HMP Gartree

Ofsted report for education, skills and work activities

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Type of establishment:	Category B training prison
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Education, skills and work activities

Expected outcomes:
All prisoners are expected and enabled to engage in education, skills or work activities that promote personal development and employability. There are sufficient, suitable education, skills and work places to meet the needs of the population and provision is of a good standard.

This part of the inspection is conducted and written by Ofsted inspectors using Ofsted's inspection framework, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework.

Ofsted made the following assessments about the education, skills and work provision:

Overall effectiveness: Requires improvement
Quality of education: Requires improvement
Behaviour and attitudes: Requires improvement
Personal development: Requires improvement
Leadership and management: Requires improvement

Leaders did not have a clear, purposeful plan for their education, skills and work (ESW) offer at HMP Gartree. They had not done enough to fully resolve the recommendations from the previous inspection, and it was not clear what the curriculum was preparing prisoners for given the very long-term sentences they were serving. The quality of education, skills and work was still not good enough and did not meet prisoners' needs.

Leaders had recently broadened their curriculum offer to ensure there were sufficient purposeful activity spaces across ESW. For example, leaders had opened a handyman workshop and increased capacity in a few industries workshops. Despite the availability of spaces for prisoners, unemployment was relatively high.

During induction, prisoners received careers information, advice and guidance about the ESW opportunities at HMP Gartree, with an emphasis on developing their mathematical and English skills. However, prisoners did not routinely receive enough time to complete initial assessments of their mathematical or English ability. Prisoners had to return to complete these assessments later, often after they had been allocated to an activity. In several instances, prisoners then had to complete diagnostic assessments after they had started learning or change the course they had commenced.

In too many instances, prisoners were not allocated to ESW activities based on their aspirations or learning and development plans. The allocations process was unnecessarily complicated. It was not working effectively for those prisoners who wanted to change jobs or access other learning and development opportunities. This caused delays allocating prisoners to activities and, too often, waiting lists were high. This resulted in around only half of prisoners accessing their first choice of activity.

The pay and reward strategy did not incentivise prisoners to participate in education or training. Jobs that did not require prior training, such as laundry work, attracted a higher salary than attending education. Prisoners who were motivated to become mentors had to take a salary cut to attend mentor training before being allowed to carry out those roles. Leaders recognised this concern and had partially drafted an updated pay policy for prisoners.

The prisoner education services provider, PeoplePlus, provided a few high-quality education courses for prisoners. For example, in English, teachers used effective strategies to enthuse and teach prisoners. Prisoners made sustained progress and often achieved their intended qualification. In subjects such as mathematics, teaching was less effective. Prisoners did not receive sufficiently helpful feedback on how they could improve the quality of their work, and they did not understand how their newly learned mathematical skills could be used in ESW across the prison.

Other subjects, such as horticulture, helped provide a balanced curriculum offer in education. For example, prisoners often studied the horticulture qualification as a pathway into employment so they could gain work in the gardens. Those working in kitchens had to complete a mandatory level 2 food hygiene qualification at the start of their employment as evidence of their ability to handle and prepare food safely.

Staff generally helped prisoners develop new knowledge and skills. Most were able to recall what they had learned, including how they were using those skills. For example, those in horticulture could explain how they knew little about gardening previously but were now able to use tools such as hoes, strimmers and secateurs. They knew the importance of equally spacing seed drills when planting vegetables to sustain a good quality harvest. In textiles, prisoners recognised that they had developed measuring and cutting skills, as well as progressing from basic stitching to using machine sewing techniques to make prison clothing.

Despite long-term staff absences in roles to support prisoners with additional learning needs, staff in education supported prisoners with additional learning needs effectively. For example, in English, prisoners with a visual impairment were given a hard copy of slide decks to refer to, both during and after lessons. Others with dyslexia were provided with text on coloured paper or coloured overlays so they could read information clearly. However, in industries and work, support for prisoners with a learning need was much less effective. Staff had not received sufficient training on how to identify and support prisoners with those needs.

The education outreach for prisoners was of a poor quality. Only a few prisoners accessed the available education outreach opportunities and were making slow progress. Since October 2025, no prisoners had achieved any qualifications, even though these were broken down into units. Leaders' oversight of the outreach provision was poor. Prisoners were able to access in-cell learning via Way2Learn, the system that has replaced the Virtual Campus, but the take up among the population was extremely low.

Instructors generally sequenced knowledge and skills development in industries and workshops well. For example, in the production kitchen, prisoners learned the fundamentals of knife skills, food preparation and heating temperatures before learning more complex skills such as baking breads, pastries and pizzas from raw ingredients. In the bicycle

workshop, prisoners learned how to strip a bicycle to its component parts, before refurbishing those parts and learning how to rebuild the bike. In gardens, prisoners first learned about planting, watering and feeding, before weeding, pruning and then harvesting, using relevant tools and equipment.

Within many industry workshops prisoners felt a strong sense of purpose. Prisoners working in the kitchens recognised their own contribution towards the effective running of the mealtime regime for the prison population. Those working in the laundry recognised the importance of clean bedding and clothing for their peers. Prisoners in those workshops valued their roles and fostered a sense of community and teamwork within the realistic working environments.

Mentors supported their peers very well across ESW activities. They were trained well and worked very effectively in their various settings. In music, peer mentors used their own experience to support prisoners who had never made music before to produce unique pieces of music. In English, teachers briefed mentors about what topics they would be covering and which prisoners to work with so that mentors could plan how to best support them

The prison reading strategy was under-developed. Many prisoners who needed or wanted support to improve their reading did not receive it. Although Shannon Trust supported several prisoners to improve their reading skills, reading was not promoted well enough across the prison. This was particularly evident on wings, industries and workshops. Although better in education, reading was still not sufficiently well promoted.

In industries, too many staff did not have the expertise to manage their respective workshop areas. They had not received sufficient instructor training to provide a helpful or meaningful learning experience. Although prisoners often learned and developed new skills, these were not recorded well enough or did not link to their long-term career development at HMP Gartree. Where prisoners' skills development was recorded, these were too often related to very short-term goals. Once goals were achieved, staff set the same goals for them again.

Attendance during our visit was low. Lateness to activities was a persistent issue during our visit, with prisoners often arriving over 30 minutes after the start time of sessions. Regime issues, such as additional roll checks, further delayed prisoners' arrival to their planned activities, particularly wing work.

Mostly, prisoners were polite and behaved well. They exhibited respectful attitudes in education and work settings with very few instances of anything other than calm, orderly, productive working environments. Prisoners generally felt safe in ESW. Older workers on the wings felt less safe, citing being vulnerable to bullying and violence. In a few workshops, such as headphone refurbishment, prisoners undertook mundane and boring activities that did not inspire or motivate them to attend further learning or work.

Staff provided prisoners with useful information about how to access support to stay physically and mentally healthy. This included information about external services such as the Samaritans as well as prison listeners, whom they could talk to confidentially about their wellbeing. Prisoners received useful guidance about the importance of regular gym attendance, including for those who were retired. Prisoners could also find out about the range of support available to them via displays on their wing and from prisoner information desk workers.

In education, most staff taught a range of topics to raise prisoners' awareness of equality and diversity, radicalisation and extremism, and British values. Teachers used contemporary resources and held themed events to deepen prisoners' understanding of topics such as the Windrush scandal, Black History Month and Pride. However, in work, prisoners were not provided with the same access to such training, discussions or promotion of these topics. Consequently, these prisoners did not have the same understanding as their peers.

Leaders did not provide enough extra-curricular opportunities for prisoners to develop their wider interests. There were a few prisoner-led activities available via the library, including Spanish, Italian, origami, role-play games and a writing group. However, only a small number of prisoners accessed these opportunities. There were very few community events or social clubs for prisoners.

There were no plans to help prepare prisoners for release, although around a sixth of the population had been downgraded to category C and there were a very few category D prisoners. Almost no prisoners were released in the previous 12 months.

Priority concerns

Leaders had not developed a cohesive education, work and skills curriculum that aligned to prisoners' interests, aspirations and career paths in prison.

Key concerns

Prisoners did not have access to a suitable personal development curriculum. Activities designed to develop prisoners' interests beyond the education curriculum were limited.

Prisoners' attendance and punctuality to ESW, particularly in work activities that prepared prisoners for further work and study, was low. The sequencing of initial assessments was poor and delayed allocations to ESW.

The quality of education, skills and work across the prison was not good enough. Several industry staff had not received sufficient training to effectively operate their workshops.

The reading strategy was not fully implemented, which limited prisoners' access to the curriculum.