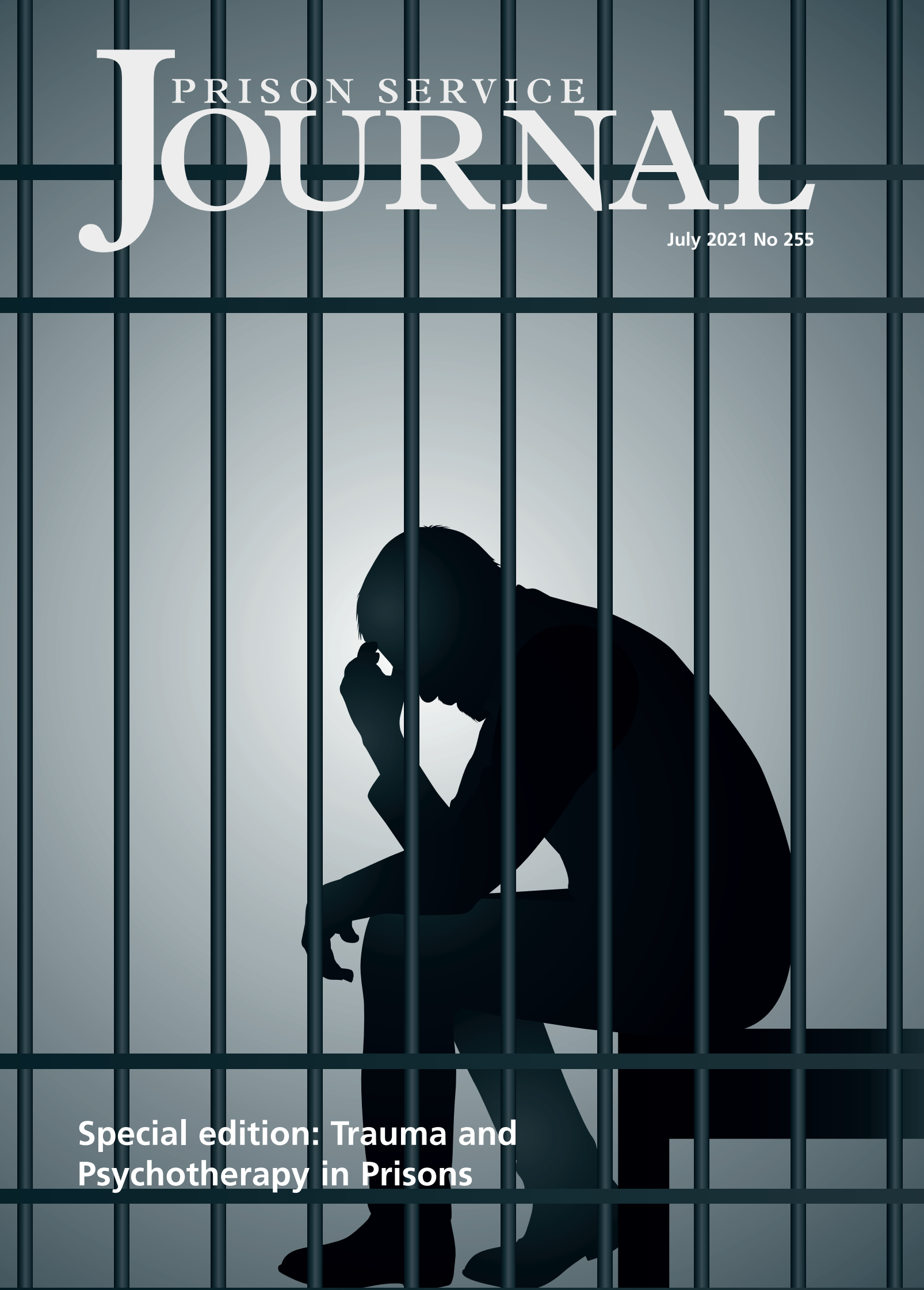
PRISON SERVICE
JOURNAL

July 2021 No 255



Special edition: Trauma and Psychotherapy in Prisons

Interview with Stephen Akpabio-Klementowski

Stephen Akpabio-Klementowski *is an Associate Lecturer at the Open University (OU) and an Open University Regional Manager for secure environments. He is interviewed by* ***Dr Marcia Morgan,*** *Health and Social Care Services Senior Manager in HM Prison and Probation Service.*

Stephen Akpabio-Klementowski is in his final year of completing a Doctorate in Criminology. He has spent 18 years as an academic, completing his first degree in 2008 while serving a 16-year prison sentence. He has three daughters aged 18, 11 and 10, and has been married for 20 years. He works for the Open University as a regional manager supporting learners in secure environments. OU was created over 50 years ago with a mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. The OU promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. During the last half a century, they have changed the lives of more than two million people, bringing them new knowledge, skills, interests and inspiration, and helping them achieve new goals. Their work includes offering the opportunity for university level study by people in secure environments such as prisons.

During the 50th anniversary of the OU, Stephen Akpabio-Klementowski used his own story and experiences to promote the work of OU. He featured in a short film on the BBC iplayer[1] and was interviewed by the national press[2].

This interview took place January 2021. All responses are Stephen's personal view and opinion and do not represent the organisations he works for.

MM: Could you describe your route into academia and your profession?

SAK: I have several roles. I am one of four regional managers for the OU students in the secure environment team. I am responsible for managing the relationship between the university and prisons. I am responsible for 29 prisons overseeing over 400 students involved in OU studies. This is a part-time role. I am also a lecturer in Criminology with the OU and have been in this role for over 18 months. I have students in prisons and in the community as part of my student group. In addition, I am a part-time researcher in Criminology with the OU because I feel the structure of the university fits well with what I am trying to achieve. My thesis is focused on prisons, specifically higher education in prisons and the question of whether the notion of punishment and how prisons are represented, in relation to the notion of rehabilitation as we understand it and learning activities. And how do these twin concepts, that are clearly opposing, can coexist in the prison system. I am in my final year of study and my interest in exploring this topic stems from my own personal journey.

I left school with no qualifications. I was very rebellious and had issues in terms of authority. I wanted to be independent and able to fend for myself. I did not see anything to inspire me in my council estate. What I saw was people getting around the law. I did not see that there was meritocracy. I did not think that if you worked hard, you would get somewhere with it. So, I chose to earn money, to seek my independence. When you don't have any skills or qualifications and you are ignorant in many ways as well, there are not many options. I was smoking cannabis and involved in drugs from a young age and saw no issues with them at that time. When it came to apply that knowledge to make money, I went down that path. I had a few scrapes with the law that were not quite serious to end up receiving a custodial sentence. In 2002, I was prosecuted and convicted of Conspiracy to Supply Class A Drugs. I received a 16-year sentence. This was my first custodial sentence.

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/ideas/videos/i-went-from-prisoner-to-phd/p08mpxtt
2. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jan/07/stephen-akpabio-klementowski-i-educated-myself-in-prison-and-changed-my-story

I knew people who had been to prison, I visited people in prison. Prison was not a deterrent for me. I was very casual about the notion of going to prison. It was part of the process — I go to prison, I come out, pick up from where I left off and so on. When I was arrested, I just bounced into prison. At the time I had been married for 18-months and I had a baby daughter. The whole drug culture has a huge psychological effect. You have a lot of power by virtue of that. You have drugs, you have access to everything. You can get people to do things, you can pay for things to be done. So, I remained in that mentality because I had the resources. I believed I could continue to look out for my family from prison. While I was on remand, I literally just lived off my canteen. I was not eating the food from the servery. I had money coming in, so I tried to live this parallel life. I was in prison, but I wasn't in prison.

It was after three months that I really began to have an appreciation of the impact it was having on my wife and my daughter. I was going through the process of separation, having a distant relationship and the reality of my situation began to dawn on me. I was no longer on the streets, I did not have access to the same resources. The more my reality dawned on me, the more frightened I became. The more scared I became because I began to realise and appreciate the process, I was now in. There was no getting away. I was going to do my time and I accepted it. The question was what would come afterwards. If I do my time, come out and go through the same process again.

I was going through the process of separation, having a distant relationship and the reality of my situation began to dawn on me. I was no longer on the streets, I did not have access to the same resources. The more my reality dawned on me, the more frightened I became.

I was 36 years-old when I was sentenced. I began to realise I had a real problem and the problem was compounded by not knowing what to do about it. I began to think about wanting to have a different future, to be a different person, but I did not know how to go about it. I knew I did not want to go through this again.

The prison environment does not offer much. But then I got lucky in a very odd way. In many ways I was successful because I was financially independent with no qualifications. When I arrived at prison, I was ignorant. I was not open to dealing with anything intellectual, making excuses that education was for clever people. I lacked confidence because I had no qualifications and I felt uncomfortable during conversations about education. I was reluctant to do my initial assessment for education. It was explained to me that all prisoners had to do it. I completed the level two assessment in record time. The tutor was surprised by how quickly I completed the assessment. She asked me if I wanted to gain some qualifications. I thought about the implications of going to education as I was working on the servery and was able to be out of my cell for long periods during the day. Education did not appeal to me. The tutor convinced me to give education a try.

I completed my GCSEs effortlessly within the shortest time permitted. She then suggested that I do A-levels. I was uncertain about continuing with my education as I had no educational aspirations, but then she suggested I consider applying to the OU as I met their criteria. I questioned what kind of university it was. I completed 43 courses in the end including offending behaviour programmes. On reflection, I realised that I enjoyed learning, and this was the reason why I volunteered to complete so many courses.

I did not have to pay for the access module with the Open University, which I completed quickly. This was a motivation. I was then offered the opportunity to complete an undergraduate degree. I chose to complete a Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences. I started my degree in 2003 and completed it in 2008. My achievement coincided with my recategorisation to an open prison. I was transferred to HMP Springhill. When I arrived, I went straight to the education department to see if they had received my BA certificate. I was speechless when I saw my certificate.

A member of the education department asked me what next? I was thinking, I have just arrived at Springhill, I will go through my lie down period. I have a degree now so it will increase my prospect for employment. She asked me if I had considered a

postgraduate qualification, a masters or even a diploma. I replied 'no'. I explained I could not fund a postgraduate. She explained that the prison had a contact at Oxford Brookes University, the Dean of faculty for International Relations — Professor Higgins. He was interested in my academic achievement and was willing to interview me for a place on their master's programme.

I was the first prisoner at HMP Springhill to be released on ROTL (released on temporary license) to attend a course at Oxford Brookes University. I was awarded a MA in International Relations in 2009. I was due for release in 2010, which was my automatic release date. I felt even more confident that I would be able to gain employment with a degree and postgraduate qualification.

I was approached by Professor Higgins who felt I could complete a full time PhD programme as I had achieved a merit in International Relations. I found this offer overwhelming. I declined the PhD offer as it was not the right time and I explained my reasons for doing so. I ended up completing my second master's qualification in International Law and achieved a higher merit.

I was released June 2010 with three degrees. These qualifications provided the foundation for me to first work as a volunteer for charities and then other opportunities became available. This is how I ended up in my current role.

MM: Why have you chosen to continue to work with offenders?

SAK: A lot of people in prison have not taken their first opportunity at education. My understanding of the pivotal role of education not just in relation to prisoners but to anyone, is that education is a human right. The power of education is transformative and beneficial that goes beyond the individual.

For example, 42 per cent of prisoners were excluded from school with no qualifications[3]. I could relate to people who had no qualifications, and with those who are reluctant to talk about education, because you are afraid of exposing that you are lacking in this area.

Education is profound because it brings about a change in you. I never thought that I could work with the Prison Service or the Probation Service or would even go back into prisons and work with prisoners. But here I am, doing just that.

I now understand there is a certain shame associated to being imprisoned, not just shame for myself, but shame for my wife, my family, kids. It was a consequence of the work, the activities I was involved in. But I had another level of shame. As a young black man, I was reaffirming the stereotypical views. I did not know how to respond, until I found that education was a form of empowerment. I advocate for education and put myself forward for this role 18 years after my first taste of it, because education allows you to better understand yourself. You can train your mind in a certain way to deal with information. The process of knowledge acquisition and understanding, involves organisation, you can apply these organisational skills to a set of problems. You find you can transfer this to your personal life and aspirations. This is what makes education so profound. The product of education in material terms is the qualification, but you can also improve your prospects in the future even with a criminal record. This can inspire all human beings, especially young black men. People expect black men to be incarcerated. This is the stereotypical view of young black men. Highlighted by The Lammy Review[4] that found black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals were over-represented in the criminal justice system.

People expect black men to be incarcerated. This is the stereotypical view of young black men. Highlighted by The Lammy Review that found black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals were over-represented in the criminal justice system.

3. Coates, S. (2016) *Unlocking potential: A review of education in prisons*. Ministry of Justice.
4. Lammy, D (2017) *The Lammy Review: An Independent Review into the Treatment of, and Outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Individuals in the Criminal justice system*. London: Lammy Review.

MM: How were you able to maintain your motivation to study while incarcerated?

SAK: Quite simply my wife, daughter and wider family. I mentioned my sense of shame earlier, associated to reaffirming the stereotypical view of black men. I ticked the box. I had no qualifications, I had been expelled from school, I was at my lowest, I felt worthless. The oddest thing was that I could understand why I had no value. I was not offering anything. I did not know how I could bring about change to my life. I did not know how education could change a person's life because I never had an education. I never gave education a chance, I did not recognise that education could be a vehicle to social mobility.

My motivation was based on having hope instead of despair. Prisoners would ask me why I was doing all this studying. I believe this question came from a position of feeling hopeless because they could not see any way out of their situation. There was simple logic that worked for me. That logic was, if the activity I was engaged in was positive, it would lead to a positive outcome.

Having the right tutors was motivating. When you have the right tutors who are motivating you, it drives you to want to be better. It took a real personal effort and with support of certain prison officers who recognised my maturity. I had no issues in terms of being allowed to get on with my sentence. I was not antagonised by officers, I did not antagonise officers, I did not antagonise the system and the system did not antagonise me.

The biggest motivation was that I did not want to be released after serving eight years with nothing, with no possibility of being able to live a law-abiding life. I just did not want to return to prison and become a recidivist.

MM: How do you use your experience to motivate others?

SAK: When my sentence ended in 2018 and I was officially notified by the Ministry of Justice, I had a strange feeling about it. Because on the one hand my punishment had ended, but on the other hand I would still have the legacy of that action for all my days.

I went through my sentence with no adjudications. I transitioned back into the community on release and was on probation for eight years. I made sure education was part of my sentence plan. I argued for it because I realised that education would help change my life. When I visit prisons, I engage with prisoners. I understand how prisons strip away the agency that all individuals have, to make decisions that can affect their life. So, most prisoners become passive in terms of how they use their time during incarceration. When I return to prisons, I can show others what I am doing with my qualifications. This is very powerful because many of the people I speak to at some point were in a position of shame and feeling hopeless and will question why they are investing in education.

The biggest motivation was that I did not want to be released after serving eight years with nothing, with no possibility of being able to live a law-abiding life. I just did not want to return to prison and become a recidivist.

During these interactions I invite prisoners to challenge themselves and their position. I help them realise that incarceration does not have to be a time waster when it is used effectively. The analogy of time as either passive verses active encourages individuals to use their time in prison effectively, to acquire an education. When they meet someone, who was in their position and has achieved some positivity out of a negative experience, they can start thinking about it as something they can achieve for themselves.

MM: How would you relate your life experience to your field of study?

SAK: My research is directly related to my experience. While studying the social sciences. I realised I was knowledgeable in this subject area. I had views on the issues of the whole process of the Criminal Prosecution Service and why some cases are prosecuted, and others are not. Studying social sciences was a perfect fit for me because I was able to engage with the topic because of my interest in social justice, racial justice, and my personal experience.

MM: How do your intersectional identities (ex-offender, PhD researcher, drug dealer, father) influence your perception of the world?

SAK: All my intersectional identities come together. In terms of my profession as a lecturer in

Criminology, I find the criminal justice in the US and UK an interesting area for anyone of African-Caribbean origin or descent. My experience of the criminal justice system adds to that. I was able to find myself, not by planning or by design. It just simply came together for me. I find myself in quite a unique situation because on the one hand I have personal experience of the criminal justice system, educating myself in prison, and then I have the added benefit of having an academic interest in studying criminal justice.

MM: How do you manage the issue of belonging in different environments?

SAK: The notion of identity is fluid. I don't think it is permanent. So, you feel things at different times. I found myself with a different identity when I was in prison, but I never accepted that this was the end of my story, as I knew there was another chapter to be written, although I did not know what it would be. So, when I had the opportunity to get involved in education and I started doing well over a consistent amount of time and years, I started to change my own understanding of my identity. I was able to think about my identity, who I was: I was a university student, I was a postgraduate student, now I am a PhD researcher. They have been the most consistent identities I've had over the past 15 years, since 2009. I did not want my last chapter to be that I was a prisoner and it would be remembered forever more. It was by luck and chance because of my educational achievement that I am a scholar.

MM: Do you face any specific challenges or barriers as a black male ex-offender?

SAK: Yes and no. In relation to the Black Lives Matter and issues around social injustice in the UK, this will have an impact on me like other black men. Beyond that, what I have found although it is not specific to black people, is that having to declare any criminal conviction has serious implications for any jobseeker. And it is very difficult to generate a debate on the issue of declaring your conviction and time-spent.

I have applied for lecturing roles where I fit the person specification, have the appropriate experience and have not been invited for an interview. There are some mainstream universities who may have an issue with my background and history and if I was to apply to study with them and declared my conviction, they may be judgemental.

MM: How do you experience being a minority because of your race?

SAK: There are not many black men working in this department. There are a few across the wider university, but it is noticeable that we are in the minority in this environment. I am conscious of some of the less favourable outcomes for black students in higher education. And then those students in secure environments like prisons there will be even fewer.

I strongly believe it is important for people like me to work in these environments to use the opportunity to help promote and raise awareness about these issues. Sometimes it's not because organisations and institutions are reluctant to implement policies that will bring about change. Many of these organisations and institutions have these policies in place. There are other issues affecting black men's visibility in these institutions. But it is important that others can see that it is okay to work in the prison service and be part of the university.

My employers celebrate my background, the fact that I have been able to turn my life around using their product. I am grateful for the opportunities they have given me and in return I put myself out there, although I am a very private person.

MM: How do you deal with the added responsibility of developing others that comes from the shared sense of community — a psychological construct that is prevalent amongst African-Caribbean people?

SAK: There is a level of humility required because I never expected to be in this situation, and I would

get a worthwhile education. I could quite easily have gone away refusing to talk about my time in prison, because it is painful. It is painful when I visit prisons and meet prisoners because I leave them behind.

When I deliver my lectures and we talk and discuss topics and social issues everyone is engaged. I do not see the monsters. I guess I was a monster once. I see students with needs, needs that can be addressed, such as addiction, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder. I would argue that all prisoners suffer from this. I suspect that prison officers might suffer from this because they must deal with the fallout, as society places different people in prisons and prison officers are expected to sort them out.

While I studied, I wanted to support others and help others. Ironically, by helping others, the better I would feel about myself and the better responses and relationships I would have with officers and my peers too. What I was doing was to the benefit of others. I developed this community type thing. Before I was this individual whose focus was on how much money I had in my pocket. I then realised that the community was quite important, because during times when you were down, I found that you can look to the community for support. And because of this, I did not have any real problems with my progress through the system. Part of the reason I continue to work with prisons is so that people can have the opportunity to meet me. Young black men, mature black men, anyone can meet me and for them I'm symbolic of what can be achieved.

I know I don't have to share my experience, but I think it is important that people know I am black, I have been in prison, I have sold drugs, but I have taken my time in prison to do things that have helped me to do the positive things that contribute to my community and society. I am now quite proud to be a part of my community. It has been very difficult on an emotional level to share my experience so widely, because I am a very private person. But I think it is very important that the negative stereotypes associated to black men are challenged. And as uncomfortable as it was in the beginning to talk about my time when I was in prison. I can now talk about being a family man and being employed, paying my taxes and being a law-abiding citizen.

MM: What can we learn from your experience so that we can identify and nurture more (black) men who may find themselves in similar life situations?

SAK: I don't know how you go about teaching resilience, but I believe achievement breeds confidence. It does not matter how small the achievement is, it breeds confidence. So, if you find yourself in a situation, you need to be looking at what you can do to give yourself that sense of achievement, no matter how small, because you can then build on that sense of achievement. The sense of feeling good about yourself will propel you forward as well. For me, it was about confidence. So, I strongly believe there are different ways to address individual barriers to learning.

> The difficulty of punishment on the one hand as manifested in prison security and then on the other hand this notion of rehabilitation, education and activity, makes it difficult to draw them together.

MM: You mentioned on the BBC Ideas- 'I went from prisoner to PhD'. Your biggest barrier was inside of you, can you explain what you meant?

SAK: When you lack confidence, you cannot see yourself in a different light. You cannot dream, it is very difficult to be something you cannot imagine for yourself. My internal barrier was the belief that I could not go to university because I was not bright enough. Another barrier was that I did not try to test myself, because I strongly believed in my inability. So much so, that I thought I did not even need to think about it. And that was fine. I could live, I did not need to go to university. But now, I cannot live any other way.

MM: What do you think HMPS can do to improve the delivery of prison education?

SAK: There is an issue of how prisoners relate to those who instruct them whether it's in education or on the wing. Being able to relate means that you share some kind of common understanding this can be the basis to have a positive engagement. It would also be good if prisoners could relate to their tutors. This is a huge barrier. Simply because whether it is

cultural reasons or because they are unrelatable, as far as the student is concerned, because of the choice of language, or the way tutors speak to prisoners. It can be experienced as quite condescending. Tutors need to recognise that the students are adults and not children.

MM: How can prison education keep pace with pedagogical changes in mainstream education and the adoption of new technologies for learning?

SAK: A change of policy would achieve this. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the disparity between students in prisons and students in the community. The difficulty of punishment on the one hand as manifested in prison security and then on the other hand this notion of rehabilitation, education and activity, makes it difficult to draw them together. This is why I am looking at it in my research. The use of technology would be very beneficial on many different levels. It would free staff to do other things. It would give prisoners the opportunity to increase their digital capital and digital skills. It would give providers the flexibility to tailor the content. And when people are bored, they could read or watch the learning material. I do not know if the desire for security is going to allow prisons to really take advantage of information technology.

MM: How can prison education ensure equity of access for offenders from BAME backgrounds?

SAK: One of the things that I appreciated and was the catalyst for me was this idea that a member of staff, a person in authority, told me that she had confidence in me based on my results. It was encouraging that she could see beyond my offence. She saw my potential. Every prisoner gets the opportunity to do a literacy and numeracy assessment. It's what happens after the assessment has been done. Tutors are the gatekeepers and it's important for prisoners to relate to their tutors. Education needs to be promoted more. It needs to be accessible to all prisoners. But most importantly, the gatekeepers need to broaden their expectations of their students.

MM: How can prison education decolonise their curriculum?

SAK: The curriculum can be off-putting to people from BAME backgrounds. Whilst it can sometimes spur you to want to challenge the narrative, which comes down to confidence and relatedness. When people think the curriculum is reflective and meets their needs, they will engage with it. And for that reason, it may mean that different curriculums are needed for different cohorts. In my opinion the curriculum should reflect the interest of your students and it should engage them.

Students in the prison environment are very committed to their studies, they are working often with less resources than what the rest of the student population have. Yet they still achieve parallel grades to what their counterparts in the community achieve.

Education is a human right. There is a misconception that one glove fits all. When people say university is not for everyone, because not everyone can study at degree level. I disagree with this. My view is that people have different needs and because they have different needs, some may need more support than others. They should not be excluded, the resources should be available. My belief is that everybody can succeed with the right support. When a person sits down and engages with an individual who needs support, they will get the best out of them.

Students in the prison environment are very committed to their studies, they are working often with less resources than what the rest of the student population have. Yet they still achieve parallel grades to what their counterparts in the community achieve. There is added value to teaching students in prisons as it reflects well on the tutor.

MM: What support can HMPS provide to help more students complete higher education?

SAK: A review of prisoner funding is needed. The six-year rule, which stipulates that to qualify for university funding the prisoner must have six years or less to serve to be eligible is problematic. The

eligibility criteria inadvertently disadvantage a large proportion of prisoners, especially prisoners from ethnic minority backgrounds who tend to be given longer custodial sentences.

MM: How do you deal with the emotional labour of your work — the pain of leaving prisoners behind?

SAK: I immerse myself in music. I do not play any instruments, but I love all sorts of music. I like to lose myself in music, or in a really good book. I read self-help books and take time to reflect and be alone.

MM: What do you want your legacy to be?

SAK: I'm not looking for a legacy. If the role of education is prioritised in prisons, reflecting its importance in terms of rehabilitation and reducing reoffending, then I would be happy. There is status and prestige that comes from being an academic and scholar with a PhD. I recognise that I am a massive counteraction in relation to the ideas that exist about prisoners when people see what I have achieved. My contribution is to help people, so we don't have more victims being released.