49.

In contrast, people in prison aged 60 and over were slightly underrepresented among those who completed digital content during the pilot. This was consistent with literature around older offenders and digital learning, as well as feedback received from prison staff during fieldwork (see Effect of Learner Characteristics on Engagement).

Table 8. Content usage by age.

Age Band	Opened	Interacted	Completed	National Prison Population[†]
<=24	15%	15%	14%	13%
25-29	16%	17%	16%	14%
30-39	33%	32%	34%	33%
40-49	22%	21%	23%	21%
50-59	10%	10%	10%	11%
60+	4%	4%	[3%]	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

[†]*As of 31st December 2024*

The 30-39 age group had the highest average number of pieces of content completed.

Table 9. Average number of pieces of content completed by age.

Age Band	Average number of pieces of content completed
<=24	4.1
25-29	3.9
30-39	4.6
40-49	3.8
50-59	4.3
60+	[3.2]
Overall	4.2

Additional Characteristics

Additional characteristics explored during the analysis of the digital content data included responses to several questions from OASys assessments, focusing on education and employment prior to custody. Among those who interacted with at least one piece of digital content, 72% were identified as having an employment need, compared with 66% in the general prison population. This pattern was also observed among people in prison who completed at least one piece of content.

For education-related questions, general prison population data was not available for comparison. Of those who interacted with digital content, 16% were recorded as having poor school attendance, 14% had no qualifications, 3% had a poor attitude towards education and training, 2% had difficulties with reading, writing or numeracy, and 2% declared a learning difficulty.

6. Qualitative fieldwork findings

6.1 Appetite for Digital Learning in Sampled Prisons

Overview of Digital Learning in Prisons

Digital learning, defined as any learning delivered through digital resources, was widely regarded as a valuable tool for preparing people in prison for life after prison, particularly by helping them develop essential digital literacy skills and maintain a connection with the modern world. This was seen as especially important for those nearing the end of their sentence, as participants highlighted the rapid pace of technological change outside prison. Some people in prison had never used a smartphone or computer prior to their incarceration, underscoring the need for basic digital skills training.

Some participants valued digital learning when it was seen as purposeful and relevant to life after release. Courses that led to certificates or qualifications were particularly appreciated, especially when they were recognised by employers. Staff also reported that learners are not interested in learning that '*does not mean anything*' and '*employers can disregard*'. There was also the view that offline digital learning can only take you so far; improving digital literacy for people in prison requires a safe and monitored access to the internet.

In some sites, digital learning was reported as commonly used to complement classroom-based education. Some courses incorporated digital elements, such as baseline assessments and access to supplementary materials like practice exams and informational content through the digital education platform. This blended approach was valued by those who preferred structured, tutor-led sessions but also appreciated the flexibility to build on their learning digitally. Staff also used digital platforms to support learners with additional resources, including transferring materials for distance learning and uploading content to individual learner accounts. The integration of digital resources into classroom provision was seen as a practical and effective way to enhance engagement and extend learning opportunities, although this varied significantly between tutors and sites.

Despite the appetite, participants expressed the view that prison technology in general, and digital learning particularly, have not been a priority and require improvement. Digital skills courses were reported as being deprioritised in favour of traditional learning, like English and Maths. This was considered to be due to limited funding and need to prioritise those courses that count towards performance targets. Similarly, digital infrastructure in general was described as disjointed and outdated.

Views on Self-Directed Digital Learning

Many participants appreciated the independence that self-directed digital learning offered. It allowed them to take control of their learning journey and fit it around other activities. It was also seen as beneficial for those with anxiety or negative experiences of traditional education as it avoids classroom distractions like "*being put off by the noise*". It allows learners to work at their own pace, take breaks when they need, dip in and out of different topics and does not require keeping handwritten notes.

This approach, however, did not suit everyone, particularly those who lacked confidence or digital skills. Others preferred tutor-led sessions or needed support to navigate digital platforms. Some participants expressed a desire for a blended approach, combining classroom learning with digital follow-up.

Effect of Learner Characteristics on Engagement

Engagement with digital learning varied considerably across the prison population, with certain groups more likely to participate than others. Participants were asked which type of learners seemed to engage or disengage with digital learning. The following predictors of engagement emerged from the data:

Prior Educational Engagement: Learners already involved in education, such as those studying Open University courses or acting as peer mentors, were more likely to engage. They often had higher levels of familiarity with learning environments as well as the opportunity to engage with the content, as they already had access to the Virtual Campus. Further, peer mentors and those in supportive roles reported engaging as part of their responsibilities, to be able to advise other learners on available content.

Digital Confidence and Skills: Participants who were comfortable using computers or had prior digital experience were considered more likely to engage. Conversely, those with low digital literacy or who had never used a computer before prison were reported as often hard to engage. Staff attributed this to a fear of putting themselves in a situation where they would have to admit they could not use a computer. Learners identified during induction as wanting to improve IT skills were more likely to engage with digital courses.

Age: Younger learners were generally more confident and willing to engage with digital platforms, often due to greater exposure to technology prior to custody, although this was not universal. Some younger people in prison disengaged quickly if the content did not meet their expectations or entirely lacked interest in structured learning. Participants and staff consistently reported that older people in prison, particularly those who had served long sentences, were less likely to engage with digital learning. Many lacked confidence or familiarity with technology, and some were reluctant to admit their difficulties.

Learners with limited access to other activities: Retired or medically unfit people in prison were reported as particularly well suited for this type of content as they are not seeking employment post-release and therefore were not put off by the lack of accreditation of the content. Those considered similarly well suited were people with a vulnerable status, who have limited options to engage with most other activities. For these people in prison, digital courses were seen as a constructive way to pass time and maintain mental stimulation.

Sentence Length and Timing: Learners on shorter sentences, approaching release or waiting for a place on a preferred programme were more likely to engage with the courses that allowed access to the content as a flexible alternative to longer, accredited programmes.

Learning Preferences and Needs: Some learners reported preferring the independence and flexibility of self-directed digital learning, especially those who found classroom environments distracting or overwhelming. There was also the view that tutor-led instruction was important for some learners who would not engage with digital content unless it was integrated into their existing education. Staff considered the text-heavy digital

content to be off-putting for learners who do not want to read. For such cases, gamification and interactive elements were suggested.

Perceived Value of the Content: Engagement was higher when learners saw a clear benefit—such as gaining a certificate, improving employability, or preparing for release. In open prisons, where evidencing progression is particularly important, the lack of accreditation following completion of this digital content was a barrier. Learners expressed a preference for content that led to tangible outcomes. Participants also suggested using this kind of short content as tasters of other courses available or providing suggested further reading at the end of each content.

While learners expressed strong interest in digital learning, their ability to access content was shaped by a range of institutional and technical factors, explored in the next section.

6.2 Access to self-directed Digital Learning in Prison

Access to self-directed digital learning varied across the sampled prisons but was generally linked to induction processes and course enrolment. In some cases, learners could log in and choose content independently, while in others, access was granted through specific courses, such as digital skills, via tutor allocation. This was influenced by the prison category (with open estate allowing independent access due to the regime differences).

In all cases, access to the pilot digital content was possible via Moodle in Virtual Campus. Each learner needed their individual login for the platform. The platform was available to all learners, and their login was provided during induction, with some sites automating account creation unless restrictions applied.

While some learners found the process straightforward, others experienced delays or required staff support to navigate enrolment and login reset. Overall, access was available in principle, but in practice it was shaped by local procedures, staff involvement, and the clarity of information provided to learners.

Location of Access

The location and number of access points to the Virtual Campus varied widely across sites. Education departments were the most common access point. In some sites learners could use the computers in libraries, employment hubs, and computer rooms but not all computers have access to the platform. The open prisons visited as part of this fieldwork offered more terminals connected to the platform and from more locations than closed. Finally, one of the sites we visited had in-cell access to the content via Launchpad.

Frequency of Access

Access frequency ranged from daily (in open and in Launchpad enabled prisons) to once a week or less (in more restricted settings). Learners in some prisons reported long delays in being allocated to courses or accessing computers, often due to limited available spaces in relevant courses, staff shortages, or system issues.

Barriers to Access

Access to self-directed digital learning in prisons was shaped by a complex interplay of logistical, technical, institutional, and personal factors.

Regime and Institutional Constraints

In many prisons, access to digital learning was tightly linked to the education timetable and allocation processes. Learners often need to be enrolled in specific courses to gain access to the Virtual Campus, which limits flexibility. In some cases, participants reported waiting several weeks to be allocated to a course. This delay can be particularly problematic for those on shorter sentences or nearing release who may not have time to complete a course once access is granted.

In closed prisons, movement restrictions and limited access to education spaces further constrain opportunities. In contrast, open prisons with more flexible regimes reported fewer barriers, suggesting that digital infrastructure and prison category status significantly influence access.

Technical Issues and Infrastructure

Technical barriers were frequently cited as challenges. Learners and staff described frequent problems with passwords, logins, and system crashes. Forgotten passwords

often required intervention from education staff and, in some cases, learners were locked out of their accounts for extended periods. The process of logging in was described as cumbersome, with multiple steps and long loading times. Some learners reported being discouraged by the time it took to access content, particularly when using older or slow computers.

There were also issues with the reliability of the Virtual Campus itself. Content sometimes failed to load, links were broken, and navigation was not intuitive. These problems were exacerbated in in-cell learning environments, where learners lacked immediate support and were unsure who to contact when issues arose. In-cell learners reported that sometimes opening the content, it was taking too long to load without indicating that it does so, leading to confusion as to whether it was simply not working.

Awareness and Support

A recurring theme was the limited awareness and understanding of digital learning platforms among prison staff. In several participating prisons, staff did not have access to the content, making it difficult for them to promote or support its use. This lack of visibility meant that learners were often unaware of what was available or how to access it. Some staff expressed a desire for training or access to tutor packs to help them better support learners.

Digital orderlies, who were intended to provide peer support for in-cell access, were inconsistently used and often lacked the training or clarity of role needed to be effective. In some cases, neither learners nor staff knew who the digital orderlies were or what they were supposed to do. Further, the lack of a tutor meant that learners did not always know that the content was available on their in-cell device.

Equipment and Licensing Limitations

Although some prisons had enough computers, others faced shortages or licensing restrictions. For example, there was confusion in one establishment about whether the Virtual Campus licence applied to the number of users in the platform or the number of terminals with access to the platform. In some classrooms, only one computer had access to the platform, making it difficult to integrate digital learning into broader education provision.

In-cell access was also limited as not all prisons are equipped with in-cell laptops. Participants in non-Launchpad enabled sites expressed frustration that they could not access digital learning from their cells, despite having the motivation and interest to do so.

Fragmented Systems and Interfaces

The digital learning environment was described as fragmented and difficult to navigate. Learners had to manage multiple logins for different platforms, each with its own password and interface. Some learners reported that they stumbled across content by accident, while others gave up due to confusion or lack of guidance.

The distinction between the different education platforms was not always clear, and learners were unsure which platform to use for which purpose. Staff also found it difficult to navigate these systems, especially when they were not regular users.

Personal and Regime Barriers

Finally, personal factors also played a role. Learners with low literacy or digital confidence were less likely to access self-directed digital learning, particularly when support was not readily available. Staff reported that learners can be reluctant to admit they did not know how to use a computer, which made it harder to identify and support those most in need.

There were also prison regime related barriers. Learners who were not already engaged in education or who worked full-time in prison industries had fewer opportunities to access digital learning. In some cases, the timing of access sessions clashed with work schedules, and there were not enough computers to accommodate both groups.

Suggestions for Improvement of Access

Learners considered easy access important to the success of the pilot, alongside interactive content. Participants across establishments offered a wide range of practical suggestions to improve access to self-directed digital learning in prisons.

Increase Access Points and Flexibility

A recurring theme was the need to expand the number and variety of access points. Learners suggested that self-directed digital learning should not be confined to education

departments or specific courses. Instead, access should be made available in more locations, such as communal areas, on the wings or in canteens and in cells.

In-cell access was seen as particularly valuable for learners who preferred to study independently or who found classroom environments challenging. Several participants noted that they would be more likely to engage if they could access content in their own time and space.

Improve Staff Awareness and Involvement

Staff involvement was seen as critical to improving access. Participating staff suggested that tutors and staff in general should be given access to the digital learning platforms so they could better understand the content and recommend it to appropriate learners. This would also help staff identify which courses were most relevant to individual learning plans.

Some staff expressed a desire for tutor packs or introductory videos that explained the purpose and structure of the courses. These resources could help staff promote digital learning more effectively and support learners in navigating the platforms.

Simplify Systems and Interfaces

Many learners found the digital platforms difficult to navigate, particularly when they had to manage multiple logins or switch between systems and platforms.

Regarding the sign in process, one suggestion was to introduce single sign-on to reduce confusion and streamline access. Another was to allow users to set their own memorable passwords or simplify the reset process.

Once in the platform, users commented on the difficulty of searching among all the available content, suggesting adding search functions to help learners find relevant courses more easily.

Suggestions regarding in-cell access included improving the user interface, such as by making educational content more visible on the in-cell device homepage or adding a short video on the content page about what is available and how to access it. Another suggestion was to provide progress indicators or loading bars to reassure users that

content is working, as learners were not always aware whether the content was broken and failing to upload or just took a long time.

6.3 Engagement

In addition to the access barriers to self-directed digital learning discussed above, engagement with the pilot was shaped by a range of other factors among people in prison. This section explores the motivations and barriers to engagement, as well as participants' suggestions for promoting self-directed digital learning content.

Motivations for Engaging in Digital Content

Curiosity and Personal Interest

Some participants engaged with the content pilot after coming across them and seeing them *'pop up'* on the wallet. Pieces of content would then be selected based on personal interest in the subject matter. Others browsed the content catalogue and selected topics that "*took their fancy*", such as health and fitness or digital marketing, especially when these aligned with personal hobbies or future aspirations.

Progression and Pathways

A recurring theme was the use of digital pieces of content as stepping stones to more advanced or accredited learning. Several people in prison completed introductory contents to qualify for more specialised ones, such as Computer Aided Design (CAD) or construction. This pathway-based motivation was particularly strong among those with clear educational or vocational goals.

Resettlement and Employment Preparation

Some content on offer motivated people in prison to engage based on the relevance to their post-release plans. For example, the social media and digital marketing content attracted participants who were interested in setting up a business after release. Certificates that could be included in progression passports or used in job applications were seen as tangible benefits and motivations to engage in contents.

Social Interaction and Distractions

For some participants in closed prisons, engaging with the content pilot was seen as an opportunity to get out of cells and into the computer room. This gave participants the chance to socialise with other people in prison as well as the ability to use computers, which some participants expressed they had missed from life outside of prison. Staff also acknowledged this as a motivation for people in prison and despite some not being able to log in to computers *"they still enjoy being out of their cells and chatting."* This motivation was less prevalent in open prisons, where people in prison had more freedom and activities to occupy their time.

Staff Member's Suggestion

For others, pieces of content were recommended by staff members who were able to suggest them based on their knowledge of what people in prison were interested in or their roles within prison. For example, Shannon Trust mentors would advise mentors to complete the "Reading for Pleasure" content to then be able to support mentees through the content as well. Despite this, it was expressed by some staff members that being unable to access content themselves limited their ability to recommend pieces of content to people in prison more effectively.

Gaining and/or Refreshing Knowledge

Some participants were motivated to engage with pieces of content to gain new knowledge in an area of interest or to brush up on learning they were already familiar with through qualifications/courses completed outside of prison.

Barriers to engaging in digital content

Lack of Awareness

Several participants were unaware of the content on offer. This was especially true in open prisons, where people in prison were busier and less likely to browse educational platforms and find content by chance. One participant stated confidently that *"no one would know about it"* if he were to ask other people in prison at random.

Irrelevant or Unaccredited Content

Pieces of content that lacked accreditation or clear relevance to employment were often dismissed. Some participants questioned the value of learning about topics like nature or

music production if they did not lead to qualifications or job opportunities that they could get within the prison. Accreditation was seen as a key motivator, with certificates bearing recognised logos (e.g., City & Guilds) preferred over those associated with HMP or MoJ.

Both staff and people in prison acknowledged that pieces of content needed clear links to employment and resettlement. One staff member expressed that *"if courses are not accredited, it's not helping towards that goal so what's the point."* Some participants stated that it did not seem worthwhile completing the "Health and Fitness" content and would instead prefer to do a similar accredited course via the Prison Education Trust.

Lack of Interest in Topics

Some participants expressed not finding any interest in the pieces of content on offer and therefore were not motivated to engage with any.

Limited Access to Computers

For some participants, there was frustration around their limited ability to access computer rooms due to technical difficulties (slow computers and login issues) and due to staff absences, limiting their frequency to be in front of computers as well the time spent completing contents if any technological issues occurred.

Suggestions for promoting content

Induction was mentioned as an opportunity to introduce Virtual Campus and Wallet contents, by encouraging browsing time for new learners to explore the platforms. It was also noted, however, that the volume of information during induction often overwhelmed people in prison.

Suggestions to raise awareness of the pilot across the prison estate included distributing leaflets and brochures via orderlies, and placing posters in key locations such as libraries, education spaces, and billets. Participants also proposed using visual materials, such as animated videos and trailers, to provide clearer explanations and demonstrations of the content. Additionally, there were suggestions to utilise in-cell TV channels to showcase digital skills and promote other educational platforms available across the estate. Assigning or providing suggestions for specific courses through library staff for those accessing the Virtual Campus outside of formal education was also highlighted as a way to

reduce the likelihood of learners being overwhelmed by the amount of content available in the platforms.

Word of mouth was also suggested as a way to raise awareness of the pieces of content on offer, particularly when mentors, digital orderlies, or staff members were able to personally recommend content. Using peer mentors to advertise content, creating Virtual Campus champions, and involving education and digital orderlies in promoting content were all suggested strategies.

This, however, was also seen to be limited staff members inability to access content themselves so, although it was recognised as a possible strategy for raising awareness, staff felt unable to do so effectively. Some participants suggested having tutor packs made with content overviews and videos for staff to be better positioned to advise learners. Some staff expressed not always being aware of when new content was being uploaded and suggested more timely communication through email alerts or pop ups on internal platforms to alert them of any updates.

Beyond general engagement patterns, learners also shared detailed feedback on how content design and platform usability affected their experience.

6.4 Navigation and Interactivity

What learners liked

Participants responded positively to digital learning formats that incorporated interactive elements such as quizzes, videos, and games. These features were highlighted as effective in maintaining attention and enhancing the overall learning experience. For instance, the space-invaders-style quiz embedded within the “Health and Fitness” content was described by learners as a particular highlight, demonstrating how gamified content can make educational material more engaging and enjoyable.

The relevance of the topics covered also played a significant role in learner engagement. Pieces of content that connected directly to real-life situations, such as Managing Personal Finances and Health and Safety, were appreciated for their practical value. Learners felt

these subjects could support their resettlement goals post-release or contribute positively to their mental wellbeing while in custody.

In terms of structure and pacing, learners responded well to content that was clearly organised and broken into manageable sections. Short quizzes and clear progression pathways made the material more accessible, particularly for those who may find it harder to engage with education content. The ability to track progress and engage with content at an appropriate difficulty level helped sustain motivation and encouraged completion for some learners.

Content that offered insights into real-world skills, such as “Green Skills Technology”, “Intro to AI”, and “Digital Marketing & Social Media”, was valued by some participants. Learners appreciated when content pointed to further study or industry pathways. Flexibility was another key factor in supporting engagement. The ability to pause and return to content later was seen as important in the prison context, where interruptions are frequent and access to devices may be limited. This flexibility allowed learners to work at their own pace and maintain continuity in their learning, even when faced with logistical barriers to accessing computers.

What learners did not like

One area of concern that some participants expressed was the use of misleading or overly complex titles. Learners reported that some titles did not accurately reflect the content, leading to confusion and disappointment. For example, the “Music Production” content focused more on music genres than actual production techniques, and “How are websites made?” offered only a basic overview rather than practical instruction on building a website. Additionally, titles such as “Nature Connectedness” were considered too abstract or academic, with some learners stating they did not understand what the term meant and would have preferred simpler, more intuitive naming.

Another barrier was the perceived lack of depth or interactivity in certain pieces of content. While interactive elements were generally appreciated, some learners felt that the content was too basic or lacked meaningful hands-on activities. This was particularly noted in content related to coding and music, where learners expected more practical exercises.

Tasks such as word searches and crosswords were viewed by some adults as childish or irrelevant, reducing the perceived value of the learning experience.

Technical limitations also impacted engagement. A recurring issue was the inability to use headphones, which made it difficult to concentrate on audio or video content in noisy prison environments. This constraint significantly reduced the accessibility of multimedia materials and discouraged learners from engaging with content that required sound.

Content that was repetitive or overly lengthy also posed challenges for some learners. Contents with long blocks of text or repeated tasks, such as “Reading for Pleasure”, were described as more of a challenge to focus on. Learners expressed a preference for concise content with varied formats to maintain attention and motivation. The lack of immediate and detailed feedback was mentioned by some learners who preferred feedback that explained their mistakes and helped them understand the correct answers, rather than delayed or generic responses.

Emotional responses to content also played a role in engagement. While some learners appreciated content like “Nature Connectedness” for their calming or reflective qualities, others found them emotionally uncomfortable. The content reminded them of being outside, which led to disengagement and a sense of loss.

Accessibility was another concern, especially for learners with low digital literacy. Contents such as “Introduction to AI” were seen as too technical, with excessive jargon and insufficient explanation. This made the content difficult to understand and discouraged participation from those who may have benefited most from foundational digital skills.

Suggestions for improvements

Enhancing Interactivity

Participants expressed a greater preference for interactive content. Quizzes, videos, and tasks embedded within contents were seen as engaging and helped maintain attention. Learners suggested having shorter quizzes throughout the content rather than a single large quiz at the end. More video content with real-life examples and greater interactive elements like drag and drop tasks or clickable scenarios were also mentioned as suggestions for improvement.

Improving Navigation and Usability

Suggestions around navigation included having a search functionality to help learners find specific topics, as well as the use of bookmarks or progress indicators to allow learners to resume where they left off.

Greater Clarity in Content Titles and Descriptions

Some participants felt that titles needed to be clearer and more relatable, with suggestions to use images on content landing pages to give learners a better sense of what a content is about.

Greater Coverage of Learners Levels

Some participants felt that the available content was occasionally too basic and expressed a desire for opportunities to progress their learning. They suggested introducing new pieces of content that build on the existing ones or incorporating signposting at the end of each to direct learners to further courses or information. Learners also recommended tailoring existing content to different ability levels, with options to engage at different points, from beginner through to advanced learner.

Suggestions for new topics

When asked to suggest new topics to cover in short form contents, participants expressed interest in a wide range of areas. This was often linked to employment, resettlement, hobbies, or personal interests. Suggestions for new contents included:

- **Employment and Vocational training**: Driving theory, Microsoft Office, CSCS training, CV writing.
- **Business and Finance**: Personal finance, entrepreneurship, and self-employment basics.
- **Health and Wellbeing**: Mental health awareness, nutrition in prison, first aid, keeping fit in prison.
- **Creative and Recreational Interests**: Chess, art and design, football, and sport quizzes.
- **General knowledge**: Language courses, law and legal rights, geography, biology.

Staff perspectives on communication from HQ also shaped the implementation and uptake of the pilot. The next section explores how messaging, support, and feedback mechanisms influenced delivery.

6.5 Communications

Staff were asked to comment on the communications received from HQ regarding this pilot. Views varied between sites, roles, and whether staff were HMPPS or an education provider. Below are the key themes.

Clarity, flow, and feedback: Participants expressed uncertainty about the purpose and value of the content pilot, with some asked to promote materials they had not seen or understood. They noted that communication was often slow and fragmented, passing through multiple layers, from HQ to prison staff to external contractors, which led to delays and diluted messaging. External pressures, such as performance targets, sometimes took precedence over pilot priorities. There was a clear call for more direct, streamlined communication from HQ, ensuring key messages reach frontline staff effectively. Additionally, participants wanted more reciprocal communication and felt excluded from feedback mechanisms and suggested the use of tools like centralised dashboards and improved data sharing to support local monitoring and learner engagement.

Volume and Frequency of Contact: Views on the level of HQ engagement were mixed. Some felt overwhelmed by the frequency of contact, especially given the small scale of the pilot. Others appreciated the regular support and felt it contributed to the pilot's success.

Advance Notice and Preparation: Participants emphasised the value of early communication about upcoming changes or new content. Advance notice would allow tutors to prepare and adapt, improving implementation and learner engagement. Some upskilling of staff in using the platforms (via training or in-person demonstration) and promotional material were also mentioned as a way of supporting frontline staff.

Understanding the Prison Context: Several participants felt that HQ lacked an understanding of the prison environment, particularly the pace and constraints of daily

operations. There were calls for HQ staff to visit prisons before launching pilots to better tailor their approach.

7. Learnings and reflections from contract manager and suppliers

In addition to learner and staff feedback, insights from those involved in content delivery offer a complementary perspective on the pilot's successes and challenges. The contract manager from HMPPS and the three suppliers of this pilot were asked for their own reflections on the content created as part of this pilot. The specific topics asked to feedback on were what worked well, what not so well, and what they would have done differently. Their responses were collated and analysed together.

7.1 Content Design Considerations

Technical framework: The first reflection was around the restrictions of the available infrastructure for delivering educational content in prisons. Contract managers and suppliers have reported that they did not want to limit themselves to what was already happening, however, there were some limitations that determined what was possible. Addressing these limitations had been out of scope for this pilot and therefore should have been considered as part of the technical specification. A more thorough understanding of the infrastructure and practical delivery methods could have refined the project specifications and provided prospective suppliers with a clearer understanding of what was possible.

Suppliers had to scale down certain elements they aspired to include due to the limitations of the technical infrastructure. One example was that learners were not able to access documents through the content. This meant there was not really a way to "*reward*" the learner or give them something for working life after prison (e.g., the template email they draft to a potential employer). As a result, the content had to be designed to exist in the moment, without opportunity to take anything away afterwards to store and reuse when needed. In some cases, the realisation of such restrictions happened after the content was being developed, leading to delays and frustrations.

Quality assurance: Another point of reflection was the quality assurance (QA) process followed by the contract managers. It was reported that there was no pre-agreed set of standards, which meant that feedback often felt subjective and inconsistent with other guidance issued. This led to delays affecting the launch of the content.

Accessibility: It was also mentioned that the pilot faced significant challenges with readability that led to access challenges to users. This was due to the older version of integrated LMS where the content was hosted.

Access to the building environment: Dissatisfaction over the limitations of the platform were heightened by the fact that suppliers have not had access to the platform used to develop the content. Suppliers had to build their content in a test site, which was then pushed to the live site by the platform supplier. This process proved cumbersome, as merging data from existing contents with new versions was problematic, leading to the creation of new data sets each time content was updated. This necessitated manual data input, which was not a viable long-term solution. Consequently, the number of amendments suppliers could make was limited and there was no review phase, as originally intended, to allow improvements to the content based on learner feedback.

In hindsight, a system allowing suppliers to directly interface with the content section would have provided them with greater oversight and streamlined the process for uploads, quality assurance, and amendments. Suppliers expressed some annoyance at the need for an intermediary, which often caused delays and made fixing glitches and errors difficult. They felt they lacked full oversight of their contents and were unable to manage them effectively. One possible solution for future content would be for the contract manager to build or suggest a suitable framework, with suppliers creating content within these parameters, to allow for more appropriate content creation and user experience.

Data issues: Limitations of the platform hosting the content was also an issue raised in relation to accessing and exporting data about the content usage. The platform provider acted as an intermediary between the department's analysts and the platform's data. The provider reported that data exports were resource intensive. The available fields were limited to the number of people in prison accessing and completing content, making any

additional analysis impossible (e.g., length of time people engaged with each content or number of attempts for each quiz).

Overall, it proved difficult to provide interactive contents with elements of gamification due to constraints. The lack of direct access to the platform caused several issues, including a lack of control over content amendments, inability to track content performance, and no means to investigate content functionality. On the other hand, there were new features that learners appreciated such as tracking their progress, autosave functionality, and certificates.

7.2 Adjustments due to the Limitations of the Prison Environment

Prison regime: Another point of reflection was the prison environment and the effect it has on any intervention. It was acknowledged that communication and early engagement with prisons was critical in the success of educational initiatives. One reflection was that more time should have been spent speaking directly to prisons to understand their needs and the opportunities for accessing digital learning. This early engagement could have provided a better understanding of the prison regime and potential adaptations to increase access to self-directed digital learning. The oversight of not introducing the initiative to prisons until after the bids were evaluated and suppliers confirmed resulted in missed opportunities to anticipate and address access issues. Engaging with prisons earlier might have allowed for measures to be put in place to enhance access opportunities, particularly for those learners outside of education.

Part of the aim of the pilot was to create content that would be accessible for learners who are not engaged with education in prisons. This was proven a big challenge as even self-directed learning in prisons often relies on staff facilitation, including finding space within existing education programmes and providing access to computer banks. Additionally, issues with video and headphones across sites further complicate the learning process. Facilitated learning, integrated into prison regimes or supported by in-cell technologies, may offer a more effective approach, ensuring that people in prison receive the necessary guidance and support.

Access to digital resources varies significantly across the prison estate, presenting a major barrier to the successful implementation of digital learning. In many prisons, the lack of digital infrastructure and inexperienced staff who are unaware of digital opportunities hinder the reach and effectiveness of the content. Addressing these disparities and providing adequate training to staff are essential steps to ensure that people in prison can benefit from the educational initiatives.

Through understanding the prison settings better, it was evident that the learning framework should be adapted to shorter bursts of learning for those with limited access to the courses. Instead of five one-hour modules, shorter, more frequent sessions could facilitate better engagement and utilisation of the courses in various settings. This approach would accommodate the constraints faced by people in prison and ensure that the educational content is more accessible and effective.

They also aimed to produce some pieces of content that were designed to have a direct link to employment opportunities, providing practical skills that could be utilised after release. By offering such content that are both interesting and beneficial for future employment, the initiative aimed to support people in prison in their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. That, however, proved challenging, given the different cohorts of people in prison, custody length, and location. The broad nature of the content designed for the entire prison estate can sometimes feel generic and not immediately relevant to specific locations or person in prison cohorts. For instance, people in prison with life sentences or those unable to access conventional work after release may find the content less applicable. Tailoring the contents to the specific needs and circumstances of different prisons, considering factors such as infrastructure, staff, and person in prison categories, could enhance the relevance and impact of the educational initiatives.

The key strengths of the initiative, as reported from the suppliers, were the involvement of individuals with lived experience of prison education and those delivering education in the content design process. By incorporating feedback from people in prison and working with topic experts, suppliers reported that the pieces of content were structured to be appropriate in length and difficulty. This collaborative approach ensured that content was

relevant and engaging, addressing the interests and needs of the people in prison, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the educational programmes.

7.3 Content Promotion

To promote the content effectively, several strategies were identified. While the initial communication plan involved targeted emails and the Education Skills and Work SharePoint, it was noted that these methods did not always ensure the message was disseminated throughout the prison. Feedback indicated that prison staff struggled with distributing the message internally. Engagement from sites that were not involved from the beginning remained challenging. Suppliers successfully used platforms like prison television and radio to spread the word about content pilots, which proved effective. In hindsight, centrally distributing communications through these channels might have increased uptake.

A personal approach involving direct outreach and relationship building was attempted by a supplier with pre-existing presence in the prisons. They utilised their reputation among people in prison and prison staff to help promote content. The communication strategy included regular emails, webinars, videos aimed at both staff and people in prison, distributing posters, in-person visits, a National Prison Radio campaign, and an article in Inside Time.

Other strategies suggested included progress tracking, peer support systems, and regular follow-ups to sustain motivation. Another suggestion was to introduce incentive-based learning, such as achievement badges or accredited certificates recognised by prisons and future employers, to maintain motivation. Access to detailed data, such as analysing learner drop-off points, could provide insights for targeted interventions to encourage content completion.

Finally, suppliers were generally positive about the content they provided. They considered their content to have demonstrated high production quality. They also reported a notable interest and appetite for content among staff, particularly for its growth mindset and personal enrichment themes. They particularly reported interest in employability content from the women’s estate prison staff with the growth mindset ethos.

8. Discussion

The findings from this report highlight both the potential and the limitations of self-directed digital learning in prisons. While digital content offers flexibility and the opportunity to reach learners who may not engage with traditional education, its success was highly dependent on the context in which it was delivered. The data suggests that access, infrastructure, staff engagement, and content design all play critical roles in shaping learner experience and outcomes.

Access to digital content varied significantly across the prison sites we visited. Closed prisons, where access was more structured and often embedded within formal education provision, tended to show higher completion rates. In contrast, open prisons, despite offering more freedom and more devices, saw lower engagement. This suggests that physical access alone was not sufficient; learners also need motivation, support, and a clear understanding of what the content offers. In-cell access was seen as a major opportunity, particularly for those who prefer independent study or face barriers to classroom participation. Uptake, however, was limited by technical issues, lack of awareness, and inconsistent support.

The diversity of the prison population further complicates the picture. Learners varied widely in terms of educational background, digital confidence, sentence length, and motivation. Some preferred short, interactive content to pass time constructively, while others sought accredited courses linked to employment or resettlement. The lack of accreditation for the pilot content limited its perceived value. The notion of value came up frequently with participants suggesting how this content can have value in a prison (e.g., as tasters of other educational programmes available, or for the reading for pleasure one as an introductory session to the library).

Feedback from learners showed little consensus on which content was most engaging or useful. While existing administrative data could help tailor content to offender cohorts, many personal preferences, such as interest in repetition, desire for novelty, or motivation

to gain qualifications, are not captured in current datasets. This makes it difficult to design content that suits all learners.

Staff engagement emerged as a critical factor in the success of the pilot. In many cases, staff lacked access to or awareness of the content, which limited their ability to promote it or guide learners effectively. Staff also emphasised the importance of targeting the right learners, noting that different cohorts are likely to engage with short, non-accredited content, which can mitigate the lack of data discussed above. Improved communication between HQ and testing prison sites was considered essential. Staff need to understand what the content does and does not do, who it is suitable for, and how it fits within broader rehabilitative goals. This will enable better targeting, more effective promotion, and ultimately, greater engagement with digital learning.

The design and perceived value of the content also influenced engagement. Learners responded positively to interactive and relevant content, especially that which was connected to real-life skills or post-release goals. Some content was perceived as too basic, while other content was seen as too technical or abstract. Gamification and multimedia elements were appreciated, but technical limitations, such as the inability to use headphones, reduced their effectiveness. Learners also expressed a desire for progression pathways and clearer signposting to further learning. Content that was clearly structured, with intuitive titles and concise descriptions, was more likely to be completed.

Finally, the pilot revealed tensions between the flexibility of digital learning and the operational demands of prison regimes. Digital content was embedded into formal education provision, which helped uptake but limited reach to non-education learners. Small pilots like this one risk limited impact without broader system change. To realise the potential of digital learning, it must be integrated into prison regimes in a way that supports both individual learning and institutional reality. This includes aligning with purposeful activity targets, supporting blended learning models, and ensuring sustainability beyond any pilot phase.

In summary, digital learning in prisons holds promise, but its success depends on more than just content availability. It requires thoughtful integration into prison regimes,

investment in infrastructure and staff capacity, and a clear strategy for targeting and supporting diverse learners.

8.1 Key Considerations

Improve Access and Infrastructure

The pilot showed that access varied widely across the estate, and that infrastructure issues, such as slow systems, login problems, and limited devices, were common.

- Expand access points beyond education departments to communal areas and in-cell devices (combined with promotional activities to increase awareness of the available platforms and content).
- Consider infrastructure upgrades, including faster systems and simplified login processes[3].
- Clarify and standardise licensing arrangements to ensure consistent access across sites.

Tailor Content to Learner Diversity

The prison population is not homogenous. Learners differ in education level, digital confidence, sentence length, and motivation. One-size-fits-all content is unlikely to meet the needs of all.

- Clearly label content with its intended audience, level, and purpose.
- Develop a mix of entry-level, enrichment, and progression-focused content.
- Consider accreditation or recognition pathways to increase perceived value.
- Use available data to better target content to learner profiles.

[3] Since the conclusion of data collection for this pilot, infrastructure improvements have been progressed through the rollout of the centrally provisioned Digital Education Platform (DEP) to 103 prisons, which include upgrades to system performance, access, and usability. While these developments were not in place during the pilot period and are therefore not reflected in the findings presented here, they are expected to address some of the technical and access-related barriers identified in this report.

Staff Engagement and Communication

Staff awareness, confidence, and buy-in can directly influence uptake. Clear, streamlined communication between HQ, prisons, and providers can help promote digital learning provisions.

- Provide staff with access to the content, digital platforms, and supporting materials (e.g. tutor packs, content overviews).
- Facilitate peer learning and cross-site knowledge sharing through digital champions or communities of practice. Involve staff in digital learning design to improve relevance and buy-in.
- Streamline communication channels, provide advance notice of changes or new content and establish two-way feedback mechanisms (e.g. dashboards, regular updates).

Embed Digital Learning into Prison Regimes

Digital learning should be integrated into the broader education and rehabilitation strategy, not treated as an add-on. The pilot showed that embedding content into formal education helped uptake, but limited reach to non-education learners.

- Align digital learning with purposeful activity targets and education strategies.
- Support blended delivery models that combine tutor-led and self-directed learning.
- Plan for scale and sustainability by engaging stakeholders early and adapting to operational realities.

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Appendix A

Summary description of each Digital Content Lot & list of pieces of content under each

Prisoners' Education Trust (Lot 1): A digital content was developed to support reading skills among people in prison. PET collaborated with a subcontractor to create the programme, which focused on reading as part of overall literacy education. It was based on the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and covered text comprehension, grammar, and word-level skills. Learners began with a quiz to determine their starting level. The content was self-directed and included six stages, progressing from Entry Level 1 to Entry Level 3/Level 1 through auto-marked tasks.

People in prison' Education Trust (Lot 2): A suite of short digital contents was created to introduce people in prison to a range of subject areas relevant to future employment. Each content provided basic subject knowledge and followed a consistent structure to help learners develop transferable skills such as digital literacy, time management, self-motivation, and self-discipline.

Big Ideas (**Lot 2):** A five-module self-directed content was developed to support prison leavers in preparing for employment. Co-produced with prison leavers and employers, the content focused on building confidence, aspiration, and practical strategies for success in the workplace. It also signposted learners to literacy, numeracy, and employment support services. The content intended to be flexible, bitesize format to engage disengaged learners and encourage further education and career development.

Meganexus (Lot 2): developed a suite of self-directed eLearning content for prison learners using its GENAIE automation engine, which applies generative AI to produce educational materials. This approach enabled rapid creation of content across multiple learning levels and languages. The content was intended to cover vocational training, general education, professional qualifications, and access contents. Materials included plain language guides, content overviews, flash cards, visual aids, and interactive

elements. Content was structured to support independent study and was broken into shorter sections to improve accessibility.

Lot	Supplier	Content title
Lot 1	PET	Reading for pleasure
Lot 2	PET	Nature Connectedness
		Music Production and Industry
		Green Skills Technology
		Health and Safety
		Health and fitness
		Digital marketing & social media
	Big Ideas	Work stories
	Meganexus	Intro to AI
		Ethics of AI
		Managing Personal Finances
		What is computer code and how does it work?
		How are websites made?
		Using Devices
		Managing and Storing Information
		Identifying and Solving Technical Problems
		Finding and evaluating information
		Creating and Editing Documents
		Creating and Editing Digital Media
		Processing Numerical Data
		Communicating and sharing

		Your online identity
		Online services
		Online transactions
		Protecting privacy
		Protecting data
		Online responsibility
		Digital wellbeing