

# Teaching prisoners to start businesses can help them return to society

December 21 2023, by Norin Arshed

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When people are released from prison back into society, they can find themselves in an unknown world for which they are [ill-equipped](#). They need stability and security to get their lives back on track—yet they

often have nowhere to go. They also [tend to lack](#) basic literacy and numeracy, which makes it unlikely they will find work.

Prisoners attend various orientation programs intended to help them with things like housing, finances, transport, and employment. Surprisingly, however, there isn't typically a program in the UK to help them to become entrepreneurs.

In fact, ex-[prisoners](#) are well suited to setting up businesses. They tend to show many [entrepreneurial traits](#), such as [self-sufficiency](#), creativity and the capacity to take risks. They have the added incentive of not wanting to return to prison and have [responded well](#) to entrepreneurship programs in places like the US.

## **Programs in the US and UK**

Across the US, the [Inmates to Entrepreneurs](#) program offers many prisoners an eight-week course in which they are taught the basics of setting up a business through a combination of face-to-face and online provision.

Out of more than [100,000 people](#) who have taken the program, around 30% have gone on to start a business. With ex-prisoners around [41% more likely](#) to become self-employed in the US compared to regular people, this program clearly gives them some encouragement.

There have also been some smaller successful programs in different parts of the US. For example, the [Washington DC program Aspire](#) saw 45 out of 125 graduates starting a business in 2021-22.

Meanwhile, the Texas-based [Prison Entrepreneurship Program](#), which has been running for almost two decades, was shown in a [2013 study](#) to have reduced reoffending by around two-thirds, outperforming

numerous other rehabilitation programs in the state.

In the UK, around 80% of prisoners are interested in starting their own business—at least according to a [2016 report](#) from the Centre for Entrepreneurs. That's compared to about 40% of the general population. The Centre argues that ex-prisoners in the UK could be starting almost [11,000 businesses](#) a year with the right support.

However, the current provision is extremely limited. In London, Queen Mary University's [Project ReMAKE](#) is an eight to 12-week program that has been running for the past few years. It teaches the basic skills to around 15 ex-prisoners each year to become self-employed, and so far, none of the graduates [has reoffended](#).

More broadly, the Centre for Entrepreneurs [calculates that](#) a nationwide UK program teaching entrepreneurial skills to prisoners might have a 14% reoffending rate, compared to the 46% norm. This was based mainly on the results of a charity called Startup, which taught entrepreneurialism to several thousand female ex-prisoners in the UK during the 2000s and 2010s.

Another previous entrepreneurship program, this time by [the Prince's Trust](#), gives an indication of how successful such programs can be. It was offered to a range of people including ex-prisoners in the mid-2010s in different parts of England. It found that 78% of businesses set up by ex-prisoners reached the two-year survival mark—similar to participants on the program as a whole.

## **The Scottish situation**

There are no entrepreneurship programs targeted at ex-prisoners in Scotland, where I'm based. Scotland particularly needs such a program, since it's got [very high imprisonment rates](#) for men and women. The

female prison population, which is [just under 300](#), is [among the highest](#) in northern Europe.

In 2022, some researchers at Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University delivered a [three-day program](#) to a group of women in prison. It's not yet clear to what extent the program was successful. It might be that delivering such training in prison isn't the best timing, since the recipients are potentially more likely to be in a better headspace once they are released and certain [basic needs](#) such as housing have been met. The three US programs I mentioned earlier all provide training after prisoners have been released, with only the Texas program also offering part of the course while recipients are still in prison.

To the same end, I recently received just under £100,000 from the Scottish government to launch a new pilot program, again aimed at women. One of my most basic challenges is to make the notion of entrepreneurship attractive to these women. I aim to show them that it is not only about setting up a small [business](#). Taking an entrepreneurship course can also help them to develop skills to make them employable and reach their potential, often by surfacing skills they didn't know they had.

The program will be delivered to 30 women predominantly based in greater Glasgow over six weeks in 2024. It will include exploring their skills, understanding digital communication, and creating tangible outcomes for and with them. The program will also pay for their travel, lunch and childcare to ensure the women do not have barriers to taking part, while there will be [social events](#) at the beginning and end to help with group bonding.

Hopefully if the program is a success, it can encourage the Scottish government to roll out this kind of training more widely. There's enough evidence by now to suggest that teaching ex-prisoners how to start

businesses should be an integral part of their rehabilitation. Hopefully the day will come when it is available across the board in the UK.

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