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NO SUSTITUTE FOR THE REAL THING: THE IMPACT OF PRISON BASED WORK EXPERIENCE ON STUDENTS' THINKING ABOUT IMPRISONMENT

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Abstract: This paper discusses an innovative approach to teaching and learning, under which students on the undergraduate Criminology, (and related) programmes at Northumbria University are offered work experience positions in prisons in the North East of England. Increasing media distortion and populist political rhetoric about imprisonment has influenced the way that students think and reflect about prison and prisoners. This paper explores how introducing prison based work experience has had a dramatic effect on students' thinking and understanding of imprisonment. The paper outlines the setting up of the scheme in one of the prisons, considers the initial impact on the first cohort of participating students, and discusses the staff and student work experiences to date. It also demonstrates how experiencing the prison in this way ensures that these students leave university with well-defined ideas about incarceration and better equipped for working in prison environments.

Keywords: prison, carceral tour, penal populism, media representation; student learning.

Background

Ensuring that criminology students graduate with a well-rounded and balanced understanding of the complex issues surrounding imprisonment is something that has dominated my experience of teaching practise over the last twenty years. Incarceration is now a crucial element of any criminology degree programme and, as the prison population soared during the course of the last few years, imprisonment has loomed ever larger on criminology's horizon. England and Wales now have the highest prison population in Europe, with over 86,000 people currently held in some 132 prisons (HM Prison Service 2012).

Criminology as an academic discipline grew at the same time as prison numbers. According to Young (2004), this growth in academic criminology was the consequence of the Government's strategy of shifting the research focus from social

policy and sociology, which served welfare and social crime prevention, towards evaluations of the criminal justice system's steadily increasing interventions. One result of this major policy shift was the expansion of academic research and teaching, which attracted significant numbers of students to the range of criminology and crime-related programmes offered by the University sector (Hillyard *et al.* 2004).

Teaching about Prison

Personal experience of working in prisons and with other criminal justice organisations prior to lecturing made it imperative that as a result of my teaching on prisons, students leave University with both the ability to understand and interrogate the major issues around imprisonment. Working in a prison and with people who have experienced incarceration guarantees not only an understanding and appreciation of imprisonment, but also an awareness of the vast range of issues being tackled inside prison by large and diverse staff teams. On leaving that 'other world' behind, one always carries an understanding of the complexity that is the 'prison world' and a desire to share this knowledge. This is partly because the prison is a closed milieu known to relatively few people, but about which there is much fascination and supposition within the wider population. Garland describes the modern prisons as "much less accessible to the public, much more secretive and socially invisible" (1990:186). Unlike any other institution the prison has to provide a range of resources for individuals with diverse requirements. Prisons endeavour to be educational establishments, hospitals, providers of psychiatric services, job centres and rehabilitation units: above all imprisonment has to be seen to serve the public's growing desire for punishment. The prison thus has an aim that is to achieve the impossible.

Media Impact

Attempting to teach effectively about imprisonment became particularly difficult with the advent of the popular media's insatiable desire for story lines depicting the prison and prison life. Coupled with this increasing interest in prisons comes media distortion, of both the impact and experience, of imprisonment. For example, students I have taught make reference to the ITV series 'Bad Girls' as if it were some great oracle on the incarceration of women. Media revelations, for instance, concerning the availability of Play Stations or televisions in prison cells, fuel an already irate public. Andrew Levy writing in The Daily Mail offers a standard example of misinformed media discourses of the prison environment, with his story entitled 'Holiday camp prison: Young murderers enjoy plasma TVs, video games, a gym, sea views...and a choice of toilet seats' (Levy 2009). Not only do these images distort the reality of prison life per se, but they leave the viewer with mixed messages of what life inside prison is really like (see Jewkes, 2006, Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004). Such sustained media based generalizations tell us very little about imprisonment, but can leave the recipient of such information feeling that they are appropriately informed about the reality of the prison, and with little or no desire to challenge such evidence. As a consequence, such distorted media discourses profoundly influence not only public attitudes, but also political rhetoric and subsequently criminal justice policies (Christie 2000; Mathiesen 2000; Mason 2006). The prison struggles to achieve public approval: if it is seen as too harsh, it is soon condemned; if it is too lenient, it is equally criticised. In general, the public view of prisoners is that they are the detritus of society and unworthy of civic concern (Jewkes 2005). Garland (1990) suggests that a misinformed public can be a benefit to those managing the prison system. He goes further by stating that the public's "distance from the penal process" means that they are far more likely to be influenced by the sensational media headlines and less concerned with the finer operational details or with the impact of imprisonment on those being incarcerated (1990:187).

It is apparent that media discourse on crime, and the subsequent representation of prison influences the general debate about prison and the aim of imprisonment. In addition to this, Mason (2006) suggests that 'cultural constructions of prison' function as important components of punitive and populist ideologies that underpin much current criminal justice policy. Mason argues that cinematic impression of prison directly impacts public opinion, often leaving the viewer with the sense that prison is the only option to deal effectively with the violent and inhumane prisoner. What is not offered within most prison focused media is the exploration of alternatives to prison or a condemnation of practices employed within prisons, let alone any consideration of the many arguments by academics who call for a reduction (see Rutherford 1986, Garland 2001) or moderation (see Loader 2010) to the current prison expansion. Occasionally, the media offer excellent examples of documentary filming, such as the work of Rex Bloomstein, or the BBC2 documentary "Women on the Edge: the truth about Styal Prison" (BBC2 2006), which aim to challenge some of the public's distorted beliefs about prison as a 'soft option' (Mason 2006:254). However, such insights are soon forgotten, unlike the infamous 'Bad Girls' that ran for seven years on ITV from 1999 to 2006.

The Impact of Politics

Rutherford (1986) points out that prison populations are not delivered by the 'providential stork', but are a result of both political choice and decision making, not necessarily determined by the levels of crime. The hardening of penal sanctions is something that most of the Western world has experienced over the last fifteen years (Van Kesteren 2009). Wacquant (2012) states that continued public support for excessive use of imprisonment is due, in part, to information and dialogue provided by successive Neoliberal governments who assure that prison is tackling the problem of crime, when in fact imprisonment simply avoids the real issues of crime causation. The public want more austere conditions in prisons and longer sentences for

offenders, however, the public's views of prison can often be 'complex and contradictory' (Roberts and Hough 2005). Sparks (2007) supports the view that we need to interpret the term 'public opinion' as something more complex and open to persuasion than we did previously. Governments are keen to gratify their public and will use both prison and punishment as trappings with which to gain votes (Pratt 2005 *et al*). Such ingrained political and media views have established an entrenched dogmatic palsy, to the extent that Newburn and Jones (2005, p.74), describe the failure of any political party to talk tough on crime and punishment as "akin to political suicide".

Since the early 1990s, political emphasis on crime and punishment has increased significantly. Michael Howard's 'Prison Works' speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 1993 brought prisons to the top of the political agenda. Consequently, we have witnessed over the last 20 years the emergence of 'penal populism' (Garland 2001, Hutton 2005, Pratt 2007, Green 2009). Leading political parties have aimed to monopolise the crime and punishment 'problem' with discourses that seek to out-tough each other in order to win political favour. The result of such sustained government and media discourses is a public encouraged to take a more punitive view. Mathieson (2003) suggests the changes in government discourse about criminal justice policy have shifted from discussions based upon legal and moral values, to those driven by the media and public. Hence, the debate about crime and punishment is no longer predicated upon 'principled legitimation' but driven by political opportunism (Mathieson 2000, p.3). Mathieson (2000) and Jewkes (2007) both purport that the media focus specifically on reporting violent and serious crime, this results in a distortion of the real picture of crime, in so far as prison becomes the only viable solution to the perceived problem. This has created a critical social condition where the public routinely associate crime with punishment and punishment with prison (Roberts and Hough 2002):

“In the newspapers, on television, in the whole range of media, the prison is simply not recognised as a fiasco, but as a necessary if not always fully successful method of reaching its purported goals. The prison solution is taken as paradigmatic, so that a rising crime rate is viewed as still another sign showing that prison is needed” (Mathieson 2000, p. 144).

Both the reality and complexity of prison life is a far cry from images and discussion depicted by media and politicians. Overcrowded, dirty prisons where prisoners may get an hour out of their cell each day, unsafe environments with high levels of self harm, few opportunities for work or education and sharing both a cell and toilet with another person(s), is not the typical image of prison presented by any of the media forms (see Jewkes and Johnston 2006, HM Inspector of Prisons, 2008, 2011). For example Ryan and Sim (2007) propose that prison is:

“a dysfunctional entity, as a place of punishment and pain, which instead of delivering redemption for the individual offender and protection for the wider society, is more likely to contribute to the psychological immiseration and sometimes physical destruction of offenders and to the maintenance of an unjust and unequal social system” (p. 714).

The subsequent effects of imprisonment, often neglected by the media, can be long lasting and life changing (Liebling & Maruna 2005, James 2003, 2005). The collateral effects of imprisonment can be immense; not only for the prisoner, but for extended family and their communities (Ewald & Uggen 2012). Displacement from your home and family, isolation, loneliness, safety, inability to cope and anxiety about participation in the job market on release, are just a few concerns that are raised continually by serving prisoners (see Liebling & Maruna 2005, James 2005, Crewe 2012).

Student perspectives about prison can reflect both media and political biases, which are unmistakably at odds with recognised academic theory. Students of criminology and related disciplines should be encouraged to both explore and question how political processes impact the prison system as a whole. They also should be able to identity the effects policy making can have on those working in prisons and on prisoners themselves. In the course of teaching penology, it became apparent that amongst the student group there was a growing overall acceptance

about the use of imprisonment as the response to any type of crime, as well as a reluctance to challenge imprisonment as a process. Academia has a duty to encourage the student to engage in challenging debates on the use of incarceration by offering alternative, more rigorous, observations on imprisonment and the overall consequences. To competently teach penology and address the wider effect of the prison and the consequences of the prison sentence on all those impacted, the starting point has to be one that attempts to counteract populist media coverage and political oratory that has served to shape contemporary public opinion about imprisonment. Trying to gauge where to start in a programme that aims to both inform students and encourage them to challenge imprisonment can be a daunting task. There are a number of excellent academic texts available (see Jewkes and Johnston 2006, Crewe 2012), and these coupled with some very informative journalism and writing within the area of convict criminology, that attempts to offer a new perspective on both crime and responses to crime (see James 2003, 2005; Irwin 2009) are an excellent starting point. In order to broaden the student appreciation of prison and the impact of the prison sentence, both professionals working in the prison environment and outside of it are invited to speak to the student group. A number of prisoners and ex-prisoners also address the student cohort: this provides students with a much more personal and detailed understanding of prison and the impact of the prison sentence. Although all of these approaches are valuable educational resources, gaps still remain in students' appreciation and knowledge of something so alien to them: life inside prison and the consequences of the prison sentence on all involved.

In addition to the guest speakers coming in to the university, there is also an opportunity for the student to visit a prison in order that he or she can experience the environment first hand. However, as the prison population expanded from 42,500 in 1992 to the current population of over 86,000, gaining access to the prison estate has become ever more difficult. As prison populations swelled in numbers, staffing

provision within the prison estate did not increase at a similar rate (House of Commons 2009), leaving little enough time for the basic duties to be carried out, and all but a modest inclination to try and accommodate students who wanted to gain a better understanding of the prison. Prison visits, or the 'carceral tour', (where students are taken on a 'tour' of a prison in order to introduce them to the surroundings) can still be arranged, albeit with limited availability. As a pedagogical tool, the prison visit has limited value due to the variability in quality of such visits. Over the years prison visits became shorter, and eventually were reduced to a quick, familiar route round the prison whilst prisoners ate in their cells. With a reduced amount of access to prisoners and less time spent in the prison environment, doubts were raised about the validity of the prison tour: both as a pedagogic and a sociological tool. Piche and Walby (2010) and Brown (2009), have criticised the penal tour in terms of its lack of effectiveness as a pedagogic tool. They state that short, often staged, prison visits cannot offer the depth and understanding required for learning about such a complex institution or the nature of incarceration.

Wilson, Spina and Canaan (2011) argue in favour of the carceral tour: they use reflective accounts from final year students as their evidence. The authors claim that a carefully planned carceral tour still has both sociological and pedagogical benefits. Pedagogically students are offered the opportunity to interact with prisoners at HMP Grendon, and experience the prison environment first hand, rather than being taken on a carefully scripted tour. Wilson *et al* (2011) found that students benefitted both from the prison tour and the discussion held with the prisoners: that these factors encouraged students to 'rethink' their ideas about prisons and to apply prior learning when considering potential effectiveness of the therapy sessions offered within HMP Grendon.

Developing Student Placements

Although in favour of the approach used by Wilson *et al.* (2011), (and an approach used previously in my teaching practice), the gaps in this approach still

outweighed the positives. The carceral tour began to concern me in that it still felt very much like a staged event where prison staff could select the areas to visit and the prisoners that students would have the opportunity to speak with. The carceral tour needed to be replaced with a far more rigorous approach in order to encourage the student to both experience and challenge the real prison environment. Having considered a number of options and at the same time developed advantageous working relationships with prisons locally. I began to explore gaining increased and unfettered access to the prison, looking at opportunities for students to work within the prison without the restrictions that a tour or visit imposed upon them. Gaining access to prisons is difficult; even for established researchers or the interested visitor; there are many obstacles to be encountered before access can be granted (Martin 2000). Not put off by these barriers, but increasingly frustrated by them, I endeavoured to secure work experience for students within the eight prisons located in the North East region. Academics have struggled with gaining credibility in, and access to, prison (Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996; King and Elliott 1978). In addition to this, access to the prison appears to become more difficult as prison populations expand and staff number, at best, remain the same (see Wacquant 2002, Crewe 2009). However, the culture of the prison has changed dramatically over the last 20 years in terms of officers needing academic qualifications and significant changes in staff working conditions (Crawley 2004; Liebling *et al.* 2011). The experiences gained from time spent working in prison and with offenders, coupled with the excellent working relationships developed with the prisons locally, made access possible and I was able to achieve a plausible 'insider' status that enabled this initiative to progress beyond the discussion stage.

An additional factor to the success of this initiative was the involvement of a Governor with the resourcefulness and foresight to recognise the potential benefits of such a scheme for all involved. The prison would gain students who could work in areas within the prison where there were resource shortfalls caused by current

financial restraints and who could also engage in much needed research that over stretched staff had little or no time to carry out. In providing much needed 'hands-on' work based practice, the prison was offering the student first hand experience and knowledge of imprisonment, while developing their overall 'graduateness' and employability. After lengthy discussions, focusing on both methodological and pedagogical concerns, it was agreed that third year students would gain a great deal of experience from working two days a week at HMP Durham for a year. HMP Durham, in turn, would benefit from having students working there and the areas of work would be identified by the prison. Coincidentally, that same Governor, who has a Masters in Criminology and appreciated all the ethical concerns raised and the discussion regarding the role of the carceral tour, became the regional manager for custodial services for the North East, which enabled me to steer this project to other prisons within the region with his full support.

Selecting the Students

An initial selection process was undertaken in order to choose 25 students from an inventory of 80 who had expressed interest. Therefore, the procedure of selection ran like that of a formal employment application process. A number of students were considered unsuitable for the posts, for a variety of reasons. These included their inability to give the time commitment, and those whose views on prison and prisoners would potentially leave that person somewhat vulnerable within a prison environment. A final selection process with University colleagues and the Head of Psychology at HMP Durham was undertaken. It was vital, at this juncture, that the right students were matched to suitable areas within the prison. A thorough risk assessment was carried out, adhering to Prison Service and University guidelines. A contract was drawn up between the University and the prison, which addressed the concerns raised by both parties. This formal contract was then signed by the student, and a representative from both the prison and the University. At this point

the extent of support available to the student was outlined: in this case to be provided by the Head of Psychology at HMP Durham and myself.

Following a lengthy security clearance process, lasting approximately three months, the first students started their comprehensive induction programmes within the prison in early September 2009. Once they had successfully completed the induction, the students began work in a variety of areas within the prison such as psychology, healthcare, offender management units, resettlement and safer custody. Students were fully 'key trained' to carry keys in the same way a prison officer would do, collecting their own keys on entry to the prison establishment. The restrictions and limitations of the 'carceral tour' are removed by the fact that students had keys and could move around the prison freely. Students had contact with prisoners whilst in the prison establishment: this was the component of the work experience they found the most interesting and challenging. They learned how to handle themselves in a difficult and unusual working environment, made observations about staff working relationships and about the complexity of the work that is carried out behind our prison walls. More importantly, the students began to rigorously scrutinize the use and purpose of imprisonment. They began to question why prison sentences were used so arbitrarily, and in some cases why such long sentences were given to extremely vulnerable individuals who they felt would be better cared for in a very different environment.

The impact on students' learning has been far greater than anticipated. The students have all been astounded at both the amount and range of work carried out within the prison by diverse professionals. For all three students contributing here (see below), the prison is not what they imagined at all: they described the environment as 'austere', but all enjoyed being there and believed that the atmosphere generated by both staff and inmates was positive. The experience that the students gained within prison has been life changing, transforming their view of prisons, prison staff and prisoners. In addition to this, they now consider themselves

better equipped with the skills and knowledge that should allow them to stand out from other graduates on entering an increasingly limited and hyper-competitive graduate job market.

The Students' Experience of Prison

What follows are extracts from three individual student's accounts, written in their own words. All three were in their final year of a Criminology and Forensic Science degree programme. They all worked two days a week within HMP Durham for a period of ten months, carrying out a variety of roles and working in different areas of the prison. The three students were asked to write about their experiences as part of an article for a Northumbria University journal which focused on both exploring innovative methods of teaching and learning, and encouraging new writers to publish.

Jamie

I started my work experience at HMP Durham working within the Safer Custody and Psychology Departments. Working within the prison environment has helped me greatly in respect to the work that I do for my degree. Lectures and discussion in seminars can only tell you so much about prison and the environment in which prisoners are held. For me it all becomes "real" when you are actually in that environment. Being inside the prison and seeing first hand the size of the cells and experiencing the smells and sounds of the prison is not something that you can really fully appreciate until you encounter it first hand.

From inside the prison it is easy to see the different dynamics at work: the complex world of incarceration becomes clearer. Articles and books that I have read about the prison make more sense to me now. I was interested in prison culture before I started work at HMP Durham, now I understand the literature that talks about prisoners from different parts of the country tending to group together and how this can cause problems within the prisons.

Working in this environment has also helped me understand about how the prison service as a whole works and enables me to appreciate the many things that occur “behind the scenes”, which never seem to be mentioned by the media. At HMP Durham there is a large waste management centre, which recycles almost all of the materials being used by the prison. This is a really remarkable scheme. The job training programme run by Durham Prison and various outside organisations is also impressive, and offers training for prisoners in order to enhance their chances of employment on release.

Although I have only spent a few months in the prison, the experience has had a big impact on my learning and understanding of the subject matter. My views have changed towards prisoners and prison in general. Even as a criminology student, my opinions on what prison was like were highly influenced by TV programmes and stories in the media.

Callum

The opportunity to carry out work experience in Durham Prison has allowed me to gain a good understanding, not just of the prison system itself, but also what lies ahead in terms of actually working and leaving my sedentary student lifestyle. I feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to work in the prison and see what goes on behind the formidable walls. I recognise the amount of trust being placed in me and the amount of responsibility I have taken on as a result.

The experience has also made me feel more comfortable and confident about speaking to my lecturers and asking for help with my course work. The experience of being in HMP Durham has undoubtedly helped me academically. There is only so much that you can learn from lectures and books about the judicial system, and more specifically, the prison system. You can be told about how prisons are run, the regime that prisoners adhere to, the conditions they are kept in and so on, but it is only when you see it first hand, that it really hits home that prisons contain a vast number of people whose whole lives are completely out of their own control.

Prior to starting the work experience in HMP Durham, I had an idea of what prison was like through reading textbooks, but the reality is far harsher than I imagined. Although I believe that people who commit crimes should be punished, I believe the complete loss of liberty, i.e. being in the prison itself, should be the punishment. Further punishment, such as being locked in your cell for 20 hours a day is not necessary. It is all too often the case that people are sent to prison and are completely forgotten about for however long their sentence is and then re-introduced back into society more criminalised and alienated from society than ever before.

Morgan

I thought that working in the prison would be a great opportunity to enhance my learning and gain work experience in a job specific role. My main role within the prison was to shadow Psychology professionals and assist them in day to day work. This involved a wide variety of tasks such as taking minutes in meetings, collecting data from wing observation books and transferring confidential files. I was able to sit in on a prisoner assessment; this involved considering the prisoner's suitability for the anger management programme. I was able to ask questions about offending behaviour, feelings about anger and ask the prisoner if he could deal with situations that he could potentially face within the establishment. I found this very useful as I was able to watch an assessment of a prisoner take place, and subsequently find out what factors would make a candidate suitable for this specific programme. Working in the prison environment has greatly improved my confidence with regards to obtaining a job at the end of my degree. Working alongside a mix of professionals has encouraged me to want to learn more about all aspects of the prison and has influenced my career decision making. There is a huge difference between being a student and working full time: my appreciation of this now will make it easier for me when I make that transition.

Initially, the prospect of entering a prison was a very daunting one, as the only view of prison I had was one which is portrayed by the media and information delivered through lectures. However, since entering the prison, my view has changed significantly towards both prisons and prisoners. Prison is not the “holiday camp” it is made out to be in the media. It is a holding ground for some of the most dangerous and damaged individuals in society. It is actually quite saddening to see so many lives ruined by drugs, crime and poorly made decisions. The work that is done within prison is vast, but it still feels that there is a lot to be done to reduce re-offending. My eyes have been opened to both the issues and difficulties faced by staff, and the many and complicated issues facing prisoners inside and outside of the prison. Moreover, this opportunity has allowed me to see first hand the impact of judicial legislation on both individual prisoners and the prisons themselves.

Concluding Thoughts

The above extracts were chosen as, at the time of writing, these students had completed their first full academic year in the prison. However, it is worth noting that all students completing this programme talk of a greater appreciation of the issues around imprisonment. Students also appreciate the wider impact of the prison sentence on those working in the prisons and on extended families and friends of those incarcerated. Common themes raised by the students who completed the work experience module centred on the vulnerability of prisoners, and concerns for their welfare on release, as well as acknowledgement that the massive social issues facing that person could not be resolved by a prison sentence. Students also expressed a desire to share their new found knowledge in an attempt to counteract some of the misinformation about imprisonment that shapes public opinion. One student in particular felt incredibly passionate about the fact that prior to going to university, and to a certain extent even whilst studying the prison academically, she

had never felt compelled to challenge or question the validity of what she was told about imprisonment by the media or to question why imprisonment is used so disproportionately for some sections of society. However, working in the prison had made a considerable difference to how she now viewed imprisonment. “In prison I saw all these people and I had an opportunity to find out why they were in prison, and I just thought ‘do we really need to be protected from this person’ and nine times out of ten, the answer was ‘no’ (year 3, Criminology student).

Time spent in HMP Durham has provided these students with a remarkable insight into how the prison works, and the subsequent impact on their learning and understanding has been exceptional. The timing of the work experience made it possible for them to use their newly gained knowledge about prison and prisoners to inform their final year dissertations. They were also able to share their learning experience with other students during seminar and group work. Students were able to relate first hand experience of the prison to earlier rigorous empirical and theoretical work of academic researchers, as well as to the more populist pronouncements of the media. Ensuing debates in seminars were stimulating and challenging, with a degree of animation rarely found in undergraduate teaching. The depth of both understanding and reflection regarding prison and the impact of imprisonment amongst this student group experiencing the prison environment first-hand is remarkable. Their acknowledgment and appreciation of widely held, unfounded prejudices about the prison and prisoners (they include themselves too) was an education in itself.

The process of establishing work experience opportunities for students in prisons has been long and complicated, but ultimately, very worthwhile. Many students have now secured jobs in prisons (one recently in HMP Wandsworth) and with other criminal justice agencies. In addition to this, the students’ understanding of the prison and the impact of imprisonment was substantially improved once they

had embarked on the work experience. There are many issues to consider before embarking on such a journey, and, indeed any other journeys that might suggest themselves in discussions with professionals working in other criminal justice organisations. For instance, the issue of confidentiality has been brought up by prison Governors and prison staff frequently during the process of arranging students' access to prisons. Although there is a comprehensive work experience agreement document that students have to sign, it is imperative that all students understand the sensitive nature of the environment they will be working in. In a cultural era dominated by social networking, well in advance of crossing the threshold into the prison, all students require full understanding and appreciation of the many deleterious consequences that might follow even the most innocent breaching of confidentiality.

Students who study criminology are part of the continually increasing numbers of social scientists seeking work within a declining job market. There is an expectation that graduates will have at least 6 months work-related experience prior to completing their first job applications. Traditionally, work experience is not something that is necessarily considered when opting for a degree in the social science field. This may all change with David Willetts calling for universities to publish "employability statements" and ensure that their students are 'job ready' (Docherty 2010).

The benefits of prison based work experience are clearly outlined above and in addition to this, there is a wealth of academic evidence to support the worth of linking classroom based theory to practices in the criminal justice field (Payne 2003; Smith *et al.* 2009). In terms of the social science students' journey through higher education, the understanding gained from being in the prison will be pivotal to their unabridged learning experience. This work experience furnishes students with new practical knowledge, enhanced confidence and an appreciation of the skills needed in order to make a successful transition from university to work. It also ensures that

organisations dealing with vulnerable and difficult groups of people can acquire informed, knowledgeable and empathetic graduates who understand the complexities of imprisonment. Such experiences mould individual insights that appreciate the hardships and challenges of both being in, and running, a prison and of personalities who ultimately can and will challenge the distorted media portrayals of both prisons and prisoners. In addition to this, a scheme like this one brings the prison back to the forefront of thought for social scientists.

Wacquant (2002) acknowledges that in recent times, ironically during a period of mass incarceration, both prisons and their occupants have become almost invisible to social scientists. There is still no other experience that can replicate the smell and feel of a real prison; the very consciousness of walking into a prison is something that is not easily simulated by books, films or lectures, no matter how good they are. This is the experience that, in actual fact, inspires our students; who are often in admiration of what the prison hopes to achieve, whilst at the same time, by utilising their critical thinking skills, will challenge those very same processes, as part of their overall aspiration: to want to make a difference. This opportunity of a 'carceral experience', with few restrictions and respect of prisoners at the forefront of planning, moves away from simple penal tourism to offer the student both a valuable educational appreciation of the prison and the prison experience. Whilst at the same time it is also encouraging the cultivation and fostering of reflection on both 'the political and ethical dimension' of what the student actually witnesses and experiences within the prison environment (Piche and Walby 2012).

Currently there is a cohort of over thirty students on work experience with NEPACS (a local organisation that staffs and supports the prison visitor centres), the Youth Offending Team (Newcastle) and the prisons within the North East of England. Now in the third year of this collaboration, I am continually encouraged by both the feedback from the organisations and the responses from students engaged in the process. As part of the assessment procedure, prison governors and line managers

attend the student presentations at the end of the placement, where they are given an opportunity to discuss with the student the impact of their work experience on their overall learning. In turn, governors leave these presentations with new ideas on improving and developing the work placements for the next student cohort coming in. This coupled with regular contact with line managers responsible for the student during their time in prison, encourages greater accuracy in the students' observations and recounting of events. In reality what has been developed here is more akin to a knowledge exchange partnership between the prisons, rather than simply a work experience model. This close working relationship has benefitted all involved: academics, students, prisons and prisoners, as we now work collaboratively on a range of other projects. This in turn will complement the student learning experience as I take back to the classroom up to date knowledge and further understanding gained from sustained and regular contact with all the prisons across the North East of England.

Students who take part in this carceral experience have all found that both the insight into the prison world, and the confidence gained as a result of the work experience, contributed to their successful securing of employment. In an era of great uncertainty regarding the future direction of imprisonment, penal policy in general and insecurity within the higher education system, the prison can only benefit from the inclusion of enthusiastic graduates who want to make a difference and understand the many challenges the penal system will no doubt encounter.

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