Research on the inside: Overcoming obstacles to completing a postgraduate degree in prison

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Abstract

Postgraduate students who are attempting to complete their study while being incarcerated, face a unique set of administrative, social and academic challenges which can significantly impact their progress. University educators are very often unaware of the particular circumstances of these incarcerated postgraduate students and fail to provide adequate support. As prisons are designed with the purpose of maintaining public security, they generally are inadequate learning environments and are staffed by officers with little familiarity with university processes and academic demands.

This chapter describes the very specific research and learning environment of a prison and details how the prison culture can support or inhibit higher level learning. It highlights the significant benefits of higher education for incarcerated students, prisons, universities and society as a whole. However, the chapter also explores the many difficulties of access and support for any form of higher education in the prison environment; and specifically, the difficulties for postgraduate students undertaking research and for their supervisors.

The chapter concludes with a series of recommendations for both universities and prisons, concluding that many of the challenges to postgraduate teaching and learning in prison can be at least partially addressed through better communication, a whole-of-prison approach to learning and the development of a learning culture. Prison conditions vary hugely across jurisdictions and so it is not possible to provide a model for study which works for all incarcerated students but this chapter suggests changes which could improve conditions for many.

Introduction

As the authors of this chapter, we have worked extensively in prisons in Australia and the UK, usually researching, supporting or instigating higher education initiatives. Much of the information contained herein comes from our personal observations and conversations with prisoners, prison officers and academics, in the absence of research literature or formal research projects on postgraduate research in prisons.

It is very difficult to determine how many prisoners are undertaking formal postgraduate research in Australian or UK prisons. This data is not specifically collected; instead it is captured under the

umbrella of the percentage of eligible prisoners engaged in higher education which fails to differentiate between prisoners engaged in university enabling courses, undergraduate courses, coursework higher degrees, and research higher degrees (for example, see Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2017). Even so, the numbers of postgraduate students are likely to be small. By way of example, the UK's Open University has been a key provider of higher education to prisoners since the 1970s but they currently have only 11 postgraduate students across 9 prisons in England. There are, however, growing numbers of other UK universities providing higher level learning opportunities through Prison University Partnerships where groups of students from the university learn together with a group of incarcerated students (see Prisoners' Education Trust, 2017). Some of these universities are building on their partnerships and beginning to offer postgraduate study to incarcerated students. In Australia, a number of universities have enrolled a handful of incarcerated postgraduate students but again, this data is not specifically collected. Our knowledge of incarcerated postgraduate students usually comes about from conversations with academics and prison education officers.

If prisoners are undertaking research higher degrees while incarcerated, it is almost certainly due to the efforts of individual champions within the prison system, within the university and among the student's family and friends. These champions act as intermediaries between the university or prison and the student, secure resources and in some cases undertake the mechanical aspects of the research. This in turn raises ethical issues within the university, creating issues around authorship and original research. There are no systematised and supported pathways for incarcerated students to enter into research higher degrees in either Australia or the UK. Anecdotally, we would say that there are slightly more incarcerated students doing coursework Postgraduate Diploma and Masters degrees, typically MBAs. But again, the pathways are not formally supported.

More than immobilising and isolating a prisoner or 'offender' for the duration of his or her sentence; incarceration also changes that person's life chances and identity choices in perpetuity. More broadly, the criminal justice systems in Australia and the UK do more than 'correct' criminals; they often disproportionately capture a particular segment of the population, specifically those who are already disadvantaged and most likely to suffer from institutional racism, systemic bias and social injustice (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press; Department for Works and Pensions, 2012). Once within the prison, these prisoners are far less likely to participate in educational programs and when they do engage, they are more likely to participate in low level numeracy and literacy programs rather than in higher education of any sort. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians make up just 2 per cent of the general population and some 28 per cent of Australia's prison population. Generally speaking, they also have had less contact with formal education prior to incarceration (Lee, Farley, Cox and Seymour, 2017).

Prisoners are routinely subject to assumptions which would be considered discriminatory if applied to other student populations. For example, despite rigorous research to the contrary (Coates, 2016), assumptions are made that prisoners need only basic skills development and vocational training, rather than higher education. This leads to a lack of provision with only 1 per cent of the funded curriculum in UK prisons being at a higher, post-secondary, level (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2012). Such prejudicial assumptions, which reflect the populist, erroneous stereotype that criminals are of lesser intelligence tend to reduce motivation, aspiration and confidence in incarcerated university students, or potential students (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press). However, in this chapter we will provide many reasons why higher education for prisoners is important, discuss the challenges faced in facilitating higher education and in particular, postgraduate study in prison and consider what could be done to improve the situation.

The case for university studies in prison

The deprivation of liberty is the punishment for a prisoner but all other human rights should remain intact. A basic principle should be that prisoners are treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the person (Arnold, 2012; United Nations, 2009). Under international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, prisoners have the same rights to education as free citizens. In reality, however, prison management frequently prioritise security, work, and economic efficiency to the detriment of educational opportunity (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press; Pike and Adams 2012).

So, the obvious argument in support of university prison education is that of equity. It can be argued that prisoners should have access to the same level of educational opportunities available to adults in wider society. However, there is a strong case for going beyond simple parity. All too often prisoners have failed or been unable to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered earlier in life. They often arrive in prison with no qualifications but can use their time constructively. Arguably, society has both an obligation and self-interest in looking to mitigate the adverse effects of imprisonment and assist prisoners to be well-equipped to re-enter society on release and empower them to contribute fully and constructively to it (Clark, 2016; Coates, 2016).

Literacy and numeracy are clearly important for those that lack such skills, but the evidence suggests that inspiring aspiration and motivation are key. Education could embed learning of literacy, numeracy and basic ICT skills into other more creative activities that prisoners are inspired and motivated to take up (Clark, 2016). Once motivated, prisoners can excel at their studies, rising to higher levels quickly if well-supported and allowed to progress as far as they are able (Pike and Hopkins, in press). Learning should address deeper personal and social development needs (essential for social integration and gaining employment) rather than simply focusing on job skills relating to any specific employment route (Clark, 2016). This is especially true when considering that the chances of an ex-offender gaining employment post-release are significantly less than for an individual of the same age and educational level who has not been previously incarcerated (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, and Yahner, 2011). The reality is that many of these ex-offenders will not be employed and this is especially true of former sex offenders (Brown, Spencer and Deakin, 2007).

Yet, in both Australia and the UK, only around 1.5 per cent of eligible prisoners access higher education (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2017; Coates, 2016; House of Commons Library, 2017). This varies significantly across prisons in the UK and across states and territories in Australia. For example, around 6.2 per cent of eligible Queensland prisoners access higher education (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2017). Until very recently, correctional centres in some states were unable to facilitate prisoner enrolment in tertiary programs and prisoners in the Northern Territory had access to neither the technology nor the support that would enable them to participate in higher education (Farley and Willems, 2017). In the UK, higher education in prison is provided mostly through distance learning and applications for funding for distance learning is a good indicator of the levels of higher education in each prison. Applications for funding in 2014-15 ranged from 0 to 14 per cent of the UK prison populations (Clark, 2016).

Reducing the damage from incarceration

Prison is damaging and almost invariably, lives are more fractured upon release than on entry. This is true almost irrespective of the design of the facilities and the programs that are offered. Education is said to lessen the damage caused by imprisonment (Costelloe, 2014). Higher education in particular,

develops prisoners' abilities to critically reflect on their situation, enabling them to have different conversations, develop new horizons and partition themselves from the more damaging effects of prison (Behan, 2014; Pike, 2014). Higher education students in prison often have a sense of belonging to a learning community which can partially protect them from the isolation of being in prison. It can also help them to stay away from the more damaging aspects of prison life and from belonging to a criminal community (Pike and Hopkins, in press).

Ex-prisoners with 'spoiled' pasts, have significant difficulty in gaining employment upon release (Farrall et al.., 2011). People with convictions are highly likely to be excluded by employers, with 75 per cent of employers using a disclosed conviction to reject an applicant or discriminate against them (Working Links', 2010). However, there is evidence that higher education can enhance a prisoner's employment prospects and rates of pay in employment, upon release (Costelloe, 2014; Duwe and Clark, 2014; Nally et al., 2014)

Empowerment, agency and sense of self

In a prison, perhaps more than in any other educational context, identity matters and identity investments will ultimately determine study success or failure. As the ultimate 'total institution' (see Goffman, 1961), the modern prison requires of its inhabitants a working and reworking of personal and social identities (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press). As Pike and Adams (2012) pointed out in their study of higher-level distance learners in UK prisons, prisoners frequently value the identity of 'student' as a 'lifeline.' Incarcerated students work hard to establish and protect this valued identity against competing interpretations of who they are as 'offenders.'

The acquisition of knowledge brings with it empowerment, improved self-esteem and a greater capacity to navigate life's options (McCollom, 1994). Education that is voluntary provides prisoners with agency, giving them the ability to take control of this aspect of their lives while, of its nature, a prison is an environment in which prisoners are necessarily disempowered from having authority or control (Clark, 2016; Crewe et al., 2014). This can be transformative, involving a shift in one's sense of self, and the emergence of a pro-social identity with pro-social attitudes, values and beliefs. Accompanying this is an investment in, and attachment to conventional roles and law abiding behaviours.

Students learn to become analytical readers, writers, and thinkers. They identify themselves as something other than criminals; they are students. They have the opportunity to interact with and be seen by people from the outside as something other than criminals and envision a different life for themselves than the one of crime (McCarty, 2006). Being given responsibilities and belonging to a learning community in prison helps students to maintain their student identity and self-esteem and increases the likelihood of success (Pike and McFarlane, 2017).

Resilience, hope and reintegration into society

Studying higher education in prison comes with many challenges. Successfully completing higher education in prison, against the odds, builds realistic hopes and aspirations for prisoners to have better lives upon release. By overcoming the challenges and ultimately succeeding in their studies, students develop a resilience which enables them to continue to overcome the immense challenges they face post-release. (Clark, 2016; Pike and Hopkins, in press).

Higher education can be a form of collateral that can be used as currency to negotiate the stigma commonly experienced by former prisoners in the 'conventional world' (Darke and Aresti, 2016). For many former prisoners, higher education is the gateway back into 'conventional society' by allowing them to develop social capital and preparing them for active citizenship (Costelloe, 2014). Relative to this, and equally important, higher education provides an alternative way of 'being', giving new meaning and value to the lives of prisoners and former prisoners. For most of these men and women, life has not only become much more meaningful, it has had significant implications for their psychological well-being (Darke and Aresti, 2016). Former prisoners who have studied higher education in prison were found to reintegrate back into society more successfully if they were are able to maintain their student identity and keep their hope and aspirations alive through belonging to a learning community post-release (Pike and McFarlane, 2017).

Reducing re-offending

The success of education and training programs in prisons is usually couched in terms of reductions in re-offending. This is especially problematic given there is no agreed definition of what rates of re-offending mean between jurisdictions and rates are measured over a period of years (Andersen and Skardhamar, 2015), and other factors aside from education, including police activity, significantly impact an individual's inclination to reoffend (Dempsey, 2013). This uncertainty around the definition of recidivism means that this measure is frequently manipulated to reinforce whatever argument is being proposed (Andersen and Skardhamar, 2015). However, if using this measure, there is much research evidence that higher education reduces re-offending, giving results between 8 and 55 per cent reduction in reoffending (Clark, 2016; McCarty, 2006; Ministry of Justice, 2013).

In Australia, the cost of housing a prisoner is around $AUD105,000 per annum (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2017). Even a small reduction in recidivism rates translates into significant savings to the public purse.

The development of higher cognitive skills and 'dynamic security'

It is theorised that improvements in cognitive processing, communication abilities and enhancement of long-term prospects afforded by education and training for prisoners, may result in pro-social behaviours with a subsequent reduction in the frequency and severity of assaults. Using education to improve security outcomes contributes to 'dynamic security', i.e. security mediated by human factors (Wynne, 2001). Early studies revealed the potential for correctional education programs to create positive institutional cultures. These changes were thought to be brought about by prisoner exposure to positive civilian role models (educators) through improved decision-making abilities and pro-social values (Brazzell et al., 2009). Correctional centre management have encouraged prisoner enrolment in basic education because it provides an incentive for good behaviour; producing mature, well-spoken prisoners who have a calming influence on other prisoners and on correctional officers (Ross 2009).

Higher education takes this a step further. It increases cognitive ability, broadening and developing a way to consider problems and issues, providing new pro-social thinking patterns, giving prisoners the ability to express themselves more effectively and negotiate agreed outcomes without having to resort to violence (Clark, 2016; Farley and Pike, 2016; Pompoco et al., 2017).

Finally, educational research shows how people's mindsets influence their capacity to learn and change. Mindsets are, in turn, influenced by surroundings. Where potential is recognised to be malleable and there are opportunities for growth, people are more likely to be able to change in the

desired direction (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). So, clearly, higher education provides higher cognitive skills and safer prison environments for both prisoners and staff.

The challenges for prisoners engaged in higher education

Prisoners who wish to access higher education experience many challenges. These arise mostly due to the harsh prison regime with the lack of provision resources and technology, lack of access to online materials, a lack of flexibility in timing of studies and the lack of a learning culture. This position is exacerbated by the lack of educational and social pre-requisites and a lack of local support. Furthermore, at a policy level, there is a conflict between the rhetoric for education as a human right or to reduce recidivism, and the global recession, financial cutbacks and moral panic about crime (Czerniawski, 2015).

The prison environment

Prison provides a very specific learning context. On entering, prisoners lose their home, their possessions and their very identity as a person, becoming just a number (Goffman, 1968). The contemporary prison has become increasingly formulated, concerned and perhaps obsessed with negative conceptions of risk (Warr, 2016). Prisons are closed institutions in which control is the primary concern and questioning authority is not tolerated. In academia, colleges and universities are theoretically open places that encourage questioning. Operating a college inside a tightly closed institution where carceral security always has primacy, requires adaptation (McCarty, 2006).

Prisons are noisy, crowded and sometimes hostile environments where students are subject to movement restrictions and transfers, often without warning (Hopkins and Farley, 2015). Movement issues are becoming increasingly common as prisons become more and more overcrowded. Prisoners from different security classifications are not permitted to meet due to concerns around the passage of contraband or because of individual security concerns. Nearly every prison in Australia and the UK has some degree of overcrowding (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2017).

Access to technology

The increased prevalence and sophistication of digital technologies and the internet from the 1980s, opened the doors for potentially greater opportunity for participation in higher education (Selwyn, 2010). Electronic access to course materials and course activities enables many students, otherwise unable to participate in face-to-face activities on campus, to participate in higher education. This digital access is often heralded as the way in which higher education institutions could enable participation by large numbers of students from non-traditional cohorts (Selwyn and Gorard, 2003; Sims et al., 2008).

There is now a fundamental assumption that people should have empowered and informed choices in how they access or use technology for learning, which is just not the case in a prison context (Pike and Adams, 2012). Although prisons vary significantly in what technology they do provide for learning, students in prison will rarely have any choice about how they access their resources, but particularly access to high-end technologies (Baker 2003). Almost without exception, prisoners are not allowed to access learning technologies in their cells. An Australian project, Making the Connection, is providing access to in-cell notebook computers for a selection of higher education

programs in Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. However, none of the programs are at a postgraduate level (Farley, 2017).

In some jurisdictions, prisoners have access to computer labs where eight or ten computers are networked to an isolated server. Hardware and software are typically out of date and poorly maintained. In the Australian Capital Territory, prisoners have access to in-cell computers running on a Linux platform. Certain websites are whitelisted, i.e. can be accessed by prisoners but the degree of access is not sufficient for prisoners to undertake university study. This same system does allow limited emails to five email addresses. This enables parents or partners to access materials on behalf of the incarcerated student (Farley and Willems, 2017).

In the UK, most prisons' education departments have at least one computer suite with 10 to 12 computers but these are often inaccessible to higher education students who are outside of the basic education provision (Pike and Adams, 2012). Also, despite significant upgrades of technologies in many prisons, prisoners report that IT facilities are often limited or out-dated. This has a number of implications for studying, for example coursework has to be handwritten, which is particularly problematic as a growing number of modules on degree programmes require computer-based work (Darke and Aresti, 2016).

Internet access

In our so-called connected, digital, 'information society' or 'network society' (see Castells, 1996; Castells, 2004), prisoners are one minority group that remains almost entirely disconnected and outside the digital network. The vast majority of Australian or UK prisoners have no direct access to internet-enabled computers, despite the fact that this digital disconnection puts them at a serious disadvantage when attempting to complete distance education courses in the age of the digital university (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press; Pike and Adams, 2012).

The increasing reliance on digital technology for teaching and learning in higher education presupposes ubiquitous connectivity, that is, a reliance on the internet (Farley and Willems, 2017). While contemporary prisons aim, in theory at least, to rehabilitate rather than punish, the overriding focus on security, on protecting victims, and on public safety, means that most incarcerated students are disconnected from online learning (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press).

Lack of access to the internet means lack of access to online learning technologies, lack of access to fully online material and lack of access to online interactive formative assessment or any of the support mechanisms normally available to students online (Farley and Doyle, 2014). Universities spend a lot of time and money to provide off-line alternatives to their students in prison and some universities are beginning to desert this cohort due to the difficulties and high costs associated with provisioning them with access to higher education (Farley and Willems, 2017).

A lack of internet access is a particular problem for prisoners doing research higher degrees, as the internet is critical for research-based activities and makes research and communicating with tutors and supervisors extremely difficult (Arnold, 2012). This lack of internet access has also become increasingly problematic due to an increasing trend towards online delivery of courses and tutorials, especially distance-learning courses. This limits the courses prisoners can do or the support they can get (Darke and Aresti 2016). The Open University has developed a 'walled garden', a secure copy of its Virtual Learning Environment, for use with its students in secure environments. This provides direct access to some of its more popular online modules and there are plans to supply prisons with a selection of award-winning, free, Open Educational Resources on OpenLearn (see Open University,

2017). However, access to the 'walled garden' is dependent on the prisons' limited and outdated facilities and, despite significant efforts, progress has been slow (Farley and Pike, 2016).

As a result of the prisons' inability to become digital, incarcerated students are in danger of falling through the digital gap between those who benefit from new technologies of learning, communication and networking, and those who are left behind. Moreover, the systematic lack of direct access to the internet for educational purposes, experienced by incarcerated students and maintained by Australian and UK corrections policy and practice, would be considered discriminatory or unjust treatment, if so consistently applied to other student populations. The denial of internet access, which undermines educational and employment opportunities, compounds social and economic marginalisation for the prisoner or former prisoner. Hence, internet deprivation becomes another form of exclusion, which the already excluded 'other' must bear, in the interests of social stratification (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press; Pike and Adams, 2012; Czerniawski, 2015).

Competition with paid work

In most correctional jurisdictions, prisoners are obligated to undertake paid work, often at a fraction of the numeration that such work would attract outside of prison. From this meagre income, prisoners must buy toiletries and other personal necessities (Arnold, 2012). It depends on the correctional jurisdiction as to whether study can be considered to be work and is renumerated. Very often prisoners are studying around their regular paid work.

Pike and Adams (2012) make the distinction between the 'working' and the 'learning' prison as two ends of a spectrum of UK prison culture, suggesting that a 'working' prison has a 'strict working environment which does not allow space, time or technology for independent learning' (Pike and Adams, 2012: 369). This may be particularly noticeable in private prisons and the increasing privatisation of prisons (Andrew, 2007) means that more and more students find themselves on strict working schedules without adequate study time (Hopkins, 2015). Space too is restricted, since study spaces, such as libraries or education department classrooms, are usually only available during the working day (Pike and Hopkins, in press).

Disruptive environment

Correctional centres are challenging learning environments, even for the most committed student. By their very nature, they are stressful, noisy, disorientating and depressing environments (Torre and Fine, 2005). Prisoners are at the mercy of the 'structured day', a system that ensures that prisoners' movements and activities are tightly controlled. Prisoners must always be attentive to the loudspeaker and direction from custodial officers or risk breaking the rules. This greatly impedes their ability to pay attention during their studies (Arnold, 2012).

Prison security is privileged over everything else in the prison and education comes very low on the prison management's priority list. This means that study sessions are constantly interrupted, cancelled or changed at short notice. Students may also be transferred to another prison, or even released without prior warning, which could mean that students lose their work and their resources (Pike, 2014).

Skyrocketing imprisonment rates have led to overcrowding in every Australian and UK jurisdiction (Criminal Justice Alliance, 2012; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2017), resulting in two or three prisoners sharing cells that are designed to house one person (Mackay, 2015). This can be difficult for the prisoner who wants to study as there is distraction from cellmates who want to

talk, listen to music or watch television. In addition, institutional 'norms' such as daily lockdowns, cell searches and head counts cause frequent disruptions (Hopkins and Farley, 2015). Security restrictions, cultural constraints and inconsistent staffing may prevent students from accessing education centres, resources and support (Lee, Farley, Cox and Seymour, 2017).

Some students feel that the prison, and some corrections officers, are hostile or indifferent to their attempts to undertake and complete higher education (Darke and Aresti, 2016). Overcrowding and financial cut-backs affecting staffing levels have only exacerbated the situation, making motivation particularly challenging for many students (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press; Pike and Hopkins, in press).

Financial constraints

Incarcerated students also complain about financial constraints to further study – a common problem for low socio-economic background students which is exacerbated by the constraints of the prison environment. It is important to keep in mind that phone calls, supplementary food items, hygiene products and textbooks must often be purchased from the limited funds prisoners earn while within the institution. Moreover, most do not have family members with the motivation and means to pay for expensive textbooks (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press).

Lack of educational and social pre-requisites

In the UK, some 47 per cent of prisoners report having no qualifications compared with 15 per cent of the general adult population (Clark, 2016). Similarly, 42 per cent report having been permanently excluded from school; 21 per cent report needing help with reading, writing or numeracy (Clark, 2016). Illiteracy rates are far higher in prison populations compared with the general (non-incarcerated) population, and over 30 per cent of inmates do not have a high-school diploma or equivalency degree (Pompoco et al., 2017).

In addition, most prisoners lack social and cultural capital. They usually have no experience of a university setting and have experienced very little educational success. They are very often first in family to attend university, let alone to undertake postgraduate study (Arnold, 2012; Baker, 2003). For those prisoners who are from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds the problems are exacerbated, with language issues, worries about deportation status and cultural shock (Easteal, 1992; Arnold, 2012). Such prisoners require much support to begin and maintain their studies.

However, lack of educational attainment does not equate to lack of intelligence and, given the right opportunities and support, prisoners can rise from illiteracy to degree level in a surprisingly short time (Pike and Hopkins, in press). It is learners' positive expectations for themselves, and an encouraging educational climate which enables them to overcome obstacles to learning, which are the most powerful agents for educational participation and achievement (Abbott-Chapman, 1994).

Challenges for universities

Universities have an institutional obligation to ensure postgraduate students are exposed to a research culture but providing such an exposure within a prison environment holds many challenges. University personnel at all levels do not fully understand the restrictions imposed by the prison environment. Invariably, the organisers of the research are not familiar with the prison context and are not sufficiently aware of the difficulties for students and staff. For example, there is a common misunderstanding that prisoners have unlimited time for study and have access to adequate

resources but as shown earlier in this chapter, this is often not the case. Initial decisions to admit prisoners onto postgraduate programmes are therefore often made without the pertinent facts. Educators may fail to take into account the disruptive prison environment, lack of suitable study space, lack of technologies and the potential distractions and transfers. With insufficient time and effort put into planning the students' research, study plans may not be sufficiently flexible to deal with the unpredictability of prison study (Prison-based postgraduate students, 2017).

There is often a lack of communication between prisons and universities. Security concerns dictate that written or electronic communication between university staff and their prison student is normally directed through an intermediary in the prison. Thus universities are invariably at the mercy of prison staff who are increasingly likely to be supporting higher education on top of another demanding full-time role (Pike and Hopkins, in press).

Particular challenges for prisoners undertaking postgraduate research

Incarcerated students often feel discriminated against, unsupported or marginalised in their attempts to obtain a research higher degree; these feelings directed to both the prison and the education provider. These feelings arise despite good intentions and university-led initiatives. Moreover, these feelings of anger and frustration that arise from perceptions of unfair treatment and unequal access to education staff, educational technologies and educational opportunities, can lead to incarcerated students dropping out or falling back into negative coping strategies (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press). However, the benefits of postgraduate study for the incarcerated student can give them tremendous perseverance and they may go to extraordinary lengths in order to succeed. 'It broadens the mind, opens up new avenues and gives one a confidence that can only come from discovering a whole new beautiful world of hope and opportunity' (Prison-based students, 2017).

Poor access to research libraries

Unlike colleges and universities on the outside, prisons do not have extensive academic libraries (McCarty, 2006). Prison libraries are generally very poor, often relying on donations with books so heavily vetted that many simply do not make it to the library shelves. Prisoners are not able to browse relevant publications either physically at a university campus or via an online catalogue. They do not get to feel the ambience of a university library and feel 'the force and power of the intellect both within themselves and within the academy' (Arnold, 2012: 945). The librarians often try hard to supply inter-library loans or other requested material but are hampered by security concerns and slow prison post (Pike, 2014)

Even if the library does offer enough material for prisoners to complete original research papers, there is no guarantee that prisoners have access to the library. As stated earlier, prisoners often work thirty-five to forty hours per week which often coincide with prison library hours (McCarty, 2006; Pike, 2014). Not only does this lack of access hamper research it also makes it very difficult for the student to situate their own research within the wider literature.

Poor access to supervisors

Prisoners cannot just pick up the phone to talk to supervisors or drop them an email to clarify an issue (Arnold, 2012; Prison-based postgraduate students, 2017). Education officers (if the prison has them; not all jurisdictions do) act as the intermediary between the supervisor and the prisoner,

sometimes providing email and telephone contact. At some universities, such as the University of Southern Queensland, there is a formal document which empowers the education officer to deal with the university on behalf of the prisoner. However, communication between the incarcerated student and their supervisor in the university often relies on post which, with security checks of contents, can take weeks.

Some educators are wary of going 'behind the wire' at correctional centres either due to fears for their own safety and/or because of prejudice against prisoners ('they are in there for a reason') (Warner, 1998). Those supervisors or tutors who do wish to visit their students may only be able to visit once or twice a year due to security restrictions and the time it takes to organise the permissions for each visit. In a country such as Australia, where students may be separated from their supervisors by many thousands of kilometres, students may never see their supervisors and are totally reliant on alternative forms of communication.

No access to other candidates

Social interactions and social networks are important for coping with postgraduate study, however, they too are problematic for incarcerated students. As Karimshah and colleagues (2013) have suggested, social factors are particularly important for the retention of low socio-economic status university students facing significant adversity. For incarcerated students, such disadvantages related to race and class positioning are frequently exacerbated further by the environment itself, which by its very nature is isolationist and prevents freedom of association. Even upon release, former prisoners are often lacking in cultural and social 'capital' (see Bourdieu, 1985), with fewer opportunities to build mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships and social networks in the 'straight' world (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press).

Due to their isolated circumstances, prisoners usually have no access to other postgraduates through discussion fora or through PhD colloquia or conferences (Arnold, 2012). Even if there were other postgraduate students in their prison, incarcerated students often have very little or no contact with each other and are not able to leverage the social learning supports that are available to students engaged in online courses (Lee, Farley, Cox and Seymour, 2017).

Communication is easier when there are good learning communities within the prison, such as in a 'learning' prison with dedicated learning spaces where students can build a rapport with other like-minded students within the prison. Such spaces can also support peer-tuition which is beneficial for all concerned (Pike and Adams, 2012). Some UK prisons also have good Prison-University Partnerships where incarcerated students and non-prison students can learn together for a short time. These communities, though possibly short-lived, allow incarcerated students to have academic conversations with their 'outside' peers (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016).

Public perception

It is important to remember that what happens inside the prison, perhaps even more so than inside other institutions, is defined and delimited by the wider political and social context. In particular, prison education will be shaped by a shifting economic climate, a punitive culture, and the rising tide of neoliberalism in society and politics (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press). The general public is very often opposed to the higher education of prisoners, although it is least tolerant of postgraduate study, even for those serving long sentences (McCollom, 1994). In response, correctional

jurisdictions may be reluctant to promote any educational activities that are taking place (Arnold, 2012).

Incarcerated students are critically aware of populist, media stereotypes of criminals, and how such (mis)representations may influence public opinion against prisoners, even those prisoners seeking to improve themselves through education. They appear critically conscious of how sensationalist crime dramas and news reporting feeds into the growing 'moral panic' about dangerous 'others', which in turn produces an increasingly punitive society (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press).

Funding

There is insufficient funding available to enable prisoners to study at higher levels of education. Like all students, incarcerated students must find appropriate funding for their higher level study but finding that funding is difficult (Coates, 2016; Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). In the UK, there are loans available for higher level study, including postgraduate study, but this is only accessible to prisoners if they have less than 6 years to serve in prison (Coates, 2016). Other funding is sometimes available but it is not sufficiently advertised within the prison (Darke and Aresti, 2016). In Australia, prisoners have the same access to tuition funding as other students. They can access HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) funding which enables them pay of their fees when they earn a certain amount of money (Australian Government, 2018). However, they cannot access Austudy which is a living allowance that also would provide funds for related expenses including textbooks. Certain universities have scholarship schemes which may enable prisoners to buy textbooks; for example, the University of Southern Queensland has incarcerated student bursaries.

Research methods and methodologies

Students in prison usually have a deep commitment to demonstrate to their families, supporters and to society that they are capable of achieving something worthwhile which motivates them to succeed (Prison-based postgraduate students, 2017). Even so, almost every approach to research is going to present significant challenges to the incarcerated postgraduate candidate. Obviously, those research projects that require significant amounts of specialised equipment, research labs or access to large numbers of people are going to be too difficult to undertake while incarcerated.

However, prisoners do have access to personal insights, and could write a reflective journal or 'autoethnography' which can act as the data set for a PhD thesis (Arnold, 2012). Time is often a commodity in prison and even if they work during the day, prisoners still have a lot of time in which to think and potentially study without the distraction of everyday life (Pike and Hopkins, in press). It might also be possible for prisoners to undertake creative arts research where the goal is the production of a significant art portfolio, piece of fiction or musical composition. Even so, the formulation of creative works is challenging given the relative dearth of supervisor feedback.

In the specific field of criminology, prisoners and ex-prisoners have 'lived experience of prison' with an 'insider perspective of prison research' (Darke and Aresti, 2016). They have a unique position to research within the prison environment and 'question established and commonly-held assumptions' (Newbold et al., 2014: 446).

Methodological and ethical issues

Providing a thesis in prison is obviously demanding and there are extreme difficulties in creating a piece of work that contributes something new to knowledge (Arnold, 2012). Prison postgraduates

will have some access to other prisoners within their prison so conducting research with other prisoners is possible. However, the permissions process for this sort of research is extremely difficult. As already stated, auto-ethnography is also clearly possible, though supervision and ethics are complex and maintaining objectivity is extremely problematic (Newbold et al., 2014). The complex power dynamics between prisoners may also compromise the quality of the research and it is difficult to know how to sufficiently mitigate those concerns to ensure that the data is of appropriate quality for analysis and discussion.

Prisoners do not normally get access to interview participants outside of prison but some universities arrange for a prisoner's friend or family member to act as their official supporter, enabling them to do internet searches or conduct interviews for the incarcerated student. With good instruction, this can be very successful even if the supporter is not academically trained (Prison-based postgraduate students, 2017). However, apart from being very time consuming, this clearly causes concerns for the supervisors, especially if the issues being researched are sensitive. Universities have a strong commitment to ethics and rigorous methodologies so proxy searches and interviewers are clearly a dilemma.

How universities can facilitate prisoner postgraduate research: Some recommendations

Though the number of postgraduate students in prisons in both the UK and Australia is small, there is clearly a willingness and maybe even a commitment to these students on the part of the universities involved. There are very often individual academics who will go above and beyond to give a prisoner an opportunity to better him or herself. Even so, the resources and literature for those academics around supporting these students is scant. The following recommendations have been formulated derived from the lived experience of the authors in supporting incarcerated students to study at a higher level.

1. Learn about the prison environment

The doctoral process will need to be adjusted for students in prison. Supervisors must be prepared for such adjustment prior to commencing the program. The set-up process may not be different but it has additional challenges in terms of how they are working ethically, how they will complete the research and what support can be accessed (e.g. family, online and so on). University staff should seek to understand the particular characteristics of the prison environment. Where possible staff should visit the prison prior to organising any research.

'[A]ctually seeing the tiny cells that my students had to share with another prisoner and hearing the blaring noise of voices and televisions reverberating off of metal surfaces helped me better picture their study conditions. While it is impossible for me to truly comprehend the very real problems of drugs, violence, and imprisonment, I did get a better understanding of what my students were up against in order to succeed' (McCarty, 2006: 92).

Postgraduate students studying within prison do not have other candidates to talk to and may find it difficult to gauge their own progress; this often makes these students demanding and insecure. Frequent, proactive contact with postgraduate students in prison will help to assuage these insecurities, allowing the student to be more productive.

2. Manage the expectations of the candidate and prison officers

Prior to acceptance of the candidate, there needs to be a frank discussion about how the student will conduct their research and communicate with the outside world, particularly related to the internet and how supervision will be managed. These discussions work best if there is already a good relationship between the university, the prison and the potential candidate.

The supervisor will need to provide sufficient information to the incarcerated candidate and to the prison officer. Regular postgraduate students are able to access the university website and to ask peers about processes and expectations. These resources will not be available to the incarcerated postgraduate and so the need for this information needs to be accommodated by the supervision team.

A schedule of communication needs to be instigated and as far as possible, be adhered to by the supervisor while understanding that the candidate may struggle from his or her end. Given the slowness and unreliability of communication to and from the prison, the supervisor needs to prioritise communication with the incarcerated candidate over his or her non-incarcerated candidates.

3. Be cognisant of sentence length and parole conditions

Though there are some prisoners who will never leave prison or who are serving a long sentence, the vast majority of prisoners are serving short sentences, mostly less than one year depending on the jurisdiction (Roberts and Irwin-Rogers, 2015). When working with the candidate to plan his or her candidature, the supervisor needs to take into account sentence length. It could be that the prisoner will be released or up for parole shortly into their candidature. Data collection should be delayed until the prisoner is released.

The supervisor should also be cognisant that the formerly incarcerated candidate will be unlikely to continue his or her research immediately upon release. The priorities of ex-offenders upon release will be to find somewhere to live, secure an income and to reconnect with family or friends. The supervisor should be proactive in suggesting that the candidate take a break after release. The supervisor should be also be aware of any parole conditions that may impact the postgraduate student's ability to conduct research. For example, it is not unusual for former sex offenders to be prohibited from using the internet during their parole.

4. Be flexible

By opening their doors to prisoners, unversities are investing in some of the most disadvantaged people in our society. Flexibility in the program is essential. For example, adjustments to milestones such as probation or confirmation, may be required for all the reasons stated above. Extra time to complete these milestones should be negotiated long before they are due. Even then, the supervisor must be aware that the conditions for the prisoner may change very quickly. The prisoner may not be able to work on his or her research if they are called away for court appearances, medical attention or if they are moved to another facility.

The research student will require practical assistance throughout the duration of the study. Bureaucratic and administrative 'red tape' should be relaxed to ensure equality of study (Prison-based postgraduate student 2017).

5. Provide timely, comprehensive feedback

As already discussed, incarcerated postgraduate students have limited access to resources, a study sample, postgraduate peers and other specialists in the field. In our experience, this can lead to issues around direction and motivation for the student. Sometimes, incarcerated postgraduate students can follow a path which seems quite logical to them but which may not be appropriate. They can be a long way along this path before it is picked up by supervisors. Once discovered and the candidate is redirected onto a more appropriate trajectory, quite a lot of time and energy can have been wasted. The student may become disenchanted, leading to a lack of motivation and in extreme cases may cause the student to completely disengage or withdraw from study.

Though it may not be possible to completely solve these issues, strateges around feedback can help to alleviate them. It is important that the supervisor sets the expectation that work be submitted regularly. In response, the supervisor must provide comprehensive and timely feedback. Because it will not be easy for the student to question or discuss the feedback with his or her supervisor, the feedback must be as unambiguous as possible. If the supervisor references articles or other literature, copies shopuld be made and provided to the student.

Generally speaking, incarcerated students will be less likely to be aware of the processes within the university but also the nature of the supervisor-candidate relationship. The student may be very demanding and easily offended, not responding to criticism favourably (of course, this happens outside of prisons too!) The supervisor should not be offended but understand that the student is in a very vulnerable and difficult position where he or she may have much time to ruminate and have noone against which to check his or her perceptions.

How prisons can facilitate prisoner postgraduate research: Some recommendations

For prisons, there are many advantages to having a cohort of incarcerated postgraduate students. Beyond reducing reoffending, higher level education significantly impacts prison culture, reducing the number of violent incidents and allowing prisoners with long sentences to pass their time productively. These students in turn become positive role models for newer prisoners. Even so, the number of prisoners engaged in postgraduate research remains very low. The following recommendations have been formulated to help prisons grow their postgraduate numbers.

1. Ditch the deficit model

Across Australia and the UK there are a few prisons which are moving away from the deficit model of incarceration. Instead of considering prisons as sites of deficit to be corrected, they can be viewed as sites of talent, experience and potential to be fulfilled, to their individual benefit as well as to the benefit of the communities which they serve (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). Such prisons, coined ‘learning’ prisons by Pike and Adams (2012), are more positive about prisoners’ outcomes, providing space, time and support, enabling prisoners to grow and develop their hopes and aspirations. More prisons should follow this example of good practice.

2. Develop a learning culture

In order to ensure education meets the needs all prisoners, prisons should develop a learning culture which incentivises prisoners to see the benefits of improving their education. The whole prison learning environment requires digital technologies and access to the internet to enable learning at all levels. To achieve this, security and education must come together to embrace the new safe technological solutions which are now available to prisons.

Spaces should be provided so that students can come together and offer mutual support, irrespective of what individuals are studying. These spaces should not only be available during standard work hours but also on weekends and evenings. Once these learning communities are established, prisoners will very often choose only to fraternise with other students, shunning those others who may not be supportive of their study or who cause trouble within the facility (Farley and Pike, 2016).

3. Develop closer relationships with universities

There is individually, socially and institutionally transformative potential in growing communities of learning and meaningful interchange between universities and prisons (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). Universities provide spaces in which people can pursue excellence through learning; seeking to contribute to society by making learning opportunities inclusive and by producing research that helps to make sense of the world and how it can be improved (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). Prisons which support their prisoners into higher education are also showing that they recognise that individual and social transformation is achievable through individual growth.

Just as university personnel poorly understand the prison environment, so prison personnel poorly understand the university environment. Universities are complex institutions made up of many parts. There is not just one person to contact to resolve issues or to provide information but a range of contacts across many areas. If possible, prison personnel should visit a university and meet those people with who they are likely to have contact. One, and preferably two or more people within the prison, should have oversight of the incarnated higher education and postgraduate students within the prison. This role would also be responsible for remaining in contact with the university and ensuring that contact lists are kept up to date. Applications for study or for extensions, should be submitted as early as possible to allow for suitable accommodations to be made.

Conclusion

Prisons and universities are both institutions that seek to play a part in being individually and socially transformative (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). Ideally, postgraduate students need to belong to a learning community with internet access and meaningful communication with academics and other students. This can be made possible for incarcerated students but there are currently many obstacles. In order to alleviate these, it is important that all parties, at all levels have a shared vision of how, why and what postgraduate students can and cannot do in their research. Planning the research requires forward thinking and flexibility from management with commitment from staff at all levels within the universities and prisons. Alternatives can be an option such as family supporters and temporary release on licence to a university but these must be sought out and carefully planned. Further research is needed to establish how to balance public security and anxieties about convicted criminals against the need to provide fair and comparable access to education for the most marginalised and isolated of student populations (Hopkins, Farley and Harmes, in press). There is clear evidence that educating prisoners improves the lives of prisoners, their families and their communities, lowers re-offending with fewer victims of crime.

This chapter has highlighted why education in prison is important and how we could enable more prisoners to progress to postgraduate levels. It describes the challenges to study, higher education and postgraduate research within the prison environment and how these might be ameliorated with careful communication, planning and resourcing. It challenges the assumptions of both prison and

university administrators when considering how incarcerated students may undertake postgraduate research while in prison. The chapter concludes with a series of recommendations for universities and prisons around enabling prisoners to become postgraduate students while still in custody.

Many individuals who are on the periphery of the criminal justice system may have cynical and well-observed critiques of human motivation, and of systems and practices. Certainly, there are many examples of individuals who have been educated before or during incarceration that go on to become famous agents for reform (e.g. Nelson Mandela). Perhaps if academics re-consider how research might look, feel and be enacted in such a different context, then we may re-consider the potential for so much intellectual energy to be directed at the difficult questions of life.

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