Higher education in prison: Could do better? Exploring the capacity of higher education in prisons to enhance the desistance journey.

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There is an extensive body of literature providing quantitative, statistical evidence for the role of prison education in reducing reoffending and improving employment prospects for those in prison.[1] However, there is, to date, more limited qualitative research on understanding the educational experience of prison students and what factors may enable or obstruct that experience[2] For example, Jon Collins, chief executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, queries whether the mode of delivery (classroom, one-to-one or online) makes a difference, and notes also that there is a lack of evidence for the impact of prison education on the self-esteem and well-being of prison learners.[3] This article draws on an empirical qualitative study conducted by the author and a colleague, Siobhan Cullen. This study investigated the enablers of, and barriers to, study by prison students enrolled on the Open University's (OU) law degree, as perceived by the Associate Lecturers (ALs) who tutored these prison students.[4]

Background

The OU has been a provider of higher education to students in secure environments for over 40 years. There are approximately 1800 students in these settings studying with the OU on over 130 modules, spread over roughly 150 prisons in the UK and Ireland.[5] ALs, who are not based in the secure environments, work closely with their prison students, offering regular phone tuition on a one-to-one basis as well as providing detailed feedback on assignments. The ALs liaise with prison education officers to arrange the tutorials and, for example, check that the prison students have received printed packs of materials and marked assignments. The ALs are therefore well placed to give an insight into the study experiences of these students and the broader context in which these occur.

Study aim

This article seeks to explore, from the perspective of ALs, the factors which may enhance the study experience of prison students as well as those which may undermine that experience. It then considers the relationship between these factors and their scope to promote or obstruct what is termed the 'desistance journey' of prisoners. Where barriers are identified, this article discusses possible changes to improve both the educational experience of prison students and, in the longer term, the scope for their desistance.

The definition of 'desistance' in relation to criminal behaviour is contested, with some arguing that it requires long term and permanent abstinence from committing crime, whilst, for others, the concept is more fluid, with periods of relapse and recovery.[6] There seems to be a general consensus though that desistance is a process or journey, rather than an abrupt, one-off event, and that particular factors influence that journey.[7]

1. See, for example: Ministry of Justice (2021). *Justice Data Lab Experimental Statistics: Employment and reoffending behaviour after support from Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) - 4th Analysis.* Ministry of Justice.
2. Collins, J. (2024). Prison Education – *A Review of the Evidence.* Clinks.
3. See footnote 2: Collins, J. (2024).
4. The research was funded by the Open University's Scholarship Centre for Innovation in Legal and Business Education
5. The Open University (2021, July 22) *Supporting Students in Secure Environments.* https://www5.open.ac.uk/secure-environments/news/supporting-students-secure-environments
6. McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C., & Maruna, S. (2012). Re-examining evidence-based practice in community corrections: Beyond 'a confined view' of what works. *Justice Research and Policy, 14*(1), 35-60.
7. McNeill, F. (2014) Desistance, Rehabilitation and Reintegration. *Research in Sociology* https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/sociological-cultural-studies-research/blog//criminology/headline_666048_en.html

Methodology

An email invitation was sent in January 2024 seeking expressions of interest from ALs tutoring prison students on the OU's law degree (or who had tutored such students within the last 2 years) to ensure currency. From a pool of approximately 30 ALs, six responded and were interviewed. All six had at least 2 years' experience and four had over 3 years. Between them, the ALs had tutored over 200 prison students. Two of the ALs were tutoring groups consisting solely of prison students, with an annual average of 50 students between them (nearly half of the 120 prison students registered on law modules in 24/25). The other four tutored smaller numbers, but their experience extended over a much longer period (in one case, stretching back to 2009). Whilst the sample size was small, the range and depth of experience ensured that salient data was obtained.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were semi-structured. One interviewer conducted the interviews although, for the first, both researchers were present to ensure a consistent approach to the style of questioning. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The aim was to gain an understanding of the ALs' perceptions of the enablers of, and barriers to study by prison students studying law. Questions, for example, attempted to elicit perceptions on the nature and effectiveness of tutorial provision and the broader context in which tuition took place.

The data was evaluated using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach,[8] with both researchers drawing on the six-step conceptual model for thematic analysis developed by Naeem et al. to ensure a consistent and methodical approach.[9] Through this process, key themes emerged that revealed perceived insights into the enablers of, and barriers to, effective study by prison learners in higher education.

Limitations

It is recognised that relying solely on the perceptions of ALs for these insights had its limitations as the students' experiences were interpreted and filtered through the eyes of the ALs. Interviews with other stakeholders, notably prison students and prison education officers, would have been useful to broaden and deepen understanding still further. Nevertheless, many of the observations of the ALs resonated with the conclusions of other bodies and agencies. Furthermore, whilst there are limited academic studies exploring the views of prison students themselves, those that do exist also corroborate many of the findings, considered more fully later in this article.

Findings

Perceived enablers and barriers to prison study

Four themes emerged, comprising the tutor/student relationship; mode of tutorial delivery; OU systems; and the prison environment. The ALs perceived certain aspects within these themes as enablers of, and others as barriers to, the overall study experience of their prison students.

> The ALs questioned the ability to build trust as quickly with students during phone tutorials because of the absence of visual cues.

Tutor/student relationship

The ALs, without exception, believed that the tutor/student relationship was an important enabler for their prison students in their study journey. Whilst it was acknowledged that some prison students did not take advantage of the one-to-one support offered by ALs, the ALs felt that there was proportionately much more uptake than amongst their non-prison students. This, they asserted, was due to the greater need of prison students for human interaction in a situation in which this was otherwise lacking. ALs observed that the prison students who engaged with the one-to-one support not only performed well academically but grew in confidence and developed a sense of purpose, with initial cynicism dissipating as the bond with the AL grew.

Mode of tutorial delivery

Whilst ALs regarded their relationship with their prison students as a positive factor, five of the six interviewed expressed concerns about the move from face-to-face tutorials to phone tutorials. This shift was initially in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (as a safety measure to limit virus transmission) but then became a permanent feature. ALs felt that it took

8. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
9. Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22,* 1-18.

longer to build trust with their prison students over the phone than it had done face-to-face as it was not possible to read body language. They also contended that it was harder to understand what materials students had received, and to work through particular activities with them, and that considerable thought and time was needed to adapt tutorial materials for phone tutorials to cater for the needs of prison students. Two ALs in particular felt that the nature of phone tutorials meant that the focus was more on checking that students understood the mechanics of the module rather than facilitating the exploration of key legal concepts and developing skills. Only one AL was less critical of phone tutorials but admitted that they had had little experience of the face-to-face tutorials that had taken place previously. Most ALs observed that phone tutorials were at least easier to arrange and more cost effective to deliver.

OU systems and support structures

OU systems and support structures were generally regarded favourably by the ALs and seen as enablers of a positive study experience for the prison students. Whilst longer-standing ALs recalled a time when there were delays in prison students receiving their materials, they did not feel this was a particular issue anymore.

It was observed, however, that certain items were sometimes missing from the printed packs provided to the prison students — in particular, two ALs commented that their prison students did not seem to receive the guidance on referencing that should have been included and that this caused frustration for their students who often struggled with this skill.

Prison environment

The ALs felt that there were certain aspects of the prison context that positively impacted on their prison students' learning. For example, from the ALs' perspective, the prison education officers were generally supportive, which they felt was particularly important in motivating prison students in situations where they lacked family or peer support. However, the ALs felt that this support was not always consistent, and that in smaller prisons in particular the prison education officers often lacked the necessary time and resources. The ALs also identified a number of other issues related to the prison context which, in their view, were barriers to a positive study experience for their prison students. These included the issue of noise and lack of privacy; lack of access to educational settings such as the library; inconsistent access to digital infrastructure; lack of internet access; disruption caused by security lockdowns and movement between prisons; and competing claims on their students' time.

> All the ALs made it clear that for them the prison students were, first and foremost, students, and that they were not interested in why the students were in a secure environment.

Relationship between perceived enablers and barriers and the desistance journey

The aforementioned perceived enablers and barriers were then mapped against the four factors considered important in the desistance journey of prisoners — age and maturation, social bonds and relationships, identity, [10] and situational aspects.[11] Using this theoretical framework, and drawing on the wider literature relating to prison education, the aim was to explore what aspects of higher education in prison might support the desistance journey of prison students and to identify where there might be scope for change.

Impact on age and maturation

A key factor identified as relevant to the desistance journey is that of age and maturation, with criminal behaviour tending to peak in teenage years before declining.[12] It is recognised though that not everyone will desist from crime as they get older, nor desist at the same rate.[13] Whilst those in prison inevitably continue to age, the environment may not be conducive to the broader concept of active maturation (including increased sense of responsibility and self-control).[14]

10. McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of 'offender' rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 17*(1), 18-36.
11. Bottoms, A. E. (2014). Desistance from Crime. In Z. Ashmore &R. Shuker (Eds.), *Forensic Practice in the Community* (pp. 251-273). Routledge.
12. Sparkes, A. C., & Day, J. (2016). Aging bodies and desistance from crime: Insights from the life stories of offenders. *Journal of aging studies, 36.* 47 – 58.
13. Rocque, M. (2015). The lost concept: The (re)emerging link between maturation and desistance from crime. *Criminology & Criminal Justice, 15*(3), 340-360.
14. Wizgell, A. (2021). *Explaining desistance: looking forward,* not backwards. Youth Justice Resource Hub

Former chief executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, Rod Clark, has asserted that prison education has potential to overcome the obstacles that the prison context may pose to this sort of maturation by providing scope to develop thinking skills, empathy and overall experience.[15]

In the interviews with ALs there were some indicators that prison education can result in maturation of prison students. For example, most ALs observed a general change, during the course of the modules, in students' emotions, aspirations, attitudes and decision making, resulting in increased investment in their study and students being on 'best behaviour' for their ALs. The ALs perceived that these changes stemmed, at least in part, from the educational experience and the relationships that arose as a result of that experience.

These findings are supported by an ethnographic study conducted in 2019 which concluded that many prison students perceived the positive impact of education on their maturation and, with it, the willingness to take on new responsibilities and withdraw from less constructive influences.[16] That said, more than one AL recognised that certain students persisted in articulating feelings that the system was against them and that they were overlooked. It was also noted that some students tended to rush ahead with their studies, lacking perhaps the maturity to understand the importance of taking stock and reflection, although this may also be indicative of the uncertainties that prison students face.

Thus, prison education may have the scope to enhance active maturation, even if that is not always the case. Where such maturation occurs, it seems that social bonds may be a key influence, demonstrating the inter-relatedness of the four factors pertinent to the desistance journey. These social bonds are considered further next.

Impact on social bonds and relationships

Social bonds and relationships are recognised to be another key factor in the desistance journey. The theory is that 'people do not simply desist; they desist into something' (p.16).[17] Relationships seem to form a turning point, supporting the process of maturation and transformation, even if it is not fully understood why such relationships should be so instrumental.[18]

Clark has argued that educational involvement in prison may afford opportunities to build ties not just with the educators themselves but with other prisoners and families, which in turn may enhance social and emotional intelligence.[19] The Coates Report reinforces the role of education in this, talking of the need for education within prisons to build social capital and improve prisoner wellbeing.[20]

The interviews with ALs indicated evidence of prison education impacting positively on social relationships. All the ALs spoke very warmly of the bonds that they formed with their prison students — 'they're the best students you could have' was a typical comment. Most ALs observed that these bonds were indeed stronger and deeper than with students outside of secure environments, for example, one commented:

> 'I suspect it's easier [to build relationship with prison students] because it's one-to-one and it's personal communication… Most [external] students don't want a phone call. Even if you phone them, they wouldn't pick up.' [AL 1]

There was a consensus amongst the ALs that the prison students welcomed these relationships because they craved stimulation and interaction and derived enjoyment from the undivided attention they received in one-to-one tutorials, enhancing a sense of purpose and engagement. Helen Nichols' earlier qualitative research with prison students, on the role of relationships in prison education, supports these conclusions on the attitude to these relationships, noting that this may be because tutors, in comparison with prison staff, are seen as enablers, thereby promoting trust.[21]

The ALs commented that the prison students also developed other constructive relationships as a result of their study — relationships with the prison education officers, as well as with prisoners on their wing, for whom they could now be a source of support and advice. ALs felt that these relationships contributed to the prison students' increase in confidence, self-esteem, skills and maturation. These perceptions are corroborated by research carried out by the Prison

15. Clark, R. (2016). How education transforms: Evidence from the experience of Prisoners' Education Trust on how education supports prisoner journeys, *Prison Service Journal, 225*(3) 3-8. https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/prison-service-journal-225
16. Pike, A., & Hopkins, S. (2019). Transformative learning: Positive identity through prison-based higher education in England and Wales. *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversity in Education, 4*(1), 48–65.
17. See footnote 10: McNeill, F. (2012).
18. Sampson, R., Laub, J., & Wimer, C. (2006). Does marriage reduce crime? A counterfactual approach to within individual causal effects. *Criminology, 44,* 465-508.
19. See footnote 15: Clark, R. (2016).
20. Coates, S. (2016). *Unlocking Potential A review of education in prison.* Ministry of Justice.
21. Nicols, H. (2017). Encouragement, discouragement and connection: The role of relationships in prison education experiences. *Prison Service Journal, 233*(4) 4-10.

Reform Trust, whose interviews with prison students revealed that the relationships with education providers and prison education staff were greatly valued and promoted resilience.[22]

More than one AL commented that some of their students were otherwise isolated, with little family support, impacting on mental health, wellbeing and motivation. In addition, several ALs noted that whilst prison education officers were generally helpful, some were less so, particularly in smaller prisons, possibly due to demands on time and lack of resources. Where prison students did develop good relationships with prison education officers, it was observed that these could sometimes be terminated abruptly when a prison student was moved to another prison and had to start again in building new relationships with the prison education team there. This could also impact on the student's relationship with the AL. The frustrations typically experienced by the ALs interviewed are illustrated by the following quote:

> 'That's always a nightmare because we don't get told often that [the student has] moved. So you're carrying on trying as a tutor to chase the education officer and then find out, weeks and weeks and weeks later, [the student's] gone.' [AL 2]

The AL-student relationship, in the ALs' view, thus enabled their prison students to be more future-focused...

These observations resonate with that of a House of Commons Education Committee Report in 2022, which recommended that a prisoner's ongoing educational requirements be considered when making decisions on movement.[23]

Furthermore, whilst studying law enhanced the reputation and standing of some prison students amongst their peers, it was apparent to two of the ALs that some prison students lacked trust in their fellow prisoners and would not have felt comfortable sharing their new-found insights and knowledge with them. These impressions are reinforced to some extent by a report in 2016 which recognised that the machismo culture of prison can be challenging for those engaging in education, although it concluded that education ultimately has the power to transform that culture, creating positive networks of learners.[24]

All but one of the ALs interviewed expressed concern that the shift from face-to-face tutorials to phone tutorials had negatively impacted on the quality of their relationships with their prison students. This shift was initially a temporary response to the pandemic but has since become a permanent fixture. The only AL who was less concerned had not had prior experience of tutoring face-to-face. The ALs questioned the ability to build trust as quickly with students during phone tutorials because of the absence of visual cues. The ALs also observed that they were not able to see what materials students had been sent and could not understand so clearly what stage they had reached in their studies, which the ALs felt undermined the level of meaningful, structured support that they could offer. It raises the question of whether, for example, video conferencing tools could be used to address some of these issues. This would also potentially allow scope for group tutorials in which prison students could learn not just from the ALs, but from each other. This may provide opportunities for the development of social networks and communities of practice considered important in supporting learning.[25]

In summary, the perception of the ALs was that higher education in prison facilitates the development of social bonds between educators and prison students and may also have a similar impact on relationships with others.. This is corroborated by a number of earlier reports and studies. These relationships in turn seem to impact positively on maturation, resilience and confidence. Certain factors, however, including the move to phone tutorials and disruptive transfers between prisons, may interfere with this. As these social bonds are regarded as a core element in the desistance journey, exploring ways of overcoming these factors may be timely; for example, the scope for the use of video conferencing tools for tutorials and factoring in a prisoner's educational requirements when evaluating the need to transfer a prisoner.

22. Prison Reform Trust. (2003). *Time to Learn: prisoners' views on prison education.* Prison Reform Trust.
23. House of Commons Education Committee. (2022). *Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity.* House of Commons.
24. Champion, N., & Noble, J. (2016). *What is Prison Education for? A theory of change exploring the value of learning in prison.* Prisoners' Education Trust.
25. Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). *An introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses.* https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/#:~:text=In%20pursuing%20their%20interest%20in,their%20standing%20with%20each%20other.

Impact on identity

The desistance theoretical framework posits that changes in a prisoner's personal and social identity can also assist in reducing the likelihood of re-offending.[26] Prison itself may lead to a negative sense of identity, focusing on the characterisation as 'offender' and 'criminal'.[27] Clark has argued that, conversely, the educational experience can lead to a more positive sense of identity which regards the prisoner as student.[28] This change of narrative may stem in turn from the social bonds outlined above, which may also reinforce maturation, underlining the complexity of the desistance journey and the interface between its core factors.

Revisioning of identity, as a result of prison education, was indicated in the interviews with ALs. All the ALs made it clear that for them the prison students were, first and foremost, students, and that they were not interested in why the students were in a secure environment. The ALs formed the impression that this enabled the prison students to see themselves in the same way, with conversations centring on what these students hoped to gain from their study, rather than on why they were in prison. The AL-student relationship, in the ALs' view, thus enabled their prison students to be more future-focused, thinking about how they saw themselves (their personal identity) as well as how others saw them (their social identity).[29] Empowered by this new sense of identity, ALs told us that prison students would consider, for example, how they could support fellow prisoners, fight for the rights of others, work in a legal capacity or gain control of their own situation, giving them a sense of agency. There was some suggestion amongst the ALs that the prison community actually perceived these prison students differently (and positively) due to their educational status. For example:

> 'Quite a lot of students said to me that …there's a guy on the wing and he's been doing the OU and he's in his second year or third year and he's helped me a lot.' [AL 3]

These findings on identity resonate strongly with earlier research in which the perspectives of prison students were sought, which identified that higher education encouraged positive personal change in prison students by leading them to seek roles as peer mentors and counsellors.[30]

Two ALs, however, expressed concern that certain expectations of their students might be unrealistic; for example, some prison students failed to appreciate that their convictions might impact on their ability to take on certain roles within legal practice after release. For example:

> 'Some of them … they think they're gonna be a barrister at the end of it.' [AL 4]

There was also recognition that some prison students might revert to old habits once released. Two ALs noted that certain prison students became increasingly distracted from their study as their release date approached and ultimately gave up their studies on release.

It is worth noting at this point that there are funding restrictions applicable to loans for students in prison; prisoners with more than 6 years of their custodial sentence left to serve are unable to secure a student loan.[31] Bearing in mind the indications in this research of the positive impacts of education on sense of identity and purpose, as well as the distractions of impending release dates, this restriction seems unjustified and may be counterproductive. These findings support the recommendations of the Prisoners' Education Trust which argues that, for many prisoners, it makes more sense to complete their degree earlier in their sentence, ensuring that they have time to fully focus on this without the distractions of resettlement and employment issues that accompany an approaching release date or release on temporary licence.[32] This is particularly important given the increasingly long sentences that prisoners are serving.[33]

In summary, the findings suggest that higher education, and the relationships which form as a result, may have the propensity to inform identity in a positive way, albeit that a revised identity may bring with it unrealistic expectations, and that identity may also shift in response to other factors, particularly on release.

Impact on situational aspects

The fourth factor which has been associated with the desistance journey is that of 'situational aspects'.[34]

26. Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives.* American Psychological Association.
27. Boduszek, D. et al. (2021). Pathways between types of crime and criminal social identity: A network approach. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 72,* 101750.
28. See footnote 15: Clark, R. (2016).
29. Illeris, K. (2013) *Transformative Learning and Identity.* Routledge
30. See footnote 16: Pike, A., &Hopkins, S. (2019), which drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews with prison students to discuss the transformative power of prison education to shape new identities.
31. For England – The Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011 (as amended); for Wales – The Education (Student Support) (Wales) Regulations 2018.
32. Prisoners' Education Trust. (2024). *Getting prison education right – Priorities for the new government. Prisoners'* Education Trust.
33. Prison Reform Trust. (2024). *Bromley Briefings Prison Fact File.* Prison Reform Trust. '
34. See footnote 11: Bottoms, A. E. (2014).

Prison may be perceived as important in removing a person from a situation in which there is the opportunity to commit offences. However, the environment is not, in itself, conducive to positive change and may simply expose the person to others from a similar background.[35] Clark has argued that the educational settings within prison, including the prison library, can, however, foster a different mindset that is more positively focused on the future.[36]

The interviews with ALs might suggest, however, that this factor is not so positively impacted by prison education. In fact, all the ALs interviewed expressed a number of concerns in relation to the educational environment and context in which their students were studying. The ALs were under the impression that the reality for many of their students is that they have very limited time in the prison educational departments or libraries — frequently only 2 hours a week, if that. This was identified too by research carried out by the Prison Reform Trust in 2003, which revealed that the prison students valued the resources and services the library afforded, and the time away from their cells, but that lack of access was problematic.[37]

ALs also observed that student access to laptops appeared to be inconsistent and often inadequate. Whilst some prisoners had laptops in their cells, this did not seem to be widespread. These views resonate with concerns expressed in various reports that prisons are stuck in a pre-digital era, and that this is impacting detrimentally on prisoners' digital literacy skills, which ultimately has implications for their employability.[38] Similar issues were reported by the ALs with regard to the Virtual Campus. The Virtual Campus is a teaching platform on which prisoners can view the OU teaching materials, without gaining general access to internet sites and forums for communicating with other students. In England and Wales, all prisons theoretically have access to the Virtual Campus — the experience of all the ALs interviewed was that, in reality, this access was not uniform, supporting earlier findings that its uptake is dependent on individual prisons' priorities and budgets.[39] These impressions reinforce earlier recommendations in the Coates Report that there should be continuity of access to the Virtual Campus across the prison estate, and that terminals should be easily accessible within prisons.[40]

Even where prisoners had access to prison education office suites, there was some challenge to the notion that this created a suitable setting for phone tutorials. For example:

> 'Sometimes [in face-to-face tutorials] you saw them on the wing, sometimes it was an educational room…, But wherever you were, you were sort of dedicated, you and them together… When you arrange the phone calls, I think they often have to be in an education office or something and I just don't find it's quite the same, to be honest.' [AL 3]

Whilst lack of access to educational amenities and digital infrastructure were identified by all ALs as issues, they were not so sure that lack of internet access, in itself, was detrimental, observing that there seemed to be a 'reluctant acceptance' of this restriction. The ALs felt that their students were still able to perform well as the OU materials and textbooks were of good quality; for example:

ALs also observed that student access to laptops appeared to be inconsistent and often inadequate.

> 'I think it's very assuring for them to know that they can still hit those top marks by using what they've got in front of them so that they're not limited.' [AL 5]

More than one AL even felt that lack of internet access had certain benefits, for example, by removing the temptation to plagiarise. It was acknowledged, however, that for a subject like law, it inhibited the ability to develop digital research skills and, more generally, digital literacy skills. The increasing approach of educational institutions to permit limited use of generative AI for assessments and, in some cases, to require it, may also raise additional difficulties for prison students due to the lack of access to the relevant tools. The latter was not something explored in our research and does not seem to have been considered in any recent reports or research in this area, but may be a fruitful area for future investigation.

35. Bunce, A (2023) Desistance and Sentencing – *A review of research.* Sentencing Academy.
36. See footnote 15: Clark, R. (2016).
37. See footnote 22: Prison Reform Trust. (2003).
38. See, for example: The Centre for Social Justice. (2021). *Digital Technology in Prisons – Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in prisons.* Centre for Social Justice.
39. Earle, R., Mehigan, J., Pike, A., & Weinbren, D. (2020), The Open University and Prison Education in the UK – the First 50 Years. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry, 7*(1), 70-87.
40. See footnote 20: Coates, S. (2016).

As noted above, ALs reported that one of the most frustrating aspects of the prison context was the disruption caused when a prison student was transferred out of, or between, prisons. Not only did this impact the relationships those students had developed, but the ALs observed that it frequently led to loss of access for the student to their educational record and materials, leading to delays and the inevitable impact on motivation and achievement. These findings are supported by a House of Commons Education Committee report, which recommended that individual digital education passports should be introduced which would contain a record of the prison student's learning and needs.[41] Our research suggests these recommendations may not have been acted on, but that implementation might be desirable.

Most of the ALs had the impression that much of their students' study took place in their cells. Whilst there was not much else for them to do there, half of the ALs interviewed said that their students complained about the noise from other prisoners and lack of privacy.[42] In one case an AL had become quite concerned about the impact this was having on a student's health, noting that:

> 'He used to study at night and sleep during the day because there was too much shouting during the day.' [AL 1]

One of the most frustrating aspects of the prison context was the disruption caused when a prison student was transferred out of, or between, prisons.

Another aspect of prison education which may negatively impact on a prisoner's situation is that tutorials are generally scheduled for daytime only, meaning that prisoners may effectively be forced to choose between attending work or engaging in study, with the differential in pay inevitably incentivising the prioritisation of work over study.[43] Prison students who have been convicted are expected to work in prison and receive payment for this.[44] Whilst educational involvement also receives payment, it tends to be lower.[45] Several ALs confirmed that this has been their experience and would sometimes disrupt tutorial attendance or simply render their students too tired to study. This comment from an AL illustrates these concerns:

> '[the prison student] was working so he said he found it hard to find the time and then he said 'I'd go back to my cell' and he said, 'I literally just wanted to go to sleep so I wouldn't study much because I was just tired'.' [AL 4]

These findings are corroborated by the Prisoners' Education Trust which recommends that 'HMPPS should mandate that pay for participating in education should be at least equal to the highest-paid work within the prison' (p.28),[46] and that prisons explore the scope for more flexible tuition regimes to try and address these issues. Another benefit of the latter may be that it increases the pool of ALs available to tutor, given that ALs often do more than one job and may not be available for daytime tutorials.

In summary, whilst some aspects of the prison educational setting might encourage a more positive outlook and sense of purpose, motivation and achievement in prison students, the general sense from the ALs was that the capacity for this environment to support the desistance journey was compromised by a number of factors. These included lack of investment in digital infrastructure and general lack of support and access to settings in which prison students could properly focus on their study, free from noise and distraction. These findings are supported by a number of independent, authoritative sources. If the prison educational environment is to have a beneficial impact on the prisoner's overall situation and, thereby, their desistance journey, it would seem worthwhile to address these issues.

41. See footnote 23: House of Commons Education Committee. (2022).
42. See also footnote 22: Prison Reform Trust (2003), in which prison students interviewed reported similar issues.
43. See footnote 32: Prisoners Education Trust. (2024).
44. Prison Rules 1999, no. 728, Part II, Physical Welfare and Work, Rule 31
45. See footnote 32: Prisoners Education Trust. (2024).
46. See footnote 32: Prisoners Education Trust. (2024).

Conclusion

This article has considered an exploratory qualitative research study on perceptions of Open University tutors of the educational experience of prison students engaged in higher education. The mapping of this research against the four factors considered central to the desistance journey suggests reasons why such education can impact positively on that journey, particularly on three of these factors: social relationships, revisioning of identity and active maturation. The impact on the fourth factor, situational aspects, seems, however, to be less beneficial. Moreover, the broader context of prison life appears to limit the prisoners' educational experience, for example through the disruption caused by prison transfers. Whilst this research was admittedly small in scale and only explored the perspective of one group of stakeholders, it has been noted that many of these findings resonate with the conclusions of various bodies and agencies, as well as prior academic studies which have drawn on the views of prison students.

Desistance from crime serves not just the interests of prisoners, but society as a whole. Whilst prison education plays a vital role in desistance,[47] there may be scope to enhance the educational experience to maximise its contributory potential. If higher education in prisons is to have a positive influence on all four factors considered crucial to the desistance journey, particularly situational aspects, it may be appropriate to re-evaluate the environment and context in which prison students learn. Implementation, for example, of changes to funding criteria, alignment of educational payments with those for work, and greater investment in digital infrastructure, digital skills development and digital education passports may be justified to enhance the educational setting and experience and, thereby, desistance.

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47. There is a wide body of evidence to support this; see, for example, footnote 20: Coates, S. (2016).