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## Prisoner Students: Building Bridges, Breaching Walls

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## Chapter 3: Prisoner students: building bridges, breaching walls, Daniel Weinbren

### Introduction

When The Open University (OU) first opened to students in 1971 it immediately facilitated the learning of a range of people who would not otherwise have been able to study at undergraduate level. These included people who were house-bound, had disabilities, needed to study part-time while maintaining a job, were in the Services or had no prior qualifications. In addition, 22 prisoners were admitted for study in 1971, of whom 16 were in Wakefield and 6 in Albany prison and in 1972 an OU-Home Office scheme was initiated in four prisons. For many of its adult learners, studying through the OU was not part of an apparently seamless, individual intellectual journey from school to degree. They did not arrive at the OU assuming that a university education was a birth right determined by their class position, previous educational qualifications or age. Their narratives about their accomplishment, collected from a variety of sources including postings they wrote and interview material, often refer to new-found confidence, the benefits for their careers and their sense of achievement at having overcome a variety of obstacles. Studies indicate that across the university sector the most common reasons for participating in higher education are interest in the subject, expectations for personal growth, and aspirations for career progression or development. However, more than at any other university, personal development has been the most salient gain for those who studied with the OU.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, beyond a sense of individual redemption their learning has had wider familial and social impacts. For many successful OU students

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Woodley, 'Graduation and beyond', *Open Learning*, 3, 1, February 1988, p. 16; Alan Woodley and Jane Wilson, 'British higher education and its older clients', *Higher Education*, 44, 3-4, October-December 2002, pp. 329-47; Claire Callender and Rayah Feldman, *Part-time undergraduates in higher education: A literature review. Prepared for HECSU to inform Futuretrack: part time students*, [www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/research\\_reports/part\\_time\\_undergraduates\\_in\\_he\\_0509.pdf](http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/research_reports/part_time_undergraduates_in_he_0509.pdf), accessed 3 November 2013.

studying involved collective support and commitment from family, tutors, colleagues and friends.

By focusing on prisoners who have studied through the OU, the broader impact of OU's students upon their communities is illuminated. OU students in prisons had to overcome intellectual difficulties, as many initially lacked self-assurance, and logistical difficulties, as prisons were not geared towards support for university students. Permission to study is not automatic for prisoners. Although sometimes these students are treated differently to other students, once legitimised as students, prisoners were supported by the pedagogic scaffolding developed by the OU. This encouraged them to form alliances and to gain the trust of tutors and other learners. Tutors assisted prisoner students to see themselves, as tutor Vincent Worth noted, as part of a 'larger body of similar-minded adults'.<sup>2</sup> Many students developed structures for learning through reciprocity and peer engagement, becoming members of a student body and creating new spaces of discourse which was formed and reformed as educational texts circulated. This enabled the students to render the unfamiliar — university life — familiar, while also recontextualising and rendering as novel the habitus of prison life. Courses, modules, required immersion in the subject matter and studying became a way to assert control and mentally escape. As a prisoner in Ireland noted, 'You really don't feel like you're in prison, it's just everything disappears in the background. [...] when I have the story sort of set up and lined up in the direction I want to go [...] I'm in with my characters in the story and just the prison's not there.'<sup>3</sup>

In the section *The framework* there is consideration of one of the important sources for this chapter, the personal testimony of students, both within and outside prisons. There is

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Worth, 'Supporting learners in prison', in Roger Mills and Alan Tait (eds.), 'Supporting the learner in open and distance learning', Pitman, London, 1996, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> 'John', HMP Maghaberry, interviewed by Kirsten Dwight for a conference on Offender Learning hosted by The Open University in 2010. See <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/information-and-developments> accessed 12 March 2012

also an outline of the relevant pedagogy and structures of the OU and of the development of education within prisons. *The impact of studying* is analysis of the attributing of the changes in students' own lives to their studying. Individual and social impacts of study were experienced by many students. Prisoners' educational attainment has been linked to a reduction in the rate of recidivism. It is likely that far fewer ex-prisoners returned to prison than might otherwise have been the case.<sup>4</sup> Attention in *Learning together* is on collaborative learning and its impact on the wider society. In particular, the focus is on Northern Ireland, where there were many OU students in prison in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s often known as 'the Troubles'. Members of the student prisoner community gained not only knowledge but also the social and intellectual equipment which enabled them to cope better with, and sometimes take active roles in shaping, the communities from which they came and the wider society.

### **The framework**

In 1971 the OU's first dedicated television programmes were broadcasts and its first correspondence materials dispatched. It offered degree-level part-time education to adult learners in the UK regardless of their prior qualifications. This was to be done principally through correspondence but also through group tutorials held in study centres located across Britain and Northern Ireland. In addition, for some modules students could attend residential weeks held on the sites of other universities during the vacations of those universities. Central OU staff prepared the teaching materials, which initially were mainly in the form of books, television programmes and radio broadcasts. There were also experiment kits and records.

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle Moeller, Scott L. Day and Beverly D. Rivera, 'How is education perceived on the inside?: a preliminary study of adult males in a correctional setting, *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 55, 1, March 2004, pp. 40-59; Annette Johnson, *A select bibliography on post-secondary education and reduction in recidivism*, Balancing Justice Task Force on Correctional Education, New York, 2001; Charles B. A. Ubah and Robert L. Robinson Jr. 'A grounded look at the debate over prison-based education: optimistic theory versus pessimistic worldview', *The Prison Journal*, 83, 2, June 2003 pp. 115-129.

Subsequently cassettes, videos and the internet were used to support learners. Part-time tutors, who were resident all over the country, taught and assessed the scattered students using the teaching materials provided by central staff. Students submitted their assignments to these tutors, who taught through their written responses, in face-to-face group tutorials and in some cases via telephone tutorials.

In 2011, Universities UK, the members of which are the executive heads (that is vice-chancellors and principals, of UK university institutions, noted that, ‘a number of those involved in violent terrorism in recent years have been university graduates’.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, universities have long been seen as institutions which enable social mobility. Prisons have long been seen as places which contribute to further lawbreaking being, to use a term attributed to Kropotkin, ‘universities of crime’.<sup>6</sup> The OU sought to overcome this dichotomy and support socially beneficial learning within prisons. There were precedents for some educational provision. A legislative framework, established in 1815 and 1823, permitted education in British prisons. Although there was subsequent intermittent disenchantment with the notion of educating prisoners, the idea retained a foothold within the system.<sup>7</sup> In 1885 the Chair of the Prisons Commission called Reading Gaol ‘a criminal university’ because of its record of support for the education of prisoners.<sup>8</sup> The idea of studying while in prison was employed by the British elsewhere in the world. In 1944 members of a paramilitary group, the Irgun Tz’vai L’Umi (‘The National Military Organization in the Land of Israel’) attacked

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<sup>5</sup> Universities UK, *Freedom of speech on campus: rights and responsibilities in UK universities*, Universities UK, London, 2011 p. 2; ‘40 UK universities are now breeding grounds for terror as hardline groups peddle hate on campus’, *Daily Mail*, 6 June 2011, presented universities as locations for criminal activity.

<sup>6</sup> Ian M. Cuthbertson, ‘Prisons and the education of terrorists’, *World Policy Journal*, 21, 3, Fall 2004, p. 16 refers to ‘the use of prisons as terrorist universities’. ‘Inside story of the Maze, a jail like no other’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 2000 suggested that the Maze Prison was known as ‘the university of terror’.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalind Crone, ‘The great “Reading” experiment: an examination of the role of education in the nineteenth-century goal’. *Crime, histoire & sociétés / Crime, history & societies*, 16, 1, 2012, pp. 47-74.

<sup>8</sup> Edward F. Du Cane, *The punishment and prevention of crime*, Macmillan, London, 1885, p. 57.

British offices, military installations and police stations in British Mandate Palestine. Hundreds of those caught by the British, the administrators of Palestine between 1920 and 1948, were sent to detention camps in Kenya, Eritrea, and Sudan. While in Africa some studied at British universities by correspondence. Following Israel's declaration of independence in 1948 many of those who had been imprisoned became political and governmental leaders there.<sup>9</sup> Meir Shamgar studied law in Eritrea and went on to become President of the Israeli Supreme Court, 1983 – 1995 and Shmuel Tamir studied law by correspondence while in Kenya and became a lawyer and Minister of Justice, 1977 – 1980. In Britain, after the Second World War, Durham Local Education Authority ran classes for prisoners and, following legislation, others authorities followed.<sup>10</sup> By 1948 there were 700 weekly classes and by 1961 there were 3,000.<sup>11</sup> However, studying for a degree while in prison was a novelty. By 1985 only 150 prisoners in 31 establishments were registered as OU students. Since 1989, while there has been other provision, the OU has been the main provider of university-level study to prisoners.<sup>12</sup> By 2012 there was a prisons team based in each of the OU's regional and national centres and around 1,800 OU students in more than 150 prisons across the UK and Ireland studying over 200 courses.<sup>13</sup>

Personal evidence can supplement evidence from written sources which were not produced for historians, can place the individual experience at the centre, rescue the

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.etzel.org.il/english/ac15.htm> accessed 30 September, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Students at the University of Durham joined prisoners in HMP Durham on a joint course run inside the prison, 'Durham to run criminology classes in prisons', *Times Higher*, 24 October 2014.

<sup>11</sup> David Ben Rees, *Preparation for crisis: Adult education 1945–80*, G. W. & A. Hesketh, Ormskirk and Northridge, 1982, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> A distance-learning degree in law was available through Nottingham Trent University and Birkbeck College, University of London. An undergraduate workplace foundation degree in offender management was run by Staffordshire University and Stafford College at Dovegate prison. It was for prison officers and was not available to prisoners. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/apr/25/prisoners-law-degrees>; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/mar/29/first-workplace-degree-dovegate-prison> accessed 17 August, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> The Open University, *Offender learning at the Open University*, 2012, <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/> accessed 30 September, 2014.

individual from the crowd, and call new witnesses to the stand. However, the tendency for informants to fabricate through retrospective editing or to employ aesthetic expressiveness or to reconstruct memories rather than recover them needs to be recognised. In the case of those convicted of crimes the relationship between informant and the interviewer may involve both parties in efforts to shape the course of the conversation. Prisoners may wish to convey ideas not only to the interviewer but may also be using the interview to indirectly address others, notably the prison authorities or the parole board. Sometimes interviews have been conducted to obtain information to prevent further crime, a suggestion first made in a report to the government in 1839.<sup>14</sup> Henry Mayhew's interview with a pickpocket, which first appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* 29 January 1850, was used to support his theory which linked crime to lack of parental supervision.<sup>15</sup> Lombroso's *L'uomo delinquente* (1876) popularised the idea that the first-hand accounts of the thoughts and actions of criminals were of interest as criminality was inherited and could be detected in individuals. If there is critical engagement then it need not be a deterrent to its employment that personal testimony has often been framed in terms of events which have occurred since those being described.

Alessandro Portelli recognised that testimony can be employed to serve social or other purposes but went on to suggest that such material could be psychologically true for the informant and could help to unravel the meanings of experiences. Interviewees he suggested:

tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did. [...] Subjectivity is as much the business of

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<sup>14</sup> *First report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire as to the Best Means of Establishing an Efficient Constabulary Force in the Counties of England and Wales*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1839, p. 48. <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044050974526;view=1up;seq=63> accessed 5 June, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> James Bennett, *Oral history and delinquency. The rhetoric of criminology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1981, p. 53.

history as the more visible 'facts'. What the informant believes is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened.<sup>16</sup>

Samuel echoed this with his view of memory as a fluctuating, creative construction, 'an active shaping force that is dynamic'.<sup>17</sup> The construction of myths might be one way to survive imprisonment. Alistair Thomson proposed that

We compose our memories to make sense of our past and present lives. 'Composure' is an aptly ambiguous term to describe the process of memory making. In one sense we compose or construct our memories using the public languages and meanings of our culture. In another sense we compose memories that help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives and identities, that give us a feeling of composure.<sup>18</sup>

The comments of prisoners collated in this chapter are derived from a range of sources. While they all offer to help us to broaden our understandings and to gain fresh dimensions for our judgements, the reasons for recording, the motives of both interviewees and interviewers, vary considerably. The material quoted has been selected and placed in a new context in order to illuminate the debate about the impact of university studies.

### **The impact of studying**

Based on their prior experiences of schooling many OU students start their OU studies with a sense of trepidation and alienation from formal education. The OU accepts students with few or no prior formal qualifications. Some of these students have low self-esteem and have to overcome ridicule, opposition from workmates and family members and their own lack of

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<sup>16</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop Journal*, 12, 1981, pp. 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of memory*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, p. x.

<sup>18</sup> Alistair Thomson, *Anzac memories: living with the legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 8.



confidence. One student recalled her husband's reaction when he discovered that she was studying with the OU by finding her books:

He threw them all down the rubbish chute (we live on the 7th floor). I get on well with Ted the caretaker so next morning when my husband had gone to work I went to see him and said I had to go through the bins ... there I was with big rubber gloves picking my way through everything but I got it all back and cleaned up. I can leave it at my pal's flat.<sup>19</sup>

The sense of isolation expressed by this OU student when recalling her first attendance at an OU Day School.

They all looked a bit posh, some had briefcases ... it was OK until this man at the front asked a question. I hadn't a clue what he was asking me and I wet myself there and then and had to leave.<sup>20</sup>

Although a study by Langenbach and Parsons' of the motivation of 350 prisoners who participated in educational programmes in four prisons in the USA concluded that 'inmates, with some exceptions, have the same orientations towards participating in educational activities as the general public', a sense of isolation and lack of self-respect has been particularly noted among OU students in prison.<sup>21</sup> Writing in the 1990s Kevin Warner, the co-ordinator of prison education in Ireland, concluded a great proportion of those in prison were disorganised, unskilled, undisciplined 'victims of severe social and psychological neglect' with low expectations of success.<sup>22</sup> Emma Hughes considered the testimony of 47

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<sup>19</sup>Students' learning journals quoted in Pat Atkins and Jo Beard, *Learning with practitioners. Rationale: frameworks: learning*, The Open University, Milton Keynes, 2010, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Students' learning journals quoted in Pat Atkins and Jo Beard, *Learning with practitioners. Rationale: frameworks: learning*, The Open University, Milton Keynes, 2010, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Parsons and Michael Langenbach, 'The reasons inmates indicate they participate in prison education programs: another look at Boshier's PEPS', *Journal of Correctional Education*, 44, 1, March 1993, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Warner, 'The "Prisoners Are People" perspective — and the problems of promoting learning where this outlook is rejected', *Journal of Correctional Education*, 49, 3, September 1998, pp. 118-132.

student prisoners. ‘Bruce’— to maintain anonymity, some of the students in prison are identified only by their first names — felt that his OU textbooks (he was a lifer studying mathematics) created a barrier between him and other prisoners.<sup>23</sup> An OU student from a middle class background felt that his studies while in prison were

An expression of an alienation I already felt. I applied so that for just a few hours a week I could get away from the obscenities, the prison gossip, the scheming. A lot of us are alienated before we start this sort of thing.<sup>24</sup>

Prisoners often had constraints on their time and many are vulnerable to problems associated with being away from their families, such as marital difficulties and financial problems. As one noted ‘we are worrying about the predicament we are in and the problems that have arisen meantime at home’.<sup>25</sup> Prisoners also noted that Prison Officers sometimes questioned the need of prisoners to gain degrees and resented or envied their studies. One prisoner said ‘They [Prison Officers] don’t like you doing OU. Some of these officers are *Sun* newspaper readers. Do you know what I mean?’<sup>26</sup> Anne Pike who taught OU students in prison, provided anonymity for those she interviewed as part of larger study of student prisoners. One of these interviewees, Student 4, said that the prison officers ‘are very resentful’. He was studying mathematics and claimed that when he was spotted writing algebra, ‘they wanted to know why I was writing in code’. In the Republic of Ireland until 1985 it was only prisoners, not prison officers, who could study with the OU.<sup>27</sup> Student 36 offered an explanation as to the behaviour of some officers, ‘they work hard — horrible hours and they see you on a laptop

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<sup>23</sup> Emma Hughes, ‘Thinking inside the box: prisoner education, learning identities, and the possibilities of change’ in Johnna Christian, Bonita M. Veysey and Damian J. Martinez (eds.), *How offenders transform their lives*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2009, p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> William Forster, *The Higher Education of prisoners*, Department of Adult Education, University of Leicester, 1976 cited in Rees, *Preparation*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Worth, ‘Supporting learners’, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Adams and Anne Pike, ‘Security issues within prison and health ODL programmes’, *5th Pan Commonwealth Forum*, London, 13–17 July 2008. Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/21048/> 2008, p. 4 accessed 14 May, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Diana Purcell interview; *The Times*, 18 May 1985.

getting a degree'.<sup>28</sup> In her ethnographic study of undergraduate prisoners in HMP Full Sutton Anne Reuss noted that the prison officers felt threatened by the prisoners.<sup>29</sup> Emma Hughes gave an example. Clive was training to be a physiotherapist. He was also on an Offending Behavior course which would improve his chances of an early release. He said that he was told by his counsellor to 'quit this Open Uni course or leave'.<sup>30</sup> John McVicar, another prisoner student, noted that some prisoners and officers felt threatened by his studies.<sup>31</sup>

While there is common ground between all students at the OU, many prisoners studying with the OU faced obstacles that other students did not have to negotiate. Permission to study OU modules while in prison has always been at the discretion of the Governor. The OU has to act in accordance with HM Prison guidelines regarding the number of hours which can be devoted to study. Prisoners could not attend residential schools (although excusal packs for prisoners were produced for some modules with residential schools) or group tutorials outside prisons (though tutors did visit prisoners). Chemicals and other items which were sent to students to allow them to perform experiments at home were not sent to prisons. The Home Office, or an appropriate Whitehall Department, took responsibility for the fees of student prisoners and had the responsibility to provide the necessary equipment in terms of set books, projectors, tape cassettes and films but there have been omissions.<sup>32</sup> There was not standardized provision of learning programmes or access to technology. Prisoners were often not permitted to study modules with residential schools, Some prisoners noted that access to CDs, or the use of PCs was not always permitted. One prisoner who was studying an OU course in environmental studies noted that 'prison has

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<sup>28</sup> Anne Pike, COLMSCT CETL *Final Report, Building bridges across the digital divide for HE students in prison*, April 2010, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Anne Reuss, 'Higher education and personal change in prisoner undergraduates, University of Leeds, PhD, 1997, p. 196.

<sup>30</sup> Emma Hughes, *Education in prison: studying through distance learning*, Routledge, London, 2016, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> John McVicar, 'Life as an OU student', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 22 September, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Perry, *Open University: A personal account by the first Vice-Chancellor*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1976, p. 173.

stupid rules: you're not allowed a scientific calculator in the cells'.<sup>33</sup> Even if materials were permitted there could be problems. A tutor, Sally Jordan, pointed out that, 'it is difficult for a Category A prisoner to set up an outdoor rain gauge and check the water level each day when he has to be handcuffed to a prison officer'.<sup>34</sup> In order to find ways to improve the learning experience of prisoners, Anne Pike reviewed the processes and carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with OU prison students in 15 prisons. She found that while the experience was thought to be life-changing as people gained confidence and a sense of empowerment and hope, the access to technology varied widely. Most students wrote their assignments by hand and then typed them up during the brief periods of computer access. There was a paucity of books. Very few prisoners were permitted to access the internet, although there were examples of tutors who downloaded online conference messages for prisoners. One tutor brought in appropriate pictures for a student studying astronomy.<sup>35</sup> At HMP Maghaberry, County Antrim, prisoners studying with the OU were allowed three days per week study time but this was not the case elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> In Northern Ireland during the 'Troubles' most political prisoners were from Northern Ireland and were less likely than prisoners in England to be moved to other gaols but elsewhere the transfer of prisoners between prisons disrupted education as sometimes records were lost in the moving process. One prisoner noted that he moved between eight different prisons while he studied an openings course, a foundation in social sciences, DD101 and a second level course, *Welfare, crime and society*.<sup>37</sup> Ofsted concluded 'the lack of a national, coherent management

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<sup>33</sup> Julia Braggins and Jenny Talbot, *Time to learn: prisoners' views on prison education*, Prison Reform Trust, London, 2003, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Sally Jordan, 'An unusual degree ceremony', [www8.open.ac.uk/science/main/about-the-faculty/case-studies/unusual-degree-ceremony?samsredir=1328029200](http://www8.open.ac.uk/science/main/about-the-faculty/case-studies/unusual-degree-ceremony?samsredir=1328029200), accessed 1 November 2010.

<sup>35</sup> This is supported by quotations from Student 34 Student 6 Student 4 in Pike, COLMSCT CETL *Final Report*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.insidetime.org/info-regimes2.asp?nameofprison=HMP\\_MAGHABERRY](http://www.insidetime.org/info-regimes2.asp?nameofprison=HMP_MAGHABERRY) accessed 14 May, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> *Insidetime, the national newspaper for prisoners and detainees*, December 2010, [http://www.insidetime.co.uk/mailbag.asp?a=302&c=open\\_university\\_and\\_the\\_internet](http://www.insidetime.co.uk/mailbag.asp?a=302&c=open_university_and_the_internet)

information system for reporting offenders' progress is problematic'.<sup>38</sup> Government plans for prisoners to engage in a large amount of menial work undermined learning.<sup>39</sup> An Ofsted report of 2009 concluded that the strict operational priorities of the prison regime could place practical limitations on learning because 'prison activities are often arranged at times which clash with offenders' learning schedules so that they miss sessions without prior notice to tutors'.<sup>40</sup> Only those serving long sentences had the time to complete degrees and not all courses were publically funded. One study, albeit based on people in prison in the USA, concluded that while prisoners had equal ability to those outside the prisons, the former were more motivated and put in more effort than campus-based students.<sup>41</sup>

The transformative impact of education was central to the narratives of many students. In 1984 *The Times* reported on the gains in confidence and self-esteem reported by women who had studied at the OU.<sup>42</sup> In 2012, as part of a wider project about the history of the OU students who were asked to post about their OU experiences to a public website. Many used similar terms.<sup>43</sup> In 2008 a survey prepared for the Higher Education Careers Service Unit by Birkbeck College, University of London, found that 88 per cent of part-time graduates, most of them from the OU, said that their studies helped them to develop as a person, 78 per cent claimed an increase in self-confidence and 55 per cent in their overall happiness, and

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<sup>38</sup> Ofsted, *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/9*, 2009, p. 54.

<sup>39</sup> Anne Pike and Anne Adams, 'Digital exclusion or learning exclusion? An ethnographic study of adult male distance learners in English prisons', *Research in Learning Technology*, 20, 4, 2012, pp. 363-376.

<sup>40</sup> Offenders and Ex-Offenders, National Skills Forum, <http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/fckimages/NSF-%20Offenders%20&%20Ex-Offenders.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Tina L. Edwards-Willey and Nadia Chivers, 'Perceptions of inmate-students' ability to succeed', *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 56, 1, March 2005, pp.65-86.

<sup>42</sup> Caroline Moorehead, 'The "little women" who graduated to a new freedom', *The Times*, 26 October 1984.

<sup>43</sup> See the testimony of Christine Smith, Ann Pollard, Gwen Rowan, Lorelei Henley, Judy Sims, Priscilla Hogan, Pat Elliott, Susan O'Donnell and Russel Mohan on [www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/historyofou/story/students](http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/historyofou/story/students), accessed 2 February 2012

employers also valued the improved productivity and efficiency of part-time students.<sup>44</sup>

Students in British prisons who succeeded in their studies often mentioned the resultant sense of empowerment. In one of a series of interviews conducted for a conference which the OU hosted and which was about about prison education, ‘Johnny’, who studied for his first degree and his PhD through the OU while in prison said:

I got hooked on education with the Open University. And I study now for knowledge, for knowledge’s sake, and I love it [...] The single most important thing that education in prison has given me is a sense of self-worth.<sup>45</sup>

‘Barry’, another prisoner, also emphasised the change in his confidence, the importance of his tutor and how he had come to realise that ‘you make your own light at the end of the tunnel’.<sup>46</sup> ‘Linda’ of HMP Morton Hall said: ‘At first I thought I would not meet the requirements [...] my results give me joy and hope’.<sup>47</sup> ‘Robert’ recalled that his success with assignments, ‘boosted my self-belief in my capabilities, which prior to that were a little bit low’.<sup>48</sup> ‘John’ also mentioned the development of a sense of self-worth, Trevor felt that ‘the OU has built my self-esteem up’ while ‘James’, also stressed the lack of confidence and how education could help prisoners to ‘pay something back to society’.<sup>49</sup> Another prisoner, Michael Irwin, felt that his ‘self-confidence and general well-being have been achieved through realisation of potential and a sanctuary of sorts within education departments of most of the

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<sup>44</sup> Callender and Feldman, *Part-time undergraduates*.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Johnny’ of HMP Maghaberry was interviewed by Kirsten Dwight for a conference on Offender Learning hosted by The Open University in 2010. See <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/information-and-developments> accessed 12 March 2012.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Barry’ of HMP Maghaberry was interviewed by Kirsten Dwight for a conference on Offender Learning hosted by The Open University in 2010. See <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/information-and-developments> accessed 12 March 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in The Open University, *Studying with The Open University. A guide for learners in prison*, <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/sites/www.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/files/files/Offender-Learning-Prospectus-2014-15-web.pdf> accessed 22 May 2015.

<sup>48</sup> For the source of this material see following note.

<sup>49</sup> ‘John’ and ‘Trevor’ of HMP Maghaberry and ‘James’ of HMP Shotts were interviewed by Kirsten Dwight for a conference on Offender Learning hosted by The Open University in 2010. See <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/information-and-developments> accessed 12, March 2012.

prisons'.<sup>50</sup> John L. wrote that having spent much of the period since the age of 15 in prison he had low self-esteem. However, he met a helpful tutor, studied *Astronomy and Mechanics of the Universe* through the OU and, having previously been classified as a danger to the prison population and to the community, began work as a peer tutor, helping people to read and write.<sup>51</sup> 'Tony', who was in HMP Wymott, said that 'OU study has completely changed me as a person. As well as being more knowledgeable about social issues, I am much more confident and optimistic about the future', 'Ben', HMP The Wolds, felt that 'learning has widened my outlook and interests', while 'Nigel', HMP Frankland, found his studies to be a 'practical, life-affirming endeavour'. 'Edwin', HMP Chelmsford, felt that he gained 'a new perspective on my life'<sup>52</sup> while 'Trevor' commented, 'education has rehabilitated me' and 'Conor' said, 'It keeps me sane.'<sup>53</sup> When Jason Warr went to prison he had a few low-grade GCSEs. On release, 12 years later, he had enough credits from Open University philosophy courses to get an unconditional offer for a degree place in the subject at the London School of Economics.<sup>54</sup> In 2011, after serving nine years of a sentence that the judge recommended should be a minimum of 20 years, Daniel Whyte wrote

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<sup>50</sup> *Insidetime, the national newspaper for prisoners and detainees*, December 2010,

[http://www.insidetime.co.uk/mailbag.asp?a=302&c=open\\_university\\_and\\_the\\_internet](http://www.insidetime.co.uk/mailbag.asp?a=302&c=open_university_and_the_internet)

<sup>51</sup> <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/information-and-developments> accessed 12 March, 2012. This student completed *Introducing astronomy*, S194 and *How the Universe works*, S197 He also completed *Understanding human nutrition*, SK183 and *Inside nuclear energy*, ST174.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in The Open University, *Studying with The Open University. A guide for learners in prison 2010/2011*, The Open University, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/information-and-developments> accessed 12 March, 2012. 'Trevor' was interviewed by Kirsten Dwight for a conference on Offender Learning hosted by The Open University in 2010.

<sup>54</sup> *Guardian*, 30 January 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jan/30/prison-education-failures?newsfeed=true> accessed 29 February, 2012. He also worked for a rehabilitation charity.

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that the OU has saved my life. The change in me has come from a change in my mindset, not just my actions. The more I learned, the more I realised there was more to life.<sup>55</sup>

He mentioned the skills he had acquired in order to study with the OU including 'self-motivation, discipline, determination and steadfastness'.<sup>56</sup> In 1989 Patrick Magee had been in gaol for four years. He began to study undergraduate and later postgraduate courses. He said that 'partly I began to study in order to push the walls back, to gain a semblance of self-determination in what was an extremely controlled environment'.<sup>57</sup> He felt that 'there was an element of personal development in education in jail. You worked to be able to articulate better your political perspective and I saw education as a means to an end'.<sup>58</sup> He went on to work closely with Jo Berry, the daughter of one of the people killed by the bomb he planted in Brighton.<sup>59</sup> Individual accounts of change were echoed and reinforced by those who worked at the OU. An OU Dean of Arts recalled that

One of the more moving letters I have received came from a tutor in the Isle of Wight to say what a therapeutic effect the Socrates units had had on long-time prisoners in Parkhurst gaol.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.mkcollege.ac.uk/news/2012/01/the-mike-batty-award-2011>;  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1387497/Rolox-robbers-begin-life-sentences.html> accessed 29 July, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.mkcollege.ac.uk/news/2012/01/the-mike-batty-award-2011>; accessed 29 July, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Richard English, *Armed struggle: the history of the IRA*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 228.

<sup>58</sup> English, *Armed struggle*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>59</sup> There was a further connection between Patrick Magee and the OU. He went on to meet Jo Berry, a daughter of Sir Anthony Berry MP who was killed by one of Magee's bombs. An Open University linguistic study analysed their early conversations. See *Guardian*, 10 October 2009. Both now work for the charity Building Bridges for Peace and there is a play about their relationship by Julie Everton and Josie Melia, *The Bombing of the Grand Hotel*, see 'Friendship between IRA bomber and victim's daughter put on stage', *Guardian* 21 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/21/friendship-ira-bomber-daughter-victim-on-stage> accessed 5 June 2015.

<sup>60</sup> John Ferguson, 'Classics in the Open University', *Greece & Rome*, 21, 1, April 1974, p. 5.



The 2014-15 edition of the OU's 'Guide for Learners in Prison' referred to the value of 'constructive and worthwhile' activities, how some people 'gain confidence and belief in their own abilities' and noted that some prisoners have gained 'opportunities for a new start after release'.<sup>61</sup>

The employment of similar discursive frameworks by prisoners from other Open Universities indicates the pervasive nature of such narratives of liberation. The OU played an important role in the creation of the Open University of Israel, which was established in 1973.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently the OU's Centre for International Cooperation and Services developed contacts with external agencies, institutions and individuals concerned with distance education, and provided policy and technical assistance to Israel. Shmuel Choskin, who was serving a sentence of six years in Israel, said: 'I arrived here a stutterer and a diagnosed dyslexic - not knowing how to read or write. That hurt me throughout my life. I was ashamed of it. I didn't take tests in high school'. He felt that the Open University of Israel provided him with some 'very important insights regarding my life'.<sup>63</sup> While imprisoned for life the anti-apartheid activist Isithwalandwe Andrew Mokete Mlangeni studied with the Open University of South Africa. He said that life imprisonment, 'gave me the opportunity to study and therefore prepared me for life outside prison and to be able to face the world with confidence'.<sup>64</sup>

Surveys of OU graduates conducted by the OU and presented to the Department of Education and Science indicate that between 1975 and 1989 over 70 per cent felt that they

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<sup>61</sup> The Open University, *Studying with The Open University. A guide for learners in prison*, p. 2, <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/sites/www.open.ac.uk/about/offender-learning/files/files/Offender-Learning-Prospectus-2014-15-web.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> The university admitted its first students, 2,267 of them, in 1976. It expanded to enrol 8,525 in 1981 and 23,791 in 1995. See Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, 'Trends in access to Israeli Higher Education 1981–1996: From a privilege to a right', *European Journal of Education*, 31, 3, 1996, pp. 331–2.

<sup>63</sup> 'An open education, behind bar', *Haaretz*, 12 November 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/an-open-education-behind-bars-1.324320> accessed 29 July, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.unisa.ac.za/news/index.php/2014/05/robben-island-prison-graduate-urges-lifelong-learning/> accessed 1 November, 2013.

derived 'great' or 'enormous' benefit from their time as students, that over 80 per cent felt that it had had a good impact on them 'as learners' and 'as a person', and that more than 50 per cent noted the beneficial effect on their careers and on them as 'members of society'.<sup>65</sup> Those who studied while in prison often focused on their own sense of achievement. Bobby Cummines, gaoled for bank robbery, on his release set up a charity, sat on the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act Review Management Advisory Group and worked with Ministers and civil servants on matters related to prison. He said that 'what changed my life was the OU'.<sup>66</sup> In 2011 he was awarded the OBE in recognition of his services to reformed offenders. Another former OU student prisoner, John Hirst was, as he put it, 'transformed from a law breaker into a law-maker'.<sup>67</sup> In 2010 he took the British government the European Court of Human Rights over voting rights for prisoners and won.<sup>68</sup> Erwin James Monahan went to prison with, in his own words, 'massive failings to overcome'. By 2012 he had written a long-running newspaper column while still a prisoner and completed an OU degree. On his release he published a number of books and became a full-time freelance writer.<sup>69</sup>

After conducting interviews and assessing the views of 153 adult prisoners and young offenders in 12 prisons in 2003, Julia Braggins and Jenny Talbot noted that 'The Open University degree courses were much prized' and concluded that the

same opinion kept coming up, across all the prisoner-learner groups: using the time to better yourself and to improve your future employment prospects was the main motivation for study.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Review of the Open University, conducted by the Department of Education and Science and the Open University* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1991).

<sup>66</sup> *The Open University. The first 40 years. A celebration of four decades of growth and innovation*, p. 17. <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/anniversary/pics/d117397.pdf> accessed 17 May, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> <http://prisonersvoice.blogspot.com/search?q=Open+> accessed 1 November, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Killer's 'champagne and spliff' vote celebration, *Daily Telegraph*, 2 November 2010.

<sup>69</sup> <http://erwinjames.co.uk/biog.html> accessed 24 August, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Braggins and Talbot, *Time to learn*, pp. 8, 32, 47.

These tales of the redemptive powers of the OU reflect a dominant narrative about the institution which frames the experience of studying in terms which adult learners often adopt, of individual improvement and opportunities to gain in self-confidence and self-belief.<sup>71</sup> This perception of the OU has been reinforced by *Educating Rita*, Willy Russell's play about the relationship between a 26 year-old female OU student, Rita, and her tutor, Frank.<sup>72</sup> First performed in 1980, with a film version (which featured genuine OU materials) released in 1983, it follows a student from the time she overcomes the difficulty of entry to higher education — she is literally impeded as she cannot open the door at the start of the play — to her final entrance and scene, when she is calm and confident about her ability to succeed within the conventional academy. In *Educating Rita* there is little collaborative, peer learning. Rita only meets fellow students offstage. Russell was the recipient of advice from OU staff.<sup>73</sup> However, Gill Kirkup, who lectured at the OU, noted if the play was 'indicative of common beliefs' about the OU then the OU's teaching system 'seems to be widely misunderstood'.<sup>74</sup> The play's emphasis on personal liberation through learning positioned the OU as part of a long tradition of such tales, including *Pinocchio*, *Frankenstein* (Frank refers to himself as Mary Shelley) and *Pygmalion* (filmed as *My Fair Lady*). On the Arts Foundation course residential school the staff would perform an *Educating Liza* sketch which, through the title, connected Rita to *Pygmalion*.<sup>75</sup> These texts are about creations who, through their own transformations, transform others. Rita presents knowledge as a permanent

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<sup>71</sup> Mpine Makoe, John T. E. Richardson and Linda Price, 'Conceptions of learning in adult students embarking on distance education', *Higher Education*, 55, 2008, p. 317.

<sup>72</sup> Russell's introduction to the 1983 edition, in Albert-Reiner Glaap (ed. annotator) *Willy Russell, Educating Rita* edited, Verlag Moritz Diesterweg GmbH & Co, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, pp. 5-6, made it clear that 'I write my plays to be played, not studied ... I hope you will find *Educating Rita* understandable without lengthy analysis'. Nevertheless, engagement with the play illuminates the image of the OU.

<sup>73</sup> Mike Bullivant, quoted in Tim Dalglish (ed.), *Lifting it off the page: An oral portrait of OU people*, Open University, Milton Keynes, 1995, p. 35.

<sup>74</sup> Gill Kirkup, 'Women's studies "at a distance": The new Open University course', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6, 3, 1983, p. 273.

<sup>75</sup> Email from Paula James to author, 15 July 2010, 19:33.

and cumulative commodity which could be mass-produced and then placed within individual minds by a tutor. She argues that her mind was ‘full of junk’, that a ‘good clearing out’ was required and that Frank ‘feeds me inside’. She admits that she nearly wrote ‘Frank knows all the answers’ across her exam paper. In addition, she dismisses as ‘crap’ *Howards End*, a novel which involves some co-operative learning between practical people and intellectuals and she is dismissive of school teachers who listen to the conversations between pupils and then ‘turn it into a lesson’. In 1983 the play was deployed as a metonym by the OU which produced a flyer, ‘You could be a Rita too!’, to accompany a professional performance.<sup>76</sup> To celebrate 40 years of the OU, The Open University in the South East and Pitchy Breath Theatre toured a version of the play. Director and Actor David Heley said of a performance in HMP Swaleside that the audience there was ‘totally engaged’ and that ‘many of the prisoners said how they recognised themselves within the play’s action and meaning’.<sup>77</sup>

### **Learning together**

A focus on individual change, on learning to escape as exemplified by *Educating Rita*, can marginalise the wider impacts of learning. The importance of support for collaboration and sharing is illuminated by employing a framework, based on ideas derived from Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Michael Warner. In 1967 Barthes argued that a text did not release ‘a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God) but is a space of many dimensions’.<sup>78</sup> By extension the learner could read a text differently to the way that the teacher, or author, understood it. The implication was that, for students at the OU, control need no longer be in the hands of those who created the texts. It could lie with the OU

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<sup>76</sup> Open University advertisement in the *Educating Rita* programme at the Derby Playhouse, 7 September - 8 October 1983.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www3.open.ac.uk/near-you/south-east/p3.asp> accessed 7 January, 2010. There is a review of the performance in a prison here <http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/index.php?id=362> accessed 2 October 2012.

<sup>78</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The death of the author’ *Aspen*, 5-6, Fall/Winter 1967, available at <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html> accessed 30 September, 2014.

students. Even when physically isolated from the wider society, OU students, engaged in studying, could employ the centrally-produced teaching texts which were dispatched to students and by drawing on life experiences rather than formal educational conventions, could read them in many ways. Their learning could be deeper than passive reception, it could involve helping one other and sharing information. By 1985 Ray Woolfe argued that the OU has had a major impact in challenging the view of tutors as employed to fill 'empty vessels or disembodied brains [...] full of facts or to impart a body of knowledge'.<sup>79</sup> This was the case for students in prisons as well as other students. Anne Reuss, having taught higher education in prison and studied its effects, noted that

individual prisoners are not "isolated learners". Social conditions prevail within a prison classroom [which] contains other adults, enlarging the interactive processes [...] The students will be learning from each other and with each other [...] a group of students collectively shape the context of learning in a prison classroom.<sup>80</sup>

There is considerable evidence of how OU prisoner students learnt from one another. During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s numerous members of the different groups which engaged in, or claimed responsibility for, acts of political violence in Northern Ireland (there were about 50 such groups in the province) were imprisoned.<sup>81</sup> There they were segregated according to their political allegiances. Approximately 25,000 of them were housed in the Maze/Long Kesh, which had formerly been a RAF base and an internment camp.<sup>82</sup> In the prison the groups had their own command structure, prepared their own food and organised their own

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<sup>79</sup> Ray Woolfe, 'Learning in groups', *Teaching at a Distance*, 26, Autumn 1985, p. 65.

<sup>80</sup> Anne Reuss, 'Prison(er) education', *The Howard Journal*, 38, 2, May 1999, pp. 119, 125.

<sup>81</sup> Adrian Guelke, 'Political violence and the paramilitaries' in P. Mitchell and R. Wilford (eds.) *Politics in Northern Ireland*, Westview, London, 1999, p. 36.

<sup>82</sup> Kieran McEvoy, 'Prisoner release and conflict resolution: international lessons for Northern Ireland', *International Criminal Justice Review*, 8, 1, 1998, p. 40; Patrick D. Rocks, 'Attitudes to participation in education of adult prisoners in HMP Maze (Compounds) and HMP Belfast', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 4, 1, 1985, p. 69.

entertainment. There was ‘a large degree of autonomy on the wings’.<sup>83</sup> Groups of prisoners also elected their own Education Officers.<sup>84</sup> These Officers interviewed prisoners who wished to engage with formal learning and recommendations were made as to appropriate courses.<sup>85</sup>

In 1973 six political prisoners in the Maze began their studies with the OU.<sup>86</sup> During the early 1980s one OU Tutor took an anti-sexist book for one prisoner to the prison in Northern Ireland where female political prisoners were held, Armagh. She soon found that the book was being lent around the prison.<sup>87</sup> However, learners shared more than texts. They also worked together. At first students were isolated from one another in the Maze/Long Kesh but in time most of the students were moved together.<sup>88</sup> Tutor Diana Purcell explained:

nearly all of them, but particularly the IRA, they set up the system. If they arranged to do an OU course then they had to give a talk about what they were studying each week to the rest of the guys in that section ... encouraged each other too.<sup>89</sup>

Those sentenced to the Maze after 1 May 1976 were not granted Special Category status. In response, there was a ‘dirty protest’ and a hunger strike by prisoners. Those who protested were not permitted to sit together or hold classes, so they shared information by shouting. The

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<sup>83</sup> Brian Gormally, Kieran McEvoy and David Wall, ‘Criminal justice in a divided society: Northern Ireland prisons’, *Crime and Justice*, 17, 1993, p. 54.

<sup>84</sup> Marion Green, *The Prison Experience— A Loyalist Perspective*, EPIC Research Document Number. 1, *Ex-Prisoners’ Interpretative Centre*, Belfast, 1998, p. 12 <http://www.epic.msi-it.co.uk/images/custom/uploads/129/files/Prison-History.pdf> accessed 2 October, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Laurence McKeown, *Out of time: Irish Republican prisoners, Long Kesh 1972-2000*, Beyond the Pale, Belfast, 1999, pp. 138, 139.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Prison sentences proved no bar to degrees for loyalists’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 January 2011.

<sup>87</sup> <http://prisonmemoryarchive.com/armagh-stories/> On these women see Gina Sigillito, *The Daughters Of Maeve: 50 Irish Women Who Changed World*, Kensington Publishing, New York, 2007 p293 and obituary of Marie Wright, 25 December 2004. <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/am1401056g.html>

<sup>88</sup> Jane Nelson, ‘One day in the life of Jane Nelson’, *Sesame*, May 1972, p. 12. Jane was a senior counsellor at the OU who taught some of those imprisoned in Long Kesh.

<sup>89</sup> Diana Purcell, interviewed 1 May 2009 by Hilary Young for the OU Oral History Project recording available via the OU Archive. Diana Purcell joined the Open University in Northern Ireland in 1971 as a part-time Counsellor while working full-time as a lecturer at the Ulster Polytechnic. She became a Senior Counsellor in the 1980s and was responsible initiating and organising much of the OU’s prison teaching.

effect was to level distinctions between teachers and taught. Even after the protests were concluded debates and classes were arranged so as to encourage discussion and active learning. Richard English's study of these prisoners during this period concluded that they were keen 'to move away from the hierarchical notions of knowing teacher and passive students'. While Patrick Rocks concluded that in the Maze in 1985 'most inmates choose not to become involved in any educational activity', the prisoners themselves told a different story.<sup>90</sup> The Ulster Defence Association claimed that 20% of those of its members who were imprisoned gained an educational qualification, the Ulster Volunteer Force claimed that 60-70% of its members and a Republican claimed that 'something like 95% of prisoners in Long Kesh participated in formal or informal education'.<sup>91</sup> Approximately five per cent of the long-term prisoners, 40 or 50 a year, officially studied with the OU.<sup>92</sup> It is difficult to say how many people accessed OU teaching materials because they were shared.

The notion of learning through collaboration also arose among prisoners in other parts of the country. Some prisoners shared with their families. In the early 1980s two modules based on the OU course *The Pre-school child* were developed for use by prisoners.<sup>93</sup> An OU student in gaol in Barlinnie felt that his relationship with his wife and children had dramatically improved saying, 'They get more out of me and I get more out of them'.<sup>94</sup> OU student James Crosby explained that 'studying in prison for me is a collective effort, whether it be my family's lengthy searches of the internet or the prison librarian leaving no stone

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<sup>90</sup> Rocks, 'Attitudes to participation', p. 69.

<sup>91</sup> Jonathan Stevenson, *We wrecked the place': contemplating an end to the Northern Ireland troubles*, Free Press, New York, 1996, p. 135; Fern Lane, 'The out of prison experience. Groundbreaking Tar Anall study on former republican prisoners', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* 20 September 2000, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Allyson Collins and Haywood Burns, *Prison Conditions in the United Kingdom*, 1992, Human Rights Watch, New York, p. 46; *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 7 January 2000, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=149558&sectioncode=26> accessed 1 November, 2010.

<sup>93</sup> Only prisoners whose offences do not relate to children are allowed to study on courses which include any material on children.

<sup>94</sup> Moira MacLean, 'Open learning in closed conditions', *Open Learning* 2, 3, November 1987, p. 46.

unturned in finding a specific text for me'.<sup>95</sup> There may even have been some sense of community across time and space. One student framed his account in terms of the story of John McVicar, who was sentenced to 26 years for robbery in 1970 and took a degree in Sociology while in prison before being paroled in 1978. Graham Godden claimed to have been influenced to engage in crime having seen the 1980 film about the life of McVicar. After Godden was imprisoned he studied criminology and social sciences through the OU.<sup>96</sup> Another student said that he sometimes questioned his own abilities 'but then I hear of ones who have done it, who had the same doubts yet managed it'.<sup>97</sup>

In 1969 Foucault helped to found the Group d'Information sur les Prisons (Prison Information Group) and within a few years he had conceptualised (in *Of other spaces*) prison as a heterotopia, that is a 'place which lies outside all places and yet is localisable'. Such a place could juxtapose 'in a single real space, several spaces, several sites which are themselves incompatible'. Heterotopias were not utopias, but 'other places' in which existing arrangements were 'represented, contested and inverted', where individuals could be apart from the larger social group.<sup>98</sup> These locations were both isolated and penetrable, their focus and meaning unfixed. When an OU student, an Irish Republican prisoner called Dominic Adams, referred to the classroom in a prison run by the British by its name in Gaelic, *seomra rang*, he was not naming it not as a utopia (literally meaning 'no place') but an OU-topia which could be almost any place in which the social order could be reevaluated.<sup>99</sup> Many of those who studied with the OU while in prison were able to create a space for themselves which was beyond their day-to-day reality and within which there was a strong sense of the

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<sup>95</sup> *Inside News. The Open University Newsletter for Secure Environments*, March 2009, 6, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> *The Observer*, 22 January 2012.

<sup>97</sup> Worth, 'Supporting learners', p. 184.

<sup>98</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16, Spring 1986, pp. 22-7.

<sup>99</sup> Laura McAtackney, 'The Negotiation of Identity at Shared Sites: Long Kesh/Maze Prison site, Northern Ireland', Paper Presented at the Forum UNESCO University and Heritage 10th International Seminar "Cultural Landscapes in the 21st Century", Newcastle upon Tyne, April 2005. Revised: July 2006 p. 3, available at <http://conferences.ncl.ac.uk/unescolandscapes/files/MCATACKNEYLaura.pdf> accessed 30 September, 2014.



collective. This tendency was so marked that one interviewer noted, ‘a very strong and understandable tendency to tell stories from the collective perspective since this reflects the solidarity of the political organisation [...] Sentences would sometimes begin ‘we’ not ‘I’’.<sup>100</sup> This concept of the heterotopia can be used to illuminate the similarities between OU students inside prisons and those outside. Both categories of students could rearrange the conventional, a living room or a cell, in order to create a laboratory, or lecture theatre. To develop these spaces, to produce and disseminate knowledge which was not only external and expert-driven, students drew on the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, who was awarded an honorary doctorate at the OUs first Degree ceremony in 1973. He proposed that much education reinforced existing social relations by encouraging the teacher to ‘fill students with the content of his [sic] narration’. Students, he said, were being treated as ‘receiving objects’, presented with packaged sets of pre-prepared sets of materials, marketed as desirable learning outcomes and delivered by part-time academic labour. Freire described such teaching as ‘educational banking’ because a teacher narrated, that is made a ‘deposit’ which filled the listener’s head, irrespective of the relevance of this activity.<sup>101</sup> ‘Banking’ impeded the development of a student’s critical consciousness, as it required students to be passive and to resist dialogue. He sought to develop critical consciousness and dialogue, arguing that, ‘through learning [people] can make and remake themselves’.<sup>102</sup> Although the impact was questioned, in that the OU continued to offer centralised control of content and automated assessment, it also developed pedagogic theories which emphasised the importance of collaborative learning using disaggregated networks.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Cahal McLaughlin, ‘Inside stories, memories from the Maze and Long Kesh Prison’, *Journal of Media Practice*, 7, 2, 2006, p. 126.

<sup>101</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New Revised 20th-Anniversary ed. New York, Continuum Publishing Co., 1998, p. 54.

<sup>102</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of indignation* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2004), p. 15.

<sup>103</sup> David Harris, ‘On Marxist Bias’. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2, 2, 1978, pp. 68-71. See also David Harris, ‘Educational technology at the Open University: A short history of achievement and cancellation’, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 1, 7, 1976, pp. 46, 48.

Warner argued that a new ‘space of discourse’ can be formed when texts, circulated among strangers, enable those people, through those texts, to organise together and to have experiences in common.<sup>104</sup> In the Home Experiment Kits mailed to the first OU students in 1971 were over 8,000 tiny (5in × 3in × 1in), cheap (£15 each) lightweight microscopes. Scientists need not be conceptualised as white-coated men but could be students able to create a laboratory in a living room who were encouraged to collate and compare the results of their experiments. Through being able to improve their skills and confidence and to strengthen their identities as learners students were able to develop, both within prison and without, their own ‘publics’ (to use Warner’s term). Some students formed self-help groups and these were soon encouraged by the OU. By 1974 there were over 1,000 self-help groups.<sup>105</sup> This concept of ‘publics’, when meshed with the notions of heterotopia and of texts being open to many readings illuminates how the impact of the OU can be understood not only in terms of the individual achievement but also in terms of a wider notion of mutual support and community.

A number of political developments have been associated with students’ learning through the OU. A Home Office report in 1977 concluded that OU studies ‘must have contributed to stability in their establishments’.<sup>106</sup> By 1986 17 former OU students who had been released from the Maze were in full-time University education and there had been half-a-dozen OU degrees awarded. The following year a further five students graduated. Many of the OU graduates went on to hold positions of authority in a variety of community organisations.<sup>107</sup> In 2012 five Sinn Féin Members of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland, a Member of the European Parliament and others in a number of civic roles were OU

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Warner, ‘Publics and counterpublics’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88, 4, November 2002, pp. 413-25.

<sup>105</sup> David Sewart, ‘Some observations on the formation of study group’, *Teaching at a Distance*, 2 (February 1975), 2-6;

<sup>106</sup> Worth, ‘Supporting learner’, p. 183.

<sup>107</sup> Diana Purcell, Internal report, January 1979, OU Archives.

graduates.<sup>108</sup> David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson were both elected to Belfast City Council in 1997 and to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 and were former Long Kesh Compound prisoners who had completed OU degrees.<sup>109</sup> Both felt that their degrees gave them political confidence and an understanding of methods other than violence.<sup>110</sup> Martin O'Hagan, who was interned in the 1970s and later gaoled, studied sociology through the OU.<sup>111</sup> He became a journalist.<sup>112</sup> Sinn Fein MLA Raymond McCartney was jailed for life in the 1970s for murder and later cleared on appeal. Kenny McClinton of the Ulster Freedom Fighters became a Master of Theology.<sup>113</sup> Martin Snoddon, who called himself a Unionist 'hardliner', met a member of the IRA in the Maze when they were both studying through the OU. They became friends and remained in contact after their release. Snoddon, when released, took on reconciliation work and helped to form a group which aimed to reintegrate former political prisoners from both sides into the wider society.<sup>114</sup> The effect of studying through the OU on

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<sup>108</sup> Gordon MacIntyre taught Raymond McCartney a Provisional Irish Republican Army hunger striker who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1977. From 1989 to 1991 McCartney was Officer Commanding of the IRA prisoners in the H Blocks. He was released in 1994, worked with former prisoners and became a Sinn Fein MLA for Foyle. See also <http://www.irlnet.com/saoirse/maghella.html> accessed 14 March, 2012. See the website of An Ciste Infheistíochta Gaeilge, <http://www.ciste.ie/?page=BOARDOFDIRECTORS> accessed 30 September, 2014 accessed 1 December, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 January 2007;

[http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/breakingnews/breakingnews\\_ukandireland/breakingnews\\_ukandireland\\_politics/progressive-unionist-leader-ervine-dies-28414284.html](http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/breakingnews/breakingnews_ukandireland/breakingnews_ukandireland_politics/progressive-unionist-leader-ervine-dies-28414284.html) accessed 22 June, 2013.

<sup>110</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/platform/node/1255> accessed 1 December, 2011.

<sup>111</sup> 'Dead Men Tell No Tales: Martin O'Hagan and *The Sunday World*', *Ulster News*, May 31 2013, <https://ulsternews.wordpress.com/tag/open-university/> accessed 1 December, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> 'While in prison, O'Hagan took an Open University degree course and by the time he was released, half-way through his jail term, he had determined to renounce his violent past and become a journalist.' Obituary *Daily Telegraph*, 1 October 2001 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1358068/Martin-OHagan.html> accessed 1 December, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> *Derry Journal*, 3 April 2012, <https://saoirse32.wordpress.com/tag/raymond-mccartney> accessed 1 December, 2011; Martin Dillon, *God and the gun: The Church and Irish terrorism*, Routledge, New York and Abingdon, 1999, p 39; Carolyn Gallaher, *After the peace: Loyalist paramilitaries in post-accord Northern Ireland*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2007, p. 43.

<sup>114</sup> Peace Direct (ed.) *Unarmed heroes: The courage to go beyond violence: personal testimonies and essays on the peaceful resolution of conflict*, Clairview, Forest Row, East Sussex, 2004, pp. 34-35; Gallaher *After the peace*, pp. 14, 44-45; Daniel Wehrenfennig, 'Dialogue Makes a Difference: Learning from Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland' see [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/2/5/4/2/5/pages254258/p254258-](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/5/4/2/5/pages254258/p254258-)

those people who became active and useful citizens was reported in 2000 by *The Times Higher*:

The extraordinary role of Open University degrees in furthering the peace process in Northern Ireland is acknowledged throughout the Republican sector as well as by the smaller Loyalist political parties whose support for the Good Friday agreement of 1998 and for the 1999 Northern Ireland Executive is vital.<sup>115</sup>

Many in the Maze felt that ‘reading and studying in jail involved self-improvement overlaid with political commitment’.<sup>116</sup> Republican hunger striker Laurence McKeown suggested that ‘republican prisoners became increasingly engaged in a cultural, literary and dramatic struggle— the struggle through education’ while from their analysis Jacqueline Dana & Seán McMonagle concluded that a strategy was developed ‘to combat the pervasiveness of the English worldview. Education, in fact, became a focal point in the battles against Britain that would be staged within prison walls’.<sup>117</sup> Prisoner Jackie McMullan felt ‘exhilarated’ by the notion of education as a revolutionary force.<sup>118</sup>

The OU’s *Changing Experience of Women* module, an OU module offered 1983-1991, drew on Friere’s ideas. The formation of self-help groups was encouraged, as was the view of staff as resources rather than as pedagogues. The material was designed to be tested against learners’ experiences so that (as one of authors of the material said) students ‘value each other’s experience and examine it supportively’.<sup>119</sup> Tutor Diana Purcell recalled that she had been struck, on first entering the men-only Maze in the early 1970s, by ‘the maleness of

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1.php; <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/martin-snodden-northern-ireland/> accessed 1 December, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 7 January 2000.

<sup>116</sup> English, *Armed struggle*, p. 231.

<sup>117</sup> McKeown, *Out of time*, p. 191; Jacqueline Dana & Seán McMonagle, “Deconstructing ‘Criminalisation’: The Politics of Collective Education in the H-blocks” *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 8 1&2, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> English, *Armed struggle*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>119</sup> Gill Kirkup, ‘Women’s studies “at a distance”: the new Open University course’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 6, 3, 1983, p. 279.

it all'.<sup>120</sup> However, in the Maze 'over 200 men took part in the women's studies class over a two-year period'. They were supported by an OU tutor who recalled that there was both collaborative learning and that students contributed to the development of the pedagogy.<sup>121</sup> Laurence McKeown, a Republican who spent 16 years in a prison in Northern Ireland, felt that 'what came out of the course in general was that men became aware of the power they held. Power they held over their female relatives and loved ones [and] over women in general'.<sup>122</sup> Gordon MacIntyre, the tutor who assessed Laurence McKeown's double assignment, recalled that it was 'an essay full of feminist insights'.<sup>123</sup> McKeown felt Freire's notions of non-hierarchical, dialogue-based, education were 'absolutely brilliant'. Material written by Republican prisoners and smuggled out of the Maze for publication in the 1980s, linked the conflict to other struggles, notably those against apartheid and for Palestine. It promoted feminism in that it argued that words like 'chick' and 'bird' contributed to the oppression of women.<sup>124</sup>

It has been recognised that the idea that learning in prison, being a social as well as a cognitive process, can support the development of citizenship.<sup>125</sup> While in prison Nelson Mandela obtained a Bachelor of Laws degree by studying through the University of London external degree programme. He passed the London Intermediate exams in 1963, but was prevented from completing his degree until a decade later. He became a central figure within the 'Robben Island University', that was the arrangement by prisoners on the island, many of

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<sup>120</sup> Diana Purcell interview.

<sup>121</sup> <http://prisonmemoryarchive.com/education/> accessed 30 September, 2014.

<sup>122</sup> Simona Sharoni, 'Gendering Resistance within an Irish Republican Prisoner Community: A Conversation with Laurence McKeown', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1, 2, Spring 2000, pp. 104-123.

<sup>123</sup> Gordon MacIntyre, 'My 20 years as Regional Director', OU Archives.

<sup>124</sup> Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party*, Penguin, Dublin, 2009.

<sup>125</sup> J. Fleming and E. Keenan, 'Youth on the margins in Northern Ireland, England, and Ukraine', *European Journal of Social Work*, 3, 2, pp. 165-77; Kieran McEvoy, 'Prisoners, the agreement, and the political character of the Northern Ireland conflict', *Fordham International Law Journal*, 22, 4 1998, pp. 1539-76; Colin Crawford, *Defenders or criminals?: Loyalist prisoners and criminalisation*, Blackstaff, Belfast, 1999.

whom went on to hold important political posts, to teach one another. After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela played a leading role in the introduction of universal suffrage and democratic elections to South Africa. In 1993 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace and in 1994 he became the first black president of the country. The Open University of Israel educated people imprisoned in Israel on charges of terrorism.<sup>126</sup> In common with many Irish Republicans some of these prisoners refused to recognise the legitimacy of the state which has imprisoned them, were separated according to their organizational affiliation and elected officers from among the prisoners. Professor Mark Hamm suggested that those he termed ‘security prisoners’ had, by studying through the Open University of Israel, ‘turned Israeli prisons into *de facto* universities of Palestinian nationalism’.<sup>127</sup> Professor Leslie Fishbein concluded that ‘you have prisoners who remain committed to the Palestinian cause and terrorism, and the prison system seems to foster that’.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, there are examples of prisoners who studied for degrees while in prison and came to work for peaceful solutions. A study of 18 high-profile Palestinian leaders imprisoned for their activities on behalf of Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, concluded that education provided a route to disengagement and rehabilitation.<sup>129</sup> ‘None of the prisoners leave their organizations’, the researcher, Sagit Tehoshua noted in her study carried out in 2014. However, she added that ‘they just become much more pragmatic, believing that the way of terror and violence is less viable and effective’. A member of Hamas sentenced to six life terms in an Israeli prison said:

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<sup>126</sup> The right of prisoners convicted of terrorism to access the Israeli OU was withdrawn in 2011. See ‘Court: End of Free College for Terrorists’, *Israel National News*, 25 December 2012, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/163549#.UR3ccKWIOzp> accessed 29 July, 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Mark S. Hamm, ‘*Locking up terrorists: three models for controlling prisoner radicalization*’ 2011, p 13, [www.indstate.edu/ccj/crinst/Locking%20Up%20Terrorists.docx](http://www.indstate.edu/ccj/crinst/Locking%20Up%20Terrorists.docx) accessed 5 June 2015. The phrase ‘de facto universities of Palestinian nationalism’ has been attributed to a Fatah leader see Debra Rubin, ‘Documentary Offers Window on Israeli Prisons’, *New Jersey Jewish News*, February 17 2009, p. 2, <http://njewishnews.com/njjn.com/021909/sxDocumentaryOffersWindow.html> accessed 5 June 2014.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Rubin, ‘Documentary Offers Window’, p. 2.

<sup>129</sup> *Times of Israel*, 23 October 2012, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/terrorist-leaders-can-change-if-only-we-let-them-says-israeli-researcher/> accessed 29 July 2014.

Since I entered prison I think before I decide, I count to ten and only then act – it was not like that before I entered prison. In prison we learn a lot from the Jews and also from the Open University – it changed me.<sup>130</sup>

Prisoners were restricted to studying in Hebrew so that the learning material could be monitored. The commissioner of the Israeli Prison Service 2000 -2003, Orit Adato, noted that one impact of this was that prisoners became fluent in Hebrew and familiar with Israeli society which helped facilitate peace negotiations. After his release Palestinian prisoner Abu Muhsin said that his education in prison had helped change his perspective:

Conflicts could be resolved not only by military force. We fought for decades, and now we should think of other ways to liberate our land.<sup>131</sup>

Israeli teachers at the Israeli OU who work with Palestinian prisoners have come to regard education as a catalyst for change and development towards non-violent conflict resolution.<sup>132</sup> The director of the Palestinian Prisoners Society's Ramallah branch Abd Ala'al Al'anani, argued that studying for a degree often prepared a prisoner for post-prison life.<sup>133</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Through their studies with the OU prisoners, and other learners, became better equipped to deal with issues of power and politics. This activity enabled them to hold a mirror up to the mainstream and recognise the ways in which the social order could be made and remade. The

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<sup>130</sup> Sagit Tehoshua, 'The Israeli experience of terrorist leaders in prison: issues in radicalisation and de-radicalisation' in Andrew Silke (ed.), *Prison, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform* Routledge, London and New York, 2014, pp, 148, 150.

<sup>131</sup> 'Jailed terrorists secretly earn university degrees while serving time in Israeli prisons', *Israel News*, 29 January 2014, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4482302,00.html> accessed 30 September, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Dalia Ben-Tsur, 'Political conflict confronted through prison education: a case study of Israeli teachers working with Palestinian prisoners', *The Journal of correctional education*, 58, 2, June 2007, pp. 108-128.

<sup>133</sup> 'PA Terrorist Murdered Two Israelis, Completes Master's in Jail', *Israel National News*, 8 April 2015, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/193836#.VXIYvGfbLVI> accessed 1 June, 2015.

OU's Charter committed it to 'the educational well-being of the community'.<sup>134</sup> It presented its work as 'a key part of its mission to widen participation in higher education especially by those groups who are traditionally excluded' while in 2012 the Prison Service conceptualised OU study as 'a vital part of resettlement and a route to reducing re-offending'.<sup>135</sup> In 1991 the Home Office emphasised that the opportunity for education was 'essential' to prisons and in 2014 the Ministry of Justice again stressed the importance of 'putting education at the heart of detention'.<sup>136</sup> In the case of Northern Ireland, the 'exemplary practices developed throughout those turbulent times' did more than support individuals, they helped transform 'angry, men ruthless in their conviction that military action was the only way forward into astute political thinkers, responsible for the leadership and strategy of some of Northern Ireland's leading political parties and community organisations'.<sup>137</sup> Many student prisoners and their tutors found that the nucleus for development lay in the cells, that the processes of acquiring new knowledge and learning led to personal growth and development. By learning to think differently and to reconstruct their identities they were then able to shape their wider communities.

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<sup>134</sup> Royal Charter (RC 000391) establishing the Open University, 30 May 1969, pp. iv, v. Online at [www.open.ac.uk/about/documents/about-university-charter.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/about/documents/about-university-charter.pdf), accessed 1 June 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Memorandum submitted by The Open University to the Select Committee on Education and Skills in December 2006, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeduski/170/170we15.htm> accessed 17 July, 2013. Written evidence to the Select Committee on Education and Skills, December 2006, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeduski/170/170we15.htm> accessed 1 March, 2012.

<sup>136</sup> Home Office, *Prison education: the Government reply to the second report from the Education, Science and Arts Committee Session 1990-91 HC 311*, Cm 1683, HMSO, London, 1991; <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/oct/16/chris-grayling-force-super-child-jail-teenage-inmates> accessed 18 October, 2014.

<sup>137</sup> Tracy Irwin, 'Prison education in Northern Ireland: learning from our paramilitary past', *Howard Journal*, 42, 5, December 2003, pp. 471, 473.



