

# insideinformation – fact sheet

## Distance Learning

Re-produced courtesy of Prisoner's Education Trust

### **Why learn in prison?**

If you are inside and have time, learning something could help you:

- To improve your job prospects
- To fill your time usefully
- To get some qualifications
- To help your children
- Or you may simply enjoy studying.

### **Where do I get information and advice?**

Talk to someone in your Education Department and ask for their support. Also ask in the library about course brochures and funding information.

### **What is available?**

There are education courses and skills training provided in every prison. If the Education Department or prison workshops do not offer what you're looking for, there are hundreds of courses available by distance learning.

### **What is distance learning?**

Distance learning is also known as open learning. It is basically learning by post, with course materials and assignments sent in. You do the work in your own time, at your own pace and send your assignments to a tutor for marking and to get feedback on your progress. Some distance learning courses use DVDs or CDs; others are paper based. Some lead to exams or qualifications; others simply provide personal development. Open University courses are one of the most popular forms of distance learning - not all OU courses can be done by prisoners, as many require internet access, but there is a wide range available.

### **How many prisoners get funded every year?**

Last year, the Prisoners' Education Trust alone made over 2000 awards to pay for courses and we are not the only funding organisation. The Hardman Trust publishes a directory of charities that fund prisoners. A copy of the full Directory is included in [insideinformation](#).

If you are interested in university level study, once you have got funded for an initial course, you can apply for a fee waiver to take further courses and complete a degree. If you are really keen, searching for funding is possible but takes commitment and patience.

### **What sort of courses are available?**

Courses people in prison have recently followed include plumbing, horticulture, bookkeeping, maths, law, interior design, event management, bereavement counselling, Spanish and health & fitness. You can study at almost every level; PET normally funds courses above level 2, as there are many level 1 and 2 courses available in prison

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### **What else can I get funding for?**

The Prisoners' Education Trust also makes small grants for art materials and funds some college based courses and short vocational courses for prisoners allowed out on licence. Other funders may be able to help with equipment, books, etc.

### **Do I need qualifications to apply?**

No, but we consider these points before we make an award:

- Whether your level of ability is suitable for the course you want to take.
- For a few courses, whether the course is inappropriate for someone convicted of your offence.
- If you have time to complete the course, and any exams before release.
- Whether you are already being funded for a course, as the Trust only funds one course at a time.
- Whether your plans in relation to the course are realistic; for example, if you aim to be employed in a particular field, whether that will be possible to someone with a criminal record.

### **Are there any exceptions?**

Trustees try to be flexible, so you are welcome to discuss whether or not an exception might be made.

### **Can I apply if I'm likely to be released before I can finish my course?**

You must have a good chance of finishing the course before your earliest possible release date.

### **Is there a price limit?**

The Trust rarely awards a grant of more than £500 at a time. If the course costs more, help is sometimes available from other charitable trusts. The prison must contribute a minimum of 10% of the course fees. You may make a personal contribution, but this CANNOT be instead of the prison's contribution. The Trust also co-funds with other charities, or with a contribution from you or your family.

### **When should I apply?**

The Trust considers applications once a month, so apply when you have all the information you need. The deadline is the 1st of each month.

### **Where do I get the forms?**

The Education Department in your establishment.

### **Who fills in the forms?**

You fill in the form, and it must be checked by the Education Department. This includes a signed endorsement from a Governor's representative, usually the Education Manager or Head of Learning and Skills, or the Distance Learning Co-ordinator.

You must write a letter, preferably in your own handwriting, to say why you want to do the course, and what difference it will make to your future plans. On the form, we also ask about what you have achieved in education outside prison, and what you have done whilst inside. We need this information for various reports, so please make sure you fill this in. We will only consider your application if the form is complete. You don't want to be rejected because of a minor mistake, so make sure you read and understand all the requirements before sending your application.

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### **How can I make my application as strong as possible?**

Make sure the letter tells us about you; what are your hopes? What matters to you? What is your experience of education? What is it about this subject or course that makes you want to do it? How does it relate to your experience before prison? What difference do you hope it will make to your future? Show us that you have thought about your future plans. Don't use the letter to tell us the course details; we can look those up!

### **Who makes the decisions?**

Your forms are checked first by our administrative team. If they are all correct, each application is reviewed by the Director of the Trust. The next stage is called Scrutiny. Here, the Director and two Trustees consider the applications and make the final decisions.

### **How do you decide which applications to fund?**

It's really difficult! It is hard to decide, for example, whether to fund one postgraduate sociology course, or two plumbing theory courses. Or whether to give priority to any particular groups - younger prisoners, as they have their lives ahead of them? Or older prisoners? Or women? Or other groups with specific needs? We have some strong principles; we believe every application deserves individual consideration and read every letter carefully. We recognise that sometimes people need a second chance - if they had tried a course earlier, but it has not worked out, that does not mean you cannot try again. We pay attention to how a course would help your employment prospects - but we also fund courses that are simply for personal enrichment. We're interested in your potential and progression. We believe everyone deserves a chance to find out what they can do. We also have to take account of conditions set by some of the charities and other organisations that provide our funds. So some courses are easier to approve than others, if they fit particular criteria.

### **When do I find out if I have got my award?**

The Trust informs each prison by post, within two weeks of the decision. A letter to you will be included.

### **If I get my award, what happens next?**

Either the course pack will be sent to you through the Education Department, or the Education Department will make any other arrangements needed. Course packs are yours to keep, even if you are transferred.

### **Why do you turn people down?**

Most refusals are simply because we cannot fund as many applications as we get. Sometimes we don't think applicants have made a convincing case, or they have chosen a course that we don't think is worth funding. And some courses are simply too expensive. We have to make a lot of hard decisions! We let you know if there's another reason when we notify the prison.

### **If I get turned down, can I apply again?**

Yes. There is no restriction on the number of times you can apply.

### **Can I do more than one course?**

The Trust will only pay for one course at a time. If the course is in modules, we pay for one module at a time, but you have to make a fresh application, and further funding can't be guaranteed.

### **Is there any follow-up?**

Yes. If you get a grant you will receive a feedback form, which you must complete after you finish your studies. We are always interested in your progress, so if you want to write to us about how it's going, we look forward to hearing from you. Your feedback about particular courses helps us give good advice to other prisoners.

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### Interested?

If everyone who reads this decides to study, we'll be very happy. But it will keep education staff and funders very busy, so it may take some time.

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### IMPORTANT NOTICE

Information is given on a strictly 'without-liability' basis, and should be considered for use as guidance only. If you propose taking further action based upon this information you are strongly advised to take further and more specific legal advice before doing so.

**insidetime** *the National Newspaper for Prisoners*

Fact Sheet Ref: PET/Oct.09