# The importance of higher education for individuals in prison

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**Access to higher education (HE) is essential for bridging skill gaps and equipping incarcerated individuals with the tools needed to compete effectively in the job market post-release.[1] The benefits extend beyond individual transformation to positively influencing society by fostering self-confidence, improving mental health, and instilling a sense of purpose among those incarcerated.[2] Despite these advantages, the current prison education system faces challenges with significant barriers, limiting access to meaningful learning opportunities and hindering its potential as a rehabilitative tool.**

In this article, I will draw on my firsthand experiences of navigating prison education and HE within penal settings. My experience of imprisonment aligns with a key feature of Convict Criminology (CC): to centre the lived experiences of those affected by the criminal justice system as a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge, using them to critique the prison system and advocate for meaningful policy change.[3] My first time in prison occurred in the winter of 2000. From that initial encounter, it felt as though my life had become a revolving door — cycling in and out of prison, trapped in what seemed like an unbreakable pattern of offending and reoffending.[4] During my most recent prison sentence, however, I came to recognise the immense transformative potential of HE to break this cycle. Engaging in HE in prison has been profoundly impactful — not only for myself, but in my view, for countless others in prison. It has helped us to manage our mental health challenges associated with incarceration while giving us hope for a better future outside the criminal justice system.

## Prison education policies

Prison education policy in England and Wales primarily focuses on providing basic Level 1 and 2 qualifications in numeracy and literacy.[5] Those in custody are usually required to obtain these before they can apply for distance learning studies. Institutions like the Open University (OU) offer degree courses tailored to secure environments, with enrolment occurring twice yearly, in September and January.[6] As Darke et. al explained, partnerships between universities and prisons have created a dual pathway where incarcerated learners can access transformative education.[7] After securing Level 1 and 2 qualifications people in prison must complete the 3-month OU 'Access' modules which are designed to prepare learners for the demands of HE studies. However, only a small percentage of incarcerated individuals gain access to this opportunity.[8] Furthermore, many individuals, already at a financial disadvantage, feel compelled to prioritise prison work over education due to the higher wages offered in workshops (though still minimal). By contrast, educational programmes are minimally compensated, which means there is little incentive for people to prioritise learning over earning.

## Bridging the gap between policy and practice

This paper advocates for the establishment of Argentina-style prison-university facilities within separate prisons in the UK, specifically designed for incarcerated individuals undertaking HE studies. It also calls for a substantial expansion of educational opportunities within the prison system. Education is

1. Hughes, E. (2021). Higher Education and Desistance from Crime. *Irish Journal of Academic Practice, 9*(1), 1-28.
2. Jones, M., & Jones, D. (2021). Understanding Aspiration and Education Towards Desistance from Offending: The Role of Higher Education in Wales. *Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry, 7*(1), 23-49.
3. For detail on Convict Criminology, see: Darke, S., Aresti, A., Faisal, A. B., & Ellis-Rexhi, N. (2020). Prisoner university partnerships at Westminster. In. S. S. Shecaira, L. G. B. Ferrarini, & J. D. M. Almeida, J.D.M. (Eds.), *Criminologoa: Estudos em Homenagem ao Alvino Augusto de Sá* (pp. 475-498). D'Placido.
4. See footnote 2: Jones et al. (2021).
5. Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2022 to 2023.* HM Government.
6. Earle, R., James, M., Pike, A., & Weinbren, D. (2020). The Open University and Prison Education in the UK – the First 50 Years. *Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry, 7*(1), 70-87.
7. See footnote 3: Darke et al. (2020).
8. Education Committee (2022-23). *Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity: Government response to the Committee's First Report.* UK Parliament.

widely regarded as a cornerstone for reducing reoffending and supporting reintegration.[9] In England and Wales, Ministry of Justice (MoJ) research found that people who participated in HE in prison were 7.5 per cent less likely to reoffend within a year of release compared to those who did not.[10] The systemic neglect of prison education exacerbates England and Wales' high recidivism rate of 42 per cent, which costs taxpayers an estimated £15 billion annually. Further, people in prison who obtain degree-level qualifications are significantly less likely to reoffend compared to their peers, demonstrating education's rehabilitative potential.[11] However, the current lack of emphasis on prison education undermines the prospects of those in custody, limiting their chances of successful reintegration into society and their ability to desist from crime.[12]

As Crewe explains, imprisonment often involves an 'erosion of agency', where autonomy, identity, and self-determination are systemically stripped away.[13] This erosion 'runs counter to the development of the skills and motivation that education seeks to foster' (p. 340). Furthermore, in prioritising containment and discipline, prisons often deprioritise activities that promote long-term reintegration, such as education (p. 346). Equally significant is the lasting social stigma attached to incarceration, which creates further obstacles to rehabilitation. In his seminal study The Society of Captives, Sykes identifies the 'pains of imprisonment' as central to understanding the institutional neglect of rehabilitative initiatives.[14] He argues that the 'frustrations and deprivations of prison life' often lead to apathy and resignation, stifling those in prison motivation to engage with constructive opportunities such as education (p. 78). Brierley and Best further highlight how individuals with lived experience of crime and imprisonment can play a crucial role in criminal justice by supporting desistance.[15] Drawing on the concept 'Desistance Habitus', they argue that those who successfully transition away from criminal behaviour develop new norms and values that reinforce positive change. Establishing HE-focused prisons could create environments necessary for incarcerated individuals to internalise these pro-social habits, fostering long-term desistance from crime. Therefore, giving incarcerated individuals the opportunity to achieve meaningful education has the potential to benefit them as well as their families and wider communities.

The MOJ acknowledges too that access to employment and education is key to reducing reoffending.[16] For decades, this has been a recurring theme in reviews, reports, and recommendations aimed at rehabilitating individuals in custody and providing them with the best chance of leading crime-free lives upon release. One of the most significant inquiries into UK prisons, Lord Woolf's 1991 review, commissioned after the HMP Strangeways riot in 1990, highlighted the urgent need for substantial expansion of educational opportunities.[17] Woolf stressed that, 'education should not be a privilege but a fundamental part of the regime' (p. 30), envisioning equitable access rehabilitative opportunities designed to enhance employability and life skills. More recently, Dame Sally Coates has identified significant shortcomings in prison education in England and Wales and proposed reforms to transform it into a more rehabilitative and meaningful process. She notes, 'Prison education is too a poor relation, seen as a low priority rather than as a fundamental part of rehabilitation' (p. 6). She adds, 'Learning must be connected to the world outside prison, offering prisoners the skills and qualifications employers are looking for' (p. 16).[18] Despite these progressive recommendations, the reality is that 57 per cent of incarcerated adults in England and Wales still have

> My life had become a revolving door — cycling in and out of prison, trapped in what seemed like an unbreakable pattern of offending and reoffending.

9. Prison Reform Trust. (2023) *Prison: The Facts – Bromley Briefings Summer 2023.* Prison Reform Trust.
10. See footnote 8: Education Committee (2022-2023).
11. Aresti, A., Eatough, V., & Brooks-Gordon, B. (2010). Doing time after time: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of reformed ex-prisoners' experiences of self-change, identity and career opportunities. *Psychology, Crime & Law, 16*(3), 169–190.
12. See footnote 11: Aresti et al. (2010).
13. Crewe, B. (2021). The depth of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society, 22*(3), 335–354.
14. Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum-Security Prison.* Princeton University Press.
15. Brierley, A., & Best, D. (2025). Desistance habitus: Strategically using experience in practice. *Incarceration, 6.*
16. See footnote 5: Ministry of Justice. (2023).
17. Woolf, H. (1991). *Prison Disturbances, April 1990: Report of an Inquiry.* HMSO.
18. Coates, S. (2016). *Unlocking potential: A review of education in prison.* Ministry of Justice.

literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old today.[19]

In English and Welsh prisons, Prison Rule 32 (1) stipulates that every incarcerated individual should be able to profit from education facilities provided at a prison and be encouraged to do so.[20] From my experience of imprisonment, the gap between these policies and their implementation is like a bridge that was promised but never built — leaving people stranded on opposite shores. During my time in prison, it became clear — through my own frustrations and those of many others — that very little emphasis seems to be placed on prison education and HE. This not only undermines incarcerated individuals' human rights but also erodes the rehabilitative potential of incarceration. The fact that, after years of reviews and recommendations, the expansion of prison education has yet to be implemented raises critical questions about the genuine commitment to rehabilitation within the British penal system. In subsequent sections, I explore how prison education has deteriorated further over the years and analyse the barriers to implementing effective reform.

## My lived experience of prison education

### The impact of security policies on HE in prison

I have firsthand experience of the severe lack of emphasis on prison education. Perhaps the biggest barriers to education in prison, in my view, are security policies and the historical narrative that continue to shape the attitude of prison staff toward people in prison (though the latter is beyond the scope of this article). Both these policies and this narrative seem to reflect an institutionalised practice where education is subordinated, as Castro and Brawn argue, 'to the priorities of security And control.'[21] Furthermore, these policies can impose significant challenges on incarcerated students, restricting their access to study materials, technology, and internet resources, and in some cases, outright banning their pursuit of HE. I recall while pursuing my undergraduate degree in a Category B prison, I encountered numerous barriers, some of which were aggravated by what I perceived to be the punitive and arbitrary use of power by prison staff, which I believe was often used as a method of asserting authority. For instance, I was barred from enrolling on my final OU modules due to 'security reasons', which I felt was both vague and driven by personal animosity rather than legitimate concerns. I was also restricted from having access to other internal education programmes and the library. Despite filing multiple complaints, supported by the Prison Advice Service (PAS), the decision was only reversed after the PAS threatened High Court action. By that point, I had missed an entire academic year, which profoundly impacted both my educational trajectory and mental health. Research corroborates that the denial of meaningful education in prisons not only violates fundamental rights but also undermines incarcerated individuals' mental well-being, contributing to feelings of frustration and hopelessness.[22]

Even in open prisons, where I pursued my Master's degree at the University of Westminster, structural barriers persisted. While I had slightly better access to resources — such as attending university in person, accessing the internet, and using university facilities — systemic obstacles stemming from security policies often disrupted my studies. This appeared to be the case for many of my peers too. For example, people held in open conditions must undergo regular risks assessments to determine their eligibility for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). These assessments, conducted at regular intervals, are designed to evaluate suitability for community-based employment, education and maintaining family ties. However, this process often prioritises perceived security risks over the benefits of reintegration and rehabilitation, restricting many individuals from accessing education. On one occasion, I returned to the prison slightly later than my ROTL expiry time because of a delay on the train. Despite providing compelling evidence to show that the delay was beyond my control, I was charged with breaching a prison rule and subsequently found guilty. Consequently, my ROTL was suspended, which prevented me from leaving the prison to access university, leading to missed lectures, assessments, and crucial independent study time via the internet. Fortunately, my course leader, who was aware of the challenges incarcerated students face, consulted with the university and secured deferrals for my assessments.

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19. Ofsted & HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2021). *Prison Education Review: The Importance of Improving in Custody.* HM Inspectorate of Prisons.
20. HM Prison and Probation Service. (1999). *The Prison Rules 1999.* HM Government.
21. Castro. E., & Brawn, M. (2017). Critiquing Critical Pedagogies inside the Prison Classroom. *Harvard Educational Review, 87,* 99-121.
22. Prisoners' Education Trust. (2023). *Getting the new prison education contracts right.* Prisoners' Education Trust.

Without this intervention, I would certainly have failed the course. Surprisingly, I appealed the decision to the Prison and Probation Ombudsman, who overturned it weeks later. However, by the time the appeal was resolved, the damage was already done. These personal examples are a demonstration of the challenges faced by people in prison in HE.

**Prison transfers: A disruptive barrier to learning**

Prison transfers were another aspect that disrupted my HE studies. During transfers, my course materials were often delayed for months by sending prisons or sometime 'lost in transit'. This had a significant impact on my study routine, forcing me to put my studies on hold and miss assignment deadlines. Similar challenges have been identified in the wider literature also, as one critique stated: 'the logistical hurdles created by frequent prison transfers, which disrupt the continuity of educational programs and demotivates students who face recurring obstacles to completing their studies.[23] There were times I wanted to quit, but I persevered, becoming even more determined to achieve my goals. Unfortunately, not all prison-based learners are able to do the same and some eventually abandoned their studies. Given the well-documented role of HE in reducing recidivism, many incarcerated individuals, including myself, struggle to understand why prison education remains so under-prioritised. These experiences highlight the need for empirical research to examine why the current system is not better fostering academic success, particularly for people in prison pursuing HE.

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**The digital divide: The impact of no internet access**

The lack of internet access in prisons also affects incarcerated students' educational progression. Davies found 'digital pedagogy in prisons does not merely suffer from neglect; it is actively resisted as part of a broader system that maintains social inequality'.[24] Having embarked on both undergraduate and postgraduate studies while incarcerated, I experienced the strain of not having digital connectivity. I had to rely solely on distance learning providers' textbooks for assignments without internet, access virtual tutorials, and experienced minimal support from prison staff. Greater digital access would have significantly enhanced my learning, as it likely would for others too. Here again, we see a conflict between the goal of rehabilitation through education for people in prison, with prison restrictions that undermine this.[25] As Davies contends, if prison education is to serve as a genuine rehabilitative tool, digital inclusion must be recognised as a fundamental right, not a privilege.

**COVID-19 and further decline of prison education**

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the weaknesses of the prison system in delivering education. Before the pandemic, most people in prison could attend education full-time, both morning and afternoon sessions, Monday to Friday. However, during the pandemic, in-person education was replaced with in-cell learning packs due to the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of infection and protect life. After the pandemic, most people have only been allowed to engage in part-time education.

**The mental health toll of neglecting prison education**

A major consequence of the lack of emphasis on prison education is its impact on mental health. Education has a stabilising effect on incarcerated individuals' mental health, offering a constructive outlet in an otherwise punitive environment.[26] Imprisonment often triggers negative emotions and, as someone who has endured multiple traumas and adversities in childhood, I experienced a decline in my mental health while in prison. However, my HE studies played a critical role in helping me to manage these difficulties, providing hope and a sense of purpose. In my role as a peer mentor in various prisons, I witnessed in others the impact of experiencing literacy difficulties on mental health, including being a factor in people harming themselves. In addition to the contribution of education to tackling reoffending, providing and encouraging engagement

23. Davies, B. (2024). Debates in digital pedagogy within prisons. *Power and Education, 0*(0).
24. See footnote 23: Davies (2024).
25. See footnote 14: Sykes, G. M. (1958).
26. Gual, R. (2023). In-prison university programs in Argentina: Building citizenship. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, 116,* 145-161.

in education may provide an opportunity for prisons to support the psychological health and well-being of people in custody.

## Global models of prison education: Lessons for the UK

### The evolution and success of Argentina's prison education programmes

The history and evolution of Argentina's university-in-prison initiatives began in the mid-1980s when reformists recognised the transformative potential of HE. Established during Argentina's transition to democracy, these programmes aimed to foster academic communities and redefine citizenship for people in prison.[27] The University of Buenos Aires (UBA) XXII Programme, launched in 1985, is the oldest and most prominent initiative.[28] It offers in-person classes for incarcerated students, allowing them to pursue the same undergraduate degrees as people in the community.[29] UBA XXII upholds education as a fundamental human right and actively cultivates academic communities within prisons. The University Education in Prisons Programme (PEUP) was launched in 2004 during a period of prison reform in Argentina's Santa Fe province.[30] PUEP integrates incarcerated students into virtual degree programmes identical to those offered to students outside of prison, providing classrooms, computers, and internet access to promote educational equality and inclusivity.[31] University-based coordinators play a vital role in helping students to navigate administrative and technical challenges while fostering collaboration with prison authorities.

Similarly, the National University of San Martin established the CUSAM (Centro Universitario San Martin) programme in 2008 at Unit No. 48 of the Buenos Aires Penitentiary. This initiative strengthens ties with marginalised communities by combining formal education with broader opportunities for incarcerated individuals and prison staff.[32] By the 2010s, over half of Argentina's public universities were involved in prison education programmes. Despite economic crises and a rise in punitive populist rhetoric, these initiatives have endured and evolved, challenging exclusionary top-down processes through grassroots activism and principles of carceral citizenship. Gual emphasises the critical role incarcerated individuals played in establishing and sustaining these programmes: 'The beginning of all three university programmes was thus characterised by a profound determination on the part of prisoners to become students and help set up the in-prison university programmes' (p. 149).[33] Argentina's university-in-prison initiatives contrast sharply with traditional punitive approaches in the Global North, which theorists like Foucault (who described prisons as 'disciplinary institutions'),[34] Goffman (who coined the term 'total institutions'),[35] and Sykes (who identified the 'pains of imprisonment')[36] have analysed as mechanisms of control and discipline. In contrast, UBA XXII prioritises self-management, ideological plurality, and critical thinking, fostering transformation at both individual and societal levels.

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### Challenges faced by Argentina's university-in-prison programmes

UBA XXII, in particular, has significantly contributed to access to HE, supporting reintegration, and reducing recidivism. Many graduates have gone on to secure professional positions in public and private sectors, including roles within the UBA and the country's Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. Beyond academic achievements, these programmes enhance self-esteem and societal reintegration.[37] However,

27. Laferriere, M. (2006). *La Universidad en la cárcel. Programmea UBA XXII.* Buenos Aires Editorial Universidad.
28. See footnote 27: Laferriere, M. (2006).
29. Sozzo, M. (2012). Contra la degradación. La experiencia del Programmea de Educación Universitaria en Prisiones, Universidad Nacional del Litoral. In M. Gutierrez (Ed.), *Lápices o rejas. Pensar la actualidad del derecho a la educación en contextos de encierro* (pp. 41-64). Editores del Puerto.
30. Noguera, M. (2022). In-prison university programmes in Argentina: Building citizenship. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, 113,* 1-20.
31. See footnote 27: Laferriere, M. (2006).
32. See footnote 26: Gual, R. (2023).
33. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish.* Allen Lane.
34. Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates.* Anchor Books (extract in Newburn, T., 2009, Key Readings in Criminology, Willan).
35. See footnote 14: Sykes, G. (1958).
36. Salomon, J. (2024). *The university goes to jail in Latin America.* America futura.

Argentina's university-in-prison programmes continue to face major challenges, including insufficient funding, societal stigma, limited post-release job opportunities, and bureaucratic inefficiencies.[38] Political instability and frequent changes in government exacerbate these issues. Despite these obstacles, Argentina's university-in-prison initiatives offer lessons for the UK. Unlike Argentina, the UK benefits from a stable government system and access to extensive funding opportunities, which could ensure the longevity and effectiveness of similar programmes.

To implement something like Argentina's university in-prison programme in the UK would take considerable effort and commitment to rehabilitation. It would require a shift in the dominant security-focussed approach, and an emphasis on equality of provision. Davies argues that incarcerated individuals are deliberately excluded from digital access as part of broader power structures that maintain social inequality.[39] Applying Gramsci's theory of 'cultural hegemony' (p. 33), he explains that the state prioritises the education of certain groups while marginalising others. He asserts that, 'by only allowing prisoners access only to the knowledge the state deems acceptable,' to 'he asserts that, by allowing prisoners access only to the knowledge the staye deems acceptable those in government can maintain hegemonic power over them (p. 4). Davies also challenges prevailing security concerns, stating: 'The fear that digital access in prisons will compromise security is largely unfounded, as international examples demonstrate safe and effective models of implementation.'

Establishing HE-focused prisons could create environments where people in prison internalise new norms and values that support long-term desistance.

**Further lessons for the UK**

Carlen used the term 'carceral clawback'[40] in the context of failed prison reform in Canada to describe how punitive policies consistently obstruct genuine rehabilitation, despite government and public support. 'Prison,' she states, 'is the central symbol of the state's power to punish, and its main function is the delivery of pain' (p. 116). Argentina's in-prison university model is unique, and its implementation within the UK penal system may face resistance from policymakers, government officials and the public too. While progressive change in the UK is challenging, it is not impossible. For example, the HMP Strangeways riot in the 1990s catalysed significant reforms, ending inhumane practices like 'slopping out' and the introduction of in-cell sanitation, TVs, association time, and educational opportunities.[41] Yet, penal policies around education continue to face setbacks due to top-down pressures and stringent security measures. Argentina's university-in-prison programmes show how grassroots activism, university support, and social justice movements have kept going despite political instability or populist rhetoric.[42] As Gual notes, 'The determination and agency of incarcerated individuals were fundamental in establishing and sustaining these programmes, proving that progressive change is possible even in adverse conditions' (p. 149).[43] The Nordic prison model offers further inspiration that the UK can learn from. Pratt describes Scandinavian prisons as exceptionally progressive, with better conditions, reduced overcrowding, and effective reintegration.[44] Norway's commitment to prison education, dating back to the 1700s and 1800s, emphasises rehabilitation and reintegration, treating education as a fundamental human right.[45] The Nordic prison system has the lowest recorded reoffending rate globally, a success attributed to its integration within broader sociopolitical and welfare frameworks.[46] Although critics challenge the notion of Scandinavian 'exceptionalism', noting high remand rates and solitary confinement,[47] the Nordic approach still provides

37. See footnote 27: Laferriere, M. (2006).
38. See footnote 27: Laferriere, M. (2006).
39. See footnote 23: Davies, B. (2024).
40. Carlen, P. (2002). Carceral clawback: The case of women's imprisonment in Canada. *Punishment & Society, 4*(1), 115–121.
41. Woolf, H. (1991). *Prison Disturbances, April 1990: Report of an Inquiry.* HMSO.
42. See footnote 26: Gual, R. (2023).
43. See footnote 26: Gual, R. (2023).
44. Pratt, J. (2008). Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess: Part I - The nature and roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism. *British Journal of Criminology, 48*(2), 119-137.
45. Tønseth, C., & Bergsland, R. (2019). Prison education in Norway – The importance for work and life after release. *Cogent Education, 6*(1).
46. Smith, P., & Ugelvik, T., (2017). *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice. Embraced by the Welfare State?* Palgrave Macmillan.

valuable lessons for the UK, particularly regarding prison education.

## The case for higher education-focused prisons in the UK

The importance of prison education cannot be overstated. Drawing on global examples, including Argentina university-in-prison initiatives and Norway's progressive prison education models, this paper demonstrates how access to HE in prisons can better transform lives, reduce recidivism, and facilitate successful reintegration. While implementing similar initiatives in England and Wales presents challenges, the evidence for their potential benefits is undeniable. The criminological and sociological case for creating specialised prisons tailored to people in prison pursuing HE are too strong to ignore. Furthermore, as Brierley and Best argue, individuals with lived experience of crime and imprisonment play a crucial role in supporting desistance.[49] Their idea of Desistance Habitus suggests that those who successfully move away from criminal behaviour develop a mindset that promotes positive change. Establishing HE-focused prisons could create environments where people in prison internalise new norms and values that support long-term desistance. Ultimately, programmes emphasising rehabilitation over punishment are essential for a fairer and more effective justice system.[48] Without meaningful investment in HE within prisons, the cycle or reoffending will persist, failing both individuals in our prisons and society as a whole.



47. Mathiesen, T. (2012). Scandinavian exceptionalism in penal matters: Reality or wishful thinking? In T. Ugelvik, & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice* (pp. 13–37). Routledge.
48. See footnote 18: Coates, S. (2016).
49. See footnote 15: Brierley & Best. (2025)