

FEATURE–EDITORIAL

Critical Reflections on Higher Education in Prison

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Since the publication of the first issue of the *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* (JPER) in 2014, the journal has provided an international platform for researchers and practitioners to explore education in prison *and* during re-entry into the community with a multidisciplinary approach. These approaches include, but are not limited to, criminology, sociology, pedagogy and policy. We, the editors, are delighted to present the first special issue of JPER within which we explore the current landscape of higher education in prisons through a collection of contributions. More specifically, this special issue brings together examples of initiatives that involve partnership work between universities and criminal justice institutions to create opportunities for educational innovation involving people in the free community as well as those impacted by the criminal justice process.

University involvement with criminal justice institutions in an educational capacity is not a new phenomenon. Through the establishment of the “Crime-A-Challenge” Society at the University of Oxford in the 1950s, criminologist Max Grunhut, a firm believer in prison as a place for education and reform, brought together boys serving sentences at Huntercombe Borstal with Oxford law students, which involved Oxford students attending the borstal for residential stays. This kind of engagement was later continued via educational classes delivered by the University of Oxford at HMPs Grendon, Oxford and Bedford. At the same time, the Open University has provided higher education in UK prisons for over 40 years spreading their *Students in Secure Environments* programme to over 150 prisons through the core belief that education should be accessible to all.

In the 1990s, the *Inside Out* initiative was established by Professor Lori Pompa at Temple University in the United States. Now described as an international movement, the *Inside Out* programme comprises of more than 150 correctional and higher education partnerships, more than thirty think tanks and in some cases, public workshops. Realising the need for incarcerated individuals to have the opportunity to continue their education on release, Professor Baz Dresinger (John Jay College, Central University of New York) founded the *Prison to College Pipeline* in 2011. Administered by the Prisoner Reentry Institute, the pipeline provides prisoners with access to public university-level education, mentorship, and community support to increase their chances of timely graduation and employment upon release. Replications of this initiative are now being seen in the UK, South Africa, Jamaica and Trinidad. Similar initiatives have once again resurfaced in the UK with the establishment of the *Learning Together* programme led by Drs Amy Ludlow and Ruth Armstrong at the University of Cambridge. This has since become a national and international programme which brings students from outside and within prison walls together to learn alongside one another and is situated within a broader scope of programmes within the *Prison University Partnerships in Learning* (PUPiL) network.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of such programmes, the aforementioned examples evidence the internationalisation of collaborative practice which aims to facilitate innovative, interactive higher education experiences in “hard to reach” environments involving students, practitioners and academics to create meaningful exchanges between people who would usually be separated by the imperatives of the criminal justice system. Beyond these initiatives, other educational projects have begun to emerge globally including *Making the Connection Project* (Australia), *Book Clubs for Inmates* (Canada), *India Vision Foundation* (India), *Africa Prisons Project* (East Africa), *Hudson Link for Higher Education* (USA) and *Project Rebound* (USA). The increasing number of universities partnering with criminal justice institutions globally (but particularly in Western countries) to deliver higher education can be viewed as a reflection of the positive success stories shared amongst the higher education communities (see Inderbitzin, 2015; King, et al. 2018; Lockard and



Rankins-Robertson, 2011).

The aim of this special issue is to bring together insights and challenges of delivering higher education in prison or within reentry settings. The papers within this issue offer critical reflections, student evaluations and innovative pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the learning journeys of students, teachers, facilitators, coordinators and academics. There is no doubt that these partnerships are creating meaningful learning journeys and breaking down societal barriers for people with convictions, but as acknowledged by the collection of articles, there must also be caution given to the ethical, pedagogical and practical challenges that are embedded in these initiatives. On ethical grounds people residing in prison, or those recently released, can be considered one of the most vulnerable populations of learners. People in prison or who have since been released are positioned very differently in society from university students and care needs to be taken not to put any of the learners at a disadvantage or in worst case scenario, cause any harm. The wellbeing of both the people with convictions and the university students is paramount, yet the nature of the short term HE courses can lead to difficulties for individual learners both during and after the learning process (see Young, 2018). This special issue seeks to elaborate on some such challenges and how they have been responded to in practice.

The setting of many of the learning programmes that are being developed and the ability of the learners on those programmes results in a number of pedagogical challenges that have received very little attention to date. These courses are higher education initiatives and thus consideration must be given to how higher education is being delivered. Furthermore, the pedagogical lessons learned from the programmes are important to explore the similarities and differences between traditional higher education and those delivered in a criminal justice context. There is an abundance of pedagogical literature on education in prison and strategies of teaching and learning in higher education but less have been developed when the two institutions have come together in a learning capacity. The aim of this special issue is to highlight the pedagogical approaches used in the programmes and consider the challenges that have arisen.

The articles in the issue fall under four key themes that address the issues discussed above. The first theme of the issue is *transformative learning*. Bringing together university students with people currently or recently incarcerated is often argued to have to a transformative effect for learners, however the relationship between transformation of self and learning is multifaceted and by no means a linear process. The first paper by Gray, Ward and Fogarty, "Transformative Learning Through University and Prison Partnerships: Reflections From 'Learning Together' Pedagogical Practice", discusses transformative learning through a lens of a transformative ripple model. The authors draw on evaluation data from two Learning Together courses and discuss the importance of a transformative pedagogy to help facilitate the learners' transformative learning journey of self. The transformative ripple model is applied to demonstrate how university-prison learning partnerships can lead to both individual and institutional transformations. The authors argue that for these learning environments to be truly transformative, the pedagogical approach must also be transformative in nature. The paper emphasises that it is equally important to consider how higher education is delivered as well as what is delivered within these spaces. The paper by Ludlow, Armstrong and Bartels, "Learning Together: Localism, Collaboration and Reflexivity in the Development of Prison and University Learning Communities", engages with the challenges of collaboration and reflexivity in the conceptualisation and development of partnership learning communities between higher education and criminal justice institutions. It is grounded in experiences of partnerships in the United Kingdom and beyond, and considers the policy and practice challenges of partnership-working between higher education and criminal justice institutions. They argue persuasively that we need to reflect critically on how different socio-political and cultural realities (both within and beyond national borders) might shape the particular nature of these partnerships.

The second theme of the special issue recognises the importance of *inclusive learning environments*. This is an important theme given the unfamiliarity of learning spaces for different cohorts, who would not ordinarily occupy educational environments in the manner in which these initiatives are delivered. Gosling and Burke present their article "'People Like Me Don't Belong in Places Like This': Creating and Developing a Community of Learners Beyond the Prison Gates", which reflects on a community-based model of higher education in the UK involving university students, criminal justice service users and practitioners. Adopting

edgework as a conceptual framework to create an inclusive learning space, the authors discuss their exploration of students' motivations to engage with higher education and consider how lecturers providing taught sessions have come to think differently about how they deliver higher education; leading to exploratory questions about higher education delivery more broadly. In the article, the authors reflectively examine the process of "pedagogical brokerage" in navigating the management of expectations, incongruity and vulnerability while also identifying the emerging institutional differences in how the purpose of higher education is viewed. Gosling and Burke argue in this contribution that more intensive pastoral care is needed for those engaging in challenging personal journeys and they acknowledge the recognition of the importance of pathways both into and out of higher education. The second article within this theme by Zampini, Österman, Stengel and Bernalick entitled "Turning Gender Inside-Out: Delivering Higher Education in Women's Carceral Spaces" offers an important contribution to the special issue by discussing the gendered learning space in the context of prison education. Drawing on their experiences of delivering higher education with women and men in prison, the authors offer critical reflections of gender dynamics within the classrooms and the pedagogical challenges that arose. This paper highlights the normative gendered assumptions within the prison setting and draws comparisons between an all-female cohort of learners and mixed cohorts of learners. The authors argue that a gendered consciousness can be beneficial in unifying student and prisoner learners whilst also disrupting the hegemonic masculine environments that can too often lead to women's voices being marginalised in learning spaces.

Theme three of the contributions centres on reconsiderations of *social identities*. With a particular focus on broader "behaviours of desistance" (Nichols, 2018) whereby notions of self and conceptions of others are challenged within unique learning spaces, the following articles examine the personal transformations experienced by learners. In their article "'There's More That Binds Us Together Than Separates Us': Exploring the Role of Prison-University Partnerships in Promoting Democratic Dialogue, Transformative Learning Opportunities and Social Citizenship", O'Grady and Hamilton explore the way in which education in penal institutions can present opportunities for social, economic and cultural transformation. Considering the role of education in enhancing social citizenship, the authors reflect on how their higher education programme delivered in a UK prison facilitated the positive challenging of stereotyping and othering through debate creating "de-othering attitudes". Arguing for a need for social citizenship to grow into active citizenship, the authors propose that better cooperation is needed between prisoners and "outside communities", and through a critical pedagogical approach, positive change can be achieved amongst all involved in agency, legitimacy and empowerment. The subsequent article by Turner, Broad, Miles and Maruna, "Learning Desistance Together", considers transformation of self by discussing processes of desistance through learning. Their paper highlights how aspects of desistance were evident amongst both university and prison-based students on their course "Learning Criminology Inside". The authors discuss desistance in a broader sense, whereby the focus is not desistance from crime but rather desisting from previously held norms and values. Drawing upon feedback from students on the course, the authors argue that bringing together university and prison learners can be beneficial for encouraging desistance from stereotypical views and criminogenic identities. The authors also discuss the challenges in delivering a course within the prison setting and consider the importance of resilience amongst staff and students and how this in itself can feed in to desistance.

The final theme of the special issue concerns *practitioner reflections*. Within these important contributions, practitioner narratives provide more personal commentary on the junction between lived experience and reflections on educational practice. The first piece to be presented in this theme by Arroyo, Diaz and McDowell, "Needed Specialists for a Challenging Task: Formerly Incarcerated Leaders' Essential Role in Postsecondary Programs in Prison", provides the authors' own experiences of managing, leading and teaching post-secondary education programmes in the United States are examined. Detailing the work of the "Hudson Link for Higher Education" project in New York, the authors (and self-proclaimed activists) of this paper specifically focus on the lived experience of incarceration as a source of expertise. The authors argue in this paper that it is those with such experiences who are the "needed specialists" for delivering academic programmes for incarcerated people. As a third-party coordinator, the Hudson Link project brings together correctional organisations with partner colleges for accredited work with the overarching objective of breaking the cycles of intergenerational poverty, mass incarceration and institutional racism. The authors have taken the opportunity

in this paper to communicate a call to action to recognise the kinds of expertise that should be seen as valuable in this work, the value of “inside teaching” experiences and the need to give those who have been formerly incarcerated empowering opportunities. The second article within this theme, and the closing article to this special issue, is “‘It’s About Whose Voices Matter and What That means’: Reflections on Insider/Outsider Status in Prison Classrooms”. Within this article, Tynan presents a practitioner piece which provides a different view of the value of lived experience in the prison setting. Rather than seeing lived experience as inherently valuable, Tynan argues instead that it is “another tool in the pedagogical toolbox” to disrupt institutional norms and that this approach can still be achieved by those without such experiences. Through a distinctly personal reflective account, the author examines the challenges and outcomes of bringing together university students and serving prisoners in a learning space that she describes as a “nexus between prison and university”. Describing such environments as being dialectical and held together by dialogue, Tynan positions herself within the reflection to broaden the reader’s consideration of how lived experience can be placed within such initiatives to generate dialogue and facilitate critical thinking about imprisonment and future prospects.

We believe this special issue highlights many of the successful outcomes that stem from prison-university partnerships while also presenting a significant insight into the challenging nature of this work. The initiatives reflected on throughout the articles highlight how valuable this work is to learners, educators and institutions in overcoming the long-standing barriers to higher education for people with convictions. Evidently, the collaborative nature of this work is central to possibilities of success. However, as highlighted in this special issue, critical reflection lies at the heart of ensuring that the aims of the programmes can be realised and sustained. Therefore, we present here a collection of articles that provide a ‘realistic celebration’ of the projects being undertaken, whereby challenge and adversity reveal themselves to be just as empowering as the rewards experienced.

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