Understanding Aspiration and Education towards Desistance from Offending:

The Role of Higher Education in Wales

Final Research Report

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Contents

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education.

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

The impetus for this project came from the community. A group of practitioners working with those at risk of offending/reoffending contacted the researchers to discuss the possibility of exploring the role of Higher Education in supporting diversion and desistance from offending. The aspiration to attend University had been discussed amongst their client group, but the prospect remained daunting and unachievable to them.

It is often the case that when people get into a pattern of offending or are at risk of offending, it is increasingly difficult to stop the cycle and this along with other factors, such as stigma and discrimination, make it difficult to find opportunities towards positive change and bolster aspiration (Ministry of Justice, 2010; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011). However, previous studies have identified that studying within a Higher Education environment can be a significant 'hook for change' as it provides positive development of personal agency through the development of new positive social networks, 'non-offending' identities as well as knowledge and skills (Lockwood et al, 2012; Runnell, 2017). Therefore, whilst the benefits of Higher Education as a route to desistance are recognised, those working with people at risk of offending/reoffending point out Higher Education can be an exclusive environment with little appeal to those with offending backgrounds (Prison Education Trust, 2107). Furthermore, there has been a renewed call that within a Welsh context, that widening access should be meaningful and explore options for the integration of those at the margins of society (Evans, et al, 2017). Therefore, this pilot study set out to consider how Higher Education, as an institution, and the aspiration of a higher education might be a useful and powerful process to support diversion and desistance from offending. It should be noted that previous research on this topic has focused on the role of education within a prison setting and therefore this study was the first of its kind in Wales as it sought to examine the role of Higher Education within the context of prevention of offending/reoffending within a community setting.

The project sought to answer the following four questions:

- What are the aspirations of those at risk of offending/reoffending to study within Higher Education?
- What barriers/problems/challenges do those at risk of offending/reoffending envisage in engaging with Higher Education?

- What support would those at risk of offending/reoffending need to engage with Higher Education?
- How might Higher Education support diversion/desistance from offending?

The study adopted an anti-oppressive methodology and was underpinned by a hybrid approach of participatory action and community engagement and learning. It worked with those at risk of offending/reoffending as partners and sought to empower and encourage aspiration by carrying out research through 'doing with' rather than, 'researching on' participants. A further aim of the project was to explore the use of Pictorial Narrative Mapping as a data collection tool and platform for expressing marginalised voices.

The data collection took place via two engagement events that replicated a flexible form of focus groups. In total 16 participants with offending histories took part in the first focus group and 8 participants took part in the second focus group. The participants in focus group 2 were a mix of university staff, prison educators, third sector agencies who work with those at risk of offending and two 'offenders' who were studying within Higher Education at the time. Both engagement events were facilitated by the Include Hub – a third sector community project, funded by the Lottery, who work with those at risk of offending/reoffending.

Whilst the findings are preliminary, at this stage, the data suggest that:

- For Higher Education to be considered as a meaningful 'hook for change', the complexity of the basic needs (housing, substance misuse, relation issues, mental health) of potential individual students requires recognition.

- Understanding how universities support such prospective learners with their aspirations to attain a higher education requires a renewed vision. As a starting point that might mean those tasked with 'widening access' reach out to organisations that work with those at risk of offending.

- Whilst many of the participants had poor early years educational experiences and a lack of opportunity, the participants expressed a desire to access Higher Education but the thought of entering into an institution was overwhelming. Their voices expressed a desire for a new type of Higher Education which focused on a more individualised and specific experience to them in their setting within the

community. Additionally, students would be supported through this transition by workers who understood their background and specific needs and what that meant so they did not feel threatened or exposed.

- For many of the participants their positive experience of education began during a prison sentence. This therefore lends itself to the opportunity for prisons to work closely with local universities to build on this positive experience and introduces and exposes 'prison-students' to Higher Education in a safe and supportive environment.

- The study also highlighted the issue of stigma for this potential group of learners. Whether real or perceived, stigma was experienced by those studying at university whilst serving a prison sentence at every level. Exclusion from student events through to discrimination from prison staff indicated that the path to desistance is fragile at every point when feelings of alienation and isolation are present.

- The use of creative and 'story-telling' approaches such as Pictorial Narrative Mapping, has the potential to support marginalised groups in having their voices heard. It also supports an inclusive and ethical approach to date collection and may also have the potential to assist those at risk of reoffending to measure their progress towards desistance.

Overall, the study has provided the platform for a larger scale study that explores the relationship between prison education, third sector community-based interventions and universities towards supporting desistance from offending.

Introduction

Research Context

The impetus for this project came from the community. A group of practitioners working with those at risk of offending/reoffending contacted the researchers to discuss the possibility of exploring the role of Higher Education in supporting desistance from offending. The aspiration to attend University had been discussed amongst their client group, but the prospect remained daunting and unachievable to them. Desistance is considered as processes of preventing or of abstaining from crime; however, it is often the case that when people get into a pattern of offending or are at risk of offending, it is increasingly difficult to stop the cycle and this along with other factors, such as stigma and discrimination, make it difficult to find opportunities towards positive change and bolster aspiration (Ministry of Justice, 2010; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011).

Research has identified that studying within a Higher Education environment can be a significant 'hook for change' as it provides positive development of personal agency through the development of new positive social networks, 'non-offending' identities and knowledge and skills (Lockwood et al, 2012; Runnell, 2017). Indeed, the Coates review (2016) found that engagement with education was a "one of the pillars of effective rehabilitation" Consequently, it might be argued that, Higher Education should be considered as a useful approach for crime avoidance and positive personal and social change.

However, whilst it seems, that the benefits of a higher education as a route to desistance are clear, the Prison Education Trust (2017) highlight that Higher Education as an institution is not always welcoming of those with a criminal record and that the sector could do more, stating: 'To be truly inclusive, universities must help prisoners feel they belong.' Moreover, in their research on patterns of participation in Higher Education, Evans et al (2017) found that whilst widening access to Higher Education has become a global endeavour within a Welsh context, despite a public and policy drive to widen access to Higher Education in Wales, the internal culture and narrative has become 'entangled' and actually resulted in re-enforcing the status quo of inequality and hierarchy with the focus remaining on the more traditional and profitable young student demographic at the expense of developing non-traditional student participation such as adult learners. Evans et al (2017) conclude that this is a particularly pressing issue and

more needs to be done if greater equality and widening access is to be truly achieved across all demographics of society towards enhanced employability and life opportunities.

Therefore, set against this backdrop, this pilot study was concerned with how Higher Education, as an institution, and the aspiration of a higher education might be a useful and powerful process to support desistance from offending.

Literature Review

There has been a growing body of research that seeks to understand the process of desistance. One of the overriding themes of previous research has been that desistance from crime can be supported if there are positive competing discourses within 'offenders' social relations and if there are 'relational goods' such as positive group interaction and mutual social conditioning (Weaver and McNeill, 2015). The opportunity to develop alternative and positive social experiences supports the growth of social capital and greater social mobility (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The literature on why people are motivated to desist and form more socially acceptable identities has largely found that marriage and stable employment are the most important factors as they offer both personal and external motivations and controls in supporting the formation of positive adult social ties which create 'interdependent systems of obligation and restraint' for a new developing non-criminal self-identity (Abeling-Judge, 2016: 1240). Dufour et al (2015) also put forward the notion that those that have offended find it difficult to shed their criminal identity and that the process of desistance can be analysed through three elements or levels: the *structural* level of society; the *relational* aspect of intergroup processes; and personal *agency.*

The structural influences refer to how major institutions control the social discourse and create common norms relating to appropriate social behaviour, ways of thinking, and notions of family and employment. The relational aspects include social interactions on a smaller community and cultural level where intergroup process shape how people socialise and are reflective of the structural influences as well as including more localised norms and values. The final element relates to personal agency and a person's ability to make choices and self-govern. Dufour et al (2015) contend that no one element explains desistance and an integrated approach is needed to fully understand how personal

identity changes in contact with 'new social identities (p495)' where-by the criminal identity is dropped.

Dufour et al (2015) believe this occurs through three stages: First that 'hooks for change' offer a 'structural opening' such as an opportunity within education, employment or family and or marriage. Second, to effectively flourish and be accepted within new structural opportunities new social identities must be developed and old identities discarded. Finally, an individual must change and identify as a contributor to society and to the group(s)/community they now want to belong to, so a student, husband or employer identity. Ultimately, Dufour et al (2015) found that for desistance to occur these stages were necessary to stimulate the change in the individual to create a new 'map of society (p495)' and place their new social identity within it. It is therefore clear that the role of Higher Education as a learning platform and also as a process of personal and social transformation can be something that supports those seeking to desist from offending in their transition to the 'replacement self'(Giordano et al, 2012).King (2012) also highlights for positive change to occur there needs to be motivation and intention to change from the learner.

McNeill (2018, 2019) adds to the idea of integrated factors and needs for successful long-term desistance with his model of four aspects to desistance. McNeill (2018, 2019) believes that for desistance to work for the offender it needs to work across all of society and for everyone. According to this vision, desistance and rehabilitation is possible only through mutual recognition and respect of the individual, the citizen, civil society, and the state. Therefore, real and meaningful liberation and integration into the community for an offender is reliant on the four aspects of desistance which are; personal rehabilitation, social rehabilitation, judicial rehabilitation, and moral and political rehabilitation. It is clear from this model that Higher Education may provide many of the elements of rehabilitation. Certainly, the personal, social and moral rehabilitation can be facilitated and supported through Higher Education. Yet, perhaps the stumbling block towards desistance when using Higher Education as the 'hook for change' might be the casting-off the offending past. Until recently the requirement to disclose previous convictions to university may have been a step too far for those individuals concerned with the

associated stigma the label offender carries, therefore the judicial rehabilitation might remain a problematic area for Higher Education integration.

The role of higher education then can be viewed as a positive factor and 'hook for change' in our understandings of facilitating desistance from offending. However, research has also pointed out that previous experiences of education can impact on future successes. For example, those that achieve post-secondary education are more likely to experience more positive desistance outcomes than those who do not (Bloomberg, et al, 2011; and Lockwood, Nully, Holt, and Knutsen, 2012). Furthermore, those that progress onto Higher Education within prison tend to desist more frequently than those that have post-secondary / further education or education below this (Meyer and Randal, 2013; and Zgoba et al, 2008). They are also able to develop greater self-confidence and skills to use upon release (Allred, Harrison, and O'Connel, 2013). Indeed, Lockwood et al (2012) and Runnell (2017) found that studying within a Higher Education environment was linked to a decrease in re-offending behaviour and an increase in positive development of greater personal agency and self-awareness, social capital; and increased opportunity and access to new positive social networks and relationships (also supported by Maruna, 2011). Therefore, it is proposed that Higher Education should be considered a useful approach for crime avoidance.

To this point however, the studies that have explored the relationships between engagement with Higher Education and desistance from offending have been largely focused on the USA, England and Wales within the confines of prison environments. Interestingly, very little has been researched on how Higher Education might support desistance after release and/or those at risk of offending (Runnel, 2017).

Research Questions

The project sought to answer the following four questions:

1. What are the aspirations of those at risk of offending/reoffending to study within Higher Education?
2. What barriers/problems/challenges do those at risk of offending/reoffending envisage in engaging with Higher Education?

3. What support would those at risk of offending/reoffending need to engage with Higher Education?

4. How might Higher Education support diversion/desistance from offending?

Methodology

The study adopted an anti-oppressive approach and was underpinned by a hybrid approach of participatory action and community engagement and learning. It worked along-side of those at risk of offending/reoffending as partners and sought to empower and encourage aspiration by carrying out research through 'doing with' rather than, 'researching on' participants. Such approaches are highlighted within the literature (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) as indicative features of successful desistance interventions that seek to:

- Bring about positive human change and development

- Build a basis of trust and reduce negative labelling

- Build positive social identity, purpose and hope

- Empower through self-determination and personal agency

- Develop a process that supports inter-personal, group, community and civil societal engagement

Methodological Framework

Offering a rich understanding of crime and the criminal justice system, qualitative methods have become a mainstay of criminological research. Such methods can include narrative approaches which include interviewing, ethnographic and observational accounts. Indeed, as Sandberg and Ugelvik (2016) point out, 'story telling' is nothing new and is in fact a facet of our humanistic behaviours that helps us to make sense of the world we inhabit. However, as a scientific method, narrative criminology began to formally emerge during the 1950s and 60s through the work of scholars such as Sykes and Matza (1957) who used narrative methods to provide an understanding of the behaviours of 'juvenile delinquents'. Since that time, cultural criminologists have adopted this narrative approach and in more recent years have started to explore the role of visual methods as a way to enhance knowledge and engagement with research; to provide a break with the taken for granted view of social reality; and to 'democratize' crime control (Francis, 2009; Brown, 2014; Carr, et al., 2015; Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2016). The use of narrative and visual methods was an approach that was utilised during this project.

Pictorial Narrative Mapping

The project set out to explore the use of Pictorial Narrative Mapping as a method of data collection that is both empowering for those taking part in the research and a valid analysis tool as it has the ability to provide a holistic, nuanced account of the phenomena under study (Lapum et al., 2015). Moreover, whilst many studies have used creative means of data collection such as drawing, poetry or photography to enable those with limited confidence, linguistic or literacy capacity to participate fully (Glaw, et al., 2017), some have pointed out that not all participants have the capacity to be creative (Brown, 2014) therefore adopting a narrative approach enables participants to become immersed within an creative process even if that artistic ability is limited.

Data Collection Process

The project began on the 1st of March 2019. Ethical approval was granted by the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law, Swansea University. A literature review was then undertaken which underpinned the focus of the research instruments which were then developed in partnership with staff from the Include Hub. This process ensured that the questions were aligned to the aims of the project and were appropriate for the participants of both focus groups.

Engagement Event 1

The first stage of the project involved data collection through an engagement event with members of the Include Hub a community project funded by the Big Lottery that focuses on reducing reoffending and improving the quality of life and well-being of its members. The participants were provided with lunch and a £10 thank you voucher for their participation. The engagement event took the form of a flexible focus group and enabled the participants to have an active voice in the direction the discussion took.

Following the event, a short survey was offered to all clients of The Hub to try to reach a wider sample. However, despite promotion of the survey and support from the Hub staff, only one person completed the survey; therefore, it forms no part of this study. Of course, we can only speculate as to why this was not a successful method of data collection however, it might be that the survey approach was not viewed as a desirable experience

by The Hub members after such an inclusive and face to face experience of the focus group. There is also support for the argument that surveys can seem impersonal and that often response rates are low.

In total, 16 people took part in the engagement event which lasted for two and half hours. The participants were encouraged to leave and re-enter the discussions as and when they needed. We acknowledge that the research literature generally agrees that the best practice size for focus groups is 5-8 with a maximum suggested threshold of 10 so that the discussions are manageable and coherent, but this was simply not possible for this research. Placing limitations on the number of participants that could take part at any one time would have been unethical and contradict the values and aims of the research and the mission and ethos of the partnership organisation. The members of The Hub are a marginalised group that face daily stigma and discrimination as well as having experienced multiple traumas and barriers throughout their lives. The Hub is an inclusive, open access provision supporting its members to feel respected and included in all aspects of the project so that they may make informed life decisions and increase personal agency and live fulfilled lives. It would have been unethical and discriminatory therefore to limit the focus group to only 10 members when 16 turned up to be part of the discussion and share their very personal and sensitive life stories. This decision was fully supported by The Hub and was clearly the right choice for this project with an immediate positive impact on members as well as the rich tapestry of narrative produced.

The demographics of the sample were composed of 13 males and 3 women; all were white; and aged between 20 and 60. All participants were currently living in the local area and all had a criminal conviction and were at risk of future offending. The majority had served a custodial sentence with offences ranging from arson, assault, drug use, drink driving and fraud. 12 of the male participants also reported current issues with substance misuse including both drugs and alcohol. All the participants stated that they had mental health issues that included anxiety, depression, stress and 2 had an atypical personality diagnosis.

Engagement Event 2

The second engagement event also took place at The Hub. The focus of the session built around the themes from engagement event 1 and were considered within the context of

the role of education in supporting aspirations towards desistance. The data was also gathered using a pictorial approach. In total there were 8 participants in this focus group. 2 'offenders' (male) 1 serving prison term (former solicitor now studying for a PhD) the other former prisoner now completing and UG degree (both in Welsh Universities) – also working with a third sector project seeking to reduce reoffending. The group also included practitioners working with those at risk of offending, prison and University staff. 2 female members of University widening access staff; 2 members of prison staff (male and female) 1 teaching and 1 in a supervisory capacity; 2 managers (one male and female) from third sector organisations working to reduce offending.

Analytical Framework

This research used a Grounded Theory approach / framework which is readily agreed to be useful within social science research (Denscombe, 2014). Grounded Theory offers an approach that supports theory development through constant comparative analysis and construction of knowledge, that is grounded in empirical research within practice and real-world settings (Harris, 2014). The focus on developing knowledge within practice with the members of the focus groups aligned well to the ethos of grounded theory and also the value base of supporting members to work alongside us and let their voices be heard and captured clearly and accurately. This way our knowledge and explanation of what was understood developed from the research phases and process as it should within a grounded theory approach (Hall et al 2013).

The grounded approach utilised within this research was a blend of inductive and deductive questioning and analysis. This combination supported the ethos of the study to listen to the lived realities of The Hub members and acknowledged the expertise of the practitioners (inductive approach) and to also question the data within the existing literature (deductive approach). In this way the project utilised an 'open-minded grounded theory' approach with 'theoretical sensitivity' as we were aware of the literature and past research but let the members speak for themselves thus creating new understandings (Denscombe, 2014).

The use of 'Pictorial Mapping Analysis' discussed above, allowed members to discuss their lived experiences and see their responses drawn in real-time by the artist present. The analyst was given the schedule of questions/themes at the start of the engagement

events and was then able to capture what was discussed in the moment by focusing on a key phrase or response to a question from one of the researchers. These key themes were then narrated in real time to directly capture the discussions of the group.

The outcome of this layered approach to data analysis not only resulted in a detailed and rich capture of the lived experiences and expertise of the participants but also supported the empowerment of the participants who fed-back that it had been a positive and rewarding experience to have 'really been listened to' (focus group member from first focus group) and 'what a great way to show what we have talked about' (focus group member from second focus group). Moreover, this approach led to immediate triangulation of data analysis – something that has been identified as bringing about increased trustworthiness of the findings (Glaw, et al., 2017).

At the conclusion of both engagement events. The researchers independently cross checked their notes with the narrative illustrations to establish a set of themes that were rigorous and represented their understanding of the data. They then discussed their thematic analysis to ensure that the themes that were identified with in the narrative mapping were an accurate representation of the data.

Preliminary Findings

The findings presented in this report seek to address the objectives of the study and the research questions. At the time of writing, the findings were preliminary and will be developed further as the dissemination outputs are developed (see dissemination section below). Throughout this section examples of the narrative analysis are presented as illustrations of the issues discussed. The full narrative outputs can be found at Appendix A.

Aspirations
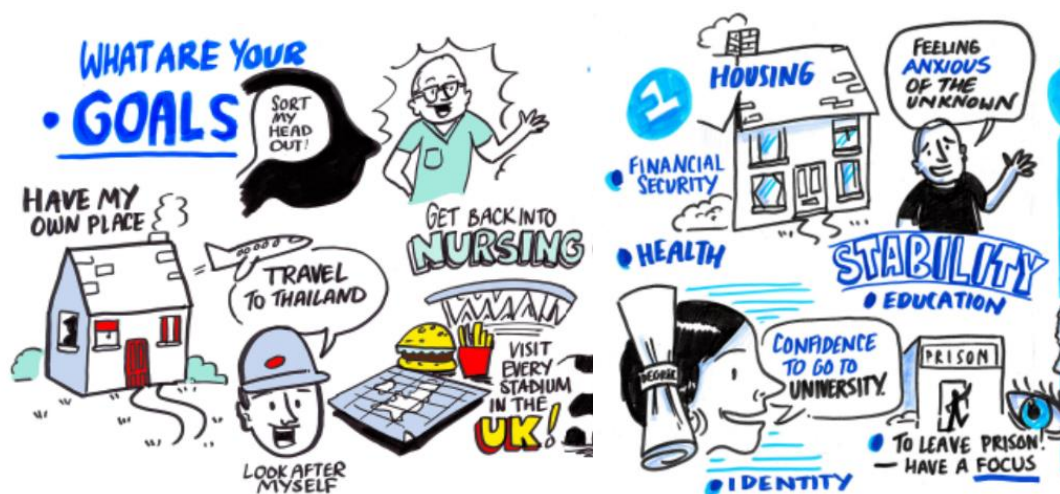
It was clear from the outset of focus group 1 that establishing an understanding of the aspirations to study within Higher Education was going to be challenging. The discussion began by trying to identify the immediate aspirations of the group and it became apparent that there was no one common theme that adequately described the needs of the group rather a series of sub-themes that can be grouped as follows:

Managing Mental Health and 'Survival'

One participant reported just wanting to 'survive' – this participant was female to male transgender and reported serious issues with mental health. Survival for them was focused on getting an appointment with a psychiatrist and pushing on with the transition period. A male participant with serious mental health issues said his aspiration was to eat McDonalds outside all the football stadiums in the UK.

However, there was general consensus that mental health was an ongoing challenge and that participants were at different points on their path to recovery, but all acknowledged

that is was a significant present factor. It was agreed that if mental health could be effectively supported then this would provide stability to explore other positive directions in life such as education, employment, family and more social connections.

Securing Employment

A further immediate aspiration of most of the participants was to attain employment. This was seen as an anchor and platform for the rest of their life that would provide them with the means to succeed in other aspirations such as having a home and a future with a family.

There were a variety of contexts here, for example one male with a drink drive conviction was a former nurse and wanted to get back into employment as a health care professional. Another male in his early 20's had a history of repeated prison sentences and wanted to get a job and believed he would be able to achieve this. Some of the group articulated the notion that employment could be a way of giving back. For example, one male participant with 17-year history of drug misuse wanted to harness and share his experiences of addiction to support others experiencing similar issues.

Motivation for Positive Change

Amongst the group, positive futures were constructed as an ideal combination of the factors mentioned so far, coupled with the inclusion of having a home, a job or an education, feeling healthy and that this would also include a wife, life partner and or a family (for some this was reconnecting with family). It was clear from the discussions that all of the participants reported that they wanted to improve their current situation, therefore identifying hope and aspiration to desist from offending. The self-recognition of a desire for change is identified within the literature as the first phase of desistance (Giordano et al, 2002; King, 2012) thereby providing an opportunity for intervention.

Indeed, data from the second engagement event supported the views of the first group in that the overriding need for stability had to be the first challenge to be overcome before consideration could be given to any form of education. And, for this group stability meant a number of things, sustainable housing, financial support, health and a partner and family. Once these had been met, then the idea of developing a new identity through education was considered as a main motivation and outcome which supports the

previous research in this area (Abeling-Judge, 2016; Dufour et al, 2015; Giordano et al, 2002).

Aspirations of Higher Education

A number of participants in the first focus group and all of the participants from the second focus group identified that education was indeed an aspiration for many people who have offended. However, during both focus groups, the idea of Higher Education was always discussed in relation to negative perceptions that universities have of 'people like me' and there were associated feelings of lack of confidence to pursue higher education due to such perceptions of the university environment.

For both of the participants in the second focus group who had served a custodial sentence, leaving prison with a focus and trying to forge a new identity or one that was aligned to a better future was seen as a priority,

> 'I have been lucky, my wife stood by me, but I can't return to my old life as a solicitor but what I am hoping for is that with the support of my family and staff at the prison I can get this PhD and start a new career within academia' – Tony first year PhD student

Both participants from the second group who were currently studying within Higher Education discussed how it was the motivation they needed to 'do something positive' and start a 'change within me' and that,

> 'It worked and slowly I started to change and didn't want to hang around with the same people anymore as I was different.' – John level five undergraduate student

This data compliments the existing literature where Higher Education can be seen as a 'hook for change' (Giordano et al, 2002). It is clear from this study that Higher Education can be one of the strongest experiences to support positive change, new identities and social capital (Lockwood et al, 2012; Maruna, 2011; and Runnel, 2017) as well as the development of confidence, new knowledge and skills (Allred, Harrison, and OConnel, 2013; Meyer & Randall, 2013; and Zgoba et al, 2008).

In the first focus group engagement there were four (3 male, 1 female) participants who had been to University. One male had completed a drama degree, a female an

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unspecified undergraduate degree, a further male began an engineering degree but failed to finish the course and then went onto nursing but not degree based. The fourth participant started an educational programme in prison which led to a place at university on release and completed a degree in engineering. This participant also took part in lecturing but following the suicide of his daughter and death of wife his life spiralled back into substance misuse and depression.

Importantly, all of the participants who had been to university expressed that the impact on their lives at the time, had been very positive. It had raised their self-esteem, social capital, and their confidence and skills – again factors associated with desistance and the literature as highlighted above.

One of the Higher Education graduates did express he felt he had been lied to by the university about the programme of study and that it did not support on contain the learning opportunities it advertised. This meant that this male had a distrust of universities and their motives being focused on income generation. There was a strong theme that Higher Education did not really 'want people on courses with problems' like them in relation to their previous convictions and current mental health and or substance use issues.

It was clear that Higher Education was not one of the first aspirations for many of the members involved in the focus groups or seen as one for those that worked alongside such people within support services. There was however strong agreement that with the right support and delivery Higher Education could and would be a positive experience providing a 'hook for change' in supporting the formation of new identities and opportunities towards desistance and positive life outcomes.

Educational Experiences
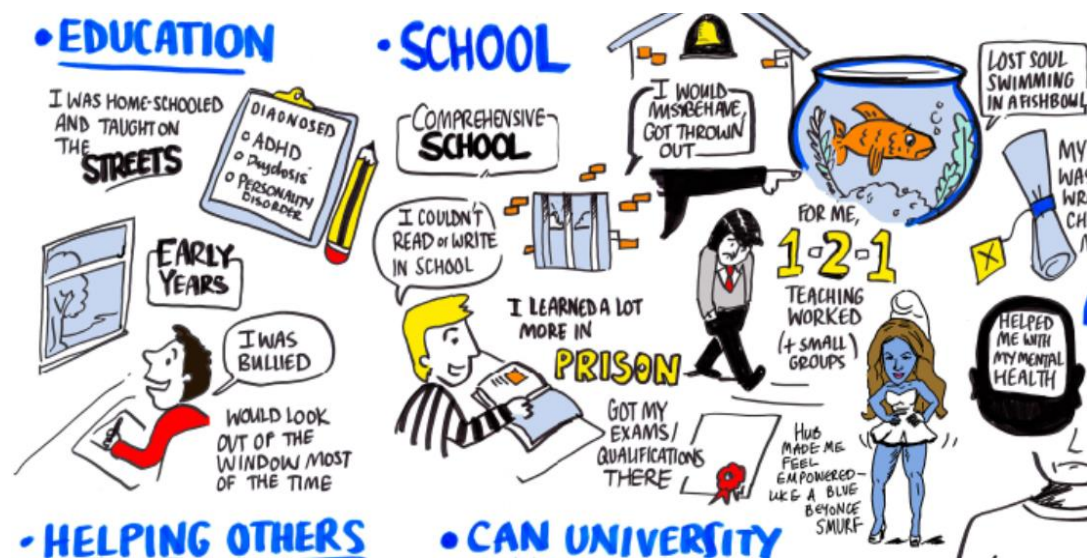
In order to the understand the participants suspicions about university we sought to explore their previous experiences of education. Overwhelmingly, for the participants in group 1, education had not been a positive experience, therefore seeking to raise their own aspirations of attending University appeared a challenge. The majority of participants (12) reported issues with primary and secondary educations. One male participant reported feeling like a 'fish in a bowl throughout school'.

10 out of the 12 participants identified learning difficulties as a barrier to education and reported that their behaviour within formal educational environments led to exclusion. Bullying was also a common theme with this group from peers and educators. Feelings of alienation were also reported and a lack of recognition by educational establishments of their wider challenges such as family trauma, behavioural and mental health issues. Overall, primary and secondary school was generally constructed as exclusionary, intimidating and a negative and damaging experience.

However, somewhat ironically, for those participants who had been to prison, the education provision within that context offered hope and aspiration to them. Indeed, they all reported that prison had been the beginning of their education, offering them the opportunity to develop some basic skills such as reading and writing and for one participant as already mentioned, it offered the chance to pursue a higher level of educational attainment which they pursued at university on release from prison. Those that had studied within the prison environment also believed that it was the 'right time' for them and that due to past experiences were now 'ready to learn' and could appreciate

the values of education as it could 'open up doors' for a positive future in employment and/or further or higher education.

Data from engagement event 2, whole heartedly supported the experiences of education. From the experiences of those working with offenders, exclusion from school was a common experience prisoners and offenders in the community. A poor experience of education was likely to put people off thinking about education as the 'hook for change'. To overcome this challenge the focus groups felt that there needed to be support to assist people to develop a change of mind-set and to ensure education providers heard the voices of those marginalised groups. Identifying a key mentor/service within a university that had been trained to understand the unmet and complex needs of offenders/ex-offenders was strongly suggested to help to bridge the gap. It was clear that the group thought that universities could and should do more to attract adult learners from marginalised backgrounds.

Barriers and Challenges to Engaging with Higher Education
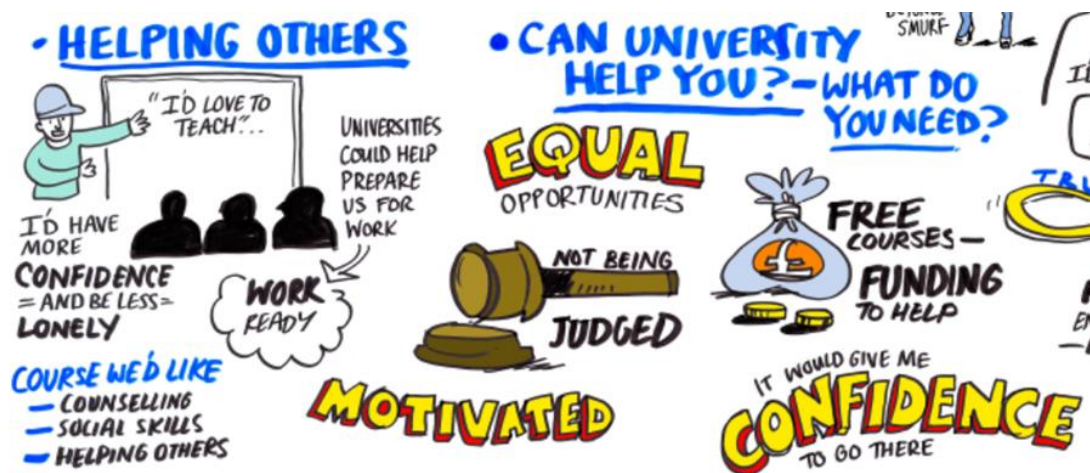
Most of the participants identified university as marketing itself as a vehicle for gaining employment. However, they felt that the level of debt acquired during the course of attaining a degree was excessive and there were no guarantees that it would lead to a job. They expressed that many of the courses were not linked to employment therefore they felt suspicious of universities in this respect. One participant who had been to university to study drama said he had been promised that the degree would lead to future opportunities, but the course kept changing throughout and he felt let down by the institution.

There was recognition however that university could help people to gain confidence and improve their well-being and as stated earlier, 'open door' the to a positive future. One participant reported,

> 'I applied for University but they rejected me because of my conviction – only drink related offences mind you – but they rejected me anyway but even when I walk across the campus now I feel proud and it makes me walk with my head heal high – the University has a good vibe about it'. – Jack, male, mid 40s

Participants in engagement event two highlighted that universities offered the chance for those at risk of offending to develop critical thinking skills which may help with self-reflection and the opportunity to break intergenerational offending. Aside of the academic progression and attainment, it also opened access to new friendships and circles of support and influence (King, 2012) and an opportunity for some form of redemption by making families proud.

The data from engagement event two, identified that Higher Education should fulfil the aspirations of those at risk of offending if it could develop 'clever hooks for change' and there was general consensus that this should be small Higher Educational experiences to build interest and confidence and provide a realistic but supportive and enjoyable 'taste' of Higher Education (Runnel, 2017). That might include reaching out to local community organisations located within grass-roots movements who work with those seeking to attain desistance so there is a 'within community' experience that embeds the learner within local networks, and civic life and society (McNeil, 2018; 2019). There was agreement that the university should be accountable and responsible for reducing any barriers and 'reach out' and 'bridge the gap' thus making higher education 'feel' attainable and realistic. There was also discussion that there was a significant need of ensuring university services are equipped to meet the wide range of needs of the potential students such as well-being, health services, student finance etc so that their needs are met to support positive transition and continuation of studies (King, 2012).

In addition to the issues identified above, both events identified a number of specific barriers to accessing Higher Education that focused on sourcing funding, judgment and stigma.

Funding

All participants were claiming benefits and felt that university was something that was completely out of reach to them and that the debt associated with going to university outweighed the benefits. Many of the participants had no access to transport so simply paying public transport fares was out of their budget most of the time. Participants were unaware of the funding available for part-time adult learners and so there was a clear need for appropriate and accessible information to support informed decision making and reducing the perceived barriers relating to funding and costs of studying within Higher Education.

Judgement and Stigma

The participants reported that they felt their convictions would prevent them from going to university. One participant reported that he had been told that he needed to be,

> 'clean from drugs for two years before I can start doing courses, it's really fucking hard'.- Trevor, male, mid 30s.

Another participant articulated the views of the group when he said,

> 'if you have the money, they'll take you but not if you have a conviction'.- Sam, Male late 20s

The expression of isolation and the stigma associated with having a criminal conviction was overwhelming for this group. One of the group stated that if you have a conviction you are marked and it 'sticks to you forever' and that they (Higher Education and potential employers) 'only see the crime'; this was clearly upsetting to the participant and he expressed a view that there was little future opportunity due to his criminal record.

Students that submit their Higher Education course applications through UCAS do not now have to declare convictions (spent or otherwise) unless it is a certain type of course that works with children, young people or vulnerable adults (UCAS, 2020). Unfortunately, this is not always the case for part-time programmes as Universities can require disclosure within their own policy and practice. Those members who discussed Higher Education often aspired to work with 'people like me, so I can give something back' and so it is likely that degree programmes that would support such groups would be within the 'working with vulnerable people' group and still require criminal record disclosure.
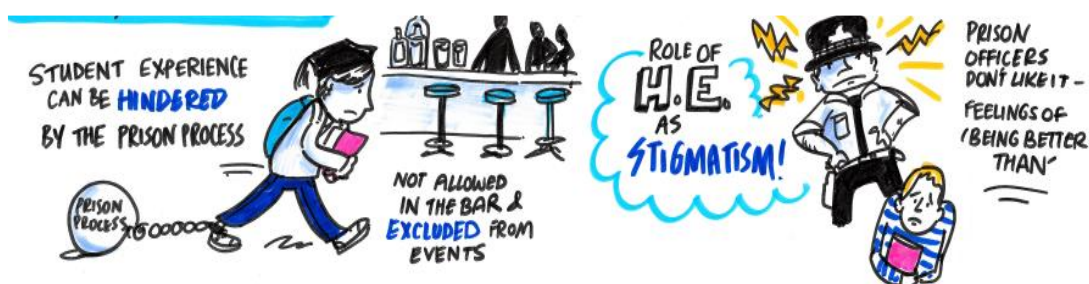
Stigma was experienced at all levels and in all environments by those who were studying whilst serving a prison sentence. Both participants in group 2 explained that whilst they appreciated the opportunity to study, their student experience had been hindered by the prison process. For example, where students were given release to attend lectures, but transport didn't turn, the consequence was missed lectures. The participants also reported that they were often excluded from student groups and not allowed to go to social events due to restrictions imposed by the prison. However, this isolation and experience of stigma continued within the prison environment as well.

Both participants spoke of feeling both physically and emotionally isolated from other prisoners and that this contributed to negative outcomes including; jealously and envy, perceptions of hierarchy 'you think you are better than us' and surprisingly this was from

both other prisoners and the prison staff. This meant that people in prison who were in education increasingly felt isolated and had no safe space or identity. Pariticapants identified that they needed transition support within the prison and outside the prison environment to stop any relapse towards cycles of offending. This is a significant finding that has not been identified within the current literature and needs further exploration.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the role of Higher Education in supporting aspiration towards desistance from offending behaviours in a very localised area, Swansea. In achieving this overall aim, the project also sought to explore the use of Pictorial Narrative Mapping as a research tool to both gather data and empower those involved in the research.

In response to the latter aim, it is clear that this methodological tool has great potential to support marginalised groups in having their voices heard. And, whilst it might be fair to say that managing a 'focus group' of the participants of this study proved challenging, the value the members of The Hub placed on the process was a key outcome of this project. Not only, was the process inclusive and ethical, an unintended positive consequence was that this method of data collection might be something that those tasked with measuring the effectiveness or impact of an intervention with those at risk of offending may find useful. Of course, this requires further inquiry to establish whether it is an appropriate tool for such purposes, but it was certainly helpful to those who were endeavouring to desist from offending in this study.

In addressing the primary aim of the project, it should be noted that, at the time of writing this report, it is too early in the data analysis phase to report any concrete conclusions. However, overall the emerging thematic analysis conducted this far suggests that for Higher Education to be considered as a meaningful 'hook for change', the basic needs of potential individual students have to be addressed. The needs of this group were complex and multi-layered with mental health, substance misuse issues, stable accommodation and relational insecurities looming large. Therefore, understanding how universities support potential learners with their aspirations to attain a higher education requires a renewed vision.

As a starting point that might mean those tasked with 'widening access' need to reach out to organisations that work with those at risk of offending. Indeed, despite having poor statutory educational experiences and a lack of opportunity, the participants expressed a desire to access Higher Education but the thought of entering into an institution was overwhelming. Their voices expressed a desire for a new type of Higher Education which focused on delivery to them in their community setting. This would need to be supported by practitioners who understood their background and specific needs so they did not feel

threatened or exposed (and therefore did not feel 'stupid' and 'out of place' like they believed they would within the university setting).

In this respect, the findings add support to McNeill (2018, 2019) and his idea of integrated factors and needs for successful long-term desistance. McNeill (2018, 2019) believes that for desistance to work it needs to transcend all of areas society. According to this vision desistance and rehabilitation is possible only through mutual recognition and respect of the individual, the citizen, civil society, and the state. Therefore, real and meaningful liberation and integration into the community for an offender is reliant on the four aspects of desistance which are; personal rehabilitation, social rehabilitation, judicial rehabilitation, and moral and political rehabilitation. In this way the individual is supported in all four areas resulting with the development of personal agency to make positive and informed life choices.

A further key finding is the role that prison plays in providing the positive exposure to education. For many of the participants their positive experience of education began during a prison sentence. This therefore lends itself to the opportunity for prisons to work closely with local universities to build on this positive experience and introduce and expose 'prison-students' to Higher Education in a safe and supportive environment.

The study also highlighted the issue of stigma for this potential group of leaners. Whether real or perceived, stigma was experienced by those studying at university whilst serving a prison sentence at every level. Exclusion from student events and discrimination from prison staff indicated that the path to desistance is fragile at every point when feelings of alienation and not fitting into either environment are present.

Therefore, it is clear from this pilot study, that Higher Education can be part of the desistance framework. However, there is still has a long way to go. Indeed, this research supports the current view that of the Prison Education Trust (2017) who argue that Higher Education can feel an unwelcoming place for those with a criminal record. It is also clear from this study that the participants had a deeply held mistrust of universities as elite institutions and more needs to be done to transform the image of a neo-liberal environment that focuses on exclusion and monetary gain into a place of empowerment, through learning and social growth supporting enhanced employability, life opportunities and, in this case, sustained desistance from offending.

Dissemination, Outputs and Impact

To date, the outputs of this project are:

- A conference paper and presentation on the preliminary findings of the 1st phase of the project at the British Society of Criminology (BSC) Conference in Lincoln University in July 2019.
- A conference paper and presentation at the SRHE Annual Conference in December 2019 focused on the methods adopted during the study.
- An interim and this final report to the SRHE.

Future intended outputs also include:

- Submission of a peer review journal article on the key findings from the project within the next six months.
- As a result of the presentation at the BSC conference, the Teaching and Learning Network and Welsh Branch of the BSC have offered to fund a teaching and learning event at Swansea University focused on the role of Criminology in bringing about Public Education on the – 23rd April 2020.
- The BSC has also invited the authors to publish a Blog on the project which will be submitted within six months of the completion of the study.
- It is also the intention of the authors to submit a joint entry with The Include Hub, to the Swansea University SURF competition in 2020.
- An abstract has been accepted for the Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice Conference 28th-29th of April 2020.
- An abstract will be submitted for the European Society of Criminology Conference 2020.
- Late 2020 - early 2021, subject to funding agreements, the authors plan to host conference focusing on the findings of the project to explore how HE can become an inclusive learning environment for those at risk of offending/reoffending.
- Additionally, a key outcome of this pilot study is that it will provide a platform for further funding applications focused on the development and delivery of an 'Impact project' that supports learners at risk of offending within a community setting. Therefore, the authors will seek collaborative funding with The Include Hub to support this aim.

- Building on the findings of the project, there are now ongoing discussions between The Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law and Swansea prison to scope the potential development and delivery of a new Criminology module that examines the role of Higher Education in bringing about desistance from offending. If approved, this module will be delivered to students who are serving custodial sentences alongside of Undergraduate Criminology students providing a unique pedagogical experience to both groups of learners.

From an examination of these future outputs, it is clear to see that the project has already started to make an impact within the academic circles and public forums. However, measuring any form of intervention or personal development towards desistance is problematic but the following quote illustrates the power of the project and in particular the narrative/visual methods, in enabling those at risk of offending to transitioning to their new identity,

> 'This is great, can we have a copy? [of the narrative mapping poster] and then we can go back every couple of weeks and think about what we said today and see if we are getting to where we want to be'. – Fergus male mid 50's

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