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Delivering cognitive skills programmes in prison: a qualitative study

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Cognitive or thinking skills programmes were first introduced into prisons in the early 1990s, and by 2003 they were running in over three-quarters of all prison establishments in England and Wales. Earlier evaluations of these programmes have tended to rely on reconviction rates as the main measure of programme effectiveness. The study reported here aimed to examine programme processes and how these were experienced by programme participants in order to inform our understanding of 'what works' in practice. 113 interviews were conducted with prisoners and members of prison staff from six prisons. The research examined factors associated with successful and unsuccessful programme delivery and impact, and identified benefits other than non-reconviction associated with programme completion.

Key points

- Both prisoners and prison staff reported short-term benefits for prisoners participating in cognitive skills training, such as improved prisoner behaviour; increased self-confidence; enhanced literacy skills and better interpersonal skills. They also said that cognitive skills training helped to prepare prisoners for other offending behaviour programmes.
- Most of those who had completed a programme said they would have liked to have started cognitive skills training at an earlier stage in their prison sentence so that they could practise their newly acquired skills before release from prison.
- Lack of institutional support for programmes was perceived to have a negative effect on the morale and retention of programme staff, the nature and quality of programme delivery and the extent of treatment efficacy.
- Programme managers were considered to play a key role in promoting a rehabilitative ethos and pro-programme culture within the prison context.
- A prisoner's motivation to change was a key factor in successful programme participation.
- The nature of motivation to participate in a programme and resettlement issues were key factors affecting reoffending or desistance from reoffending.

Cognitive programmes address six key areas of social-cognitive functioning: self-control/management; interpersonal problem-solving and social interaction; rigid/inflexible thinking; social perspective taking; analytical thinking; and moral reasoning.

Some systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of prison-based cognitive skills programmes have been conducted in the UK over recent years. Many

of these evaluations have used reconviction as the primary outcome measure (comparing the reconviction rates for programme participants with those of matched groups of offenders who have not undergone such training). These studies have produced mixed empirical results, ranging from no observed treatment effect to evidence of a modest impact. See for example, Cann et al. (2003), Falshaw et al. (2003) and Friendship et al. (2003).

Cognitive or thinking skills programmes

Reasoning and Rehabilitation programmes (R&R) were introduced into the prison system in 1992 (Porporino and Fabiano, 2000). Thinking Skills was a modified version launched in 1993. Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) was a re-titled and further modified version (Clark, 2000).

Both the R&R and ETS programmes are based on the premise that cognitive skills deficits, such as poor reasoning and problem solving, are important factors in explaining offending behaviour and that these skills can be taught. International literature suggests that many offenders either lack, or have poorly developed, thinking skills (Ross and Fabiano, 1985).

The issue is not simply one of 'what works', but 'what works for whom, under what conditions and in what types of setting'. In order to develop a full understanding of what constitutes effective practice, it is essential to explore what social and institutional factors enable prisoners to use the treatment programmes successfully and how the prison and resettlement contexts can encourage or inhibit that process. The qualitative study reported here aimed to address some of these issues in order to complement and inform findings from earlier quantitatively-oriented outcome evaluations.

The sample

As shown in Table 1, the sample contained both local and training prisons – some provided ETS programmes only; others offered both ETS and R&R programmes. Table 1 also shows the number of those interviewed (a total of 113) at each prison and the different types of interviewee. The prisons were chosen to represent establishments at the top and bottom ends of the distribution of Implementation Quality Rating (IQR) scores each prison received in the 2002/03 annual audit of cognitive skills programmes. The IQR looks at treatment management, through-care, quality of delivery and institutional support. The scores awarded for institutional support were considered particularly in this research but, given the nature of the annual audit rating scheme, the range of scores produced was fairly narrow. This may be because there is little variation between establishments or it may reflect that the scoring method is not sensitive enough to account for the variation in institutional performance across the prison estate.

Four types of prison-based interviewee

Programme graduates: adult male offenders over 21 years who had recently completed a cognitive skills programme.

Reconvicted graduates: adult male offenders over 21 years who had completed a cognitive skills programme on a previous sentence but had since been reconvicted and returned to prison.

Programme staff: mainly programme managers, treatment managers, resettlement managers and course tutors.

Non-programme staff: prison staff with no involvement in the organisation, administration or delivery of cognitive skills training courses. This group included prison officers and civilian tutors.

In addition to these prison-based interviews, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five men who had been released from prison on 'licence' and were being supervised by the Probation Service. These men ('desisting programme graduates') had completed a cognitive skills programme, been released from prison and had not been reconvicted for a further crime. The length of time they had been on licence varied from five to 19 months.

Interviewees were recruited with the full co-operation of programme staff and were given information about the study and informed about issues of confidentiality. Interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to 1½ hours.

Interviewees' perceptions of programmes

Introduction to the programme

The manner in which prisoners were introduced to cognitive skills training and how the aims and objectives of programmes were explained to them had an impact on their motivation to participate. Prisoners' initial perceptions of programmes were influenced by a range of sources, varying from hearsay among the prisoner population to a range of written or verbal information supplied by prison/programme staff. Some prisoners reported that prison staff had given them the impression that programme participation was mandatory, especially to secure a favourable parole report.

Perceived purpose of programmes

Most interviewees emphasised how newly acquired or improved thinking skills encouraged pro-social behaviour

Table 1 Prisons by type of programme and category

Prison establishment	Type of programme	Prison category	Programme graduates	Reconvicted graduates	Programme staff	Non-programme staff
1	ETS	B Training	10	1	4	0
2	ETS	C Training	10	2	6	1
3	ETS & R&R	B Local	11	1	6	1
4	ETS & R&R	C Training	11	1	5	2
5	ETS	B Local	10	1	5	2
6	ETS & R&R	B Training	10	3	7	2
Total			62	10*	33	8

Note: * One additional interview was conducted at a prison that was not in the original sample.

and thus had a positive impact on the ways in which individuals conducted themselves when dealing with other people in a variety of everyday situations and contexts. While it was accepted that improved thinking skills would help individuals to avoid patterns of thinking that had led them to offend in the past, the programmes were not seen or presented as solely focussed on offending behaviour. Only a few programme participants or programme staff members mentioned desistance from offending when commenting on the purpose of cognitive skills training programmes.

Strengths of cognitive skills programmes

Most programme graduates said they had benefited in some way from undergoing cognitive skills training. Prison staff also commented on the positive changes they had observed in the attitudes and behaviour of programme participants.

Regardless of occupational background (such as prison officer, psychologist and probation officer), tutors were held in high regard by programme graduates and the delivery of programmes through group work and participatory methods was mostly considered to be both effective and enjoyable. Aspects of programmes most often cited as being useful by programme graduates were: 'stop and think'; problem solving; considering the perspectives of others; and social skills.

Weaknesses of cognitive skills programmes

A number of prisoner interviewees said that access to programmes should be provided earlier, as this would enable prisoners to practise their newly acquired or improved skills in the prison environment. All six prisons in the evaluation operated a system of access to programmes by parole date order. It was also suggested that earlier access should be accompanied by some post-programme support to help develop and consolidate skills, with booster sessions being available prior to release from prison.

A 'one size fits all' approach to programme delivery was considered unresponsive to the needs of some individuals, such as prisoners who were intellectually able, those with literacy problems, men for whom English was not their first language and participants who were at the lower end of the distribution of IQ scores.

Perceptions of reconvicted/'desisting' programme graduates

Reconvicted programme graduates said the reasons why the programmes had not prevented reoffending included resettlement difficulties, addiction problems and failing to appreciate that skills had to be actively applied to everyday life. In contrast, 'desisting' programme graduates, who were on licence in the community, were aware that they had to monitor themselves and apply their skills daily. They had also established important 'anchor points' in the community, such as securing accommodation, obtaining a job or a place on a training course and maintaining stable supportive personal relationships. This group felt that the programmes had worked for them because they had reached a stage in their lives at which they realised they genuinely wanted to change.

Programme staff

Recruitment and retention

Tutors were recruited from a variety of occupational categories, including prison officers, psychologists and probation officers. Programme staff felt that because prison officers, who tutored on a part-time basis, had closer and more frequent contact with programme participants and graduates, they were best placed to encourage the use of new skills and act as positive role models for prisoners. However, staff in all six prisons reported difficulty in recruiting prison officer tutors, as there was a perceived bias in selection procedures in favour of applicants with a human sciences background and there was a perception among other prison officers that tutoring was a 'soft' and easy role.

Most of the six prisons had experienced problems in retaining trained tutors. This was partly attributed to a lack of equality in remuneration across the group because tutors were drawn from occupational categories with differing pay structures. Also, prison officer tutors often ceased to tutor when promoted to a more senior rank in the prison service.

Training and support

Most tutors thought the two-week tutor training course was too intensive and needed modifications. They felt overloaded with information and would like to have seen more time devoted to sessions where they could practise delivering programme modules. They also identified areas, such as report writing, where more help and guidance would be welcomed.

Most tutors felt they were adequately supported (formally and informally) at a local level. There were mixed views about the support from the Offending Behaviour Programmes Unit which produced audit reports of video monitoring. It was generally accepted that monitoring's primary purpose was to assess treatment integrity but some tutors thought that only the superficial elements of programme consistency were actually being monitored. Given the strong negative feelings expressed, the video-monitoring reports may not be achieving the desired aims of ensuring treatment integrity and high quality delivery.

The institutional context

The institutional context in which programmes operate can influence the way they are perceived, which ultimately has consequences for both programme delivery and programme impact. For example, some programme staff interviewees reported instances where prison officers did not appreciate the importance of unlocking prisoners in time to attend classes punctually. Where programme staff perceived the institutional culture to be unsupportive of therapeutic efforts, this had a negative affect on their morale. This was considered by some interviewees to lead to shortages of programme staff, due to resignations and sickness.

The overt endorsement of programmes by members of a prison's senior management team was considered by all

levels of programme staff as a key factor in improving the morale of those engaged in the administration, implementation and delivery of programmes. Programme managers felt they had a strategic role to play in tackling institutional resistance to programme interventions and developing a 'pro-programme' culture among non-programme staff. Staff awareness training sessions were seen as the main vehicle for promoting programme activities.

Perceptions of motivation

The motivation of individual programme participants was seen as a key factor in explaining the treatment impact and outcomes of cognitive skills programmes. Motivation for programme participation and individual change are influenced by a complex combination of the individual's characteristics, the institutional context in which programmes are delivered and how the individual engages with the programme. Interviewees' descriptions of motivation were analysed and three main themes (hostile attitudes and behaviours; instrumental thinking; self-development) were identified as underpinning four types of participant:

The hostile participant: a participant who displayed 'deviant' motivations in his interaction with the programme, disrupting class discussions by his general demeanour and the provocative nature of his verbal contributions.

The instrumentalist: a participant who was considered to be on the programme for instrumental reasons, such as achieving a positive parole report, rather than being motivated by a desire to change his thinking or behaviour.

The sceptic: a participant who was initially an instrumentalist but began to engage with the programme as it developed. Thus, in the case of the sceptic, instrumental thinking preceded a desire for self-development.

The self-developer: a participant who was described as being highly motivated to change before embarking on cognitive skills training.

Non-reconviction benefits for prisoners and prisons

The long-term objective of cognitive skills programmes is a reduction in reconviction rates. However, interviewees reported a number of other benefits for prisoners such as: improved prisoner behaviour; increased self-confidence; enhanced literacy skills and better interpersonal skills.

For some programme graduates the experience had sparked an interest in further learning and self-development. It was also considered that the cognitive skills courses were useful in preparing prisoners for other offending behaviour programmes.

Conclusion

This evaluation showed that cognitive skills programmes were mostly perceived as worthwhile by adult male programme graduates. The content of programmes was generally thought to be useful and programme tutors were highly regarded by participants.

It has been shown that in order to appreciate what constitutes effective practice, it is necessary to identify what social and institutional factors enable prisoners to make the best use of treatment programmes and understand how the institutional and resettlement contexts can encourage or inhibit individual change. The nature and type of motivation to change was observed as a key to understanding successful programme participation.

Programmes were seen to produce short-term, non-reconviction benefits for both prisoners and prison management. This adds to our knowledge of 'what works' and provides a broader context in which programme effectiveness can be viewed.

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For a more detailed report see *Delivering cognitive skills programmes in prison: a qualitative study* by Alan Clarke, Rosemary Simmonds and Sarah Wydall. It is available as an Online Report No. 24/04 on <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>

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