

Understanding Aspiration and Education Towards Desistance from Offending: The Role of Higher Education in Wales

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Abstract: *There has been a growing recognition of the value of education in facilitating desistance from offending. Yet, despite a determined push to “widen access” universities continue to be an unwelcoming place for those with a criminal record. To better understand the role of higher education in raising aspiration towards desistance, this paper draws on findings from a study in Swansea, Wales. Adopting a Pictorial Narrative approach the findings suggest that, whilst the participants identified potential benefits of attaining a higher education, those aspirations were outweighed by a distrust of the “institution” and a fear that the stigmatisation experienced through the “criminal identity” would be hard to avoid and may morph into the “criminal/student identity”, thus leaving students vulnerable to judgement and exclusion. This paper makes recommendations about how higher education might be remodeled to support those who wish to desist and in doing so, truly “widen participation” to all.*

Keywords: *desistance, higher education, widening access*

“The conviction sticks to you forever and they only see the crime. They [universities] don’t want people like me.” John

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The project adopted an emerging approach to data collection and analysis – a Pictorial Narrative Approach – and without the skill of Eleanor Beer, that element of the project would have been lacking.

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However, the most important acknowledgement is reserved for the members of the Include Hub who shared their often personal and distressing experiences of education to help us to better understand how higher education needs to adapt to be a truly inclusive environment for effective learning.



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. Moreover, factors such as stigma and discrimination, make it difficult to maintain aspirations and secure opportunities towards positive change (Ministry of Justice, 2010; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011; Dufour et al., 2015). However, previous studies have identified that education, and in particular studying within a higher education environment, can be a powerful and significant ‘hook for change’ (Lockwood et al., 2012; Runnell, 2017) as it supports the development of personal agency through exposure to new positive social networks, new communities and individuals with ‘non-offending’ identities as well as knowledge and skills (Weaver & McNeill, 2015; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Abeling-Judge, 2016). Emphasising this point, the Coates Review (2016, p. i) found that “If education is the engine of social mobility, it is also the engine of prisoner rehabilitation.”

However, whilst the benefits of a higher education as a route to desistance are promising, the Prison Education Trust (PET) (2017) highlight that universities are not always welcoming or appealing to 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, the internal culture and narrative of the widening participation agenda has become entangled. Evans et al. (2017) suggest that there are now mixed messages between the pressures of market-led policies, university league tables and other ranking systems and the Welsh ‘all-age’ approach to widening access from Welsh Government and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales which is often lost in translation. Therefore it is not surprising that there has been a dramatic reduction in part-time learners in the UK which is disproportionately affecting adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Butcher, 2020). This has 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).

The catalyst for this project came from the community through an organisation called the Include Hub who raised the possibility of exploring the role of higher education in supporting desistance. The Hub is a project working with those with offending histories or adults who are considered at potential risk of offending. The aspiration to attend university had been discussed amongst their members, but the prospect remained daunting and unachievable to them. Moreover from our initial scoping of the literature on the role of education in facilitating desistance, we had identified that previous research on this topic had focused on the role of education within a prison setting with less attention given to considering the role of higher education within the community (Bradley, 2017). Therefore, set against this backdrop, the project sought to address the following 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?

A further overarching aim of the project was to develop a methodological approach that would be both scientifically rigorous but also designed to be an inclusive and empowering process for those taking part. To achieve this, we adopted a Pictorial Narrative approach which is discussed later in the paper. The remainder of this paper begins with a discussion of the existing literature on the relationship between education and desistance and then outlines the

methodological approach adopted by the study. In presenting the findings, the paper argues that higher education could be a powerful vehicle for transformative change in those that are at risk of (re)offending. However, the findings also suggest that universities need to adopt a proactive approach to marketing and the transition to higher education to break down the barriers experienced by members of marginalised and stigmatised communities so that their aspirations can be supported and their student experience enhanced through engagement with education that is free from stigma and judgment.

The Desistance Journey

There has been a growing body of research that seeks to understand the process of desistance. Simply put, desistance is considered as a process of preventing or of abstaining from crime as well theoretical understandings of “how and why people stop and refrain from offending” (Weaver & McNeill, 2015, p. 95).

One of the overriding themes of previous research has been that desistance 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 & McNeill, 2015). Factors such as stable relationships and employment that offer both personal and external motivations and controls have been shown to not only support desistance, but also facilitate the formation of new identities and positive adult social ties (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). However, whilst Dufour et al. (2015) conclude that it can be difficult to shed a criminal identity because of both internal and external influences and constraints, the opportunity to develop alternative and positive social experiences supports the growth of social capital and greater social mobility (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) and thus helps in the formation of the ‘new self’. Additionally, the maintenance of such positive social relations can support the development of reciprocal trust, solidarity, and loyalty which are all key elements of supporting desistance (Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

However, as Nugent and Schinkel (2016) point out, to succeed in this transition to a new self, often people will experience challenges which can be considered as the ‘pains of desistance’ summarised as isolation and loneliness, goal failure, and lack of hope. For example, the difficulties in finding secure accommodation and employment on leaving prison have been well documented (Edgar, Aresti & Cornish, 2012; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Moreover, Senkans et al. (2015) also note that often ongoing mental health issues and substance use (McSweeney, 2010) can constrain the desistance journey. It seems therefore, that the path to desistance is rocky, often fragmented and requires an integrated approach that requires a personal transition, relational stability as well as support at a structural societal level (Dufour et al., 2015).

To understand the potential role of higher education in supporting desistance, Dufour et al. (2015) provide a useful framework to explore three stages of desistance. In the first stage ‘structural openings’ such as an opportunity to study, to find employment or build personal relationships with family and life partners provide ‘hooks for change’. Second, to effectively flourish and be accepted within new structural opportunities new social identities must be developed and old identities discarded. In the final stage, an individual must recognise their contribution to society and to the group(s)/community they now want to belong to. Therefore, in facilitating individuals to create a new ‘map of society’ and transform their identity (Dufour et al., 2015 p. 495) it is 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.

It might also be argued that higher education can support the ‘theory of cognitive transformation’ proposed by Giordano, et al. (2002). In their four-stage analysis of the desistance process, Giordano et al. (2002) identify strong commonalities to the three stages set out by

Dufour et al. (2015). Both outline the need for opportunity for a ‘hook(s) for change’ and that this supports identification with and motivation to develop a positive alternative social identity or as Giordano et al. (2012) term it, a ‘replacement self.’ The two views also capture a transformation in the way the individual views deviant behaviour and not seeing themselves as a criminal anymore. The main difference between the two perspectives is that Giordano et al. (2002) place significance on an initial need for the individual to have an openness to change before cognitive transformation can be successful. Indeed, this view has been supported by others who suggest that there must be some intention and motivation for a future positive self and that individual agency is the starting point for this change (King, 2012). However, other studies have challenged this view stating that desistance often occurs with no intention and that people can desist simply from reacting to events and turning points which offer positive opportunities (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Therefore, whilst there appears to be a lack of agreement about whether the desire to desist stems from a thought-out cognitive shift or is indeed stimulated by opportunist events or turning points, there appears to be support for the argument that the need for an opportunity to visualise or perceive a future alternative self is important to achieving desistance (Behan, 2014; King, Measham, and O’Brien, 2018; and Szifris, Fox and Bradley, 2017). In this respect, it is clear to see how the aspiration to study within higher education might help to provide the opportunities and motivations to reinvent oneself and develop positive social capital.

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) support the need for analysing desistance from multiple interrelated perspectives and found the strong interdependence of act-desistance, identity desistance and relational desistance which if not present would mean desistance was unlikely or short-term and fragile. A key finding was that hope was a foundation from which all positive change could develop and therefore strong positive recognition within relational desistance at the micro, meso, and macro levels were needed. However, the development of such relations and positive recognition from them were often a significant challenge especially at the meso and macro levels within the wider community, organisations and institutions. This is an important perspective in relation to this research and the implications for higher education and its role in supporting desistance.

However, the work of McNeill (2018; 2019) provides arguably the most insightful analysis of understanding how higher education as a holistic transformative process can support desistance. McNeill (2018; 2019) believes that 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 a person who is at risk of re-offending is reliant on four interconnected dimensions of rehabilitation – personal, social, judicial and moral and political. The personal relates to personal agency, values and beliefs supporting the transformation to a new identity and self. The social dimension refers to the need for a positive and expanded social network to support the development of social capital. The judicial element states a need for the structural ‘de-labelling’ of and from the previous crime. Finally the fourth area relates to the need for moral and political rehabilitation and societal integration at all levels of society often seen as the most difficult (McNeill, 2018; 2019).

Higher Education, Widening Access and Desistance

It is clear from McNeill’s (2018; 2019) model that higher education may provide many of the four proposed elements of rehabilitation. Certainly, the personal, social and moral rehabilitation can be facilitated and supported through higher education as it offers a learning environment rich with new skills, knowledge, and self-directed learning (personal) within a culture, community and social setting full of new social opportunities and positive social networks. Yet, perhaps the stumbling block towards desistance when using higher education as the ‘hook for change’ might be the process of casting-off the offending past. Until recently the requirement to disclose previous convictions via UCAS to universities may have been a step

too far for those individuals concerned with the associated stigma the label offender carries (Weale, 2018), therefore the judicial rehabilitation might remain a problematic area for higher education integration. As highlighted earlier the UK higher education sector is not particularly welcoming of those with a criminal record and clearly more could be done to include, support and motivate those with offending backgrounds. Within a Welsh context universities need to untangle the messages to better support non-traditional student participation such as adult learners by creating a positive culture for those who do not fit such traditional higher education student identities (Evans et al., 2017).

The Coates Review (2016) also found that a major barrier to accessing higher education was the perception of not wanting increased debt on release from prison. Darke and Aresti (2016) highlight the need for more appropriate advice, information and support services with applications to higher education to be provided by prisons. It is therefore likely that when released from prison, people are still not readily provided with a full range of guidance and support services relating to the opportunity to enter or continue in higher education, and when they are directed to education provision it seems it is predominantly aimed at securing employment and practical upskilling (Costello & Warner, 2014) often through the further education sector. However, it might be argued that this approach does not facilitate the aforementioned components needed that better support desistance. For example, employment focused education does not usually offer opportunity for self-discovery and the more holistic educational experience characteristic of higher education with its focus on critical thinking skills within an educational environment that offers diverse social networks (Behan, 2014; Costello & Warner, 2014).

Indeed, the Coates Review (2016) found that those who had been involved within the criminal justice system often had negative previous experiences of formal education and this is a common experience captured and reported in the literature (Warner, 2007; Czerniawski, 2016; Torlone & Vryonides, 2016; Wood, 2020). Therefore, despite the evidence that exalts the benefits of higher education, past experiences of education can impact on future successes. Moreover, the level of educational achievement can also be an indicator for desistance. 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; Lockwood et al., 2012). Furthermore, those that progress onto higher education within prison tend to desist more frequently than those that have education experiences below this level (Zgoba et al., 2008; Ford & Schroeder, 2010; Meyer & Randal, 2013; Ministry of Justice, 2013; Stern, 2014; Bozick et al., 2018).

Students that experience higher education also seem better able to develop greater self-confidence and skills to use upon release (Allred et al., 2013). Indeed, Lockwood et al. (2012) and Runnell (2017) found that studying within a higher education environment was not only linked to a decrease in re-offending behaviour but 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 and the transformational power it offers students to desist (Pike & Adams, 2012; Clark, 2016; Wilson & Reuss, 2000).

It seems therefore that the value of higher education in supporting desistance is worthy of further exploration. To this point however, the studies that have examined the relationships between engagement with higher education and desistance from offending have been largely focused on the USA and in England and Wales within the confines of prison environments (Pompa, 2013; Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016) with less research on how higher education might support desistance after release and/or those at risk of offending (Runnell, 2017). Therefore, this gap in the literature offers a useful opportunity to explore whether higher education is viewed as a 'hook for change' by adults outside of the prison environment and in particular within a community project that seeks to support those wishing to desist from offending.

Methodology

This study was underpinned by a hybrid framework of participatory action and community engagement and learning. The project worked alongside people who had a criminal conviction or who had been identified as at risk of offending as partners – thus seeking to empower and encourage aspiration by carrying out research through ‘doing with’ rather than, ‘researching on’ participants. Such approaches have been highlighted as indicative features of successful desistance intervention processes which support inter-personal, group, community and societal engagement to bring about positive change by building trust, supporting the development of positive social identities, self-determination and personal agency alongside of a reduction in negative labelling (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

Research Partners – The Include Hub

This project built on a long history of successful collaboration between the university and Include. Previous projects had examined a range of issues focused on supporting vulnerable and marginalised groups. Include, a third sector organisation, has been working with those at risk of offending and other vulnerable groups in Wales, for over fourteen years and are well embedded within the community and the criminal justice sector. The Hub (one of a portfolio of projects managed by Include) was launched in 2017 and funded by a Lottery grant. It aims to give members:

An increased sense of belonging and control through participation in positive activities, chosen by them; increased skills and opportunities through training and volunteering; improved opportunities to access more generic support, particularly those outside of scope of existing services; aspiration about their futures by increasing confidence to express their needs, by accessing advice support.

A key strength of the Hub is that its members have the autonomy to shape and run the project – this has manifested in terms of deciding the colour scheme of the building through to designing activities. At the time of the project, the Hub had approximately five hundred members with a daily drop-in rate of about twenty - fifty members.

Methods

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 such as interviewing, ethnographic and observational accounts. Indeed, as Sandberg and Ugelvik (2016) point out, storytelling is nothing new and is in fact a facet of our humanistic behaviours that help us to make sense of the world we inhabit. However, the past fifty years has seen the emergence of Narrative Criminology. This form of scientific inquiry formally emerged 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 increasingly 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 & Ugelvik, 2016). The use of narrative and visual methods was an approach 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 and an analysis tool that has the ability to provide a holistic, nuanced account of the phenomena under study (Lapum et al., 2015) and as an empowering tool for those taking part in the research. The use of ‘Pictorial Mapping Analysis’, enabled participants to discuss

their lived experiences and see their responses drawn in real-time by the artist/analyst present. The analyst was given the schedule of questions/themes at the start of the data collection phase 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.

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 created an inclusive environment that enabled all the participants to become immersed within a creative process and have their views represented even if their artistic ability was limited.

Analytical Framework

This research used a Grounded Theory framework which 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 (Denscombe, 2014; Harris, 2014). Importantly for us, the focus on developing knowledge within practice with the participants aligned well to the value base of the project in supporting members to work alongside us and let their voices be heard and captured clearly and accurately and acknowledged the expertise of the practitioners. Indeed, this approach was both therefore inductive and deductive in that we questioned the data within the existing literature. 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).

At the conclusion of the data collection events, we independently cross checked our notes with the narrative illustrations to establish a set of themes. We then discussed our individual thematic analysis to ensure that, collectively, the themes we identified were an accurate representation of the data. This approach led to the immediate triangulation of the data analysis – something that has been identified as bringing about increased trustworthiness of the findings (Glaw et al., 2017).

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 one participant) and “*what a great way to show what we have talked about*” (focus group two participant).

Data Collection Process

The project began in March 2019. Ethical approval was granted by the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law, Swansea University. A literature review provided context for the development of a question schedule which was then developed in partnership with staff from the Hub. This process ensured that the questions were aligned to the aims of the project and were appropriate for the participants of the study.

Engagement Event One

The first stage of the project involved data collection through an engagement event with members of the Hub. 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.

In total, sixteen 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 five-eight with a maximum suggested threshold of ten (Stewart et al., 2014; Ochieng et al, 2019) so that the discussions are manageable and coherent and therefore ethically practised focus groups (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), 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 contradicted the values the research and the mission and ethos of the partnership organisation. Given the inclusive, open access provision of the Hub outlined previously, it would have been unethical and discriminatory to limit the focus group to only ten members when sixteen 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 composed of thirteen males and three women; all were white; and aged between twenty and sixty. All participants were 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. Twelve of the male participants also reported current issues with substance misuse including drugs and alcohol. All the participants stated that they had mental health issues that included anxiety, depression, stress and two had an atypical personality diagnosis. It should be noted that we did not directly ask the participants to provide this data, it was something that emerged during the group discussion.

Engagement Event Two

The second engagement event also took place at the Hub. The focus of the session built around the themes from engagement event one by involving those that have been involved in education within prison environments. There were eight participants in this focus group. Two participants (both male) were current or previous “prison students”. One was serving a prison term (former solicitor now studying for a PhD); the other was completing an undergraduate degree (both in Welsh universities) and was also working with a third sector project that sought to support desistance. This group also included two managers (one male and female) from third sector organisations working to support those at risk of offending as well as two members of prison staff (male and female) one teaching and one in a supervisory capacity; and two female members of university widening access staff.

Findings

The forthcoming discussion is based on the findings from the engagement events. The analytical process identified three over-arching themes: aspirations; educational experiences; and barriers and challenges to engaging with higher education. Throughout this section examples of the narrative analysis are presented as illustrations of the data. The full narrative mapping outputs can be found in Appendix A.

Aspirations

Illustration 1



Given their lived experiences, the aspirations of the participants of the first focus group were diverse and consequently, it was at times, challenging to discuss aspirations of higher education. Therefore the discussion initially sought to identify the more immediately identifiable aspirations of the group and used these as starting points to later build in the notion of higher education. What became apparent, was that despite the participants having a variety of short term but important and personalised aspirations - visualised in Illustration 1 - there was one common vision for the future that connected them all and that was the need to be “safe, secure, happy and being able to look after myself.” The analysis of the data revealed four interconnected sub themes that are discussed below and shed light on the aspirations of the participants.

Mental Health and Substance Misuse

Many of the participants had experienced significant trauma within or throughout their lives and so mental health was a common factor in their daily lives. For example, one participant reported just wanting to “survive” – this participant was female to male transgender and survival for them was focused on getting an appointment with a psychiatrist and pushing on with their transition. A further example in the variance in aspirations was illustrated by a male participant with serious mental health issues who said his aspiration was to eat a McDonalds meal outside all the football stadiums in the UK (see Illustration 1).

Despite such variation, there was a general consensus that mental health was an ongoing challenge and that participants were at different points on their path to recovery. 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. This, for this group of potential future students, getting to a place where they had positive mental health was the aspirational door that would open up all other opportunities. Therefore, this finding adds support to the views of Senkans et al. (2015) who found that ongoing mental health experiences often disrupt the path to desistance.

In addition to pressing mental health concerns, for the majority of the participants in focus group one, managing their use of substances was an ongoing challenge. Interestingly, when exploring the literature on trauma, substance use and desistance there is little research linking the three in relation to an overarching framework or approach to desistance despite it appearing common that those that have been within a prison environment have experienced significant life trauma (childhood, adolescent and or adult) and have experience of substance misuse (Bradley, 2017; McSweeney, 2010).

In order to support potential learners with complex needs, as identified in our sample,

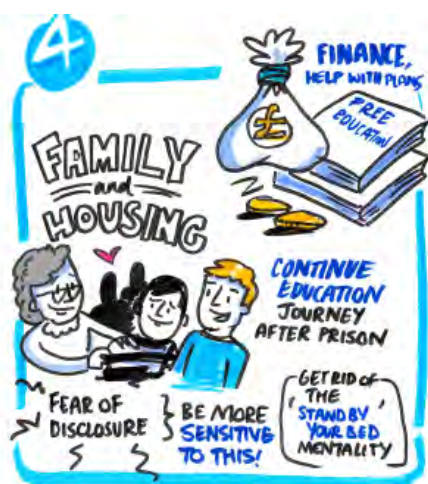
within a higher education environment, the concept of ‘recovery capital’ is worthy of exploration. Cloud and Granfield (2009) break down recovery capital into four components - Social, Physical, Human, and Cultural. Social refers to the need for positive support systems of friends and family and wider social groups. Physical relates to adequate assets like money or property to support moving away from substance use context. Human capital encompasses the gaining of new skills, new education and developing hope and positive aspirations for the future and these are often created through higher educational experiences. Finally, cultural capital is the ability of the person in recovery to be able to form new views, values and attitudes that support positive behaviour change that conforms more readily to societal norms.

Through this analysis, it is clear that there is potential for higher education to support those wishing to desist who have multiple and complex needs. Higher education has been shown to help individuals develop new notions of self through confidence and raises social capital (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). However, despite there being a push to develop university services that seek to support students’ health and well-being, it remains the case that these services are often under resourced. Therefore, harnessing the support of external organisations with the expertise to support those with complex needs may offer the ‘meshing’ of recovery capital (Best & Laudet, 2010) to provide practical and long-term avenues to those universities who are truly committed to widening access. Indeed, our analysis of barriers and challenges to accessing higher education evidence the views of our sample who called for the diversification of higher education (Illustration 10).

Securing Employment

Employment for our sample was seen as an anchor and platform that would provide them with the means to succeed in other aspirations such as having a home and a future with a family both of which are seen as powerful in supporting desistance (Senkans et al., 2015) and can be seen below in illustration 2. However, as Shapland and Bottoms (2011) point out securing employment and access to a regular income are often significant barriers to desistance.

Illustration 2



Despite the recognition by the group of how a criminal conviction can hinder future employment opportunities, some participants cited their aspirations. 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 twenty’s had a history of repeated prison sentences and wanted to get a job and believed he would be able to achieve this.

Furthermore, as visualised in illustration 9, some of the group articulated the notion that employment could be a way of giving back. For example, one male participant with a seventeen-year history of substance use wanted to harness and share his experiences of addiction to support others experiencing similar issues. However, when the topic of gaining employment

through a higher education was discussed, it became apparent that our participants were sceptical about the ability of higher education to provide this and this seemed to be due to a general mistrust of universities as can be seen from illustration 3.

Illustration 3



Motivation for Positive Change

Amongst the group, positive futures were constructed as an ideal combination 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. 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. It was very clear from the narratives shared that the members knew what they needed but not necessarily how they would be able to secure all of their aspirations despite being motivated and passionate in discussing them. There was a common narrative that emerged during this discussion thread that despite their best efforts to desist ‘the system’ did not support them and this was the main barrier to their desistance. In many ways the notion of structural barriers seen as systematic failure by the participants is reminiscent of McNeill’s (2018; 2019) explanations discussed previously about the rehabilitative factors necessary for desistance to occur.

Indeed, data from the second engagement event supported the views of the first group in that the overriding need for security and stability had to be the first challenge to be overcome before consideration could be given to any form of education. Once these had been met, then the idea of developing a new identity through education was considered as a main motivation and outcome which again supports the previous research in this area (Giordano et al., 2002; Dufour et al., 2015; Abeling-Judge, 2016). The words ‘new identity’ were not used by the members but there were phrases such as “*it would give me a new me*” and “*would change my mindset*” and offer me a “*new peer group*” and “*give me greater confidence*” as can be seen below in illustrations 4 and 5.

Illustration 4**Illustration 5****Aspirations and Higher Education**

A number of participants in the first focus group and all of the participants from the second group identified that education was indeed an aspiration for many people with a criminal conviction. Reflecting the views of the PET (2017), however during both focus groups, the idea of higher education was discussed in relation to negative perceptions that universities are not places for “people like me”. There were also associated feelings of a lack of confidence to pursue higher education because of the perceptions of the university environment (see illustration 6 below). Such views raised the question about how higher education can reach out to this marginalised group of adult learners.

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. There also remained for some, an inherent suspicion of universities. One participant expressed that he felt he had been lied to by the university about the programme of study and that it did not support or contain the learning opportunities it advertised. This meant that this male had a distrust of universities and their motives being focused on income generation and this was agreed as a view across the wider group of the member’s focus group in the first engagement event.

Illustration 6



However, there were some positive responses about the ability of university to enrich lives. 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

In the first focus group there were four (three male, one female) participants who had been to university. One male had completed a drama degree, a female an 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 use and depression.

Importantly, however all of the participants who had been to university expressed that the impact on their lives at the time, had been positive. It had raised their self-esteem, social capital, and their confidence and skills factors associated with desistance (Allred et al., 2013; Lockwood et al., 2012; Maruna, 2011; Meyer & Randall, 2013; Runnel, 2017; Zgoba et al., 2008).

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 be a positive experience providing a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano et al., 2002) in supporting the formation of new identities and opportunities towards desistance and positive life outcomes (see illustration 9). It is clear that the university environment has excellent potential to offer recognition, hope, and self-esteem and worth to adult learners offering strong relational desistance at the macro level as described by Nugent and Schinkel (2016) which was acknowledged by those members that had been to university and could be a key factor for other such learners.

Educational Experiences

Illustration 7



In order to understand the participants' suspicions about university and for some even the idea of re-engaging with education we sought to explore their previous experiences of education. Overwhelmingly and illustrative of the previous literature (Warner, 2007; Czerniawski, 2016; Torlone & Vryonides, 2016; Wood, 2020), for the participants in group one, education had not been a positive experience, therefore seeking to raise their own aspirations of attending university appeared a challenge. Most participants (twelve) reported issues with primary and secondary education. One male participant used the metaphor of feeling like a “*fish in a bowl throughout school*” to express the sadness, isolation, and vulnerability that he felt. Represented in illustration 7, this visualisation captured the consensus within the group.

Ten out of the twelve 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 worryingly from educators. Feelings of alienation were commonly reported as was 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. School was also constructed as part of the ‘system’ that further ostracised them from being able to feel happy, secure, and valued.

However, somewhat ironically, for those participants who had been to prison, the education provision within that context offered hope and aspiration arguably reflecting some of the more positive and innovative research into prison education (Warner, 2007; Wood, 2020). Indeed, this group reported that prison had been the beginning of their education, offering opportunity to develop some basic skills such as reading and writing and for one participant as highlighted above; it offered the chance to engage in 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 they were now “*ready to learn*” in the prison environment 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. It was explained by many that they were simply not ready during primary and secondary education which was often negative and along with significant other family and social challenges meant they could not engage and find value in learning at this time. Those that had been a student within prison also reported they gained greater self-respect and were often treated more like students; this reflects Warner’s (2007) view that prisons can and should be rehabilitative environments utilising an education model that focuses on a person’s humanity and citizenship.

Illustration 8

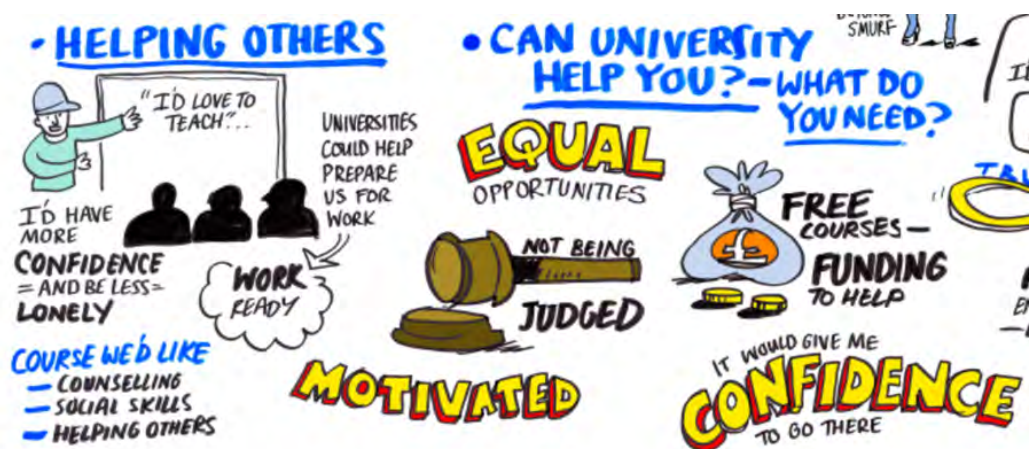


Data from engagement event two, wholeheartedly supported the experiences of education from the participants in group one. From the narratives of the practitioners, exclusion from school was a common experience for prisoners and those with a conviction in the community. A poor experience of education 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 develop a change of mind-set in those with a criminal record to better understand the opportunities and positives experiences that education can offer using taster sessions and engagement of education providers within community settings.

There was also a consensus that support services and academic staff should be better informed about how to support this marginalised group of learners. 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 this gap (see illustration 8) and that this service could also be part of a community outreach approach to engage such potential students.

Barriers and Challenges to Engaging with Higher Education

Illustration 9



As already shown, the narratives around both the environment and the potential outcomes of higher education were conflicting. However, there was a consensus within both groups that identified university as marketing itself as a vehicle for gaining employment. Yet, the participants from group one 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 which as was

presented earlier was seen as a bedrock for successful desistance. There are obvious financial commitments to studying either part or full time and Wales has student finance for both routes to support studying within a higher education environment. It was clear that despite the student finance available the people from engagement group one did not know of or fully understand the financial support that was available to them and therefore assumed it would cost a lot of money and be in debt. The idea of taking a student loan and having to pay it back was not something that the group viewed as a positive step in their rehabilitation. It could be argued that there needs to be much more appropriate community engagement with marginalised groups to explain the benefits of higher education especially from a financial perspective and to more clearly provide accessible student finance information to such people and communities. It was suggested that such work could be achieved through a university's approach to promoting higher education to such groups ensuring it was based within a community setting.

There was recognition however that university could help people to gain confidence and improve their well-being and “*open the door*” 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 held 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 - a necessary dynamic for a positive desistance journey (Behan, 2014; Costello & Warner, 2014). 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.

Illustration 10



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 (Runnel, 2017). Calling for this “*diversification*” (see illustration 10) the participants identified that this 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 also agreement that the university should be accountable and responsible for reducing any barriers by “bridging the gap” thus making higher education attainable. Within a Welsh context, the new policy for Adult Learning in Wales was released in 2017. Introducing the term “Adult Community Learning” (ACL) - which is defined as flexible learning opportunities for adults, delivered in community venues to meet local needs - the ACL strategy supports the vision outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015). One of the key overarching well-being goals prescribed in this piece of legislation, is to create a more equal Wales where there is a society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances. In adopting an inclusive outreach approach through the aims of ACL it might be argued the higher education provision in Wales would be closely aligned to meeting the needs of those with aspirations to desist as it states that provision should ideally offer introductory ‘hook’ courses. The policy context and narrative in Wales therefore offers hope and direction for the development of appropriate higher education pathways for those with a criminal record and at risk of offending.

Whilst these policy shifts are encouraging, the focus groups pointed out there was a significant need to ensure that the wider university support services and learning environment were equipped to meet the wide range of needs of “students like them”. Aside of standard services such as well-being, health services, and student finance, the group also called for specialised non-judgmental services that could support their transition to university life. 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. These sub themes are discussed below.

Illustration 11



Funding

Aside of the practitioners in group two, all of the participants reported financial hardship. Their income was derived from state benefits and the majority had no access to transport so simply paying public transport fares was often a challenge. Therefore, as discussed earlier university was perceived as something that was financially unattainable and that the debt associated with going to university outweighed the benefits. Participants were unaware of the funding available for part-time adult learners following the implementation of the Diamond Review recommendations in 2018 regarding higher education and student finance in Wales and so it is clear that there remains the need for appropriate and accessible information for potential stu-

dents with complex social backgrounds. Such accurate information would help in the informed decision making process and reduce the perception of 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 as can be identified in illustration 6 above. 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 in the UK who 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. Given the desire of some participants to support others in similar situations to themselves, it is likely that degree programmes that would support such aspiration would be within the ‘working with vulnerable people’ group such as youth and community work, housing studies, social work, and broader health and social care programmes and still require criminal record disclosure. This could be a significant limitation to supporting a desistance journey (Bradbury, 2017) and a needed consideration for inclusive change within higher education institutions that offer such programmes and the sectors that they work in partnership with.

Illustration 12



A further finding of this research was the identification of stigma experienced at all levels and in all environments by those who were studying whilst serving a prison sentence. Both participants in group two 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 failed to turn up, 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; jealousy and envy, perceptions of hierarchy with a “*you think you are better than us*” narrative (visualised in illustration 12) and this was from both other prisoners and the prison staff. This meant that people in prison who were in education felt isolated and had no safe space or identity. Participants identified that they needed transition support within the prison and outside the prison environment to stop any relapse towards cycles of offending and to positively support their choice to engage with education not stigmatise it and negatively challenge it. It was suggested that a role such as a key worker who would support people transitioning from prison to the community would be beneficial and that this would be different to a parole officer or social worker and more focused on development of education and transition to education in community and institutional settings such as further and higher education. It was also suggested that prison staff needed further and ongoing training to highlight the positive benefits of prisoners engaging with education and the supportive and rehabilitation role that prison staff should all take to create supportive environments for positive change. This is a significant finding that has not been identified within the current literature and despite being a perspective from a small group of people does suggest that prison environment can be negative and stigmatising to those that chose to engage with education and act as a further barrier to desistance and so needs further exploration to see if this is a more common experience within prison contexts.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the role of higher education in supporting aspiration towards desistance in a localised area, Swansea. In addressing the primary aim of this research, it 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, like many people who have a conviction and/or have been within the prison system, were complex and multi-layered with mental health, substance misuse issues, stable accommodation and relational insecurities common. Therefore, understanding how universities support potential learners with their aspirations to attain a higher education requires a renewed vision to alleviate the ‘pains of desistance’ (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

A key finding of this study was 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 support to the growing number of university-prison partnership initiatives discussed in previous volumes of this journal (Turner et al., 2019; Gray, Ward & Fogarty, 2019). However, in listening to the voices of our participants a renewed model of delivery was envisaged.

There was a clear sense that the existing models of university-prison delivery might be built upon within a community setting (Gosling & Burke, 2019). However, such projects should not be exclusively focused on the ‘inside-student’ and opening up the opportunity to those wishing to desist within the community, whether they had served a custodial sentence or not, would provide more equitable access and support this community in meeting many of the same challenges and experiences in their desistance journey as those within prison. The focus on the ‘inside-student’ is logically more dominant because such learners are within a controlled and easily managed system and there are policy and practice drivers ensuring prison education is a key focus for rehabilitation and desistance (Coates Review, 2016). There also seems to be a greater focus on employment for those leaving prison or those that have offended within the community both in the literature findings (Senkans et al., 2015) and within the participants of this research. There needs to be more support through all stakeholders to better engage within the community setting to ensure the message that higher education is a useful and powerful experience for desistance.

The data from this study suggest that for models of higher education within the community to be appealing to this group of potential learners there needs to be recognition of the

specific needs of this cohort and recognition and relations built with such learners (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Therefore, as a starting point those tasked with widening access might need to consider reaching out to organisations that work with those at risk of offending. This would call for a commitment from the university to work in partnership with the external organisation (in this case the Include Hub) to develop a programme of learning similar to that of the existing prison – university courses. The programme would need to be supported by external practitioners who understood the background and specific needs of the students. This expertise might be utilised as upskilling training for university staff or indeed bespoke support to students so that 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). It could mean that such a partnership approach and support delivery is in place for the first few years of education and then university services maintains and completes that support until graduation. This model means that people from offending backgrounds have initial familiar community embedded support whilst also engaging with the university support services as their confidence, trust and new social networks are established and consolidated. The student is then much more likely to effectively transition to a new student identity with confidence and better able to use and engage with support from the university. This model also ensures that the university and its support staff are appropriately educated and trained in developing their expertise and still have a knowledgeable expert in the community to support this marginalised group of students with complex needs. The findings also suggest that introductory, free taster sessions would facilitate confidence building by seeking to erode past negative educational experiences and engender a dialogue of trust that moves away from the deeply held mistrust of universities as elite neo-liberal institutions that focus on exclusion and monetary gain.

Critically however, 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 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, in learning from these negative experiences, it is vital that any community education programmes or integrated university courses seek to address the stigma experienced by this group of learners. This might begin with a review of admission process which still require a conviction to be disclosed through to the development of policies that recognise the contribution this group of learners can make to the educational environment in terms of diversity and inclusivity.

In this respect, any new models of delivery might use the ‘recovery capital’ (Cloud & Granfield, 2009) model as a framework for pedagogical structure and delivery. Adopting such an approach would support the views of McNeill (2018; 2019) and his idea of integrated factors necessary for successful long-term desistance. 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 those wishing to desist is reliant on a successful journey of the four aspects of desistance which are; personal rehabilitation, social rehabilitation, judicial rehabilitation, and moral and political rehabilitation (McNeill, 2018; 2019). It is clear that personal rehabilitation of the learner could be well fulfilled by engagement with higher education and all it can offer in the development of new knowledge and skills and exposure to new values and beliefs and this was supported by the members of this research. Social rehabilitation within the context of higher education is also obvious with the positive opportunities and pathways to engage with diverse and positive social networks supporting the development of social capital and also within a community support project that would offer further engagement ‘back into’ the community with its citizens and other opportunities. Judicial rehabilitation within such a higher education and community delivery project would need positive collaboration with the criminal justice system and within a community setting the probation service would be integral. The

probation service would need to ensure that the criminal label, language, and stigma is dropped and the re-labelling to citizen and recognition of a non-criminal identity is important. Finally, moral and political rehabilitation could be supported through engagement with the partner community project and in this way support reintegration into the community with reflective dialogue on their past criminal activity and the reasons and conditions that facilitated such choices and actions.

In this way the individual is supported in all four areas resulting in the development of personal agency to make positive and informed life choices and it is clear that such a higher education approach could play a significant role in the desistance of learners. Indeed, if developed and supported this approach could increasingly be seen as an innovative widening access role of universities across the UK and increase their civic mission and community education engagement. In this world higher education would be about supporting people from all walks of life in their transition from a non-university student to a citizen of the globe who is educationally attractive to prospective employers and a positive role model for others.

Therefore, it is clear from this pilot study, that higher education can be part of the desistance framework within a community setting. However, there is still has a long way to go. Exposure to institutional and society personal stigma, mistrust of corporate institutions and an internalising of negative past educational experiences are powerful challenges which need to be overcome. It really is a question of whether universities can put the needs of those at risk of offending above the reputational risk that goes alongside innovative projects that truly seek to make a higher education accessible to all and support the path to sustained desistance.

To conclude, what was abundantly clear from this project is that listening to the voices of the marginalised can provide clear solutions. Indeed, in the true sense of putting the voices of the participants at the centre of this research, we would like to finish with a quote from Fergus, a male in his mid-50s from group one, who expressed the impact of the narrative mapping experience in enabling those at risk of offending to transitioning to their new identity whatever that may be:

“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.”

Appendix – Narrative Focus Group One and Group Two

ASPIRATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS

- SORT MY HEAD OUT!
- HAVE MY OWN PLACE
- TRAVEL TO THAILAND
- GET BACK INTO NURSING
- VISIT EVERY STADIUM IN THE UK!
- LOOK AFTER MYSELF

• HOW WILL YOU ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS?

- GET MY DRIVERS LICENCE
- PUBLIC TRANSPORT
- LIFE-EXPERIENCE OF THE STREETS
- I FEEL I CAN GIVE MORE AS I HAVE EXPERIENCE
- THEY DON'T WANT PEOPLE ON COURSES WITH PROBLEMS

• BARRIERS

- STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH, UNEMPLOYMENT ETC.
- I DIDN'T TRUST THE UNIVERSITY

• EDUCATION

- I WAS HOME-SCHOOLED AND TAUGHT ON THE STREETS
- EARLY YEARS
- I WAS BULLIED
- WOULD LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW MOST OF THE TIME
- DIAGNOSED: ADHD, Psychosis, PERSONALITY DISORDER

• SCHOOL

- COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
- I COULDN'T READ OR WRITE IN SCHOOL
- I LEARNED A LOT MORE IN PRISON
- GOT MY EXAMS/QUALIFICATIONS THERE
- I WOULD MISBEHAVE GOT THROWN OUT
- FOR ME, 1-2-1 TEACHING WORKED (+ SMALL GROUPS)
- HUB MADE ME FEEL EMPOWERED - LIKE A BLUE BEYONCE SMURF

• UNIVERSITY

- PRISON-ED TRAINED
- MY COURSE WAS THE WRONG CHOICE FOR ME
- I LOVED UNIVERSITY
- HELPED ME WITH MY MENTAL HEALTH
- I'D LOVE TO GO ONCE I GET OVER MY DEMONS
- LOST SOUL SWIMMING IN A FISHBOWL

• HELPING OTHERS

- "I'D LOVE TO TEACH"...
- UNIVERSITIES COULD HELP PREPARE US FOR WORK
- I'D HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE = AND BE LESS = LONELY
- WORK READY
- COURSE WE'D LIKE: COUNSELLING, SOCIAL SKILLS, HELPING OTHERS

• CAN UNIVERSITY HELP YOU? - WHAT DO YOU NEED?

- EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES
- NOT BEING JUDGED
- FREE COURSES - FUNDING TO HELP
- IT WOULD GIVE ME CONFIDENCE TO GO THERE
- I'D WANT THE UNIVERSITY TO ACCEPT MY PAST
- TRUST
- UNIVERSITY WASN'T FLEXIBLE ENOUGH FOR ME - NEEDS TO CHANGE
- HELP TO MAKE SENSE OF MY OWN WORLD

UNDERSTANDING ASPIRATION & EDUCATION TOWARDS DIVERSION & DESISTANCE FROM OFFENDING: THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN WALES



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