

# Outside the box: Designing better prison education

Two students have risen to the challenge of updating prison education design, with the help of learners at HMP Cardiff. PET invited Alex Whelan and Reece Elder, who study Product Design at Cardiff Metropolitan University, to develop initiatives that would make it easier for prisoners to study in their cell. As their final show approaches, both students have nearly finished their prototypes: Reece has designed a durable tablet device, while Alex has created a box that stores education material and also doubles up as a writing desk. Both students visited HMP Cardiff as part of their research process, where they learned more about the context their designs would fit into, and spoke to learners about the challenges of studying in a prison environment.



Reece's tablet

### The Tablet

Reece's tablet has been built around the restrictions and security concerns of the prison world. It is battery powered to allow for the lack of charging ports in-cell; has few physical points of entry making it almost impossible to take apart, and is transparent so it cannot be used to store things.

The tablet would allow people to study from preloaded PDFs, use multimedia downloaded from education providers, and access their own preloaded media, as well as filling out prison forms. A closed network for Cloud access would enable communication between the education department and the user. The tablet uses a simple, accessi-

ble interface, a wrist strap to make it easier to use from a bed, and a place to store a notebook and pen.

Aesthetically, the tablet may look clunky compared to an iPad, but this is part of the point, says Reece. "It's not designed to be a sleek and aesthetic object but instead as a bulky and strong functional object," he says. "Some functions that make sense outside of prison had to be sacrificed. Because it was so essential that the object couldn't be broken or taken apart, you ended up sacrificing how easy it would be to fix."

But the device is also a way of circumventing some of the restrictions in prisons, says Reece. "One thing that struck me when I started looking into prisons is the lack of free

movement to take advantage of opportunities. By streamlining the education process through digitalisation more people can be given the opportunity to have an education."

When Reece came up with his design, he was unaware of plans to introduce tablets into some prisons in England and Wales. "It shows my outside-of-the-box approach wasn't outside-of-the-box at all," he says. "I imagined the device wouldn't be in use for the next 10 years, but in fact prisons are developing faster than I imagined."

Coming up with a design that would work in a restrictive prison environment was difficult, says Reece. "But doing so could make a huge positive difference to people who aren't given enough recognition in society."

### The Box/Writing Desk

Alex has designed a way for learners to store and transport PET's study pack, which was given to all distance learners in Welsh prisons last year, and includes a study skills book and a dictionary. In Alex's, it resembles a "sturdy toolbox", embossed with the PET logo. It is blow-moulded, which makes it cheaper and more durable, and attractive for prison budgets.



Alex's Box/Writing Desk

Its lid can be tilted upwards, to use as a surface to write on. This idea, says Alex, stems from architecture desks and art table tops that can be propped up to help people draw at better angles. This part of the design was influenced by his visit to HMP Cardiff, where he met learners who did not have a hard surface to work on.

Alex abandoned some of his more creative ideas during the design process, including the concept of a pair of handcuffs, which would be attached to the box and would only release once the person had answered a certain amount of questions. Instead, he opted for a gentler form of encouragement: a recording device attached to the box on which could be uploaded messages from friends and family; or advice from a distance learning tutor.

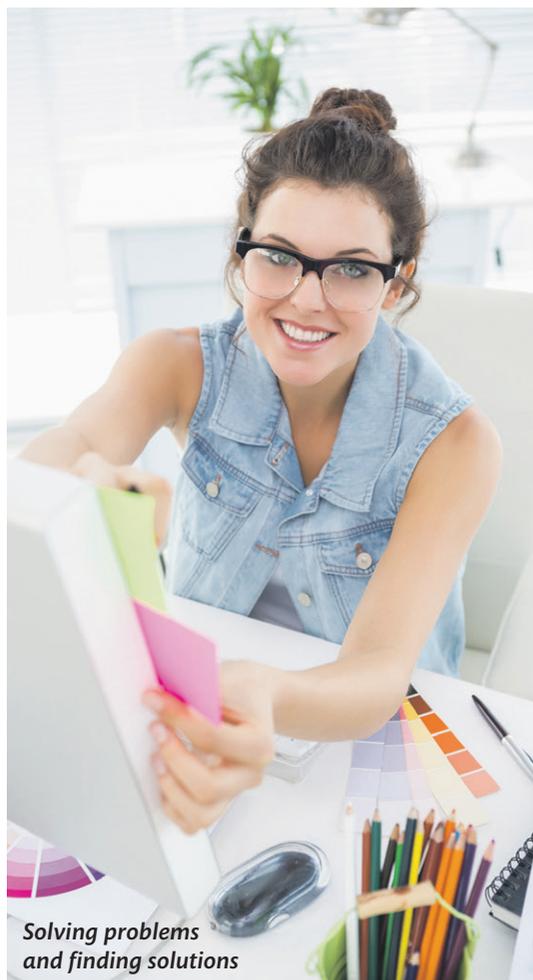
"The limitations of designing for a prison context restricted my ideas for the pack, but I learnt a lot about prison life, which I never would have known before embarking on this project," says Alex. "What I like most about the box is that it is personal to whoever possesses it, and can be used to privately store and organise things."

*What do you think? Alex and Reece would love to hear Inside Time readers' views on the designs. What could you see working/not working for you? What part of the design would improve your education experience? Write to Katy Oglethorpe, FREPOST, Prisoners' Education Trust, to pass on your feedback so they can include it in their Final Show in Cardiff on 27 May.*



## Course Notes

PET provides funding for over 300 types of distance-learning courses. Every month we shine a spotlight on one of them.



Solving problems and finding solutions

## Graphic Design

PET has recently funded London Art College's Graphic Design Art Diploma, which covers the fundamental elements of art and design; including drawing techniques, layout skills, typography and logo design. The course takes about a year to complete, and by the end of it students will have created a portfolio to later apply for higher education courses or work.

Graphic designer 'Alia', 28, had just completed a degree in Visual Communications when she went to prison. Alia kept developing her skills during her sentence, designing posters and presentations, and redesigning the prison's education boards and its magazine.

Since her release last year, she has begun work on a freelance basis, including designing new logos, leaflets and banners for PET.

Alia says: "Graphic design is quite a competitive area where the market is always changing, so being up-to-date with the latest designs and technology is crucial. Having your own style and 'stamp' on things is an advantage to have as this will make you stand out from the competition and makes you unique.

"The main role of a designer is trying to solve a



Prisoner Learning Academic Network PLAN logo designed by Alia

problem to come up with a new solution. You get to experiment with ideas, as well as having fun doing it. Everyday is different: you can be working on one thing today and tomorrow working on something totally different."

PET funds a range of other design-related courses, including interior design, garden design, fashion design and web design. Richard, who wrote to PET applying for a Dressmaking and Fashion Design course last year, said he plans to use his skills to start up a T-shirt business with his sister. He also has a two-year-old daughter who he "would love to be able to make clothes and dresses for throughout her life".