Maynooth University Mountjoy Prison Partnership and the Unlocking Potential Project

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Introduction

The school-to-prison pipeline is well-rehearsed in penological literature (Bacher-Hicks, 2021). Pathways from prison to university are less developed but are constructive steps toward profound positive changes for individuals and society (Ludlow et al., 2019; O’Grady and Hamilton, 2019). This brief note will provide some context of Mountjoy Prison before discussing the partnership between Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University (Ireland) and its instigation of the complementary Unlocking Potential Project (UPP).

Mountjoy Prison Campus (hereafter Mountjoy) comprises two distinct prisons in Dublin’s North Inner City, Ireland. Opened in 1850 and designed by Joshua Jebb (designer of HMP Pentonville, London), Mountjoy Main Men’s Prison is a medium security closed prison for those over 18 years of age (Carey, 2000; IPS, 2023b). A similarly aged separate radial design prison building—formerly St Patrick’s Institution for Juvenile Offenders—now operates as an annexe of the main men’s prison but is named The Progression Unit. The unit remains a closed medium-security prison but functions as a more open regime for enhanced men including porous activities such as day release for academic endeavours. There is a third annexe building named the Training Unit which houses 95 older men; the combined population is 804 (IPS, 2023c). The Dóchas Centre—Dóchas meaning ‘hope’ in Irish—opened in 1999 and completes the campus confining 168 females over the age of 18 (as of 28 April 2023) in a closed medium-security prison (IPS, 2023a; 2023c).

Maynooth University Mountjoy Prison Partnership (MJMU)

Maynooth University has a strong track record of engaging with people with prison experience or convictions and supporting penal reform. This tradition contributed to the University’s decision to identify ‘prisoners and former prisoners’ as an under-represented group in our student population in the most recent strategic plan. In 2019, Maynooth University and Mountjoy Prison came together to establish Ireland’s first university-prison partnership. The MJMU Partnership aims to harness the transformative power of education to promote access to higher education and support the reintegration of prisoners and former prisoners in society. We support the engagement of the university with the prison through a range of educational activities and the creation of shared learning spaces for students in prison and students in university.

Building on the great work which has already been taking place between the university and Mountjoy, the partnership provides strategic direction and support for a range of new
initiatives, some of which are detailed below. Our work is guided by a Steering Group, whose membership is drawn from both organisations and includes current and formerly incarcerated people. Supported by the Public Service Innovation Fund 2019, the MJMU Partnership was launched on 19 April 2021 with Minister Simon Harris TD (Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and currently Acting Minister for Justice) attending to provide his department's endorsement of the partnership.

The programme of initiatives within the partnership are numerous so for the sake of brevity, two of particular note will be elaborated on here: the ‘Story Exchange’ and the ‘Mountjoy Lecture Series’.

**The Story Exchange**
The Story Exchange is a collaborative initiative between the MJMU Partnership and Gaisce – The President's Award (Gaisce). Gaisce is a “self-development programme for young people aged 14 -25” which focuses on core values of empowerment, inclusion and equality, respect and excellence (The President’s Award, 2023). Established in 1985, Gaisce “has been proven to enhance confidence and wellbeing through participation in personal, physical and community challenges” (The President’s Award, 2023).

The Story Exchange originally ran from September 2019 to March 2020 and brought together young people incarcerated in the Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit and MU students over 13 weeks. The Story Exchange works by randomly partnering people in the group to swap a story from their lives. Assembling the group once more, each student re-tells their partner’s story in the first person. The MU students taking part in the project are part of the MAP Ambassador Programme, a volunteering student-led initiative which promotes access to higher education for people with fewer opportunities. Participants worked with Emer McNally, a data harvester, to explain their experience of the project and the power of story exchange to foster connection, solidarity, and self-belief (see a short film here). Ever evolving, this year's story exchange is currently running with an additional focus on power and change while integrating mentoring and leadership skills.

The Story Exchange uses the Gaisce Award framework, which means that participants received a Gaisce award for their contribution to the project. The project was documented and evaluated by Sarah Meaney Sartori (Research Manager, College Connect Project & Department of Adult and Community Education). You can read the full report: Evaluating the Story Exchange Project or the summary report: Introduction to the Story Exchange.

**Mountjoy Lecture Series**
Those entering higher education (HE) from under-represented backgrounds, including people with convictions, can sometimes find themselves funneled into particular disciplines and careers such as sociology, social work, community and/or addiction services. The MJMU Partnership runs multiple series of lectures in Mountjoy to open up a broader range of academic experiences to the people in prison. The lecture series launched in February 2020

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1 TD is an abbreviation of ‘Teachta Dála’ meaning ‘Deputy to the Dáil’ in Irish. The Dáil is Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament). Other jurisdictions’ equivalents are Member of Parliament (MP) or Member of Congress.
with the initial lecture being delivered by Dr Conor Murphy (Geography Department) on climate change. The lecture, held in the Progression Unit, was attended by over 40 people in prison. Inspired by what they heard, members of the audience initiated the placing of recycling bins on the prison landings. After navigating unfortunate COVID-19 enforced postponements, the series resumed with Dr Rory Hearn (MU Department of Social Policy) discussing his recent popular book, ‘Gaffs’ (2022), on the current housing crisis and solutions – further demonstrating the shared experiences of those in prison and the wider community. The 2023 programme continues with a diverse range of lectures while seeking expand the offerings in all sections of the prisons.

The Unlocking Potential Project

The Unlocking Potential Project (UPP) brought together a consortium of six partners: MU Access Programme; MU School of Law and Criminology; Irish Prison Service; (Irish) Probation Service; Pathways Centre (City of Dublin ETB); and the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT). Drawing inspiration from recent developments in the UK including the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UK) ‘Criminal Convictions: Good Practice Guide’ and the Unlock UK ‘Fair Chance Pledge’, the UPP seeks to build on these to further remove barriers by implementing the innovative fair admissions policy facilitated by the toolkit developed for all higher education institutions (HEIs). The UPP aims to make higher education more accessible for people in prison and those in the community with convictions and in doing so to support their reintegration into society. It also aims to support HEI staff to unlock the potential of students with convictions and ensure the transformative power of education is accessible to all.

The UPP developed a suite of resources for higher education staff interested in developing a fair admissions policy, as well as information and resources for prospective students regarding accessing third-level education including:

- A toolkit for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their administrators, including a fair admissions policy template, principles for fair admissions, and information on collecting criminal records data in line with GDPR and student admissions.
- A student portal with resources for prospective students with convictions, including information on their rights, Garda (Police) vetting, testimonials, student supports and funding opportunities including the new KickStart Scholarship Fund providing financial support for current and future students.
- A new podcast series and documentary exploring the project’s aims, and celebrating and amplifying the achievements and stories of graduates with convictions.

Minister Harris TD referred to the ‘transformational’ potential of the project (Baker, 2022). Funding for the project was awarded by the Public Sector Innovation Fund 2020 with additional funding from the Irish Prison Service and Maynooth University.

Impact and Next Steps

The MJMU Partnership and UPP continue to evolve at a pace while achieving significant impact to date. Recent developments in the MJMU Partnership include the development of
the Strategic Plan 2023-2028 (forthcoming in July 2023) and the establishment of relationships and plans to run a series of lectures in Portlaoise Prison, Ireland’s only high security prison. The MJMU Partnership and the UPP were key factors in establishing people with convictions as a target group in the new National Access Plan 2022-2028 (Higher Education Authority, 2022). The projects were also central to the establishment, in 2022, of the Kickstart Scholarships (funded by the [Irish] Probation Service) in partnership with MU, developed exclusively to support students with convictions to access higher education. The Scholarships distribute various awards totalling €100k to students (with convictions) in higher education in Ireland. In 2022, the MJMU Partnership and the UPP were also pivotal in including people with convictions as a target group for the 1916 Bursary Fund, a national scheme to support students from low income households to access higher education.

The next phase of the UPP includes an ongoing empirical project which was awarded funding from the Irish Research Council New Foundations Fund 2022. The study examines the attitudes and experiences of higher education staff and those with criminal convictions in Ireland while analysing perceptions of risk in policy and practice. In a parallel study, the employers’ policies and practices regarding people with convictions are being examined. These complementary studies will further the aims and broaden the scope and future integrations of the MJMU Partnership and the UPP respectively. The first project is in partnership with the IPRT while the latter is funded by the IPRT, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Open Doors Initiative.

While the principle of prison being a last resort requires constant assertion and implementation, the MJMU Partnership and the UPP projects demonstrate the opportunities to collaboratively ameliorate prison conditions to build positive pathways for those imprisoned or with a history of contact with the criminal justice system.

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- Prof Aislinn O’Donnell, Dr Seamus Taylor (MU Department of Education)
- Ms Martha Brandes, Ms Grace Edge (2019-2021), Ms Gemma Lynch, Dr Rose Ryan, Dr Sarah Sartori (MU Access Programme)
- Gov Edward Mullins, Gov Donnacha Walsh (ret) (Irish Prison Service, Mountjoy Prison)
- Irish Penal Reform Trust, Irish Prison Service, Our Public Sector, The Pathways Centre (City of Dublin ETB), Probation Service

References


The President’s Award (2023) About Gaisce | The President’s Award. Available at: [https://www.gaisce.ie/about-gaisce/](https://www.gaisce.ie/about-gaisce/) (accessed 28 April 2023).