

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Westminster		
Unit of Assessment: 20 Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Designing and Implementing Participatory Prison Education Programmes in the UK and South America		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Sacha Darke Andreas Aresti	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer Senior Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 09/2007+; 10/2012+
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Aug 2013 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This case study centres on the practice and implementation of inmate participation in social science higher education in the UK and South America, as devised on the basis of research into participatory prisons and convict criminology.</p> <p>Dr Sacha Darke and Dr Andreas Aresti identified seven key barriers to higher education learning in UK prisons and resolved them through the design and delivery of participatory higher education courses at HMP Pentonville, HMP Grendon, and HMP Coldingley. This provision of access to higher education learning has produced the related impacts of: increased social reintegration – and mobility – of prisoners; the reduction of negative perceptions of prisoners from ‘outside’ students; and the recruitment of the latter into work within the prison sector.</p> <p>Darke and Aresti have expanded the reach of the benefits of their UK programme through their sharing of best practice amongst prison education practitioners across South America. Their model of prison education has been adapted and implemented at an APAC (Association for the Protection and Assistance to Convicts) prison in São Luis, Brazil, while ongoing knowledge exchange has seen their model being adapted for use by convenors of similar programmes in other parts of Brazil and Argentina.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Brazil, England, and Wales boast the highest levels of imprisonment in South America and Western Europe, in terms of rates of incarceration as well as absolute numbers of prisoners. Conditions in British and Brazilian prisons have also rapidly deteriorated in the past decade, negatively impacting everyday prison living and working environments, as well as the longer-term prospects for inmate rehabilitation.</p> <p>Of most significance to Darke and Aresti’s research, prison inmate-guard ratios have increased significantly in both countries. Inmate numbers have doubled in Brazil, without any increase in staffing; the number of guards has fallen by a third in England and Wales, without a reduction in inmate numbers [1]. This has had major consequences for the extent to which Brazilian and English convicts are able to spend time out of their cells participating in purposeful activities – principally education and domestic work, where prisoners are responsible for everyday prison routines – which are internationally recognised as having positive impacts on prisoner rehabilitation. Given such activities rely on the sufficient provision of supervision by guards, the increase in the inmate-guard ratio has potentially negative consequences for prisoner rehabilitation and their ability to cope with prison [1][2].</p> <p>Since 2008, Darke has studied the means by which prisoners self-govern in the absence of guards across Latin America, visiting over 40 Brazilian prisons in order to explore the roles played by gangs and inmate councils in overseeing prison routines and enforcing prison rules [1]. In 2010 and 2012, Darke completed ethnographic studies of institutional order at two prisons in which inmates were entrusted to participate in all areas of prison governance, including security and discipline [1][3]. Both prisons were characterised by good inmate and staff-inmate relations, especially among those involved in prison governance activities, and low levels of indiscipline and conflict between and among prison inmates and guards overall. The second prison, APAC de Itaúna, run by a voluntary sector non-governmental organisation and staffed by former prisoner wardens, purposefully delegated such domestic responsibilities to inmates as their principle means of rehabilitation. In 2020, Darke was awarded a Leverhulme Trust Fellowship (£53,055) to study two APAC prisons in greater depth, including APAC de São Luis, Maranhão.</p>		

These findings on the benefits of Brazilian convicts taking on the role of prison wardens provide further insights into the emerging concept of Convict Criminology (CC). CC is an international ex-prisoner-led movement of which Darke and Aresti are leading figures. It aims to develop collaborative research between social scientists, prisoners, and former prisoners, and to support prisoners and former prisoners through higher education and into academic and criminal justice positions [2][4]. Darke and Aresti established the British Convict Criminology (BCC) research-activist group in 2012 to achieve these aims in a practical way. Through BCC, and drawing on their previous research on participatory prison structures, the researchers established an academic mentoring scheme for former prisoners studying social science degrees, and three prison higher education initiatives in which prisoners study with University of Westminster students and contribute to the course content (this is outlined in Section 4). As with participation in prison governance, participation in prison education has the potential for significant institutional and societal impact. Not only do the projects provide prisoners with qualifications, opening up a range of opportunities and pro-social life choices [2], but they are specifically designed to engage prisoners in reflecting upon their experiences of crime and punishment, which is demonstrated in critical pedagogical ([Freire 1968](#)) and desistance-from-crime ([Maruna 2001](#)) literature to be an effective means of challenging offenders' perceptions of themselves as anti-social citizens and figures of authority (such as prison staff) as enemies. Outside learners increase their understanding of criminology through mentoring and hearing the perspectives of prisoners. In 2020, Darke secured a Quintin Hogg Trust grant (£54,910) to finance the projects until 2023.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Darke, S. (2018) *Conviviality and Survival: Co-producing Brazilian Prison Order*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. Portuguese version (2019): *Convívio e Sobrevivência: Ordem Prisional em Cogovernança* (trans: Karam, M.L.), Belo Horizonte: D'Placido.
2. Darke, S. Aresti, A., Faisal, A. and Ellis, N. (2020) Prisoner university partnerships at Westminster, in Shecaira, S.S. et al. (eds) *Criminologia: Estudos em Homenagem ao Alvaro Augusto de Sá*, Belo Horizonte: D'Placido: 475-498.
3. Darke, S. (2014) Recoverers helping recoverers: Discipline and peer-facilitated reform in Brazilian faith-based prisons, in Miller, V. & Campbell, J. (eds.) *Transnational Penal Cultures: New Perspectives on Discipline, Punishment and Desistance*, London: Routledge: 217-229
4. Aresti, A. & Darke, S. (eds.) (2018) Twenty years of Convict Criminology (Special Issue), *Journal of Prisoners on Prison*, 27(2).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Breaking down the Barriers in UK Prison Education

Between September 2012 and July 2013, Dr Darke and Dr Aresti undertook a survey of 27 prisoners in order to identify the key barriers to higher education study inside prisons [a-i]. Seven key barriers were identified [a-ii], and Darke and Aresti have created the impact of breaking these down by using their research into participatory prisons and Convict Criminology (CC) to shape their prisoner-university partnership model of education.

Darke and Aresti's prison projects involve third year University of Westminster students studying criminology inside prison with prisoner students. The two sets of students share academic knowledge as well as understanding of crime, justice, and desistance from crime gained from personal experiences. Equally important from a CC perspective, all three projects are designed and delivered by both convict and non-convict academics, with at least one former prisoner being involved in the design and delivery of each course.

The course of study (eight lessons of three to four hours) has been delivered at HMP Pentonville since 2015 and runs twice a year, while the HMP Grendon and HMP Coldingley courses started in 2017 and are run monthly, all year round. 5 of the key barriers to prison education were directly addressed within the design of these courses. The Grendon and Coldingley projects have been put on hold during the pandemic, but the Pentonville project has been [uniquely delivered](#) at a distance through Microsoft Teams.

In regard to the barriers of a *lack of higher level courses* and *the pressure (e.g. from internal and externally set targets) to study at a lower level and/or participate in non-academic skills training*: the researchers have **provided access to higher level courses to prison-based students** ("inside learners"). The Pentonville course has been accredited by University of

Westminster since 2018 which means inside learners receive level 3 (foundation year) credits that count towards their future degrees and provide them with a pathway to higher education, whereas all other courses at the prison are level 1 or 2. Further, classes replicate the university experience through lectures, group discussions, and presentations.

The Grendon and Coldingley projects expand on the above approach by allowing participatory learning between Westminster students and prisoners studying social science degrees with the Open University. At Grendon all students study at level 6, while at Coldingley all students study at level 7 (Masters certification). These sessions take the form of reading and writing groups, with the students jointly deciding a criminology topic on which to write and publish and identifying the academic books and articles they need to read in order to do so. Output [4], for instance, features articles written by one of the Coldingley students and by six of the Grendon students in collaboration with four of the Westminster students. That these texts were externally peer-reviewed attests to the beneficial quality of the education that has been provided to the prisoners. The 2019/20 cohort are currently working on 7 academic papers with Darke and Aresti to be presented at a three-day international CC symposium – two days of which are hosted by the prisons, the other at Westminster – and subsequently submitted for publication as a book on inmate perspectives on prison. The symposium was arranged for July 2020 and is currently suspended due to the UK COVID-19 prison lockdown.

The further impact of providing these higher education courses within prison is highlighted in a report from the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA): “A review of this scheme highlighted the benefits of providing a challenging course, one that is the same as done by university students, and not tailored specifically to the prison environment. It has **helped the inside students to feel more included in wider society, to aspire to greater things when they are released and ‘to conceive of themselves as part of the general public’**” [b-i, p.36]. The social and educational benefits of the projects are also attested to by inside learners in testimony collected in November 2020. For instance, an inside learner, who has been in prison for 15 years, writes: “the knowledge I have gained around criminology [...] has allowed me to understand a lot more about myself and my circumstances”, that his enrolment onto Westminster’s PhD programme “will have a huge impact on my future and help me with the work I intend to do in the crime diversion sector”, and that involvement with the “BCC has made me a lot more confident in various aspects of my life, educationally, socially, confident I will desist from crime and have a positive future” [b-ii]. Another emphasises the benefit of the joint inside-outside learner environment: “For the time that I am in the groups we have shared, the walls and bars fall away. It has given me the chance to experience a glimpse of life as a constructive member of a wider society” [b-ii].

In regard to the problem of a *lack of resources (academic literature, space, teaching, educational advice, etc.)*: “the partnership between University of Westminster and HMP Pentonville sparked the university’s Outreach team, who were involved in delivery of the sessions, to run a textbook drive. They donated over 50 degree-level textbooks to HMP Pentonville library”, and the university has continued to pay for textbooks since the projects began in 2016 [b-iii, p.7]. In relation to this, and the further identified barrier of a *lack of access to the internet*, the course design also responds to such issues of access through its mentorship elements. On each course, Westminster students can gain further credits as academic mentors to the inside learners. These mentors proactively engage with the inside learners and any issues that they face regarding access. For instance, they download and print documents requested by inside learners, and those engaging in the collaborative writing of journal papers do so via post when necessary, as during COVID. Attesting to the benefits of such **access to educational resources**, a Grendon inside learner states the “readings make my time seem more meaningful. It distracts me from the harshness of prison and allows me to fill my time with productive activities. The responsibility of a learner makes me more aware of my actions and solidifies my seeing myself as a student rather than an offender” [b-i].

In regard to the problem of *practical barriers (attitudes of prison staff and other prisoners, prison transfers, etc.)*: the students at Pentonville are “put on hold” by national prison authorities during the three months of the module, meaning they are not at risk of being transferred until they have completed their course. This **ensures that their learning is not disrupted**. Further the governors of Pentonville and Coldingley, while initially reluctant to engage, now actively support the projects. For instance, in 2018 Pentonville signed a Partnership Agreement with the university; further, the

governor hands out the certificates at graduation and officers regularly observe lessons [b-iv]. At Coldingley, during the restrictive COVID lockdown, the governor agreed to receive boxes of books to pass on to an inside learner who is now undertaking a PhD under Darke and Aresti's supervision.

A further impact of these courses is that both sets of students (Westminster and prisoners) find that the project plays a beneficial role in **challenging the broader stigma attached to crime and imprisonment**. As the Ministry of Justice reports: "The panel visited HMP Pentonville to witness the graduation ceremony for prison learners studying a HE module alongside Westminster University students. Both groups spoke eloquently about the benefits achieved by breaking down the barriers, challenging perceptions and learning from each other" [b-v, p.43]. An example of this is a Westminster graduate who continues to work on the programme voluntarily and states that it "allowed me to break preconceptions on prisons and prisoners, and listen to the lived experience of people serving time, [...] it is a privilege to be able to hear such silenced voices that I rarely encountered in my academic path. It made me realize the importance of including these voices in the debate on prisons, and therefore the importance of challenging official knowledge to have a more honest view that will inform policies" [b-vi].

Amanda Baldry, a participating Distance Learning Tutor at Coldingley, adds: "The group **helps the prisoners to gain employability skills** that they are unable to develop through distance learning alone as they are able to exchange ideas and perspectives with other students and academics in a seminar style setting" [b-iii, p.5]. Such an exchange is also highlighted by the inside prison coordinator at Pentonville, who states that his involvement "has been the best thing I have done in my 12 years of incarceration" [b-ii]. Inside prison coordinators support other inside learners both during lessons and between, e.g. helping absent students catch up, and act as the researchers' point of contact for reaching inside students. Such a role actively builds employability skills amongst such appointees. In regard to outside learners, **more than 15 alumni went on to work or volunteer for prison, probation and prisoner support services**. Given the issue of [understaffing](#) in these sectors – and the associated problems described in Section 2 above, the mentorship and collaborative aspects of these programmes have had a beneficial effect on recruitment in this field [b-vii].

These programmes have also resulted in **inside learners progressing onto further higher education degrees**. At Pentonville, 10 inside learners are enrolled on each module run. 31 of the 40 students who started the course in 2018-19 or 2019-20 graduated with 20 level 3 credits. Of the approximately 100 inside learners that have completed the module to date (December 2020), 21 have subsequently started degrees at the Open University [b-vii]. 25 prisoner students have so far participated at Grendon and Coldingley; of the latter, ten have since progressed onto lower security prisons or been released [b-vii]. One transferred to Westminster from the Open University to complete his degree in 2018-19, while two commenced PhDs under Darke and Aresti's supervision in 2020. As far as they are aware, they are only the third and fourth prisoners to start a Criminology PhD in a British prison (Darke was the examiner for one of the other PhDs, which was completed in 2019; the student subsequently transferred to Coldingley prison and now participates in the reading group).

This success speaks to the breaking down of the final two barriers identified, that of *access to information on higher education courses / support in making applications* and *funding (lack of, advice on; support in applying for)*, which has occurred through Darke and Aresti's additional engagement with inside learners, beyond the delivery of the courses, by which they proactively deal with information requests from students on how to make such progressions.

Replication of this Approach to Prison Education in South America

In July 2019, the higher education model Darke and Aresti first developed at Pentonville was piloted at a prison in the city of São Luis, Maranhão, Brazil; a voluntary sector prison in which inmates manage all aspects of the prison regime, including security and discipline. These are known as APAC prisons. This pilot involved lecturers from the local university, Universidade Estadual de Maranhão (UEMA), as well as Darke and Aresti, who jointly taught the classes attended by both UEMA students and prisoners, following the model of the UK projects. As UEMA academic Dr Karina Biondi explains: "We adapted [Darke and Aresti's] program to the reality of APAC. And all the students have been included in the project, from those who are not yet literate. And everyone will have the opportunity to learn during class and be protagonists of their future

through teaching” [c-i]. The project - Another Vision - was **fully implemented by UEMA** in October 2019. It ran for 20 of the planned 32 weeks for 2019-20, until late March when Brazilian prisons also went into lockdown. 31 prisoners and 10 UEMA students participated. The convenors released a [documentary](#) on the project on YouTube in December 2020. Similar to Darke and Aresti’s programmes, Another Vision has social as well as educational benefits, as evidenced by a UEMA student who states that, “thanks to the project, the students gained access [...] to the lives of people they would not usually cross paths with”, helping them to recognise the value of studying with prisoners whose “stories need to be told by their own authors and heard by people from different backgrounds” [c-i]. An inside learner at APAC reflected that the lessons “served to open our minds, to help us survive, never to think we are better than anyone else, that we are equal regardless of our [background]” [c-i].

The success of this prison project is evidenced by the fact that it has been **praised by the Brazilian government, who are seeking to expand the reach of its benefits**. In November 2019 Darke and Biondi met with Maranhão state prison authorities and the Secretary of State for Penitentiary Administration, Murilo Andrade, to have, in his words, a “first dialogue to analyze how this project will take place in the units of the Penitentiary Complex. The proposal is undoubtedly very good and adds to our goals of guaranteeing education and training to interns” [c-ii]. At the meeting it was agreed that UEMA would replicate the Pentonville model at two more prisons from January 2021, although these plans are currently suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Darke also convened meetings at the Brazilian National Justice Council and National Prisons Department (DEPEN) regarding funding for UEMA’s existing project in São Luis as well as the implementation of the Pentonville model in other parts of the country, although progression on these plans have likewise been disrupted by the COVID pandemic.

The replication of Darke and Aresti’s prison education model is also occurring elsewhere in South America. For instance, a representative of Grupo De Estudos em Criminologias Contemporâneas (GECC), a criminology research group comprising members from universities across the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, visited the Pentonville project in October 2019 and has since engaged in ongoing knowledge exchange with Darke and Aresti. As the GECC representative confirms, this has resulted in **the launch of the Criminologia de Condenados project**, “specially inspired by the design of the project coordinated by Professor Sacha Darke. [...] Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were forced to slow down our activities. Nevertheless, three ‘inside learners’ have already been selected and have been trained for a while” with the aim of enabling them to become “qualified researchers and introduce the convict perspective in the Brazilian criminological movement” [c-iii].

The University of Buenos Aires (UBA), Argentina, runs a project involving prisoner students studying for university degrees in their prison-based university centre. However, they do not yet study alongside “outside” university students. For this reason, following Darke and Aresti’s presentations of their model at the UBA centre in August 2019, one of the UBA coordinators visited the Westminster prison projects in the UK (February 2020) to explore how the model can be incorporated within the UBA programme. As the coordinator explains, UBA “are particularly interested in exploring the possibility of **implementing peer tutors and reading groups with students from inside and outside, replicating Westminster’s model**”, and while COVID disrupted their plans for 2020, “we institutionalized the relationship [by] signing a MoU [Memorandum of Understanding] between the University of Westminster and the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature of the University of Buenos Aires. This agreement gives us a platform for future exchange and projects regarding Higher Education in prison” [c-v].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [a] (i) Barriers to prison education survey responses (ii) Darke, Aresti “Connecting Prisons and Universities through Higher Education”, *Prison Service Journal*, May 2016, #225: 26-32 [\[link\]](#)
- [b] (i) RSA, “A Matter of Conviction” (2016) (ii) Testimony from inside learners (iii) PET, “Prison-University Partnerships: A Toolkit” (2018) (iv) Pentonville-Westminster Partnership Agreement (v) MoJ, “Unlocking potential: a review of education in prison” (2016) (vi) Westminster graduate’s Pentonville Log (vii) Data relating to graduation and progression
- [c] (i) UEMA testimony – Biondi and Inside/Outside learners (Portuguese) (ii) Secretaria de Estado de Administração Penitenciária. News article on Darke visit, 3rd Nov 2019 (Portuguese) (iii) GECC testimony (iv) MoU UoW-UBA (v) UBA testimony