Learning to live together? The Open University, student-prisoners and 'the Troubles'.

In 1971 the Long Kesh Detention Centre (later HM Maze) opened to inmates and the Open University, OU, opened to students. Within months some Maze/Long Kesh prisoners had become OU students. Their learning is illuminated through the employment of David McMillan's 'sense of community', comparisons with other prisons and analysis of the testimony of prisoners, prison officers and OU staff.[1] In Part I the experience of studying is framed through an outline of the context of prisoner learning and an analysis of the OU's ethos and role within the prison system. The building and maintenance of the sociable collaboration required for learning is outlined in Part II. To move beyond a correlation between learning and the development of citizenship, the notion of community, as built at the intersection of spirit, trust, trade and art has been employed. In Part III the focus is on the role of the OU and OU student-prisoners in Ireland within the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the wider institutionalisation of dialogue and co-operation known as the peace process.

I Universities and prisons

In the 21st century UK universities became associated with terrorism. In 2015 they became obliged to try to 'prevent individuals from being drawn into terrorism'.[2] However, in the prior century universities were seen as institutions which promoted civil society. By contrast, prisons were often conceptualised as contributors to further lawbreaking being, to employ a term attributed to Kropotkin, 'universities of crime' or 'terrorist universities'.[3] During 'the Troubles', the Maze/Long Kesh gained a

'deserved reputation as the university of terrorism'.[4] In 1974 Labour MP Tam Dalyell claimed that prisoners were being drilled there and 'we are breeding a loathing of English politicians among the next generation'. The PM, Harold Wilson responded by saying that he loathed 'the parading of paramilitary forces' and that 'Long Kesh is becoming a university of disruption and subversion'.[5] Subsequently, journalists called Long Kesh/Maze 'a university of terrorism, formenting the confrontations and violence it was intended to control' and 'the university of terror'.[6] Although legislation to promote instruction in prisons had been passed in 1823, suspicion of the idea of supporting learning within prisons remains. In 1855 support for learning at Reading Gaol led to it being dubbed (by the Prisons Commission chair) a 'criminal university'.[7] While there were countervailing measures, 'resembling a school or university campus' HMP Blundeston, opened in 1963, reflected the shift in attitudes 'from detention and retribution towards training and rehabilitation', scepticism of prisoner education and making connections to universities, remained.[8]

Most OU students have always been both part-time and adult. Being established on the principle that 'enrolment as a student of the University should be open to everyone […] irrespective of educational qualifications, and no formal entrance requirement should be imposed', it challenged the notion that universities were largely for a small number of the social elite.[9] It has never had a residential campus. Rather, central staff prepared the teaching materials, which initially were mainly in the form of books, television programmes and radio broadcasts. For some modules gramophone records and experiment kits were posted to students. Part-time tutors, resident all over the country, taught and assessed groups of students in their area. Some local tutors were also counsellors, offering advice on course choices, study

skills and a range of other issues. There were precedents for university education in prisons using correspondence.[10] However, the OU, unlike most other universities, was structured to be able to support prisoners in Long Kesh/Maze through personal contact as well. OU tutors used their expertise to transmit knowledge and to curate the centrally-produced OU content. They supported sense-making by facilitating learners bringing their own experiences into a learning process. They arranged graduation ceremonies, with food brought in, relatives present and academic staff wearing, and providing graduands with, gowns.[11]

The OU's shape, roles and status were framed by the social democratic, post-war notions of efficiency and central government control.[12] It was funded directly from Whitehall and the creation of the distance teaching materials, which were to be delivered by local tutors, was centralised. This was a period when scientific intellectuals, rational planners with technocratic expertise were lauded.[13] There were efforts to restructure, on scientific lines, the civil service, industrial relations and the criminal justice system.[14] In 1968, as a demonstration of efficiency, the government arranged the amalgamation of companies to create the second biggest car manufacturer outside of the United States on the largest manufacturing site in the world.[15] These developments were reflected in the OU's division of labour (notably short-term, teaching–only contracts and specialist support staff) its economies of scale and its mass mail outs from its own warehouse. It employed language previously not associated with academia including 'lines of study', 'units' and 'production'. It was based in Milton Keynes, designated as a new town in 1967 and run not by local government but a corporation. State-funded universities and polytechnics opened and grew. A 1965 National Plan envisaged 60,000 full-time

students by 1969–70. State funding of the arts increased.[16] The idea that a scientific, industrial state could disseminate culture and support the creation of economically productive citizens framed the decision to support OU learners in prison.

The OU also recognised the benefits of pluralism, dissent, equity and the belief that humans can and should shape the world. In common with the seven new campus universities built in England in the 1960s, the first objective of the OU's 1969 Royal Charter was to advance and disseminate learning and knowledge. Unlike the others the OU also sought 'to promote the educational well-being of the community generally'.[17] This 'great liberal experiment', a 'cosy scheme that shows the Socialists at their most endearing but impractical worst', attracted staff enthusiastic about such values.[18] OU Professor Stuart Hall noted that the OU was 'filled with good social democrats. Everybody there believes in the redistribution of educational opportunities and seeks to remedy the exclusiveness of British education'.[19] `The idea that 'students can learn together' was also promoted.[20] A tutor, in 1972, who later became the OU Vice Chancellor described the OU as being where 'people who walked the talk on access and student-centred pedagogy'.[21]

Although the OU was not designed specifically for them, in January 1971, when it was first opened to students, six prisoners in HMP Albany and 16 in HMP Wakefield started their OU studies. By 1985 150 prisoners in 31 establishments were registered as OU students.[22] Reflecting on why he had accepted prisoners as students, Walter Perry, the OU's first Vice Chancellor, argued that the OU was 'providing an opportunity of retraining that may prove to be of inestimable value in reclaiming them as active and useful citizens on their release'.[23] Katla Helgason, a

tutor who went on to develop the OU's Scottish Prison Scheme emphasised that tutors who worked within prisons 'had to be very proactive and very positive'.[24] Tutor Counsellor Ormond Simpson taught many prisoners. He felt that 'as an educator, I had ordinary liberal values and a wish to help the disadvantaged members of society'. He went on to list some of those values as 'the value of education, the sanctity of human life, the importance of doing things democratically'.[25] The OU had the systems and the staff to support prisoners' education.

Although centralised for many aspects of its work, decisions about teaching arrangements were made locally with prison provision being reliant on co-operation between the OU and governors. In the 1970s versions of the residential summer schools that the OU ran, were arranged, with students from inside and outside the prisons.[26] Only some prisons permitted VHF radios (for OU broadcasts of teaching materials) CDs, DVDs and calculators and the OU's Home Experiment Kits. Telephone calls were monitored and restricted. The time allocated to study varied. Although most OU teaching materials were delivered through correspondence, prisoners were unable to receive or send mail freely.[27] However, video and cassette recordings of OU materials were sometimes permitted, a student in a top security mental hospital was permitted to receive a scalpel, HMP Maidstone permitted a student to accompany a tutor for four days for a version of a residential school and a senior counsellor was permitted to take a student, accompanied by a Prison Officer, to a regional office to use a computer. He was also allowed to bring a car full of materials for a Course Choice meeting into the prison.[28] By contrast, in Armagh, a women's prison used for internment, Republican Mary McArdle recalled additional barriers to studying the OU course, 'Crime, Justice and Society':

the prison administration conducted a mass strip search and physical assault of all of the women. [Over 22 women were] physically attacked and forcibly strip searched. [This] changed the whole nature and the whole environment of the jail [and] education was that it wasn't my priority then.[29]

In Long Kesh, Loyal Education Officer Ronnie McCullough recalled that there were riots, protests and a serious fire at the prison and 'there was no established educational system, the prison library was in its infancy'.[30] The OU's decentralisation of teaching arrangements, the opportunity for students to take breaks from studying, enabled flexibility in the face of a range of barriers to learning.

In August 1971 internment was introduced into Northern Ireland. Initially almost 350 people suspected of involvement with the Irish Republican Army were imprisoned without trial in the Long Kesh Internment Camp. A Welfare Officer attached to the prison contacted the OU and the first OU classes for internees were started in 1972.[31] In 1973 the OU's Belfast-based Regional Director visited and in 1974 six political prisoners in Long Kesh/Maze began their degree studies with the OU.[32] An estimated 30,000 men and women served time in British and Irish prisons during 'the Troubles', approximately 25,000 of them in the Maze/Long Kesh.[33] The men in the Maze had a range of political and military allegiances and the prisoners were housed according to their affiliation, had their own command structure, prepared their own food and organised their own entertainment.[34] In the Maze there was 'a large degree of autonomy on the wings'.[35] The prison was extended, with the addition of the Compounds and, from 1976, the H Blocks (officially the Maze Cellular).[36]

The OU's involvement in prisoner education was echoed elsewhere. The structures of the Israeli OU, which opened to students in 1976, are different to those of its UK counterpart. Nevertheless, its ethos and pedagogy owe something to the UK OU.[37] It has taught imprisoned Palestinians.[38] One study concluded that these student-prisoners have moved towards disengagement and rehabilitation.[39] A member of Hamas concluded:

> 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.[40]

Prisoner Abu Muhsin felt that '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'.[41] Tutors also saw education as a supportive of non-violent conflict resolution.[42]

II Learning together

While definitions of community vary, in this journal one of the 'building blocks of community' has been the 'self-help group'.[43] McMillan's 'Sense of Community' incorporates characteristics from communities of interest, of practice and of learners.[44] It is

> as a *spirit* of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be *trusted*, an awareness of *trade* and mutual benefit come from being together and a spirt that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as *art*.[45]

While not designed specifically for a study of student-prisoners, McMillan's notion is of value. It can be used to connect joint negotiation and the advancement of ideas to the settings (in which threads of knowledge were developed) and the affective

elements of motivation and confidence. While in Long Kesh Laurence McKeown wrote a complaint about teaching materials. It was published by the OU and he received a reply from the text author. As he noted "my experience of studying with the OU was not a lonely one".[46] Shared political ambitions and constraints on resources and movement may have bolstered the 'sense of belonging' which is an aspect of 'Spirit', one of McMillan's four elements of a sense of community.[47] There may also have been a sense, for some of the learners, of solidarity over time. Republicans, while interned by the British in Wales in 1916, established their own 'Republican Universities'.[48] Some Republicans conceptualised their education as part of a political struggle.[49] It was 'to combat the pervasiveness of the English worldview'.[50] Even though the OU had its headquarters in England, some learners felt a sense of ownership. Ulster Volunteer Force member 'Tommy', praised the OU 'because it wasn't sponsored or organised by the prison authorities […] it was always ours'.[51] Groups of prisoners elected their own Education Officers.[52] These Officers interviewed prisoners who wished to engage with formal learning and recommendations were made as to appropriate courses.[53] When the decision was taken to offer a Social Sciences module to prisoners in 1974 this was not an imposition, but the outcome of negotiations 'just to get the ball rolling' as Provisional IRA Education Officer Noel Quigley noted.[54] His sense of distance from the British state and connection to the OU may have been enhanced following media and Ministerial investigations in the mid-1980s as to whether the OU was promoting Marxism.[55] It could be seen as an institution at odds with the Conservative government. This sense of ownership was recalled by OU academic John Allen who, in 1990, visited the H Blocks and met a Republican leader:

I thought he was going to ask me about the course and the teaching, to ask me what I was going to teach. Not a bit of it, he actually sat me down and told me the political line, why they were in there, why they were political prisoners, exactly their position.[56]

Dommett's general point, that learners benefitted when they developed a sense of ownership and that 'if students are to develop a sense of belonging in their learning, it is likely that social interaction will be needed with other learners', was demonstrated among the political prisoners.[57]

Shelagh Livingstone taught OU community education courses to women in West Belfast. She reflected 'when I say "teaching" that is the wrong word, but I had been there with them as they learned, so I drew on that for my own work I did on my own [OU] course'.[58] Her course was E355, *Education for adults* which included both student choice and student involvement in developing interpretations of texts.[59] There were core readings with a 'wrap-around by the course team [the central academic authors of the course] who suggested frameworks, rather than defining the field of study'. Students added readings, there was flexibility as to the order in which texts were studied and students selected their own project topics. Students were assessed on assignments which were 'deliberately designed to be concerned with the individual life experiences of the students either as teachers or learners'.[60] Having access to the Maze/Long Kesh as a Board of Visitors member, Shelagh Livingstone discussed her E355 studies with fellow OU students in the prison. The OU's model of teaching and learning, designed for relatively isolated adults without prior qualifications encouraged collaborative engagement and a sense of ownership.

The attempt to implement a recommendation from a committee chaired by Lord Gardiner (who was the OU's Chancellor 1973-78) that those sentenced to the Maze/Long Kesh after 1 May 1976 should not granted Special Category (that is political or *de facto* Prisoner of War status) led to a refusal by some prisoners to wear the prison uniform.[61] This was followed by a 'dirty protest' and a hunger strike.[62] After the protesters were banned from sitting together to learn they started to shout as a means to communicate with one another. One effect of this was to reduce the distinction between teachers and taught. Once the protests were concluded debates and classes were arranged. However, the pedagogy had shifted. The prisoners sought to promote greater discussion and 'to move away from the hierarchical notions of knowing teacher and passive students'.[63] This decision echoed ideas associated with the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire. He was awarded an honorary doctorate at the OUs first Degree Ceremony in 1973. Instead of treating learners as 'receiving objects', he proposed that teachers engage with them.[64] Freire sought to develop critical thinking and communication, arguing that, 'through learning [people] can make and remake themselves'.[65] The OU recognised the importance of collaborative learning.[66] It promoted the idea that tutors were not employed to fill 'empty vessels or disembodied brains […] full of facts or to impart a body of knowledge'.[67] Rather they should promote 'self-direction' and 'participation' and foreground the notion of knowledge as 'not something that can be easily fixed or prepackaged but something more uncertain, tolerant of contradiction and individually and socially dependent'.[68]

Provisional IRA member and former hunger striker, Laurence McKeown was in charge of building the Republican Prisoners education programme, 1987-1989. He

felt that Freire's ideas of non-hierarchical, dialogue-based, education were 'absolutely brilliant'.[69] He studied an OU module, 'Changing Experience of Women' and concluded 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.[70]

Gordon MacIntyre, the OU tutor who taught Laurence McKeown, recalled 'an essay full of feminist insights'.[71] Material written by Republican prisoners and smuggled out of the Maze for publication argued that words like 'chick' and 'bird' contributed to the oppression of women.[72] The original OU module 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'.[73] Laurence McKeown worked with the tutor, Joanna McMinn and Republican prisoner Jackie McMullan who felt 'exhilarated on first reading Freire'.[74] Students contributed to the development of the pedagogy.[75] Laurence McKeown felt that 'really it was the study of masculinity […] and that became a project that went on for the next two years and I think there was a couple of hundred prisoners who went through it'.[76] The OU's pedagogy supported learners working together to forge new ideas and connections.

Regarding *Trust* McMillan argued that the 'spirit of sense of community can begin as a spark […] but it will never become a fire unless there exists in the community an authority structure that can sustain the fire'.[77] The OU's Founding Chancellor opened the OU by describing the human mind as not only a vessel to be filled with knowledge but also a fire which could be 'set alight and blown with the divine afflatus'.[78] Due to surveillance and lack of trust the metaphorical flames were dampened in most

prisons. Doors were locked, windows barred, and there were constant reminders of punishment. One prisoner in England told his OU tutor:

> In prison there is rarely another inmate following the same [OU] course and visits from a tutor can be infrequent and sometimes impossible. There is noise, arbitrary interruption, tension and sometimes the threat of violence […] The student in prison can face prejudice, jealousy and ridicule in an environment which is often hostile to intellectual activity.[79]

By contrast, when the OU Regional Director met in Maze/Long Kesh, with no Prison Officer present, the Officers Commanding the Provisional IRA, the UVF, the Official IRA and the UDA:

> The four men clearly knew each other, and treated each other, and me, with great courtesy and respect. All the men testified to the need for educational facilities.[80]

Loyalists and republicans collaborated to secure access to the OU.[81]

The Ulster Defence Association proposed that 20% of those of its members who were imprisoned gained an educational qualification. The Ulster Volunteer Force suggested that 60-70% of its imprisoned members were students. One Republican said that 'something like 95% of prisoners in Long Kesh participated in formal or informal education'.[82] Many prisoners accessed shared OU teaching materials and considered themselves to be students. The OU's Regional Director, who himself taught in the Maze, noted that 'at one time there were as many as one hundred students following our courses and being visited by tutors'.[83] On the other hand, a 1985 study of Long Kesh/Maze concluded that 'most inmates choose not to become

involved in any educational activity'.[84] Officially five per cent of the long-term prisoners, 40 or 50 a year, studied with the OU.[85]. Nevertheless, such accounts:

> 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 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.[86]

Ronald Grele felt that 'when we interview someone, he [sic] not only speaks to himself and to the interviewer but also he speaks through the interviewer to the larger community and its history as he views it'.[87] The notion of trust was entangled with that which was psychologically true for the prisoners. Their accounts reveal understandings of the culture and ideology and indicate that the Maze/Long Kesh was a place where a sense of community among learners could be built on trust.

Trust and cohesion developed as prisoners learned what to expect from one another. McMillan noted the importance of 'loyalty to the group' as an aspect of *Spirit*.[88] To process information and make decisions there was a formal hierarchy within each of the different factions and as McMillan noted 'communities and groups are more cohesive when leaders influence members and when members influence leaders'.[89] For the IRA, Freire's ideas were related not only to the approach to education but also to daily life. 'Collectivization and collective self-regulation began to compete with a formal chain of command'.[90] Among the students there a strong sense of the collective developed. 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''.[91]

There was trust in leaders, but not the leaders were not necessarily those formally in positions of authority. OU's teaching materials fostered *Spirit* ie, 'a setting where we can be ourselves and see ourselves mirrored in the eyes and responses of others'.[92]

'A community', argued McMillan's in regard to *Trade* 'is as strong as the bargains its members make with one another'.[93] The OU encouraged trading through student self-help groups. By 1974 there were over 1,000 of these across the UK.[94] In his 1976 study of prisoner students in England William Forster concluded that 'One of the most valuable things I saw was the 'self-help' group which was a mixture of inmates and non-inmates meeting regularly in a prison'.[95] Collaborative engagement was promoted on OU modules studied by prisoners. One prisoner in Scotland, having studied *The Pre-school child,* said that his relationship with his wife and children dramatically improved.[96]

At first students were isolated from one another in the Maze/Long Kesh but, in time, Jane Nelson, a senior counsellor at the OU who taught in Long Kesh, recalled that most of the students were moved together.[97] 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.[98]

Harry Donaghy, who was in the Official IRA Compound, created his own library and recalled

They would come into your cubicle with 'Ah I see you have got that. When you have finished, can I borrow that?' Or 'Harry, we are doing this, this is part of the OU course we are doing, here is an interesting module'.[99]

During the early 1980s an 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.[100] Michael Culbert recalled how prisoners taught one another. He felt that one OU Social Sciences course:

broadened our perspectives and grasp of how things work structurally in society. We all knew what we were opposed to but we needed that to be structured. Although not everybody was unaware, we had to give it to the Open University. They gave it from A to Z and it was very, very structured, very understandable […] Once we started into it, had a grasp of it, we delivered our own classes. So, whilst I was doing the formal education […] in the evenings I was also doing my own classes […] we were then rewriting the OU programme in easy steps for people […] we wrote out stuff then other men did the copying and then maybe one guy would sit and read it out and two would copy, so there would be two copies getting done to go to other wings.[101]

Interactivity sustained community. Noel Quigley recalled how 'you had to present your stuff at each lecture' to fellow prisoners.[102] Sharing learning did not stop with other prisoners. Geoff Moore, Prison Education teacher in the H Blocks in the 1980s, supervised two students as they watched an Open University television programme on non-Euclidean geometry. Realising that he did not understand, the prisoners made a Möbius strip and told him

"Now, no matter where you start in this paper you can always keep going round and round and round and round and round and round and round forever, never ending". And that is how they taught me about what non-Euclidean geometry was.[103]

For McMillan '*Art* represents the transcendent values of the community'. It was based in experience and 'in addition to being shared, an event must have a dramatic impact'. He emphasised the importance of risk for the community and the need to create a collective memory regarding a 'dramatic moment of tragedy'.[104] The dirty protests and the hunger strikes aided the creation of community in the Maze/Long Kesh as they provided a sense of being part of a wider struggle. While the OU provided the content and the ideas for learning and helped to shape those communities, it did not create the communities. However, the trading of skills and resources for mutual and collective benefit was bolstered by the OU.

In most of the UK prisoners were often moved to other prisons. Records and teaching materials could be lost in the process of transfers. One prisoner noted that he moved between eight different prisons while he studied an OU Openings course, a foundation in social sciences and a second level course.[105] Although the OU had tutors across the UK and was well-structured to support peripatetic students, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills concluded 'the lack of a national, coherent management information system for reporting offenders' progress is problematic'.[106] Even after a formal arrangement was agreed with the Scottish Office, the OU was not always informed of moves.[107] By contrast, generally prisoners in the Maze/Long Kesh stayed there and built ties to one another. There were exceptions. Republican Gerald Murray, was in the H Blocks. His OU materials

disappeared when, in 1981, he was moved to Magilligan Prison, which had no facilities for education.[108]

While the OU did not provide a campus, it encouraged learners to create their own study spaces. An OU broadcast concluded that 'when you become an [OU] undergraduate you become a member of that university and it gives you a sense of belonging to something else other than the prison community'.[109] The OU offered 'some sense of a lifeline to the world outside' and 'a completely different dimension'.[110] After interviewing 53 student prisoners Forster concluded that to enter a prison is to 'enter another world', that 'the concentration required [for study] removes the student from prison for a while' and that many saw studying as an 'escape from routine'. One prisoner said that he applied to study at the OU 'so that for just a few hours a week I could get away from the obscenities, the prison gossip, the scheming', another called studying 'a lifeline – it reaches outside. I'm a member of the University and that means that I'm still am member of the human race'.[111] Forster quoted a prison officer: 'it doesn't help them to adjust to prison at all – it just helps them to pretend they're not here'.[112]

Moving into and remaining in the alternative space was not always straightforward within other prisons across the UK. Tutor Tracy Irwin felt that 'prisoners would often come to the classroom in disturbed or distressed state after a difficult visit or following bad news from outside'.[113] Tutor Jackie Watts explained:

> During my three years as a higher education tutor in prison I was never once able to move straight into a teaching role at the start of the session. This was because before the student could move into the student 'self' to be fully engaged in the

learning situation, it was necessary for [the student] to actively, if only

temporarily, leave and 'unlock' the prisoner 'self'.[114]

McMillan suggested that 'symbolic expressions represent the part of a community

that is transcendent and eternal'.[115] 'Andrew' recalled 'You can treat it like you're in a

university […] I didn't feel like a student most of the time. Occasionally when I'm here

[independent learning room] I do, but you are reminded very quickly on the wing that

you're in prison!'[116] Student prisoner Jed noted that 'I sort of dissociate myself with

prison […] I'm like at a crossroads. I've got one foot in and one foot out of my

previous life'.[117] An OU Senior counsellor recalled that students

said that finding time for quiet study was often a problem. They could opt for

education during the day instead of working in the prison workshops (and thus

giving up the chance of earning), but this did not provide enough time and trying

to study in their cells in the evenings before 'lights out' was often difficult

because of noise and other interruptions.[118]

Following the 1983 break-out from the prison, teaching in the Republican H Blocks

took place in 16 separate tutorials. However, there was a communal space in the

Compounds. In 1988 the Compounds were closed and in 1992 the 40 OU students

in the H Blocks were permitted to study together. Within the constraints of

confinement by the British the Maze/Long Kesh students also created their own

spaces for study. Student H, a Republican, said 'I found myself putting a towel over

my door and sort of creating a wee space for myself, a wee positive space. I was

actually able to study'.[119] Republican Dominic Adams, referred to the classroom in

the Irish language, *seomra rang,* perhaps to distinguish it from the British prison.[120]

By adapting the teaching materials and offering and receiving support the problems of studying in prison were mitigated and communities constructed.

III Peace process

The communities of learners which developed had impacts beyond the success of individual students. One effect was to reduce tensions in the prisons. The first Education Officer for Armagh Women's Prison, who went on in 1989 to become the Chief Education Officer for the Northern Ireland Office with responsibility for Education in all Northern Ireland's prisons, concluded that the OU made a huge contribution to 'maintaining order in the prisons'.[121] Farley and Pike refer to 'the often anti-social communities within prisons'.[122] By contrast, Ulster University's study of ex-prisoners and their families noted 'the loss of comradeship developed within prison'. One respondent said of Long Kesh

> 'he comes home, he has lost the friendships he had inside, he has a lot of issues but he can't talk to us about it because he has always had his fellow prisoners as his confidants. Those are the people he can relate to.[123]

Learning, as Republican Liam McAnoy said, 'gave you an opportunity to think wider than the Compounds [in Maze/Long Kesh] you were in, wider again in the society from which you had just come out of and it gave you an opportunity to actually meet a lot of people that you would never have met, to be in a position where you could have discussions with them'.[124] Martin Snoddon, who called himself a Unionist 'hardliner', met a member of the IRA in Long Kesh/ Maze when they were both studying through the OU. They became friends. After his release Martin Snoddon took on reconciliation work and helped to form a group which aimed to reintegrate

former political prisoners from both sides into the wider society.[125] Brendan Mackin was in the Official Irish Republican Army:

> The Open University study group in many respects allowed people to discuss within their own environment [....] There were the guys who were sitting in the hut, there was a screw standing, he used to go outside and leave us alone because we were all at our books and allowed us to have a discussion and tease out that type of discussion. So The Open University […] played perhaps an unwitting role in being a bit of a catalyst for further discussions to take place in the camp.[126]

Republican Rosie McCorley (who graduated in 1997 and in 2012 became a Sinn Féin Member of the Legislative Assembly) noted 'the courses we were doing – the Social Sciences – it's political in nature and it helped our political education in that formal way'.[127] Laurence McKeown, who was a candidate for the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue a body which led to the Belfast Agreement, reflected that 'the development of my political outlook and consciousness [..] was integrated with, and influenced by, my studies with the OU'.[128] The Belfast ('Good Friday') Agreement of 1998 was the result of years of quiet effort. As Republican Michael Culbert noted, it 'did not just fall off a tree', but evolved from, among other places, the debating chamber of prison.[129]

John Hirst, a prisoner who studied with the OU, won his case against the UK government regarding its ban on voting by prisoners. He was, he said, 'transformed from a law breaker into a law-maker'.[130] In Ireland, a high number of OU graduates have been elected to the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland, the European Parliament and Belfast City Council.[131] Others took on community roles. As part of

the peace process Alan Carr, the OU's Regional Chair of the trade union for university staff, met with the Sinn Féin higher education spokespeople; 'I said I was working for The Open University and each of them in turn recited The Open University experiences they had had and how many degrees they had, all of them had at least one'.[132] Two Loyalists were more specific. Billy Hutchinson, one of the first to engage in the Peace Process, felt that, 'The Open University taught me how to actually do that'.[133] John Wallace reflected: 'There is a thread, in my view, through to the Peace Process. A lot of the UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force] guys would have been influenced by what they did in the OU. How they thought about things; started to change'.[134] Such perceptions were echoed in *The Times Higher* which noted:

> 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.[135]

Many of the skills taught through university study could be employed to build the peace. Séanna Walsh's study of the Treaty of Versailles enabled him to recognise a tactical shift in the position of the British Government. Republican Tommy Quigley mentioned how the OU gave him the discipline and skills to write reports, construct arguments and marshal evidence.[136] Loyalist 'Student C' noted that the value of learning critically engagement with complex documents. When copies of the Good Friday Agreement became available 'suddenly we became a valuable resource, because there was a vocabulary used in the Agreement. There was a certain jargon, there were lots of concepts and terminology'.[137]

Personal accounts and McMillan's 'Sense of community' illuminate how, during 'the Troubles', the ethos, structures and pedagogy of the OU enabled students and tutors to co-own, co-produce and co-create the knowledge employed to build a multi-party, international, political agreement. When a signed copy of the Belfast Agreement was auctioned it became possible to see on it many of the names mentioned in this article.[138] Unwritten, but not unacknowledged, was the OU.

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