Community Needs Analysis with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners

A Pilot Study as part of College Connect

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Sarah Meaney is associate staff with the Adult and Community Education Department in Maynooth University, where she works as a researcher and educator. Her PhD research, funded by the Irish Research Council, was a creative exploration of prisoners' and early school leavers' experience of educational exclusion in mainstream school. From 2017-2018 she worked with former prisoners in The Bridge Project, and was the script writer on 'The Trial', a visual arts installation grounded in historical and social research on the human rights and access to healthcare for prisoners in Ireland from the 1800s to 2000. She was the Principal Investigator on the Community Needs Analysis pilot with The Pathways Centre, to assess the barriers for prisoners and former prisoners in accessing higher education.

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Foreword

Building relationships between higher education institutions and regional community partners is a fundamental part of College Connect. As part of our commitment to this approach, the Community Needs Analysis was undertaken in true partnership with one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society; prisoners and former prisoners. Using participatory methods - which included employing former prisoners as peer researchers - has ensured an authentic and unique insight into the experiences of this group. In addition to the rich insights that have emerged from the research, it has also proved to be an extremely important means for developing strong relationships between the colleges and the communities and ensuring sustained community engagement going forward. This research is ground breaking given that there is little to no research in this area in Ireland. Prisoners and former prisoners experience deep educational disadvantage; they also often face multiple forms of marginalisation, in that a prisoner / former prisoner may also be living in poverty, may be a lone parent, may be homeless, may be an Irish Traveller, or a person with a disability, or from a minority ethnic group. It was for these reasons that College Connect chose to focus our first community needs analysis with this group.

Many of the key barriers outlined in the report will be recognised and shared with other marginalised groups: stigma, use of language, finances, lack of support, lack of clear information; and some are unique to the prisoner experience, e.g. Garda vetting as a barrier to higher education, and employment. We welcome the recommendations, in particular, the need for a role to guide, signpost, and support prisoners / former prisoners to deal with the challenges in navigating their journey into, through and beyond higher education. As part of our commitment to ensuring information is accessible to all we have used creative and artistic methods to share the findings in this report.

This research allows us all an opportunity to learn about and reflect on the unique challenges and barriers for prisoners and former prisoners in accessing higher education, and to work on solutions together, as education providers and communities. College Connect, and the higher education institutions it represents, look forward to continued partnership with The Pathways Centre, the peer researchers and other stakeholders alike, so that we can work together to ensure higher education is accessible for prisoner and former prisoners. We recognise the profound positive impact that this has on the individual, their families, their communities, the educational institutions and wider society in general. I would like to sincerely thank all those who have been involved in the research for your honesty and bravery and for ensuring your voices, which are often silenced, are now heard.

**Emma Gilchreest, Programme Director,
College Connect**

Executive Summary

Introduction

This Community Needs Analysis (CNA) is a pilot study carried out by College Connect, in collaboration with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners, based in Dublin city. College Connect is a 3-year project funded by the Higher education Authority (HEA) under its Programme for Access to Higher education – PATH 3. College Connect, led by Maynooth University supports access and widening participation of groups under-represented in higher education in the MEND cluster (Midlands, East, and North Dublin region). The cluster is made up of Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Maynooth University. The aim of the project is to empower and support non-traditional learners to access higher education.

Study Aim

The study aimed to explore the needs and experiences of Pathways Centre' participants who had prior convictions, to gather their views and insights on the factors that may either encourage or discourage participation or progression in higher education.

Study Approach

The study was carried out from April to October 2019 and used participative and experiential approaches to encourage collaborative leadership and participation throughout all stages of the research process. Five peer researchers, three men and two women carried out four focus groups, seven one to one interviews, and 2 paired interviews with prisoners or former prisoners (n = 34). The themes explored were their prior educational experiences; motivations in re-engaging with education; 'encouragers' and 'discouragers' to continuing with education or progression to higher education; and recommendations to support progression.

Professional voice was also included in the research through a focus group interview with Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit (n=6); and an informal conversation with staff of Shelton Abbey Prison's Education Unit (n = 2). These findings were supplemented by two performative pieces, a 'Spoken Word' performance, drawing from an initial analysis of the interviews, as well as a short film, Jimmy's Story, based on one peer researcher's story.

Findings

There are 4,015 people in prison custody in Ireland (01 July 2019), the majority of whom have never sat a state exam, with over half having left school before the age of 15 (IPRT, 2019). The return to education, which often begins inside the prison, has been identified as a key factor in enabling prisoners to reconceptualise their place in society.

If one believes that education can combat the exclusion of society's most marginalised and disenfranchised citizens, then one must also hold the view that education can 'bring prisoners back into society' (Costelloe, 2014 : 31). Prisoners and former prisoners have been identified as being underrepresented in higher education in Ireland, although official data on this in an Irish context is unavailable.

This study makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the barriers experienced by prisoners and former prisoners in their engagement with education, and progression to higher education, as well as clear guidance on the supports needed to begin to address these barriers. The key findings are summarised below.

Experiences of Education at School, Prison and Post-Prison

Childhood experiences of school were profoundly negative for most participants. This was due to their socio-economic background, linked to teachers who at the very least lacked empathy, but more usually were punitive in their pedagogical approach. Discrimination and stigma featured in participants' accounts, in their interactions with school and authorities, because of their social background, negatively impacting on their self-perception and identity. Educational disadvantage contributed to disengagement and poorer academic performance. Participants spoke of how 'real life' meant that education at the time was not an option for them, due to adult responsibilities being placed on them and the lack of value placed on education in working class families. Participants also spoke of the impact of having a learning difficulty and not receiving the necessary supports, leading to further educational disadvantage and exclusion.

The return to education for a lot of participants in the study began in prison, and for many their initial motivation was connected to avoiding prison routines, or to source drugs. Many participants in the study went on then to experience this return to education as an adult in prison as positive and transformative. In addition, participants highlighted how one person inspired them, and was a pivotal influence in their return to education.

Post-Prison Experiences: Motivations and Barriers to Progression

For other participants their motivation to return to education occurred post-prison. The identity crisis that occurs at this stage was dealt with by many through a return to education. The desire for a better life, improved employment opportunities, recognising the need for new skills, e.g. IT skills, and getting a recommendation from a friend about a course were identified as 'encouragers' to further study. Other key 'encouragers' emerged from participants' talk and included getting the opportunity to study as an adult, acquiring critical thinking and analytical skills through adult education pedagogy; the desire to contribute and challenge experiences of oppression in society for prisoners; becoming empowered, changing self- perceptions; and being able to advocate for family members.

Meanwhile the barriers discussed by participants fell into a number of categories:

- Educational: participants spoke of feeling inadequate when faced with others' use of language that was experienced as academic and exclusionary; and also of not having their adult status and experiences understood and appreciated. The issue of being funnelled into certain professions based on their experiences, e.g. addiction counsellors, social workers, was experienced as an extension of stigmatisation.

- Structural: Garda vetting processes acted as a serious 'discourager' to progression in education in not being accepted onto a course of one's choice, and in not being able to take up a course placement. It was felt that the interpretation and application of the Garda vetting process varied across different institutes and contexts and in some cases was being used as a regulatory power beyond its intention. The prospect of not being able to secure employment because of Garda vetting was a 'discourager' to pursing higher education in the first place.

- Psychological: an overriding theme was participants' low self-esteem, their sense of shame about past experiences, and the stigma associated with being a prisoner or former prisoner. These conditioned thoughts led to participants' self-excluding from progression to higher education.

- Material: in common with other underrepresented groups in higher education, nearly all participants in this study found the SUSI grant application process and the lack of accessible information on financial supports as a 'discourager' to progression.

- Lack of Supports: lack of addiction supports including addiction counsellors, support meetings, were identified by the majority of participants as barriers to progression in higher education.

Recommendations

Recommendations were proposed to address the barriers and 'discouragers' identified in participants' accounts and included:

- the need for a 'Connector', i.e. a person to be available to connect them to accessible and relevant information and to 'signpost' the steps involved in pursuing a pathway to higher education
- provision of peer support / mentoring in each higher education institute (HEI)
- provision of an access course to cater for the needs of this cohort as a pathway to higher education
- provision of access to addiction counsellors and information on meetings through Student Support Services
- provision of IT skills training for this cohort by higher education institutes
- specific targeted support on the available financial supports
- connector role to provide information about the impact of the Garda vetting process on both higher education and employment options
- Provision of access to targeted personal development supports
- targeting students in prison / post prison with information on available courses and pathways to further and higher education.

List of Abbreviations

AIT	Athlone Institute of Technology
CC	College Connect
CDETB	City of Dublin Education and Training Board
CNA	Community Needs Analysis
DCU	Dublin City University
DkIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IPS	Irish Prison Service
IPRT	Irish Penal Reform Trust
MEND	Mid-East North Dublin Regional Cluster
MU	Maynooth University
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PAR	Participatory Action Research
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SRESC	Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland

Why are we here?

I am here because there is no refuge,

Finally, from myself,

Until I confront myself in the eyes

And hearts of others, I am running.

Until I suffer them to share my secrets,

I have no safety from them.

Afraid to be known, I can know neither myself

Nor any others; I will be alone.

Where else but on this common ground,

Can I find such a mirror?

Here, together, I can at last appear

Clearly to myself,

Not as the giant of my dreams,

Not the dwarf of my fears,

But as a person, part of a whole,

With my share in its purpose.

In this ground, I can take root and grow.

Not alone anymore, as in death,

But alive, to my-self and to others.

– RICHARD BEAUVAIS 1965 –

1 | Introduction

1.1
Introduction

This is a report of a Community Needs Analysis (CNA) carried out with Pathways Centre for prisoners and former prisoners, as part of College Connect. College Connect is a 3-year project funded by the HEA under its Programme for Access to Higher Education – PATH 3. College Connect, led by Maynooth University supports access and widening participation of groups under-represented in higher education in the MEND cluster, covering the Midlands, East, and North Dublin region. The cluster is made up of Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Maynooth University. The aim of the project is to empower and support non-traditional learners to access higher education.

Pathways Centre is an education centre based in Dublin. It is an outreach initiative of the City of Dublin's Education and Training Board's (CDETB) Education Service to Prisons, funded by the European Social Fund. Pathways Centre first opened its doors in 1996, and aims to provide an inclusive learning environment, with courses and teaching methods adapted to meet participants' specific needs; its primary aim being the facilitation and the re-integration of former prisoners back into society.

The vast majority of students in the Pathways Centre have experienced deep disadvantage and are second chance adult learners. In addition to their status of having previous convictions, there is a high incidence of addiction, mental illness, unemployment, disability, homelessness and lone parenthood. The Centre offers full Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI accredited courses from Level 1 to 5 along with a selection of Leaving Certificate subjects and is a registered Leaving Certificate examination centre. The Centre provides a number of 'college preparation' modules, including research skills and study skills and is equipped with a full-time educational guidance counsellor. The Pathways Centre continues to play a role in supporting students who have progressed to higher education.

1.2
Context

The National Equity of Access Plan 2015-2019 reports that there is still significant progress needed to achieve equity of participation and experience for many parts of Irish society (Higher Education Authority, 2015). However, the current landscape of higher educational outreach into disadvantaged communities is fragmented, institutionally focused and complex to navigate for learners. College Connect's mission is to change who goes to college by supporting education providers and communities to work together in an equal and collaborative way. This new partnership will empower future students to make informed choices and fulfil their potential.

It was identified that research carried out in collaboration with community partners to explore needs was a key initial stage of College Connect. This Community Needs Analysis is the first study in a series of explorations of the needs of communities across the groups that are under-represented in higher education. These target groups as detailed in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 - 2019 are as follows:

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education
- First time, mature student entrants
- Students with disabilities
- Part-time/flexible learners
- Further Education Award Holders
- Irish Travellers

The learning and lessons from this CNA will be used to inform the approach and methodology of further research on the higher education support needs of other under-represented groups. The CNA with the Pathways Centre is intended to provide a roadmap for how the MEND HEIs can add value to the work of the centre and maximise impact in terms of HE progression. Irish Travellers will be the next under-represented group to participate in a CNA. A summary paper is currently being prepared reviewing existing evidence / research on needs which will inform selection of further target groups. The pilot CNA with Pathways is intended to be a model on which to base future CNAs with other under-represented groups.

In terms of the CNA with the Pathways Centre little is known about the higher education support needs of prisoners and former prisoners, and none in an Irish context. We do know that this cohort is educationally marginalised, being part of a socioeconomic group that has low participation in higher education. Prisoners and former prisoners are for the most part severely educationally disadvantaged. The majority of Irish prisoners have never sat a State exam and over half left school before the age of 15 (IPRT, 2019).

Prison education has been identified as a pathway to rehabilitation and resettlement and found to be effective in reducing reoffending (Champion, 2018), and participating in higher education has been shown to improve self-perception and confidence, strengthen personal relationships, and to reduce recidivism (Baranger et al., 2018). Yet research in the UK (Gosling & Burke, 2019), shows there to be limited opportunities for those with a criminal conviction to access higher education. In an Irish context, the HEA is committed to widening participation in higher education for disadvantaged students (HEA, 2011), of which prisoners and former prisoners are undoubtedly part. It has been identified that to do so, there is a need to make grassroots' attempts to better understand experience and outcomes for prison learners post-release, as well as the needs and experience of current HE students with criminal convictions (Gray et al., 2019).

1.3
Working with Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners

College Connect marks a departure from the traditional institution-based approach to equity of access to a collaborative regional model which prioritises people in MEND experiencing multiple disadvantages. Intersectionality describes multiple threats of discrimination when an individual's identities overlap with a number of minority cohorts, such as disability, gender, age and/or ethnicity. As referred to in the introduction, the threats of discrimination for many with previous convictions are varied and complex, especially in relation to mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, under / unemployment and lack of education. As such, prisoners and former prisoners are a priority target group.

While prisoners and former prisoners are not identified as a target group in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019, as discussed above, they are undoubtedly an educationally disadvantaged cohort.

This fact, as well as the deficit in research on their educational needs in HE, as well as pre-existing relationships and trust between the Pathways Centre and staff members in Maynooth University were key factors in deciding to carry out the first CNA with this group[1]. The CNA, as will be outlined later in this report, proved to be an extremely important vehicle for building on and strengthening existing community relationships, as well as a means of engaging communities.

1.4
Aims and Objectives

The broad aim of the CNA was to explore the educational experiences of this group in order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experience in education and educational outcomes.

The study aimed to explore the needs and experiences of Pathways Centre' participants who had prior convictions, to gather their views and insights on the factors that may either encourage or discourage participation or progression in Higher Education. With these aims in mind, the CNA explored the following questions with participants:

1. What was your primary experience of education as a child?
2. What motivated your re-engagement with education as an adult?
3. What encouraged / would encourage you to progress with your education? What discouraged / would discourage you to progress with your education?
4. What could colleges / HE institutions do to better support your education?

The CNA adopted a participative and experiential approach to this research process, to encourage collaborative leadership and development of the project at all stages. The peer-research team participated in and reviewed the focus group process before facilitating discussions with participants. In addition, they have been actively involved in preliminary discussions about access initiatives and strategies that have sprung from the recommendations of the CNA with the Pathways Centre.

The research with the Pathways Centre is the first College Connect CNA to be undertaken with underrepresented groups in HE, and a clear focus was the collaborative process between the university and community partners.

1   The Centre's manager is a member of the College Connect Regional Steering Group.

Key themes emerged from the research which run throughout this report and form important framing concepts. The intersectional and multiple nature of barriers faced by non-traditional students in education is widely recognised in the literature and is evident throughout this report. Structural and institutional issues are also evident in terms of the barriers experienced by students and the diverse range and type of supports needed. Themes which are more specific to the experiences of this group include the impact of stigma and having a prison record on their education and employment as well as managing recovery from addiction, trauma, family breakdown and other issues. These are themes which emerge throughout the report and we would expect will resonant with the experiences of other community needs analyses.

It is intended that the findings from this research on needs and experiences of this group will inform College Connect's continuing work with the Pathways Centre. This work involves identifying the most appropriate initiatives that best suit the educational support needs of prisoners, former prisoners, and people with previous convictions, and maximising impact in terms of HE progression. Collaboration and partnership is fundamental to this vision.

1.5
Structure of Report

Chapter two presents the methodological approach of the study. Chapters three and four present the discussion. Chapter 3 focuses on a discussion on participants' experience in education following the trajectory of school, prison and post prison. Chapter 4's discussion focuses on specific barriers in terms of educational progression for participants. The creative outputs from the CNA with the Pathways Centre, which are being used as public engagement tools to present this research, act as links from one chapter to the next, and are highlighted so can be pulled out or used as stand-alone pieces. Chapter 5 concludes the report and lays out specific recommendations from the research participants, merged with the recommendations from staff working in the sector.

In addition, there are seven appendices accompanying this report as laid out below. The appendices are intended to be a useful resource for College Connect when conducting future community needs analyses with other target groups. These appendices are available in the online version of this report.

- Appendix 1 contains a toolkit of the CNA that is laid out in ten steps. This is a practical guide and includes agendas to meetings, as well as the training schedule for the peer researchers. The toolkit is colour coded and can be dipped in and out of depending on requirements.

- Appendix 2 is the PPT presentation that was used in the training day with peer researchers. It was designed to be delivered in a dialogic fashion and covers practicalities such as recording devices and data storage, as well as subjects such as: ethics in research, limits to confidentiality, and conducting focus groups.

- Appendix 3 contains the questionnaire that was used to collect feedback on the training day with the peer research team.

- Appendix 4 is the 'mission possible pack' that was printed and given to the Pathways Centre and to peer-researchers so as to minimise the drain on Centre resources. The pack contains consent form, information sheet, and researcher notes templates. This pack would also be a useful resource for future applications for ethical approval.

- Appendix 5 is a copy of the research poem 'Education Will Set You Free' (Meaney, 2019), which was used to elicit discussion in the focus groups.

- Appendix 6 is a flyer of 'The Trial', (McCann, 2018) an arts installation installed in Dublin Castle about prisoners' human rights and access to healthcare from the 1800s to 2000, and which participants could attend at the Dublin Castle event to celebrate participants' contribution to the CNA.

- Appendix 7 is the PPT presentation that was presented at the Dublin Castle event to participants to share the findings from this study.

2| Methodology

2.1
Introduction

The research and community engagement process of the College Connect project is based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) frameworks (Heron & Reason, 1997; Thomas, 2000). Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves research partners, researchers and participants collaboratively leading and developing the project at all stages in an iterative cycle of research, reflection and action. The significance and usefulness of involving research partners in the knowledge production process has been recognised as essential (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The principle of PAR is that stakeholders are invited into participative and democratic relationships in which they are encouraged to engage in genuine collaborative leadership (Bland, 2017) in any work on access initiatives or strategies relevant to their cohort. Peer research was used to enable this democratic engagement as described below.

The Pathways Centre was involved with the CNA throughout the research process in both a support and an advisory capacity as well as in both influencing and contributing to decision-making. As the Principal Investigator on the CNA, I worked alongside the Community Connector, Declan Markey, to facilitate the deepening of relationships between the community organisation and the HEI. This process involved consciously minimising the impact of the CNA on the resources of the Pathways Centre e.g. by pre-empting printing and travel needs for peer-researchers and participants, and reviewing the CNA process with the Centre Manager during and again at the end of the research process.

2.2
Peer-to-Peer Research

In this CNA a peer-to-peer research approach was used in an attempt to generate authentic insights and better understanding of the barriers and encouragers at play for this cohort in progression to higher education. Peer-to-peer participatory research was adopted as a methodology in order to actively encourage participation in a solution focused approach to research through democratic and dialogic involvement (Denzin, 2010).

The purpose is to generate authentic insight, but it is also developed with a focus on participatory action and empowerment, and in recognition that peers are experts within their field of experience. The 'insider' knowledge and position of the peer-researchers, and the manner in which they are able to frame research questions and interpret responses has the potential to facilitate a deeper understanding of the support needs of this group. Connolly (2003:5) notes that participating in research can reinforce feelings of powerlessness within society if participants are not democratically involved in the process, and if they see no direct change or insight as a consequence of the research. An additional core reason for employing a peer-to-peer methodology was to minimise power imbalances in the research process (Lushey & Munro, 2014: 522).

2.2.1 Peer-to-Peer Researcher Selection Process

Peer-to-peer researchers were recruited from the Pathways Centre. The Manager at the Centre was able to identify the most appropriate people to take on this role, based on their own educational journey, life experiences, and capacity. Five people were recommended for the role of peer-researcher. All of the proposed peer researchers had an honours degree, and all, but one, were experienced facilitators. At the time of the research, all five had worked as teachers and facilitators in the Pathways Centre. Two of the peer-researchers had completed their post-graduate diplomas, one was just beginning a post-graduate diploma, and two were beginning Masters degrees. All of the peer researchers had come through the Pathways Centre themselves at some point, and most had participated on education courses in the Pathways Centre, before progressing to higher education.

2.2.2 Peer-Research Training Day

A day's training in research skills was facilitated by Sarah Meaney, as Principal Investigator on the CNA, and Declan Markey, Community Connector, College Connect, Maynooth University. The peer-researcher training day was designed experientially, with a focus group facilitated by the Principal Investigator so that the peer researchers could experience both the process of being a participant in a focus group, as well as observing the role of facilitator. The focus group explored their experiences of education, re-engagement with education, and what encouraged / discouraged progression to higher education.

Creative methods were used, i.e. photovoice and elicitation using a performance poem, to encourage critical discussion. Participants were asked to bring photographs that represented the barriers or hurdles they experienced in accessing higher education.

The sharing that resulted from using the photographs to elicit conversation was more emotive and descriptive than might have otherwise arisen. Participants were also hugely supportive and encouraging of each other in the focus group discussion. Patricia Leavy (2007) upholds the belief that this is because the arts evoke emotional responses, and so the dialogue sparked by arts based practice is highly engaged. Furthermore, by connecting people on emotional and visceral levels, artistic forms of representation facilitate empathy (p.14).

A selection of the photographs and descriptions from the CNA are included at the end of this chapter.

The second part of the day involved reflecting on the process of the focus group and exploring the various stages of the research in more detail including:

- Informed Consent
- Ethics and limits to confidentiality clause
- Researcher skills – listening, honouring all voices, managing participant input, outlier view, etc.
- Research Methods – focus group, one-to-one interviews, paired interviews, photovoice, use of poem to generate discussion
- Communicating the findings from the Needs Analysis – knowledge exchange

The practicalities of the research, such as how to use recording devices and safe storage of the data, as well as the writing up of research notes were also covered. The PowerPoint slides from the second part of the day are in Appendix 2.

2.3
Qualitative Interviews with Participants

The peer researchers (three men and two women) carried out a combination of focus group interviews, individual interviews and paired interviews with participants from the Pathways Centre. Thirty-four participants took part in the research in four focus group interviews, involving twenty-seven participants; eight individual interviews; and two paired interviews.

2.3.1 Selection of Research Participants

Research participants were invited through the use of posters advertising the research in the Pathways Centre, as well as through peer researchers' connections and word of mouth. Peer researchers took gender into account, when identifying potential participants ensuring the participation of women in the study. This meant there was strong female representation in this study, especially considering females currently make up approximately 4% of the prison population in Ireland (IPRT, 2019). Peer researchers also purposively sought out friends and colleagues whom they felt would be able to make a strong contribution to the research based on their past educational experience and attainment.

2.3.2 Profile of Research Participants

Twenty-four men and ten women took part. Three participants were non-Irish, two of whom were non-Irish EU nationals. Participants ranged in age between 26 and 62 with an average age of 41. The average age of participants at 41 at first glance, appears quite high. However, there is a high concentration of people committed to prison in the 30+ age bracket, accounting for almost 60% of all committals in 2017 (IPS, 2017). The majority of participants declared themselves as living in Dublin, while, twelve participants left this section blank. At the time of the study, fourteen participants had achieved 3rd level education, NFQ Level 7 or higher, six participants were at further education levels 5 or 6; thirteen participants had achieved QQI Levels 3 or 4, and one participant did not provide this information. The education level of participants in this CNA research was comparatively very high, given that the majority of Irish prisoners have never sat a state exam (IPRT, 2019). The five peer researchers formed part of the study group as well. See table 2 below for a detailed profile of participants, and table 2.1 for an overview of the study group.

Table 2: Profile of Participants

| No.	Age	Education Level	Gender	Participation Type
1	33	8	Female	Focus Group
2	37	9	Male	Focus Group
3	40	8	Female	Focus Group
4	62	8	Male	Focus Group, Interview
5	56	8	Male	Focus Group
6	43	9	Female	Paired Interview
7	44	4	Female	Paired Interview
8	36	8	Male	Focus Group
9	36	3	Male	Focus Group
10	43	8	Male	Focus Group
11	42	3	Male	Focus Group
12	57	8	Female	Focus Group
13	26	5	Male	Focus Group
14	54	9	Male	Focus Group
15	43	6	Female	Focus Group
16	35	5	Male	Focus Group, Paired Interview
17	30	5	Male	Focus Group, Paired Interview
18	45	4	Female	Focus Group
19	43	4	Male	Focus Group, Interview
20	38	5	Male	Focus Group
21	37	3	Male	Focus Group
22	42	9	Male	Interview
23	40	8	Male	Focus Group
24	39	3	Female	Focus Group
25	30	3	Male	Focus Group
26	27	4	Female	Focus Group, Interview
27	40	4	Male	Focus Group
28	40	9	Male	Focus Group
29	26	4	Male	Focus Group
30	49	3	Male	Focus Group
31	45	4	Female	Interview
32	40	6	Male	Interview
33	42	3	Male	Interview
34	44	7	Male	Interview

Table 2.1: Overview of qualitative study group[2]
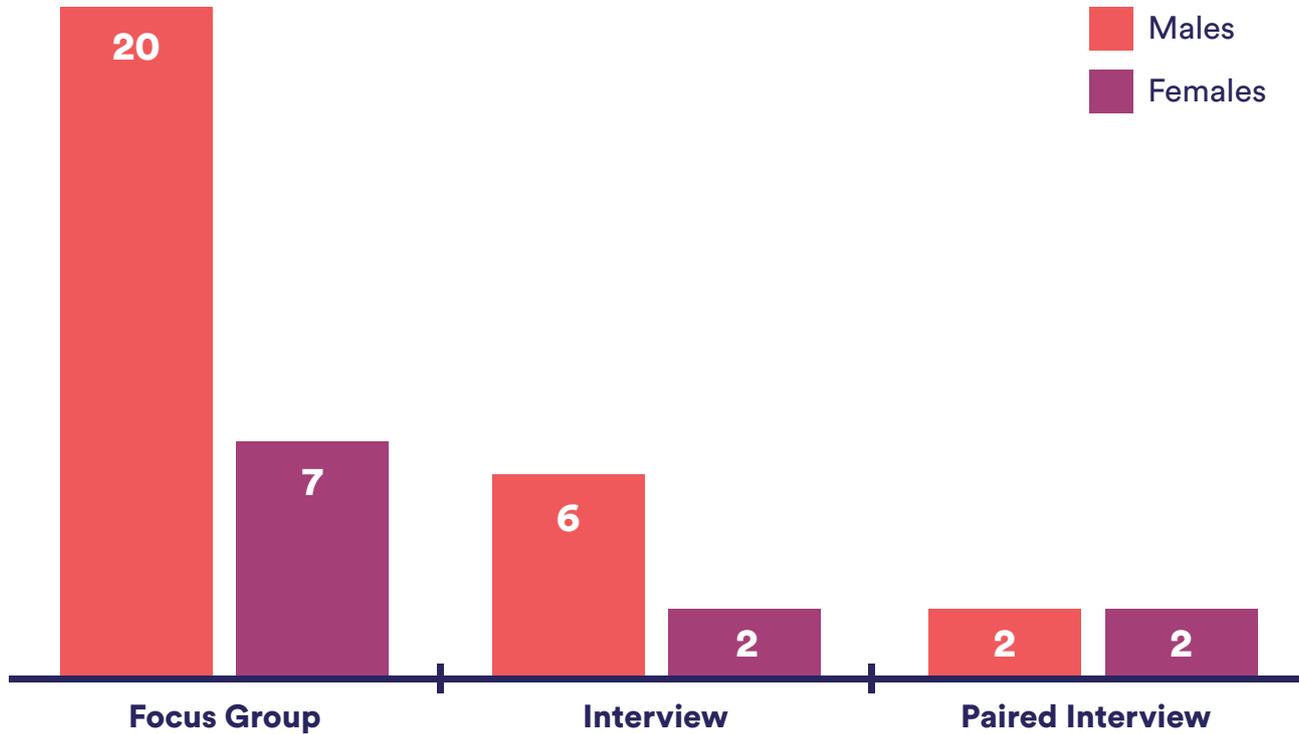
All of the interviews were audio recorded and peer researchers were asked to write up their notes retrospectively in 'researcher notes templates'. The Principal Investigator organised de-briefing sessions via phone with the peer-researchers following the interviews.

2.3.3 Approach to Interviewing

Following our participatory approach, interviews were carried out in an unstructured way so as to allow the participants direct how they shared their educational experiences. Peer researchers used the key questions identified in section 1.4 above as a guide for themselves but allowed the participants to lead in discussing their insights and perspectives on their own experiences. The interviews were closer to 'research conversations' or 'discussions' due to the participatory nature of the research, and the peer-research methodology employed.

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2 Note the total is greater than 34 participants where participants who took part in a focus group also took part in an individual interview, and a paired interview.

In the interviews, peer-researchers facilitated discussion on the following five key areas:

- Prior experience of education
- Motivation to re-engage and experience of re-engagement with education
- 'Encouragers' to continuing with education or progression to higher education
- 'Discouragers' to continuing with education or progression to higher education
- Recommendations to support progression to higher education for prisoners and former prisoners.

2.4
Creative Methods

The representation of the results of participatory research cannot be limited to texts, and other forms such as creative methods are required, in order to render the findings understandable to affected persons, to reach a wide audience, and to provide a basis for further discussion (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The CNA with the Pathways Centre used creative methods to both explore participants' experience and to represent findings.

Participatory arts-based pedagogy in adult education research is designed to evoke thought rather than prescribe meanings (Norris & Saudelli, 2018). This is based on the premise that looking at the problem is at least as important as finding solutions, as unless people's perspectives and experiences are properly grasped and understood, it is unlikely that effective solutions can be created (Denzin, 2010). While it was intended that focus group discussions would be used as the primary qualitative method of data collection, it was highlighted by the Pathways Centre that some participants might struggle with this format. Peer researchers were therefore supported in the use of creative approaches, as appropriate.

These methods included:

Photovoice: Participants were asked to bring a photograph that represented barriers to their educational progression. Photovoice as a term was first used by Caroline Wang (1999) in her research into community health with rural women in China, and as a method has a strong commitment to social critique and to supporting the empowerment of marginalised groups where individuals are viewed as experts in their own lives.

The group were hugely supportive of each other, particularly during the showing of the photographs. Participants were respectful, listened to each other, and expressed identification with each other. The photovoice process is rooted in what Connolly (2008:55) posits is the 'Golden Rule' of adult education: the process begins with participants' lived experiences (Cited in Hegarty, 2017: 185). This formed the foundation for trust-building and dialogue.

Guidelines to using Photovoice as a tool were outlined to participants, specifically that:

- the photo is owned by the participant and they should be able to give permission to use it
- ethics of taking photographs of other people (Palibroda et al., 2009).

A selection of the photos and the descriptions that ensued are included after this chapter.

Responding to a Poem: Participants listened to the research poem 'Education Will Set You Free', (Meaney, 2019) about a prisoner's educational journey and responded by identifying with their own story. The use of a 'frame' such as a poem or story allows participants to create meaning through distance, while providing the safety to engage emotionally and honestly (O'Connor & Anderson, 2015). A copy of the poem 'Education Will Set You Free' is included in Appendix 5.

Creative research methods should be crafted using the criteria whereby the claim can be validated and interpreted within the wider research community (Denzin, 2010). While Laurel Richardson (2000) has put forward five criteria for evaluating creative analytic research projects: substantive contribution; aesthetic merit; reflexivity; impact; ability to evoke lived experience; ultimately the success of a project must be considered at each methodological stage, by responding to the crucial question: 'What knowledge / understandings did the methodology generate that may not have been revealed by any other mode of enquiry?' (Barrett, 2010). Therefore, in the presenting of each of the creative methods used throughout the CNA justification for the method is articulated.

2.5
Conversation with Prison Educators

The CNA with the Pathways Centre also took into account professional voice from partnership organisations, namely Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit and Shelton Abbey Prison Education Unit. A focus group discussion was organised in Mountjoy Progression Unit, involving six participants: four staff from the Education Unit, a Guidance Counsellor, and a member of staff from the Irish Prison Service. The discussion centred on their perspectives on the barriers for prisoners and former prisoners accessing higher education. An informal conversation also took place with the Manager of Shelton Abbey Prison's Education Unit.

2.6
Reflection and Action

Reflection and action on the research process were an integral part of the approach and incorporated a series of stages, outlined below, upon completion of the CNA focus groups and interviews. In PAR, the reflection and action cycle is iterative, so while the stages below were completed at the time of writing, the work is ongoing, continuous, and constantly changing.

At the beginning of this research, an initial feedback meeting was conducted with peer-researchers to discuss the process of carrying out the interviews, practicalities around recording and taking notes, and to ascertain initial thoughts and insights into the research process. At the end of the process, a feedback meeting was conducted to receive comment, both on participants' input, but also on the experience of conducting the CNA, specifically, what worked and what could be done differently. A final meeting was also held with the Pathways Centre Manager to discuss the experience of hosting the CNA. The aim being to learn about the process from the Centre's perspective, again focusing on the positive aspects of facilitating the process and reflecting on areas that could be improved upon. Greater detail on this discussion is provided in the CNA Toolkit that accompanies the online version of this report in Appendix 1.

An event to recognise participants' contribution to the research and to present the findings was hosted in Dublin Castle. This event was facilitated as a performative and dialogic process to give participants the opportunity to respond, confirm or refute findings. The responses from the event are included and merged into chapter 5. Participants received certificates of recognition of their participation in the research, and free entry to see 'The Trial' (2019), an arts installation installed in Dublin Castle about prisoners' human rights and access to healthcare from the 1800s to 2000. See Appendix 6 for a flyer of the Trial and Appendix 7 for the presentation of the findings by two of the peer researchers.

The performative aspects to the Dublin Castle event: the Spoken Word Performance, and Jimmy's Story, are contained within this report. The Spoken Word Performance was created from an initial analysis of the interviews, and involved selecting quotes that represented emerging themes, and collating these into one story / monologue for performance. This was done to communicate the findings in a non-academic way, and to support public engagement. The piece was performed at the Dublin Castle event by renowned Irish actor Ruaidhri Conroy, and is included at the end of Chapter 3.

The second performance piece involved the creation of a short film from one individual's interview who chose to waive his anonymity. The interview was turned into a 'transcript poem' or 'research poem' (Prendergast, 2009), which in turn was narrated by Irish actor Jimmy Smallhorne, perhaps most famous for his role in Ireland's hugely successful TV show, 'Love Hate' (2010-2014). The participant, actor, and principal investigator worked collaboratively on this piece, which was recorded over an afternoon in Dublin's Camden Recording Studios. The narration plays on screen to a montage of paintings painted by the participant, who is doing a Masters in Fine Art. The essence of the piece details how a man, who was deemed so dangerous that he was kept in a cage in prison was completely transformed after being introduced to art through the prison education system. Jimmy's Story is included at the end of Chapter 4.

Members of the peer-researcher team have continued to be involved in an advisory capacity connected with the development of access strategies as a result of the CNA with Pathways. The team has also been employed to present the findings from the CNA at the College Connect launch in November 2019. Preparation for the event will involve a rehearsal and public speaking training day.

Photovoice

The CNA with Pathways used photos to elicit discussion. Participants were asked to bring a photo that represented barriers to their educational progression. The following is a selection of photographs from the research and the description that accompanied the picture.


Rear-View Mirror

How do you navigate the system without that rear-view mirror? It's heart-breaking. I went down to the secondary school with an open-mind 'Is it going to be different?', and I ran out of there. If you're middle class you're going to be fine. But it was the same vibe. A horrible culture. People think they're going to teach you something, and that's the wrong place to start. You really just need someone to sit down with you.
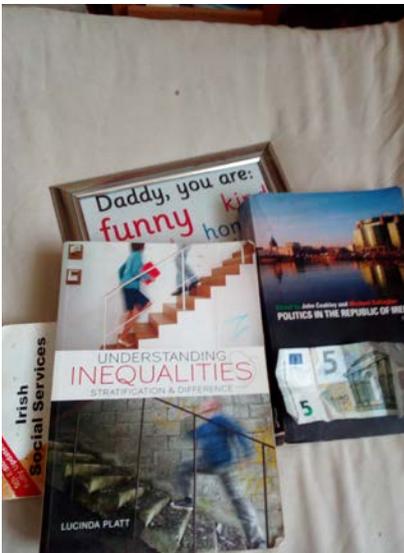
Understanding Inequality

To go back to college was huge because my son needs 24 hour care, and people were coming at me with 'how are you going to do that?' And I didn't like that, because it was as if he was an issue. And he's not an issue. He's my child and he's perfect. But everything is a battle. Just to get the right kind of services. I'm arguing at the moment for a hoist. But college gives me the ability that I can communicate with these services. Because I know, A, B and C, so you're going to do A, B and C. Hang on, I've a degree in policy. My son deserves equity.
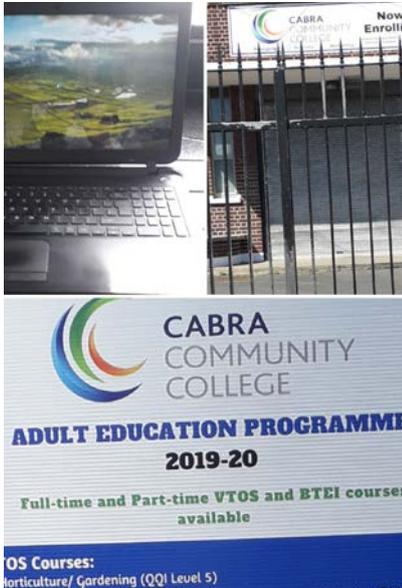
Going through the gates

I got to the gates, rang up and made the interview, but it was going through the gates. The biggest joke in my house was that I wasn't able to use the computer. But there were some teachers that were coming from the secondary school ethos and that was a barrier. But finding the 'real adult education' as I call it, that's what kept me going. It taught me what education and learning is and made me want to learn more. It's just a love now. Just something that's in my life. I do enjoy it. It's not a burden. Yes, it's challenging but it keeps you going.
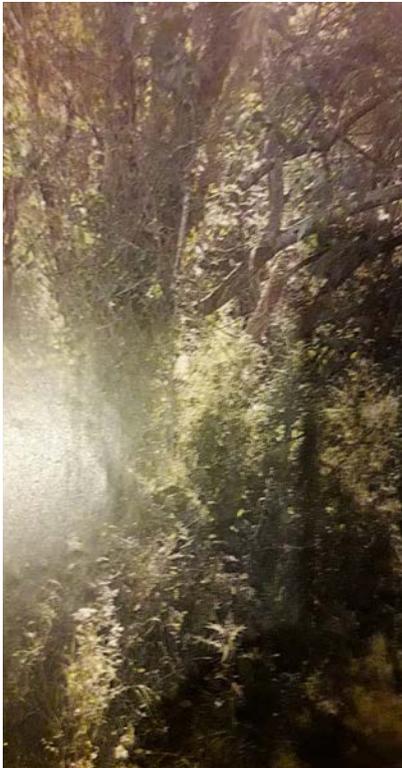
The biggest barrier was myself

So it was like not being able to see the wood for the trees. I was brought up thinking you need to get yourself a job. That's what I done up to the time I went to prison. I never thought of educating myself. The only reason I went up to the school was to get drugs. But in order to get in you had to sign up for a class. So, the biggest barrier was myself. And then I had to go cap in hand for grants. I'm an ex-prisoner, there's people who deserve it more. Stuff like that held me back. When you get the education, it opens your mind so much. It's so enriching. It has a ripple effect on the family. My daughter now is a mid-wife. My other daughter went back and now she's doing a Masters. I'm now looking at my Grandkids. Cos that's where it starts. It starts in our family.

3| Discussion - Experiences of Education at School, Prison and Post-Prison

3.1
Introduction

The findings are discussed under three main headings: school, prison and post-prison, exploring participants' educational experiences across this trajectory. With this structure, we can trace the link between prior experience in school and barriers to educational progression, exploring the link between participants' experience of reengaging with education as an adult, and the elements here which might encourage progression to higher education.

This chapter explores participants' experiences of school, impact of disadvantage, as well as returning to education while in prison.

3.2
School - Initial Experience of Education

Most of the thirty-four participants spoke of their childhood education as a profoundly negative experience. That said, while in the clear minority, there were nevertheless several participants, whose experience of school as a child was either positive or relatively so:

> 'I don't think I had a bad experience in school.'

> 'I was pretty alright in school.'

For the majority of participants, however, social class was highlighted as being an issue in school, as well as a lack of empathy from teachers, who either did not seem to care, or just did not understand working class children and their background:

> 'All the teachers were from the country. I mean nothing against people from the country, but they just didn't get us'

This would certainly concur with the literature which shows that Ireland's teachers are overwhelmingly female, white and middleclass. Neither social justice, nor children's rights nor equality concerns emerged in teachers' narratives, beliefs or rationales about what good teaching should involve (Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016: 440).

The average age of participants in this study was 41 years and many experienced schooling and discipline in Irish schools, in a manner which would be unacceptable today:

> 'I had a stammer in school. Some got pleasure in hurting you.'

> 'I grew up in the corner at school.'

> 'Growing up with the Christian Brothers, if they weren't trying to sexually abuse you they were trying to beat you into playing hurling.'

> 'The teacher used to tell me to stand in the corner in the bin because I was rubbish. I didn't pick things up as easy as everyone else.'

Maguire and O'Cinnéide (2005) highlight the fact that up until the 1980s in Ireland, corporal punishment of children was standard practice in Ireland and widely accepted as a necessary measure to instil respect for authority and to maintain discipline. The use of corporal punishment, which today would be classified as abuse, was scarcely questioned.

3.2.1 Impact of where you grow up: socio-economic background

Participants spoke of discrimination because of where they came from and of being stigmatised by school and by authorities because of their background. An example of this came from one participant who spoke about being 'labelled' from the moment he 'walked through the door' [of the school], because of his siblings. His experience was, of always fighting these preconceptions of him and his family. Despite this participant's academic ability – he ended up in a higher academic stream - he was never able to break free from these pre-conceptions. He gave a stark example of this where he used to sing at the annual school concert, as he had an excellent singing voice, 'like Aled Jones'. He was put behind the curtain to sing, while the 'good' kid was put out front on the stage miming the words:

> 'We're pigeon holed and we're on the backfoot from the beginning'

> 'If you're middle class you're going to be fine.'

Some participants spoke of how it seemed pre-determined from the outset that progression in education was something for 'others' and not for them personally:

'They'd be getting forms to do their Leaving Cert or whatever, that was never even mentioned for me.'

Other participants spoke of how 'real life' meant that education at the time was not an option for them, highlighting some of the adult responsibilities placed on children, and in some cases the cyclical nature of how education is not as valued in working class families (Reay, 2001, Mahoney & Zmroczek, 1997):

'My grandparents got very ill when I was doing my Leaving Cert. I left school to be a full time carer for them'.

I was brought up thinking you need to get yourself a job.

For others, who did well in school, it did not seem to make much difference to their educational outcome:

'Academically I was good, but I preferred to be with the boys smoking or whatever they were in to. I went off on my own little path, robbing…'

School success is predicated on dominant cultural resources in terms of values, attitudes, language skills and styles of interaction transmitted from parents to children, which are acquired in school more quickly by children already familiar with them (Byrne & Smyth, 2010: 27). Young people for whom there is a mismatch between the cultures of home and the school environment are more likely to become caught up in a cycle of 'acting up' and 'being given out to' by teachers, a cycle of misrecognition which reinforces their disengagement from school (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, Reay, 2001, Ingram, 2009). This in turn cements a negative judgement on the capacity to progress based on social background:

'You're a schemer, a scammer. Keep away from the Gardai. Keep away from school teachers.'

'In the schools; 'you're not good enough', 'you're from the wrong place', 'you're never going to amount to anything'. 'That's the way you are'.

Access and progression to higher education in Ireland can be determined by your postcode, with over 99% of 18–20-year olds in an affluent area of Dublin going on to higher education, while in another postal district the rate is as low as 15% (HEA, 2015). Predestined to viewing education as a waste of time and effort, perhaps subconsciously as a result of identifying the unlikelihood of beating the odds, the disadvantaged student is precluded from achieving a higher level of education either because of academic performance, or

because he or she effectively excludes himself or herself through disengagement. Children from different social classes are therefore predisposed to experiencing the education system in radically different ways (Bourdieu, 1977).

3.2.2 Impact of having a learning difficulty

Participants in the CNA spoke of having learning difficulties and being punished for this in school rather than supported. Learning difficulties that went undiagnosed or contributed to a negative schooling experience were spoken about by several participants:

| 'School was always a struggle because I just couldn't sit down'.

| 'You go to secondary school and you're in the dunce class.'

This is unsurprising given the high prevalence of learning difficulties among the prison population in Ireland. While figures are unfortunately not up to date, we do know that four in ten children (under 16 years) on custodial remand have a learning disability, (Anderson & Graham, 2007), and the report on literacy in Irish Prisons commissioned by the Irish Prison Service (Morgan & Kett, 2003) found that about 25% of the population scored at the lowest level (Level 1). The only survey conducted on the level of learning disability in Irish prisons commissioned in 1999 by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform of the Irish Government showed that almost 30% of the sample population scored a figure suggestive of a significant degree of intellectual disability (Murphy et al., 2000).

For participants in this study, having a learning difficulty further compounded their experience of disadvantage and reinforced their exclusion from educational progression. One participant explained that he had a stammer in school, which made him feel very shy, and how he also discovered that he had dyslexia.

| 'Schools were horrible places.'

This combination of disadvantage made his time in school very tough. Eventually his mother got him a place in a 'special school', where he was eventually taught how to read and write.

3.3
Prison Experiences – Return to Education

Many participants spoke of how one person had been an inspiration or a pivotal influence in their return to education, which links to the lack of self-worth that was instilled from a negative primary experience of education:

> 'The psychiatrist in the prison encouraged me to go back and do a bit of education.'

> 'I used to talk to a nun in the prison and she used to say to me that I was very philosophical. I didn't know what that meant. But if someone shows you a bit of encouragement…'

Schooling in a prison occupies a precarious position within the prison system due to its reliance on the prison (Carrigan, 2015: 66). Within this position, schools in prison are working to combat severe educational disadvantage. The return to education for a lot of participants in the CNA began in prison. The motivation for many, however, was often initially for 'the wrong reason', for example, 'to get out of going to the yard', or 'to get drugs':

> 'I went to school in prison to get out of doing laps of the yard, or because it was raining.'

> 'The only reason I went up to the school was to get drugs. But in order to get in you had to sign up for a class.'

> 'Always going to school in prison because I didn't want to go to the yard and all the little mickey mouse level 4s and the level 5s.'

Researchers have expressed amazement at how often the word 'freedom' appears in prisoners' descriptions of prison school, and how this concept could be evoked within a system created to deny it (Carrigan, 2015: 66). Personally, I have heard prisoners refer to the prison classroom as a 'sanctuary', an 'escape', and a place where 'you can forget where you are':

'It opened up my mind completely, I wasn't in prison anymore, I was in another country, I was in another world'.

For other participants, regardless of the reasons behind the initial motivation, the education availed of in prison was a positive experience:

'I started subjects like social studies and loved it.'

'I really got into education big in prison.'

Prison culture is brutal in its capacity to strip prisoners of their sense of self (Costelloe, 2014: 32), yet within this system, adult education functions to restore individual's self-worth and as a means of resistance to the discourse that prisoner lives do not matter (Key & May, 2019).

Spoken Word Performance - The 'CNA with Pathways Centre in Quotes'

The Spoken Word performance emerged from an analysis of participants' interviews and focus group data. Poetic transcription has now become a common method that researchers use in an effort to reveal the essence of participants' lived experience, and as a means to evoke emotional response in readers and listeners (Faulkner, 2005, pp. 7- 9). The purpose of research poetry is poetry that utilizes participants' exact words in a compressed form in an attempt to convey the central message (Faulkner, 2007), and preserve the speaking style of participants at the same time as capturing the spirit of the story.

The piece presented here follows Glesne's (1997) three rules to guide the process of poetic transcription; namely that; the words be those of the participant not the researcher; that phrases could be extracted from anywhere in the transcripts and juxtaposed; that the poem should be presented according to the participant's speaking rhythm (p. 205). Patricia Leavy (2009) recommends 'interdisciplinary collaboration', by which she means working with other professionals outside of our own disciplines, in order to 'maximise the aesthetic qualities and authenticity of the work' (p. 18). Professional Irish actor Ruaidhri Conroy was employed to perform the piece at two presentations of the findings of the CNA with Pathways, to represent the findings of this study in an alternative form to text or academic discourse, so as to be understandable and engaging to a wide audience, including, first and foremost the participants on whom this research is based.

Community Needs Analysis with Pathways Centre - in Quotes

A spoken word performance with actor, Ruaidhri Conroy

School for me was always around surviving. Who was at home when you got home? Who was the adult?

All the teachers were from the country. I mean nothing against people from the country, but they just didn't get us. If you come from a wealthy family and you didn't have to worry about your dinner… The education didn't represent my reality.

I always felt like I wasn't getting it. I didn't pick things up as easy as everyone else. I wasn't stupid. Far from it. I just needed it explained more. The teacher got bored. Used to tell me to stand in the corner. In the bin. Because I was rubbish. I always knew what was what. I just could never articulate it. I could articulate it with violence. I think I was 13 when I ran. That was the end of it.

I started to get into a lot of trouble. Involved in gangs. I went robbing, drinking whatever. All I know is self-taught, I am like a sponge. I pick up things. I pick up everything. Legal stuff from being in court. Solicitors. I pick it all up. I suppose if someone had recognised my abilities back then, things might have been different. But I was that strong-willed.

All bets were off, I was destined for prison.

I went to school in prison to get out of doing laps of the yard, or because it was raining. 'I'm not being talked down to, I'm actually being talked to!' I started subjects like social studies and loved it. There was a word on the board 'social stratification'. Within 5 minutes of the teacher explaining the word. I knew. Aaaah. That's how I ended up in a corpo flat. Why my Dad was a labourer. People talk about this? It amazes me! I thought I was on my own. It was relevant to my life. I felt valued and it matters.

Where do I fit into society post prison? Who am I? I knew if I didn't go back to education, I'd go back to crime. Someone told me about an access course. That's something for 'them'. Not for me. 'I'm an ex-prisoner, there's people who deserve it more'. We've no college graduates in my family. Not even extended family! They're not going to be interested in someone like me. In and out of prison my whole life, on heroin, crack.

'You're an addict. Go into addiction studies.' Funnelled into a course by someone who knows 'better'. Everyone thinks they have the solution to our problem. Mature students have other obligations, children, bills, day to day living, even if finance is covered can I afford to do this? I paid for modules and then I bumped into someone and they said, 'you can go back to college for free'.Education may be free, but life isn't. Financial assistance requires jumping through hoops. I met in college what I've always met, but now you're in a middle class environment in a college that you pay thousands for a year and you're coming in here with cheques from Saint Vincent de Paul!. Cap in hand for grants. You're not so equal.

No Infrastructure to stay clean. No addiction counsellors in university. People speaking a language that I didn't know what it meant. Education had taken the compassion from these people and they hid behind complicated language. Language holds power, so I had to learn this language, but it was exhausting.

Traumatised from being a prisoner an ex-addict, but no help available. I couldn't even use a laptop! If there had of been a prison liaison officer in the college, I'd have gone and spoken to him. As long as it wasn't on his door 'prison liaison officer'. It's knowing where to go and get the information. A person who can connect me from day one. A connector. Take the hardship out of asking. Make it readily available!

A lecturer decided she was going to tell everyone 'you can't be in this class because of your previous convictions'. Disclosed my personal information in front of the whole class. I'm blessed with the class I had because when I walked out, they walked out with me. Without them I was leaving. The shame. Is it really worth it? Is it really worth it when Garda vetting stops you from even being a cleaner?

Everything is a battle. But college gives me the ability to not set that battle on fire. A lot of that comes down to understanding how these inequalities can be on top of each other and the intersectionality of this. So, it's understanding it and understanding what I can do. I can now help my daughter with homework. If she asks me a question, I want to know. For her!

I don't know if it's the madness around you subsides first or does it start to subside because of the education. It's just a love now. Just something that's in my life. It's not a burden. Yes, it's challenging but it keeps you going. It opens your mind so much. It's so enriching. It has a ripple effect on the family.

You know what? The further you go. That life gets further away. And this life gets nearer.

4|

Discussion - Post-Prison Experience: Motivations and Barriers to Progression

4.1
Introduction

This chapter will present findings on participants' experiences following prison, exploring their reasons and motivation for returning to education, and discussing the specific barriers experienced by former prisoners along their pathways to higher education and beyond to employment opportunities.

4.2
Motivation to Pursue an Educational Pathway

For some participants in the CNA the motivation to return to education happened post-prison. Participants spoke about the identity crisis that happens post-prison, and how education can work as an antidote for this:

'Where do I fit into society post prison? How can I find myself? Who am I?'

'I knew if I didn't go back to education, I'd go back to crime..'

Participants' intrinsic motivation to pursue education and progress was a major factor discussed in this category of 'encouragers' to progression. For some, this centred on a desire to 'better' themselves, to stay away from crime or to achieve better employment opportunities:

'I was getting low end jobs with lack of safety and lack of responsibility for the employer'

'I always had low skilled jobs, I wanted to better myself.'

For one participant, this motivation came in the form of a friend who had done a course and recommended it. The experience of doing the course was so different to this participant's prior experience in school that it inspired him to continue and pursue his Leaving Certificate.

Another participant was tired of only working 'shitty jobs' and it was a personal goal to be able to use a computer. The computer course then led to her doing a full-time course. Even though the course was not a good experience, it led to a placement in another centre, which opened her eyes to how education could be:

> 'There were some teachers that were coming from the secondary school ethos and that was a barrier. But finding the 'real adult education' as I call it, that's what kept me going. It taught me what education and learning is and made me want to learn more.'

When we discuss the dimensions of adult education, we often use words such as 'empowerment', 'social justice' and what Freire (1972) termed 'conscious raising'. Based on Freirean pedagogy that builds solidarity and works towards an examination of the role of power in the lives of individuals and communities (Grummell, 2007), adult and community education is strongly committed to not only challenging educational disadvantage, but also to overcoming it. Many participants in the CNA, who had returned to education as adults, were able to critically evaluate their reasons for pursuing education, and the motivation to change the systems of oppression they saw themselves operating within. This desire to change things and to change the system was for some participants the impetus to pursue education:

> 'There be lots of jobs for the kids in Ringsend… sure we are going to need loads of cleaners!'. I was in [a further education college] at the time and I said fuck this.. I am getting somewhere, they are not doing this to me anymore.'

One participant spoke about her motivation coming from a desire to change policy, as she noticed that certain policies, particularly those for addicts, were inhumane. This fuelled her desire to progress in education:

> 'I was being told by human rights people that these educated people had made these policies to watch people go to the toilet in front of a mirror, and I just thought: 'I need to get an education 'cos where's the compassion in these so called educated people?'

Becoming aware that education enables you to be able to be articulate and stand up for yourself and your family was described as another encourager to pursue higher education. One participant spoke of being able to use his knowledge of policy to argue supports for his son, and this was in many ways his motivation to continue his education:

'I'm arguing at the moment for a hoist. College gives me that ability that I can communicate with these services.'

4.3
Barriers to Progression

4.3.1 Language

Ryan (2011:5) draws our attention to discourse, or language, and how the dominant discourse can give authority to the statements of a person or to the policy documents of an institution. In one focus group discussion in the CNA, language was spoken about by everyone as something they recognised as holding power, as they had direct experience of being excluded by language. One woman recounted having left a course because of how she perceived others as better able to articulate themselves:

'People speaking a language that I didn't know what it meant..'

'I had to learn this language, but it was exhausting cos of how my brain works'

4.3.2 Lack of Understanding of Adult Status

For some, being treated as children in courses almost caused them to drop out, and is almost certainly linked to negative experiences in school. For some participants, not having their adult status and life experience respected almost dissuaded them from pursuing education. Participants spoke about little or no understanding of their real-life challenges like childcare:

'What were we supposed to do with the children? Hang them on the railings on the way in?'

The importance of dialogic education that respected participants' adult status was accentuated by many participants.

4.3.3 Garda vetting

Garda vetting was raised as a serious barrier for this cohort in terms of progression. Garda vetting affects all areas of life, college and employment. The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016 provide a statutory basis for the vetting of persons carrying out relevant work with children or vulnerable persons. A vetting disclosure must include particulars of a criminal record. Although Ireland did introduce a spent convictions regime in 2016, meaning a conviction that does not have to be disclosed to potential employers during the Garda vetting process after a set time period, in practice the legislation is limiting. The maximum length of a custodial sentence that can become spent is 12 months or less and for a non-custodial sentence (an alternative to a prison sentence usually involving community service or a fine), the upper limit is 24 months or less. The Act also places a limit, so that only one conviction can ever become spent, regardless of how minor the incident. Residential stability, getting insurance and volunteering can all be impacted by Garda vetting.

In terms of education, it is possible to lose a place on an educational course due to the disclosure of previous convictions. This has the result that someone with a conviction may not be accepted onto a college course or be able to complete the placement element of a college course (such as in education, social work, healthcare or youth work programmes). Participants in the CNA highlighted how difficult it was to move on from their past, regardless of how much work they had put in to changing their life trajectory.

The stigma of having previous convictions was raised across all the focus group and individual interviews as a serious barrier to progression. While there are recognised needs for Garda vetting and declarations of previous convictions in certain circumstances, participants described how Garda vetting was implemented differently in different institutions and contexts, in some cases being used as a regulatory power beyond what is intended by the Garda vetting process.

One participant gave the example of a breach in data protection as his previous convictions from his Garda vetting form were read out in front of his college class by his lecturer. This lecturer proceeded to ask the class if the participant deserved to be in college considering the crimes he had committed:

‘My experience in college was an absolute nightmare.. it was only perseverance, it was only like.. ‘fuck that I'm not leaving’.

The only reason that this participant did not drop out from the course was because his classmates walked out of the class in solidarity with him, and because of sheer determination.

Garda vetting was also raised as a barrier to employment for this cohort even when deciding whether or not to pursue education. The following participant's insight demonstrates how not knowing about the impact of a Garda vetting process can act as a deterrent to pursuing a higher education option:

> 'I don't want to be labelled, I want to be treated like the person beside me, but I'd like the information. I don't want to go and do a college course and then get sacked out of my job because of my past'

One participant spoke about having worked as a cleaner for two years in a workplace before being asked to complete a Garda vetting application. This participant almost lost their job as a consequence. The question was posed by participants as to whether pursuing education was really worth it if Garda vetting could 'stop you from even becoming a cleaner'. Another was told that her experience would be an asset in the place she was applying to work in, which was in a community setting, only to be knocked back at the final hurdle:

> 'I went for a job interview and after the interview they offered me the job on the spot. I told them I'd loads of previous convictions, and they said, 'that would be an asset here. A couple of weeks later the Garda vetting came back, and they said 'sorry, we've to bring it to the board'. So, I didn't get it. That really knocked my confidence.'

Participants spoke unanimously about being unable to escape the stigma of their past, and how Garda vetting was like a life sentence. One participant spoke of how he was 'punished twice'. Once in prison, and again upon trying to reintegrate into society post-prison.

4.3.4 Self-stigmatisation

People with previous convictions face significant structural and social barriers to community involvement, and pre-empting social stigma can have serious implications for normal functioning, leading to maladaptive behaviours, poor mental health and difficulty participating in the community (Moore et al., 2016).

An overriding theme across the CNA was participants' low self-esteem, shame about their past experience, and the stigma associated with being a prisoner or former prisoner:

> 'The shame. Is it really worth it?'

Self-stigmatisation is a negative consequence that many formerly incarcerated individuals experience, manifesting in low self-esteem and personal barriers to reintegration into society, and can be resisted through the empowerment and motivation enhanced by education (Evans et al., 2017). However, self-stigmatisation for some participants in the CNA resulted in feelings of unworthiness and posed a barrier in terms of deciding whether to pursue education in the first place:

> 'Stigma because I was coming from a background of where I was a criminal, I had been in and out of prison all my whole life, I been on heroin, crack. No way would I ever achieve college or even a level 5 to start off with..'

Others spoke about feeling 'unworthy' of a college place and that they would be taking a place from someone who 'deserved it more'. 'They're not going to be interested in someone like me', was pervasive across all of the interviews, and identified as a barrier to progression:

> 'It's the stigma we attach to ourselves, the things we've done, the shame that knocks your own confidence'

The lack of confidence associated with this way of conditioned thought was also frequently discussed as one of the ways this cohort is effectively self-excluding on top of all of the other barriers. Yet reducing the stigmatisation of formerly incarcerated individuals is vital, because positive feelings of self-worth can improve their reintegration into society and life trajectory (Evans et al., 2017).

4.3.5 Academic / profession pigeon holing

The issue of being funnelled into certain professions based on their experience was also highlighted. Professions such as addiction counsellors and social workers were named here. One participant gave the example of a friend, who was about to start college and had been advised to pursue Addiction Studies. When asked what he 'wanted' to do, he replied: 'I've always wanted to see a whale'. The friend is now studying Oceanography. Participants saw this 'funnelling' as an extension of the stigmatisation and stereotyping they experienced in their earlier education:

| 'You're an addict so go into addiction studies'

Diane Reay's (2017) research into working class children's experience of education, found that we are still educating different social classes for different functions in society. It would appear that this theory extends right the way up to higher education, and that there is evidence of sectoral differentiation into elite and non-elite disciplines in HEIs (Finnegan & Merrill, 2015).

4.3.6 Finance and Information

| 'Mature students have other obligations, (children, bills, day to day living) even if finance is covered, can I afford to do this?'

Lack of information about the financial aspects of college, the supports available and eligibility for these supports have already been highlighted as serious barriers to higher education access (McCoy & Byrne, 2011). This information was confirmed by CNA participants, who highlighted the SUSI grant application process and the difficulty in accessing information about the available financial supports as discouragers to progression. Nearly all of the participants spoke about the difficulty in finding out about the supports available to them. In one extreme example, a participant had paid for a number of modules, only to find out afterwards that this cost would have been covered:

| 'I paid for modules and then I bumped into someone and they said, 'you can go back to college for free'.

In addition to these barriers of cost, and information, participants spoke of the smaller financial hurdles, and how these impacted them on a daily basis. Many participants spoke of the ongoing financial stress of trying to attend college or courses, and of often having to make the choice between paying for travel or paying for lunch:

| 'I was lucky in that I had a bus pass. A shred of paper, but the man in the station knew me'

This was experienced as unsustainable. Participants in the CNA highlighted that it was often the small expenses that they really struggled with in college such as money to join clubs, printing and books. Financial strain among more disadvantaged groups has been shown to have implications for their opportunity to fully participate in college life, that is, to participate in the non-academic social and cultural dimensions of college life as well as the academic (McCoy & Byrne, 2011).

4.3.7 Lack of Addiction Supports

The vast majority of participants in the study also identified as addicts, many of whom are in recovery programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). This is unsurprising given that the Irish Prison Service has identified that 70% of the general prison population are suffering from drug and alcohol addiction (Pollak, 2017), with an even higher percentage of women, estimated to be at 85% (Clarke & Eustace, 2015). Lack of addiction supports for this cohort was highlighted as a barrier to progression and retention in higher education. Difficulty accessing meetings or addiction counsellors while in college was raised. Participants spoke about feeling isolated; one focus group participant recounted that what he found most difficult was the fact that there were no addiction counsellors in university. This delayed his graduation as he relapsed on a couple of occasions which affected his progress and increased his sense of isolation:

'Drugs if I can keep this under control, that's the very base line. If I sort this everything is possible, everything will fall into place.'

Some participants spoke of being on methadone while they were in university, and of experiencing stress relating to the uncertainty around when and where they would be able to collect their prescription while in college:

"At the moment I am on methadone, I have to collect script. I don't know where I be living when I get to college. I am really worried about time to get script if teachers will work with me"

'I done my degree when I was on the methadone, I got through it'

People involved with criminal justice frequently are exposed to violence and traumatic experiences, which may lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the prevalence of which has been found to be three times higher in incarcerated females than in males (Baranyi et al., 2018). Prison is frightening and rife with bullying and threats of violence, and brutal in its capacity to strip prisoner's sense of self, hope and meaning (Costelloe, 2014: 32). Participants in the CNA spoke about dealing with post-traumatic stress following prison, reintegration into society, and recovery from addiction. An emphasis was placed on needing continued support to deal with this:

'I've gone through trauma with addiction, I've gone through trauma in prison, doing a ten year sentence and then coming back into society'

'I don't want to be different, but I am'.

Jimmy's Story

A Public Engagement Action Research Response to Combatting Stigma

The creative public engagement output piece from the CNA, 'Jimmy's Story' evolved from an individual interview with a participant, who was also a peer researcher on the project. One of the main participant findings of the CNA was the barrier that stigma creates to educational progression for this cohort. A criminal conviction results in consequences that extend beyond incarceration, and self-stigmatisation that manifests in low self-esteem and personal barriers to reintegration is a negative consequence that many formerly incarcerated / criminally convicted individuals experience. Self-stigmatisation is compounded by the negative attributes ascribed to this cohort by society in general, making reintegration into the community as social equals more difficult (Evans, Pelletier & Szkola, 2017). Life stories have been widely used in the field of mental health research as a means of combatting stigma. Research has shown that when the sharing of personal stories of recovery are incorporated into a presentation, stigmatising attitudes are decreased (Spagnola, Murphy and Librera, 2007).

'Jimmy's Story' was of particular interest to this research as it details the transformation of a former violent prisoner, following his introduction to art in prison under the tutelage of Irish artist Brian Maguire, and through the prison education system. 'Jimmy's Story' condenses the interview with the participant into a poem or monologue. This was a collaborative involvement between myself, Sarah Meaney, and the participant. We met up several times and spoke on the phone about the participant's experience. Poetic inquiry is an increasingly common form of research analysis (Prendergast, 2009), and is a research method I have been using with prisoners and former prisoners for several years, and a method I was mentored in under Professor Monica Prendergast in the University of Victoria in 2017. How we know the world in emotional, embodied and psychic ways, stretch far beyond the typical format of prose selected from an interview transcript. Methods such as transcript poetry can reveal the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken as a meaningful whole, a whole which makes sense of its parts (Richardson, 1993). This is especially crucial in research with prisoners, as this is where the oppressive structures that preceded, or as Irene Baird (1999) would say 'precipitated' the criminal actions are made visible. The research methodology can therefore be considered an instrument for social change.

Professional actor Jimmy Smallhorne was employed to narrate the monologue to a background montage of paintings created by the participant, who is doing a Masters in Fine Art. Jimmy Smallhorne is an acclaimed Irish stage actor, but most famous for his TV role as 'Git' in Ireland's hugely successful series 'Love Hate' (2010-2014). Smallhorne expressed huge support for the project, given his own personal background, and his recognition that his own life trajectory could have been very different had he not been introduced to the arts at a young age.

The piece was audio recorded in Dublin's Camden Recording Studios, and changes and alterations to the piece were made and decided on collaboratively between the participant, myself and the actor over the course of the day. This is rooted in a Freirean commitment to adult and community education ideals and pedagogy, and the deliberate positioning of the participant as 'expert' and active stakeholder in the research process, which formed the basis and the principles on which this CNA was grounded.

Jimmy's Story

Foreword - A research project with The Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners, to look at the higher education support needs of this community, found that one of the biggest barriers to going on to college was 'STIGMA', or the associated shame of having gone to prison or of having former convictions.

One of the ways we can help to combat stigma is by sharing our experience; what happened, who we were, and who we are now...
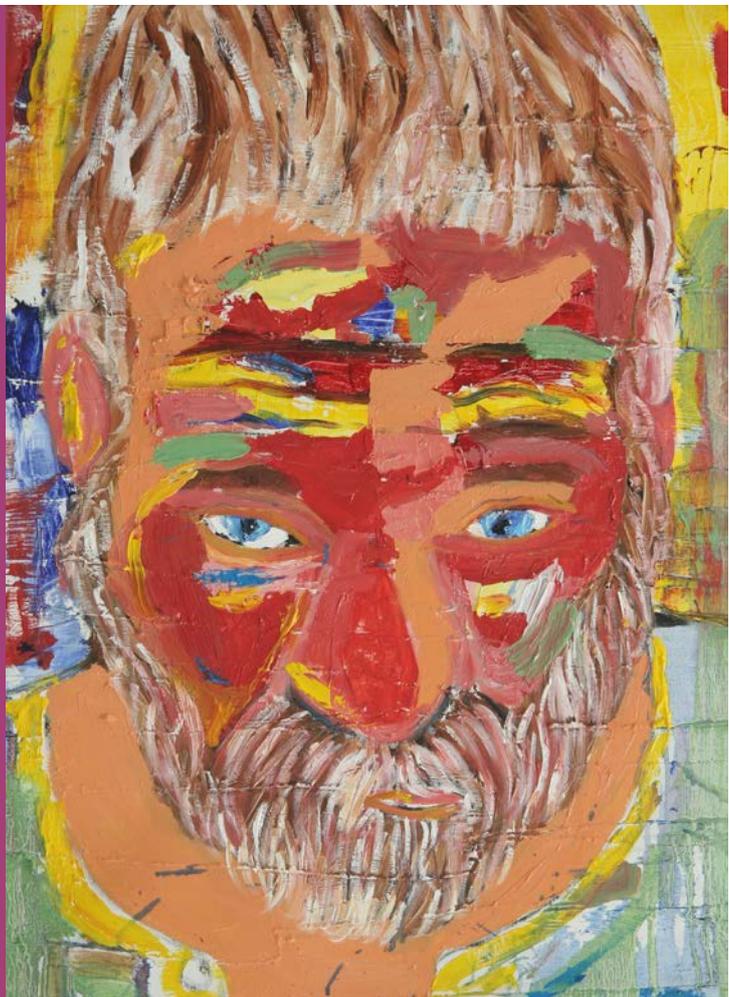
This is Jimmy's story...

Jimmy Leonard – Artist, post-graduate student, former prisoner and institutional abuse survivor

I liked being a bank robber
Watching James Cagney
And all the money would just be sitting there
This is for me!
I formed a little cohort of a few lads
I wanted to go International!
I went over to England and started to steal over there
Banks, post offices, building societies
I ended up getting caught and got 10 years

Strangeways, Brixton, Durham
I must have gone to about 8 or 9 different prisons
I caused mayhem so I got moved around a lot
I spent most of it down in the basement
Sometimes I found piece of mind in the bunker

They had about 14 of us they just couldn't control
When you go in up the stairs, it's all caged off
You have to get in a cage, and then you get out of that cage
And you have to get into another cage, and then your cell
I've arrived!
I'm the top dog here.

Funny you should say animals
Every Thursday when the prison officers got paid
They'd be making noises like cows and pigs
Mooooo Oink Oink (Like big children)
What the fuck?

My first sentence was in St Patricks
It didn't bother me that much
I got a strength,
Acceptance,

I'm one of the boys now
I enjoyed having the name when I got out.

Me and a very good friend
He's dead now
We'd go robbing
If I'd get a few quid I'd drop it into my Ma
Get milk and butter off the doorsteps
We used to sleep in the buses and the trains
We'd end up in the country
We'd rob the clothes off the lines and go to the disco in Butlins
We got chased by all these Nordies cos they thought your man recognised his clothes!

My mother was promiscuous
Is that what you call it?
She done what she had to do,
For us,
For her kids
There were eight of us
We were in the tenements
My father took my sister to England
But he left us
We were taken and put into homes
My ma was put into mental institutions
I was in some nice places funny enough.
Cheeverstown was a lovely place.

Kilmainham court
Two tall men in black
I was about 8
My brother was a baby
I was roaring and crying
They put my mother into an ambulance
And my sister trying to hang onto me
And they just pulled us apart
They sent my sisters and my brother into Goldenbridge Orphanage
They brought me up to Artane

The kids were on their hands and knees scrubbing floors
The boards would be creaking
Haunting whispers from the statues
Male whispers
At night they'd lift us out of the beds
You'd have your head under the covers hoping it wasn't you
I remember telling the priest I was scared and then he started…

I used to wet the bed
They made you walk through a parade of everyone lined up
About a hundred boys shouting at you
'Bed wetter! Wet the bed!'
Your peers!
That was nearly worse than the abuse
So, I cursed everyone

I found drink and I found drugs in prison
And I hated it
I hated people using,
I hated people selling it,
And then I became what I hated

And then Maguire came along, Brian Maguire
He challenged me
I went in and he was painting away
'Anyone could do that'
He handed me a brush
'Go ahead so', that's all he said
I got a big reddner
I didn't want to attack him, So I sat down
I actually painted HIM

After that it was just painting, painting, painting
In the space of 3 months 500 paintings
And he kept in contact with me. He kept coming back
And the work I was doing. It was like peeling back an onion

I won a competition for prisoners overseas

Mary Robinson was presenting the prize
She was president at the time
'We can't let this man out, he's dangerous'
She refused to partake in the presentation
So I gave my word and I was brought
I seen how proud my family were

I was breaking down all over the place
I've never experienced blackness like it, I mean BLACKNESS
And I remember thinking
'I deserve this'
Then BOOM I was brought up into this light
'I'm not ready for this'

I went up to the Governor
'I want to see a psychologist'
'I need help'
Two prison officers were laughing outside the door looking in
He started cursing them and everything
He really let them have it
'THIS MAN IS MAKING A BREAK THROUGH!'

I stopped drinking, I stopped taking drugs
People would owe me money and I couldn't do anything to them
I just stopped
Within 12 months I was out

My son died and I relapsed
After a while I had to accept
I used to talk to him, stuff you'd say to a son if he was there
There are some dark paintings through that process
That painting wasn't meant to be the way it turned out
I scrubbed it, I painted it, I washed it back

The sunlight was hitting off it,
And then the colours started coming through

Painting is like a life source

It's like eating or drinking
I'm conscious of what I'm doing at the start
After that time doesn't exist
It's like my spirit
It's like something kind inside me Leading me towards a gentle way of expressing myself

I'm doing a Masters now for structure
I'd love to do landscapes
I want to do something to express how I feel about nature or urban
I'm all for supporting those kids with climate change
Because they're right
Those forests in Brazil
They're still burning

I can't verbalise sometimes
The only way I can express it is to put it down
And then it hits me
The paintings are mirrors
The mirror keeps changing
Sometimes I look in the mirror and I feel ugly
And sometimes I see that I'm OK

'You're alright'

5 | # Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1
Conclusions

Key themes emerged which run throughout this report and form important framing concepts for the report. The intersectional and multiple nature of barriers faced by non-traditional students in education is widely recognised in the literature and is evident throughout this report. The people we spoke to in this study experienced all of the barriers mature students experience when attempting to access higher education: finances, lack of IT skills, level of academic requirement, family commitments, childcare and time management (Graham, 2015). Structural and institutional issues are also evident in terms of the barriers experienced by students and the diverse range and type of supports needed. These are themes which emerged throughout this report and we would expect will resonant with the experiences of other community needs analyses.

On top of the barriers experienced by mature students, people with previous convictions are often managing recovery from addiction, family breakdown, trauma, and psychological responses to stigma, which can all impact on the ability to function. Themes which are more specific to the experiences of this group include the impact of having a prison record on their education and employment opportunities. The findings from the CNA with the Pathways Centre reveal the multiple barriers this cohort is required to navigate in order to successfully progress educationally. The fact that many in this study managed to do so, 24% had attained higher education was testament to the sheer determination and perseverance on the part of individuals. The issue of support was raised by all participants, be that financial, emotional, peer / mentoring, IT, addiction, or academic. There was an acknowledgement that in many cases these supports already existed, and so participants echoed the frustration experienced by other groups attempting to access higher education (McCoy & Byrne, 2011: 153), at having to chase information, and in relation to not knowing 'who' to ask.

The term 'intersectionality' came up time again in this work with participants from the Pathways Centre. One participant was particularly succinct in his summing up of this; '… inequalities can be on top of each other'. As one participant put it:

'When I fill out the application, they know everything about me, they know about my temporary housing, they know I'm an ex-prisoner, they know about my children, they know I'm different from the person who's going to be sitting beside me, I don't want to be different but I am. So why then do I need to chase for my supports?'

5.2
Recommendations

The participants in this study discussed the changes they would like to see put in place that would support prisoners and former prisoners to access and participate in higher education. These recommendations were almost identical across the focus group and individual discussions. Their recommendations along with those coming from the prison staff discussion groups are presented below:

5.2.1 Connector:

Participants identified the need for a person to be available to 'connect' them to accessible and relevant information, and to 'signpost' the steps involved in pursuing a pathway to higher education. The need for targeted information was also raised in the staff discussion groups as well as the need for a person to liaise with various bodies including SUSI, Teaching Council, and Law Association, on behalf of a potential student. They also pointed to the need for better relations between HE institutions and prisons, i.e. the creation of a 'go to' person.

Recommendation: Each HEI in the MEND region should ensure that there is a 'Connector' in place to target this cohort for support, advice, and guidance.

5.2.2 Peer Support / Mentoring:

An overriding theme in the CNA was the need for individual support, particularly peer support. Participants felt that this support should come from people who had already overcome similar obstacles and who had succeeded in higher education. It was felt that this would be critical in helping to break down feelings of being overwhelmed. The need for one to one mentoring was also recommended in the prison staff discussion groups, along with the importance of making success stories available more broadly.

Recommendation: Each HEI in the MEND region should facilitate peer / mentoring supports targeted for this cohort prior to entering college, and during college.

5.2.3 Access Courses:

Participants felt that having an access course would help to provide them with information on subjects / courses, to guide them in discovering their interests and capabilities, and to allow them to explore their 'readiness' for a higher education experience. Staff in the workshops spoke about the need for college skills workshops, as well as preparatory programmes, and clearer information regarding how to best prepare prison students for college. Participants expressed confusion about whether an Open University course or an access course was more beneficial for progression to a particular Higher Education Institute.

Recommendation: Ensure the provision of appropriate access courses across the four MEND HEIs that are inclusive and cater to the needs of this cohort.

5.2.4 Addiction Support:

Participants highlighted the importance of addiction supports to progression and retention in higher education.

Recommendation: Student Support Services should provide access to specific addiction counsellors, as well as information on AA and NA meetings in the MEND region, close to each HEI.

5.2.5 Skills Training:

Participants who had experience of higher education identified the need for targeted training in Internet skills, Moodle, etc. Targeted skills training was also raised by prison staff in the focus group discussions. They also noted that there was a presumption that students will have access to WIFI and laptops.

Recommendation: HEIs to provide computer skills training for this cohort; Connector role at point 1 above to assist students in exploring finance for computers / equipment.

5.2.6 Information on Funding and Grants:

Lack of accurate information on available funding and grants was experienced as a barrier for this group. Frustration was expressed at having to 'chase' information. Staff in the discussion group also noted the SUSI application process as being incompatible with this cohort, and the frequency of support services being closed in the month of August when help is needed with applying for courses and funding.

Recommendation: Specific support is needed for this group in understanding the financial supports that are available to them. 'Connector' role in point 1 above should assist potential students in identifying financial supports for other expenses such as lunch, travel, printing costs.

5.2.7 Garda Vetting Support:

This was found to be a particularly pervasive barrier in deterring a person from this cohort in pursuing higher education, and one that impacts on all areas of life ranging from getting insurance to getting a job placement.

Recommendation: Connector role as discussed under point 1 above or another liaison person should be able to provide key information to this cohort about the impact of the Garda vetting process on both their higher education and career options as well as limits prior to embarking on a higher education pathway.

5.2.8 Personal Development Supports:

Participants identified the need for personal development supports to help them in dealing with the stigma attached to having been in prison and to support them to address self-stigmatisation.

Recommendation: Students from this cohort should have access to targeted counselling supports that address the personal development issues relevant to them.

5.2.9 Information on Options:

Participants spoke about being 'funnelled' into courses that would 'suit' them, such as Addiction Studies, and a lack of clear guidance about what other options might be open to them. This point was confirmed by staff in the discussion group, who expressed a need for clearer information about the course options that were available and that had viable employment prospects.

Recommendation: Students from this cohort should be targeted in prison / post prison with information / examples of the wide range of courses available at third level.

5.2.10 Additional Recommendations from Dublin Castle Event:

Participants in the CNA were presented with the findings from this research at a recognition event in Dublin Castle. Feedback was invited and the following key points were highlighted as additional areas for consideration in relation to barriers for this cohort:

- Non-refundable application fees for college courses
- Education grants being unavailable for persons with no fixed address
- Child care supports for mothers wishing to pursue education

5.3
Concluding Remarks

The work with the Pathways Centre to assess the needs of the community of people with previous convictions in accessing and progressing to higher education has resulted in a clear set of targeted recommendations. The methodology and approach used to carry out the Community Needs Analysis, that is, the use of participatory action research, peer-to-peer research, and creative methods, in both exploring and representing the findings are also recommended for future community needs analyses. This research demonstrates that the methods used provided richer and deeper insights to the support needs of this community in improving their access to higher education.

Future analysis on the part of the four MEND HEIs is required on meeting the needs of this cohort, on the implementation of these recommendations as well as the investment needed to fulfil the recommendations. Amidst the identification of many critical needs, it is important to remember that there is a strong base of good practice in these HEIs in the support they provide to underrepresented groups accessing higher education. The MEND HEIs are well placed to become a model of a good community of practice among other higher education institutions.

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