

University courses for prisoners could reduce re-offending by *Dr Anne Pike*

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Re-offending rates of former prisoners in England and Wales are stubbornly high, [at more than 50% for young adults](#)¹ – and this costs the taxpayer between [£9.5m and £13m](#)² per year. Despite the fact that research shows that inmates who study higher-level courses in prison and continue to study on release integrate better into society and are less likely to return to prison, these courses have a very low priority in prison and lack adequate funding or support. Many more prisoners could and should be studying at this level.

Although most prisoners come from disadvantaged backgrounds where truancing is commonplace, many have gained at least a secondary education before prison and [22% of prisoners' have GCSEs at grades A-C](#)³, similar to the general population.

Hunger for higher education

Given the opportunity to study in prison, they often complete all the basic education on offer and want to progress to higher-level (post-secondary) study on offer through distance-learning. The [Open University](#) is the largest provider, with nearly [1,700](#) students in prison in 2012-13. [Previous research](#)⁴ has shown there are many barriers to distance-learning in prison – but also that prisoners appeared transformed by their study and thought that it would help them in the future.

To investigate how prisoners were changed by their study and whether it actually made a difference to them after release, [I interviewed 51 adult prisoners](#)⁵ who had studied (or attempted to study) with a variety of distance-learning providers, in ten prisons across England and Wales. I traced more than half of them after their release and re-interviewed them many times during the following year. I also interviewed ten former prisoners who had been released for many years, as well as more than 60 education, prison and probation staff, family and peers.

Those prisoners who had successfully completed at least one higher-level course while in prison developed a positive student identity, resilience and hope with realistic aspirations for a crime-free life after release. Those who had not engaged with learning lacked these qualities and most returned to prison. Of the 28 adults I traced, only four had not engaged with learning – and three of them returned to prison. Of the other 24 former prisoners I traced who had studied while in prison, only two returned to prison – and one of those was on a technicality.

Resilience and hope

Life after release for all the people I interviewed was chaotic and difficult. The resilience and hope developed by those prisoners who had studied in prison, helped them to reflect on their situation and gave them the strength to tackle the immense challenges they faced. For example, Rees had been to prison twice before but had started studying psychology on this latest sentence. He had no money and had been told to give up his job and go back onto benefits to keep his bed-and-breakfast accommodation. He had to travel by train each week to visit his probation officer who gave very little support. After three months, he said:

¹ <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2011-01-17d.33110.h>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/reducing-reoffending-and-improving-rehabilitation>

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/296320/impact-of-experience-in-prison-on-employment-status-of-longer-sentenced-prisoners.pdf

⁴ <http://www.researchinlearningtechnology.net/index.php/rlt/article/view/18620/html>

⁵ http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/per/?p=3342&LKCAMPAGN=tw100&MEDIA=tw100ngencom_352

There have been days when I've just thought sod it, I think I'll go and do something that'll send me back to prison and it'll just be easier – but I know that in the long term I won't be doing anybody any favours. If I was to go back in, I'd come back out in the same situation.

Planned college places for prisoners often failed to materialise and – although there was no proof – they thought it was related to their criminal past. Others lacked the means to organise themselves with no information, no computer and no mobile phone. But in time life gradually improved. Where possible, maintaining a student identity helped them to integrate into society more easily.

Doug had four previous convictions but he attended university after his last sentence. He said:

It was a new circle of people, I wasn't mixing with villains, I was mixing with students and I was part of society, with other students and it was just a completely different institution with a different attitude and conversation.

After months of waiting, Manuel eventually continued his Open University studies and is now working in renewable energy. He said the “*sense of belonging*” from studying was really important, as was being “*part of something constructive*”, helping him to pursue a career upon his release.

These findings add depth to a 2013 [Ministry of Justice](#)⁶ Data Lab report. It found that prisoners who received a grant from the Prisoners Education Trust to undertake an Open University course in custody were between 2% and 8% less likely to re-offend.

Few opportunities

Sadly, such routes are few and far between. Outside the funded prison education process, prisoners must apply for limited charitable funding, pay their own way or apply for a student loan. But funding is not their only problem. There is hardly any Internet access in prison, so prisoners cannot access study information in the same way as distance learners generally can.

Technology exists which could allow prisoners secure access to specific websites for education, but it has been slow to develop. Prisoners currently depend on an intermediary in the prison to provide information and handle study material. Support for higher education varies widely across different prisons and the majority of adult prisons have a working culture that leaves little space or time for learning.

Higher education has very low priority with most prison management. There are no targets for success, progress is not recorded and [recent policy changes](#)⁷ are making matters worse. As the government pushes its “[working prisons agenda](#)”⁸, there is less space for learning in prison – and as there are no targets for whether or not a high education scheme has been successful in prison, it is invisible in the payment-by-results process.

Higher education can provide the qualities that enable former prisoners to overcome some of the many barriers they face after release, help them to improve their integration into society and reduce the chance of their re-offending. Policies which encourage more prisoners to study at this level should therefore be a priority.

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270089/open-university-report.pdf

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/reducing-reoffending-and-improving-rehabilitation>

⁸ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/about/noms/working-prisons>