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Higher Education and Desistance from Crime

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Abstract

Prisoners are one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in society, with low levels of educational attainment and involvement in higher education. This paper reviews the literature on prisoners and higher education to consider the link between higher education and desistance from crime, utilising Giordano et al.’s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation and Mazirow’s theory of transformative learning. Higher education has many advantages for prisoners and former prisoners, providing opportunities to develop new skills, self-respect, resilience and it can also assist in the development of a new identity as a non-offender, and the sense of a new life and how it can be realised. This new identity is an essential feature in desistance from crime and developing a life that is crime free, with new opportunities based on educational achievements, rather than criminal opportunities. Education and learning is, thus, transformational, for the individual prisoner or former prisoner as they desist from crime. There are also many benefits for society in general through a reduction in crime rates, and new sources of social and human capital. This paper will consider the links between higher education as transformative for the individual and desistance from crime.

Keywords: access; crime; desistance; higher education; transformational
Introduction

Prisoners in Ireland are one of the most socially, economically and culturally deprived groups within society. They tend to come predominantly from the most deprived areas of the country (O’Donnell et al., 2007; Healy, 2010) and return to those areas on their release from prison (O’Donnell et al., 2007). Prisoners have high rates of drug use (Drummond et al., 2014) and their rates of mental health difficulties are significantly higher than among the general population (Kennedy et al., 2005). Family breakdown and homelessness (Seymour & Costelloe, 2005) are also common experiences for prisoners. It is little wonder then, that prisoners have low levels of educational attainment, with many having problems with basic literacy and numeracy (Morgan & Kett, 2003), and leave school early with few educational qualifications (Healy, 2010; O’Mahony, 1997).

Given their status as a prisoner or former prisoner, and also given that the communities where they reside have traditionally been under-represented in higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2015), with low rates of access, retention and attainment (Archer, 2003), it is not surprising that prisoner participation in higher education is also low. There are many challenges to access and participation in higher education generally (Hayton & Paczuska, 2002), particularly for minority and non-traditional students, such as prisoners and former prisoners (Carter et al., 2013). When prisoners do engage with higher education during imprisonment, however, rates of retention are high (Swann, 2008) and there is a strong link between learning, rehabilitation and reintegration (Schuller, 2009). Education has the potential to be transformative for the individual (Mezirow, 1991, cited in Imel, nd) and can lead to a new identity as a learner, and assist in the process of desistance from crime, where an individual ceases to offend, and reframes their identity into that of a non-offender (Maruna et al., 2004).
This paper is part of a wider study of former prisoners in higher education, though the focus here will be to review the literature in order to consider the link between higher education and desistance from crime. The paper has four objectives. First, to consider the benefits and challenges of engaging in higher education generally, for both the individual and society. Second, to consider higher education from the perspective of prisoners and former prisoners. The focus here will be on access, participation, the challenges faced and the benefits of engaging in higher education, both during imprisonment and following release from prison. Prison education in Ireland will then be outlined.

Engagement in education, and particularly in higher education, can be transformative for the individual, providing the individual with many benefits, not least of which is a new identity as a learner, and the many possibilities that entails. The development of a new identity, from offender to non-offender, is an essential feature in desistance from crime and the development of a life that is crime-free, with new opportunities based on educational achievements, rather than criminal opportunities. The final objective of this review is, therefore, to consider the link between higher education as transformative and desistance from crime, using Giordano et al.’s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation and Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, cited in Imel, nd). For an individual to successfully desist from crime, they must develop a sense of what the future may hold for them and how this future can be realised (Farrall, 2005). Education and in particular higher education, can assist in the development of a new future and possibilities for how that new future can be realised (Farrall, 2005), and in doing so can assist an identity transformation to that of a non-offender and desistance from crime (Maruna, 2001).
Benefits of Education for the Individual and Society

There are many benefits of education generally, for the individual and for wider society. Education provides obvious benefits to the individual in the form of economic benefits, through employment and financial security (Vila, 2000). Non-economic benefits to the individual include: higher levels of trust and tolerance, lower levels of unemployment, longer life expectancy, better mental health, greater life satisfaction, better general health benefits, fertility benefits, benefits from children, occupational benefits and benefits related to consumption and saving (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2013; Vila, 2000). The benefits of engaging in education have the potential to be significant for prisoners and former prisoners. For individuals who have been involved in crime, education provides an opportunity to associate with individuals who are not involved in crime and who have pro-social, non-offending attitudes, and in doing so reinforces non-criminal identities (Farrall, 2002; Shover, 1983). It can also provide new forms of occupation and outlets, which can relieve the boredom and lack of occupation that is often associated with engaging in crime (Costelloe, 2003). By providing engagement, outlets, opportunity and new associates, education has the potential to further the progress of desistance from crime.

The participation of individuals in higher education has both economic and social benefits for society. Benefits to society include; improved social cohesion, trust and tolerance, social mobility, social capital, political stability, faster economic growth and less crime (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). MacMurray (2012) describes one of the benefits for society, as the socialising aspect of education or ‘learning to be human’, which is a central feature of the purpose of education. This is the process whereby through education, we learn to live in a community with others and we
learn what it means to lead good lives together, and to develop our humanity through mutual care for one another. The idea of learning to be human and to live with one another in a community, is particularly important from the perspective of prisoners and formers prisoners as they attempt to desist from crime and return to live in the community. Engaging in education can provide them with the potential to become a part of society and to learn to live in a way that does not involve engaging in criminal activity. It is also important from the perspective of the community itself, as communities become more open and receptive to the participation of former prisoners within society.

**Barriers to Higher Education**

While the benefits to the individual of engaging in higher education are many and varied, the reality is that there are many barriers to individuals participating in higher education. The barriers can be broken down into dispositional and situational barriers. Dispositional barriers can also be referred to as motivational hindrances (Flynn et al., 2011) or attitudinal barriers (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). They relate to individual beliefs, values, and attitudes which can prevent participation in organised learning activities, and include lack of interest, feeling too old to learn, being tired of school, and not enjoying studying (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Low self-esteem and lack of confidence were found to be dispositional barriers to participation in higher education for Irish participants (Bailey & Coleman, 1998 and Cousins, 1997, cited in Costelloe, 2003).

Situational barriers are unique to the individual and include a lack of financial support (Hardin, 2008) and family or time commitments and constraints (Cross, 1981). Cross (1981) expanded the list of possible barriers to higher education to include institutional barriers, which refer to the practices and procedures of the educational institution and the
educational programmes themselves, which exclude adults from participation in higher education. They include; scheduling problems, location and transportation, a lack of interesting, practical or relevant courses, and procedural problems, such as red tape and problems with registration (Cross, 1981). Darkenwald & Merrian (1982) added challenges associated with information as an additional barrier to participate in higher education.

Prisoners engaging in education and higher education, experience unique challenges, such as: long waiting lists to attend the school; getting no answer to their application (Westrheim & Manger, 2014); a lack of information about educational opportunities in prison (O’Keeffe et al., 2007; Westrheim & Manger, 2014); uncertainty about whether or not they will be able to complete a course if they are transferred to another prison, or are released early (Callan & Gardner, 2005) or serving a short sentence (Alós et al., 2015; O’Keeffe et al., 2007). Behan (2016) highlights other challenges faced by prisoners accessing education in prison: access to the internet, high turnover in classes, particularly in remand centres, and the attitudes of prison staff and management, which according to Behan can either facilitate or stymie educational opportunities for prisoners.

The Importance of Education for Prisoners and Former Prisoners

Desistance is the process whereby an individual ceases to offend. It is not a one off event, rather it is a process which takes time and is often characterised by progress and setbacks, often in the form of reoffending (Carlsson, 2012). Hence, the process of desistance has been described as zig zagged or curved (Carlsson, 2012; Leibrich, 1993; Piquero, 2004), and is characterised by “tenuous motivation, instability and uncertainty” (Healy, 2010, p.175), or what Farrall (2002) describes as degrees of success. There are many factors
involved in the process of desistance from crime, including employment, marriage, aging
and acquiring an education. These factors are valued by the individual and initiate a
re-evaluation of his or her life and sense of who they are (Farrall, 2002).

There are a number of benefits for prisoners and former prisoners of engaging in and
acquiring an education. These benefits include lower rates of reoffending (Abeling-Judge,
2020), personal development benefits for the individual and identity transformational
benefits as a non-offender. The benefits for the individual also benefit the wider society
and community, through lower rates of offending and crime, and the wider participation
of these individuals in society.

Davis et al. (2013) estimated that on average, prisoners who participated in education
programs during their time in prison had rates of reoffending that were 43 percent lower
than prisoners who did not participate in education. Employment is an important factor in
desistance from crime (Farrall, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1993), and there are strong links
between education and employment. Education can help prisoners secure employment
following their release from prison and so reduce their rates of reoffending (Ellison et al.,
2017), particularly for prisoners who have engaged in higher education (Chappell, 2003;

Research conducted in Canada found that prisoners who engaged in higher education
were significantly less likely to reoffend (Duguid, 1998; Duguid et al., 1998). This was a
three-year research project, following students who had been involved in the
post-secondary prison education programme (PEP). The research sought to investigate
the ‘transformative capacity of education’ and the extent to which a causal link could be
established between education and post-release success (Duguid, 1998). The predicted rate of reoffending was 42 per cent, the actual rate was 25 per cent, thus, participation in PEP had a greater impact on participants than anticipated by the researchers, with the completion of even minimal post-release education and training courses or programs leading to reduced reoffending (Duguid, 1998).

Gould (2018) argues for a new approach to considering and evaluating the impact and benefits of higher education for prisoners, with a move away from the traditional approach which has been to consider reductions in the rate of reoffending following participation in education, the accompanying financial savings to the state and improvements in safety and security. Rather, Gould suggests that if we are to seriously consider the benefits of higher education for prisoners, then we need to recognise higher education as potentially transformative for the individual and their personal development, with ‘ripple effects’ and benefits for the individual’s family, community and wider society (Gould, 2018; Baranger et al., 2018; Payne & Bryant, 2018). Costelloe (2003, p.2) also makes this point in relation to Irish prisoners participating in higher education, that by focusing on reoffending as the outcome the “individual prisoner is lost from view”, as are the many other benefits associated with prisoners and former prisoners participating in higher education. Higher education in a prison environment is transformative when it recognises “the whole person” and their membership in society, and draws out “talent, ability potential and creativity” (Costelloe & Warner, 2014, p.178; Warner, 2018).

Education in prison can provide prisoners with much needed occupation and can relieve the boredom which is associated with imprisonment, and in doing so can help relieve the
‘pains of imprisonment’ (Liebling, 1999; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Livingston Runnell, 2016). Prisoners who receive visitors are more likely to participate in educational courses than those who do not (Rose, 2004; Brosens et al., 2015). Visits from family or friends provide prisoners with emotional and social support and helps to maintain connections with the outside world and the life that awaits them on their release (Connor & Tewksbury, 2015), which is important for relieving the impact of imprisonment on the individual, and can act as a motivator to engage in education.

O’Grady (2017) found that participating in education while in prison can lead to improved socialisation, respect for others and greater self-respect, while Strang (2015) found that teaching compassion and compassion as a practice within a prison education setting can have many benefits for the students and teachers alike. Pike (2018) found that participation in Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning in prison led to increased self-awareness, a positive identity and resilience. It also encouraged positive personal change through transformative learning, with higher education student prisoners expressing hope and aspirations for the future and the impetus for the continuation of their learning following their release from prison, for employment and a brighter future upon their release (Pike, 2018). Baranger et al. (2018) found that the benefits for women who engaged in higher education during their time in prison included, personal development, resilience and empowerment, and they suggest it is “possible that engagement in prison higher education can support the development of coping skills and foster transformative self-inquiry and personal development” (2018; p.510).

Respect, self-respect, compassion, greater socialisation, positive personal change and hope can all be described as transformative for the individual and can assist in the
creation of a new pro-social identity which is essential if an individual is to desist from crime and lead a life that does not involve criminal activity (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002). Prisoners and former prisoners who engage in higher education value progression and the challenge of higher level learning (Taylor, 2014), highlighting the importance of learning being 'aspirational' and providing prisoner learners, be they in prison or outside of prison, with opportunities to learn and to continue to learn. Education for prisoners and former prisoners can thus build self-esteem and the belief in a better life ahead, and enhanced social capital and well-being (Healy, 2010; Schuller, 2009).

The desistance literature highlights the importance of overcoming a negative identity as a prisoner or criminal, and developing a new, positive, pro-social identity in the process of desisting from crime (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002). Participation in higher education can assist an individual to develop a new pro-social and non-offending identity, such that they no longer see themselves as a prisoner or criminal, but as a learner and a member of society. Higher education for prisoners and former prisoners, can, therefore, be said to be transformative (Pike, 2018), enhancing self-esteem, social capital, coping skills, resilience, empowerment, respect for one self and respect for others (Baranger et al., 2018; Healy, 2010; O’Grady, 2017; Schuller, 2009; Taylor, 2014). Education alone is not sufficient for an individual to desist from crime, but it can be part of the wider desistance process.

**Prison Education in Ireland**

The link between education and crime has been well established, with early school leavers more likely to become involved in crime (Farrington, 2012) and low educational attainment associated with less stable employment, higher rates of reoffending...
(O’Donnell et al., 2008) and lower chances of reintegration (Alós et al., 2015). Rates of educational attainment are low among prisoners. In the only study of its kind in Ireland, Morgan & Kett (2003) established that the rates of literacy among Irish prisoners was so low as to be the equivalent of what would have traditionally been described as ‘illiterate’.

All Irish prisons have an education centre providing a range of educational opportunities, ranging from basic literacy skills through to degree level, usually through the Open University (Irish Prison Service, 2016). Participation in education in Irish prisons is voluntary. Prison education is delivered in partnership between the Irish Prison Service (IPS) and the Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI). It is broad-based and flexible, as it must cater for the complex educational needs of prisoners and it is based on a philosophy of Second Chance, Continuing or Adult Education (Irish Prison Service, 2016). Warner (2018) describes adult education as recognising learners as individuals and their capacities to transform their lives. The focus, both in Ireland and elsewhere, has tended to be on basic skills, with priority given to literacy, numeracy and applied job skills in preparation for release from prison (Szifris et al., 2018). This is understandable given the low level of education attainment of most prisoners and the link between education and crime. Education within a prison environment must be dynamic and innovative if it is to maintain the interest of individual prisoners, it must also be supportive of prisoners individualised needs, and work at their pace, all within the confines of a defined prison sentence length (Behan, 2014). Indeed sentence length and movement from one prison to another are significant impediments to the commencement of and continuation of higher education while in prison (Alós et al., 2015; O’Keffe et al., 2007). While Warner (2018) argues that punitive penal policies can limit the possibilities of adult education in a prison environment.
In 2017, 7,484 individuals were committed to an Irish prison (Irish Prison Service, 2018), but the average rate of participation in education from September to December 2017 was just over one third of prisoners, with rates of participation in work and training averaging one quarter for the same time period (Irish Prison Service, 2018). This low level of participation in education and training is concerning given what we know about the importance of purposeful engagement during imprisonment and the links with desistance from crime (Grosholz et al., 2020).

Costelloe (2003) conducted research on the motivations of Irish prisoners to engage in higher education. She identified two distinct groups of prisoners who were involved in higher education. Traditional non-participants tended to be younger and would not have considered adult learning had they not been imprisoned, due primarily to previous negative educational experiences and their socio-economic backgrounds. Traditional participants on the other hand were older and more similar to mainstream mature students, and had undertaken some form of third level education prior to their first conviction. Higher education for traditional non-participants was initially about relieving boredom, though the more they engaged with learning, the more they came to realise the possibilities afforded by education and the new horizons it offered, though, they were determined to resist, what Costello (2003) referred to as ‘social class identity change’, because of their involvement in higher education. For traditional participants involvement in higher education was also about meaningful occupation while in prison, but they were aware of their need to gain employment on their release and that a career change may be necessary, hence they were motivated to participate in higher education. Costelloe found that situational and institutional barriers did not apply in prison and this gave traditional non-participants the ability to engage in higher education while in prison, when they
would not have done so on the outside. For those prisoners who did not engage in higher education or in any education at all during their time in prison, Costelloe suggested that the reason could be because of negative dispositional barriers.

Prison education in Ireland attempts to meet the complex needs of prisoners, by providing basic level education for those who need it, through to higher education for those who are motivated and encouraged to move beyond their traditional educational aspirations, and previous negative experiences of education. Education in prison which allows students to voluntarily participate in learning, at their own pace, and at a time of their choosing, can encourage critical reflection and desistance from crime (Behan, 2014). This is an important benefit of prison education for both the individual and for wider society.

**Transformative Learning**

Maruna (2001) has described the process of desistance from crime as a ‘black box’. Despite all that we know about why someone desists from crime, we still do not know exactly how the process of desistance works and what ultimately leads an individual to stop offending, particularly in the early stages of desistance (Healy, 2010). It is now accepted that part of the process of desistance is a change in identity for the individual (Farrall, 2005; Giordano *et al*., 2002; Healy, 2010; Maruna, 2001), who begins to see them self in a different way and not just as a ‘criminal’, or ‘prisoner’. Rather they take on new roles, such as father, employee and student, and these new roles lead to a change in their identity, sense of self and how they define them self. LeBel *et al.* (2008) for example, found that prisoners who defined themselves as a ‘family man’, prior to their release from prison, were less likely to reoffend, even after a period of ten years. The process of creating a new identity takes time, however, as individuals must first select,
explore and finally commit to a new self (Farrall, 2005). Thus, desistance from crime is a process and one which happens gradually and over time.

Giordano et al. (2002) have put forward a theory of cognitive transformation to explain why individuals desist from crime, and the change in identity which it can involve. This theory emphasises personal agency in the desistance process. They suggest there are four cognitive transformations which are necessary and which will lead to an identity transformation for the individual, from an identity as an offender to one of non-offender. The first cognitive transformation is a willingness on the part of the individual to change. In order for this willingness to change to be successful, there must be an exposure to a hook or hooks for change. This is the second cognitive transformation and examples of hooks for change, include, a new relationship, the birth of a child, spending time in prison, getting a job or an education. The third cognitive transformation is when the individual envisions and can begin to create a new appealing “replacement self” that will replace their old offending self (Giordano et al., 2002, p.1001). This is a critical phase as it is when the individual begins to believe that many of the things they could not do in the past are now possible, such as getting an education and the possibility of a new life is envisaged (Farrall, 2005). The final cognitive transformation, the capstone, involves a transformation in how the individual views criminal behaviour and the lifestyle associated with it. It is no longer a lifestyle that is regarded as positive, viable, rewarding or personally relevant. It is at this stage that Giordano et al. (2002) believe the desistance process is complete.

From an education perspective, Mezirow’s (Mezirow, 1991, cited in Imel, nd) theory of transformative learning has many similarities to Giordano et al.’s (2002) theory of
cognitive transformation and desistance from crime. The theory of transformative learning states that if an individual is to change their beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions to the world around them, they must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, and this will lead to a transformation in their perspectives (Mezirow, 1991, cited in Imel, nd). Transformative Learning has been described as an idealized model of adult learning which distinguishes between learners as receptacles of knowledge and learners who are actively engaged in the learning process, through critical reflection and discourse, whereby they question their assumptions, expectations, and context to achieve deeper meaning and new perspectives to guide their actions. In this way the individual becomes “critically aware” of how their existing assumptions have constrained their perceptions and understanding of the world, which leads to a change in their expectations, and a new integrating perspective which allows them to make new choices and to act upon their new understandings (Mezirow, 1991, cited in Imel, nd.). Giordano et al. (2002) also stress the role of agency in the desistance process.

There are a number of specific stages in the transformative learning process, which bear similarities to Giordano et al.’s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation. The process of transformative learning begins with a “disorienting dilemma” or a choice of two alternatives, which the individual must resolve. The dilemma is whether to reinforce their existing worldview or to begin the process of revision, which will lead to a new worldview. For an individual involved in crime, the dilemma is to continue their life of crime or to desist and lead a life that is free from crime. A process of self-examination and critical assessment is then engaged in, with a recognition that others have gone through a similar situation. This is followed by an exploration of the options for forming new roles, relationships and actions, and the formulation of a plan of action. The plan of
action involves acquiring new skills and knowledge, trying out new roles, renegotiating existing and new relationships, and building competence and self-confidence, until the final stage of reintegration is achieved, where a new and transformed perspective is adopted (Malone, 2003).

In their theory of cognitive transformation Giordano et al. (2002) stress that if individuals are to desist from crime there must be a willingness to change and the identification of a hook for change. One such hook can be engagement in higher education. The dilemma to be resolved is whether or not to continue with their existing way of life and crime, and all that it entails, or to ‘make good’ (Maruna, 2001) and desist from crime. The resolution of this dilemma will involve questioning the assumptions, expectations and context of their existing life as an offender, and whether to continue with that worldview or to develop a new worldview as a non-offender. A period of critical reflection and reassessment of what is important to the individual appears to be a common feature of the initial process of desistance (Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986; Farrall & Bowling, 1999). Leading to the creation of a replacement self or new identity as a non-offender, and a transformation in how crime is perceived and regarded by the individual. Livingston Runnell (2018) found that higher education following release from prison can be an important hook for change, leading to a reduction in offending behaviour and a new identity as a non-offender.

Hence, desistance takes time to achieve and is not a simple, one off event. Engagement in higher education can provide the individual with an opportunity for critical reflection (Behan, 2014) on their existing assumptions and help to generate new assumptions, expectations and perspectives. By resolving this dilemma the individual can develop a new ‘replacement self’ which is no longer dependent on or defined by a life of crime,
where they are no longer limited by what they believed was possible for them, and where a life of crime is no longer regarded as desirable, viable or rewarding. Education alone cannot lead to desistance from crime, desistance is a cumulative process, with multiple life experiences involved (Maruna, 2001), but it can incite an inner will to change and provide the opportunity and space to make that change (Grosholz et al., 2020; Livingston Runnell, 2018). In this sense education, and in particular, higher education, can be regarded as transformative, assisting in the process of cognitive transformation and ultimately desistance from crime.

Malone (2003) describes the learning in transformative learning as revolutionary rather than evolutionary and incremental. It “drastically changes the sense of self and the feeling of competence, and may bring forth new talents and capacities, not apparent before. It is a dramatic, fundamental change in the way an individual sees the world and himself or herself” (Malone, 2003, p.299). This description of transformative learning could equally be applied to the process of desistance for the individual, where they transform their sense of who they are, their attitudes towards crime and their attitudes, motivations and expectations for their future. Thus, while for Giordano et al. (2002) education can be a hook for change, leading to an identity transformation for the individual and desistance from crime, Mezirow’s transformative learning describes the process whereby education and learning can act as a hook for change, how it operates and can lead to desistance from crime.

**Higher Education after Release from Prison**

However, what happens when someone is released from prison? What challenges and obstacles are faced as they attempt to continue their involvement in higher education or to
commence higher education? In many ways prison presents a unique opportunity for an individual to participate in higher education, with a level of support and structure that may not exist on the outside (Costelloe, 2003), and away from the temptations and reality of life in the community, be it people, places or drugs (Livingston Runnell, 2018). There is an obvious challenge in how to build on the good work and motivation of prisoners when they are released from prison and return to their old lives and communities. Prisoners belong to a group who are more likely to be socio-economically deprived and to have limited access to education, thus, how to improve their access to higher education and lifelong learning is an important question (Downes, 2014).

This difficulty is compounded by the fact of their involvement in criminality and the time they have spent in prison, which can reinforce criminal labels and make it more difficult for them to be accepted into society. While the attitudes of their wider communities may not be supportive of higher education, and their involvement in higher education could actually be an isolating factor for them (Costelloe, 2003; Livingston Runnell, 2018). Research undertaken by Downes (2014) which focused on prison education, rather than on engagement and continuation with education following release from prison found that for those individuals who wish to continue with, or to commence, higher education following their release from prison, additional support and assistance in the community is essential. Prisoners face many significant challenges on their release: these can include finding a stable and secure place to live (Seymour & Costello, 2005; Travis, 2005), finding a job and a means of subsistence (Western et al., 2015), avoiding certain people and locations and staying drug free (Maruna & Roy, 2007). Higher education in prison provides prisoners with a structured environment and a level of accountability and support. On release, however, challenges to engaging in higher education can include:
lack of time, financial considerations, transportation, physical and/or mental health
issues, drug and alcohol use, employment, and child care (Baranger et al., 2018).

Harmes et al. (2018) found a number of distinct challenges for individuals who wish to
participate in higher education following their release from prison: relationship and
accommodation problems, leading to problems of where and how to study in a quiet and
secure environment; problems engaging in study if they do not have access to a computer,
a desk, money or resources; not being able to organise themselves and focus on studying;
and limited IT skills. Nugent & Schinkel (2016) found that an often unacknowledged
challenge for prisoners following their release from prison, is loneliness and isolation, as
desisting from crime often means moving from old and known communities and giving
up former friends, or ‘knifing off’ aspects of their old lives (Maruna & Roy, 2007). This
can only enhance the challenges faced if they are also participating in higher education.
Harmes et al. (2018) also found that many former prisoners experienced loneliness in the
community when they attempted to engage with higher education, with no ready access
to learning groups or support networks and difficulties in forging new friendships. This
can be compounded if the individual’s probation officer is not supportive of them
undertaking higher education or if they do not have the support of family or friends.

Engaging in higher education following release from prison is, thus, a significant
challenge. Schuller (2009) believes there is a strong case for all prisoners to be given
access to education or training immediately when they leave prison, as part of their
pre-release preparation and plan. This would involve providing the necessary supports in
the community to ensure that former prisoners can engage in education and not be
hindered by the challenges which they so often face. Not only would this benefit the
individual, but it would also act as an ‘effective instrument against crime’ (Schuller, 2009, p.5) and would ultimately be of benefit the wider society.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to consider the link between higher education and desistance from crime. It has done this through a review of the literature. Limited consideration has been given to prisoners and former prisoners engaged in higher education and in particular how higher education can assist them to desist from crime and develop a new identity as a non-offender, with a new sense of what the future may hold and how to realise that new future. The paper had four objectives: to consider the benefits and challenges of engaging in higher education generally, for both the individual and society; to consider higher education from the perspective of prisoners and former prisoners; to outline prison education in Ireland; finally, to consider the links between education as transformative and desistance from crime, using Giordano, Cernkovich, Rudolph’s theory of cognitive transformation (2002) and Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, cited in Imel, nd)

Engaging in education has many benefits for the individual, both economic and non-economic, while society benefits through improved social cohesion, trust and tolerance, social mobility, social capital, political stability, faster economic growth and less crime (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). There are challenges to engaging in higher education, in particular dispositional, or motivational barriers and situational barriers, including a lack of financial support and family or time commitments and constraints. Individuals who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and
non-traditional students have lower rates of participation in higher education and experience more barriers as a result (HEA, 2015, 2019).

Prisoners come disproportionately from the most deprived parts of society (O’Donnell et al., 2007), are more likely to leave school early and to have fewer educational qualifications (Healy, 2010). For this reason, much of the work of prison education is to bring students up to a basic level of educational attainment, although prison education has benefits for the individual beyond those of educational attainment. Each year many prisoners process to higher education during their time in prison and many will continue that engagement following their release. Education and higher education in particular, can provide prisoners and former prisoners with a sense of the new life that is possible, beyond that of crime and prison, and a way to realise that life. In this way, education and learning for prisoners engaged in higher education can be described as transformative, opening up new pathways, possibilities and future.

Desistance from crime, when an individual ceases to offend, is a process, which takes time and effort on the part of the individual, and involves multiple life processes, one of which can be education and learning. Desistance also involves a change in the identity of the individual from that of offender, to non-offender, Giordano et al. (2002) describe this as cognitive transformation. This process begins with a willingness on the part of the individual to change and requires a hook for change if that willingness is to be successful. Higher education can be a hook for change, and can facilitate an identity change for the individual, leading to a transformation in how they view the world, their place in it and the possibilities for their future. Thus, education can be transformative for the individual,
and can assist the process of desistance from crime, benefiting both the individual and society in general.
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