

Welcome

Welcome to the third edition of the Global Freedom Scholars Network (GFSN) UK Chapter Newsletter, created in partnership with Doing What Really Matters (DWRM).

Following your feedback, the theme for this quarter is *Prison to Paycheck, Classroom to Career*, focusing on the transition from higher education study in prison to employment opportunities after release.

The journey from education to employment is rarely straightforward, as our contributors powerfully demonstrate. Their stories highlight both successes as well as challenges, and offer practical coping strategies and models.

We understand that qualifications alone don't guarantee employment, but they do provide crucial foundations. Your experiences of navigating this path will help others on their journeys.

The theme for the September edition will be *Starting Out*; we would welcome submissions covering your reasons for and experiences of beginning study whilst incarcerated. See *Next Edition* for details.

Please share your stories and feedback via your Education Lead, by emailing us at info@dwrm.org.uk or by post to DWRM, PO Box 6219 Sheffield S2 9JQ.

The editorial team for Curious Minds consists of serving prisoners, ex-prisoners, academics, employers and DWRM staff.

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The ABCD model of employment opportunities

The Parole Board at a recent hearing viewed my achievements of a First-Class Honours degree, a Postgraduate Diploma and a Master's degree whilst in prison in a very positive light, regarding rehabilitation. However, they did not view them as beneficial to my employment or resettlement needs in the short term.

Initially, I was frustrated with their assessment; I had plans to use my degree in future employment, and I felt that they were entirely realistic. A chat with DWRM's Release Support Manager helped me to realise the importance of adopting a flexible approach to finding employment post-release, and she suggested that I adopt Phil Martin's ABCD model:

- Any job
- Better job
- Career job
- Dream job

Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful at this parole hearing due to a lack of ROTLs. Since then, I have completed qualifications in Culinary Skills and Food Safety (Any job), and have applied for a bookkeeping qualification (Better job), all whilst pursuing a PhD (Career and Dream job). I have also created several CVs that are targeted towards these different employment goals of mine.

After editing Lee and James' experiences in this issue, I am confident that taking this flexible approach to securing employment will be hugely beneficial, not only on release, but in getting me a decent ROTL job that sets me up for a successful next parole hearing!

Nathan R

Congratulations to

Dilip Parmar
HMP Five Wells

David Leesley
HMP Dovegate

Keeley Barnard
HMP Send

Eduardo Cruz
HMP Rye Hill

Macaulay Og Beide
HMP Fosse Way

Nelson Corriea
HMP Lowdham Grange

for completing all 6 modules of the Social Sciences Foundation Year with Westminster University

From crossing roads to creating change

After being released from prison, the first fear I experienced was how to cross a road. I had not crossed a road for two years! Experiencing anxiety about something so mundane highlights the sheer breadth of challenges a person faces when they leave prison.

However, I have now been working at the Howard League for Penal Reform for three years. It is in many ways the perfect job for me. It is an organisation that finds value in the lived experience that I have with regards to prison. It shares my strongly held views around the need for prison reform and the need to reduce the prison population, and I work in a team with other individuals with lived experience of the system.

Getting work after prison is not easy; it is extremely challenging. However, opportunities with non-judgemental employers are available, but you must work hard to find them. Here are my key bits of advice:

1. Study - grab every single qualification you can possibly find. You never know when it may be of use to you. While you have free time on your hands, studying puts this time to good use.
2. Volunteer - offer yourself to organisations for free. Show people who you are and what you are capable of; you are more than a conviction. You must convince others of your value. I volunteered for several charitable organisations before coming to the Howard League.
3. Positivity - give everything your best shot even if it is not exactly what you want to do. One of my colleagues began his post-prison employment career in a chicken factory. You may not walk into a dream job right away, take on every opportunity and hold your head high; you may never know where it might lead.

When I visit prisons as part of my new role, people ask if I find it triggering. I reply that I hope that my success will inspire some hope in others. There is a good life to be had post-prison. Making life better for prisoners is important, so now, I find visiting prisons rather empowering.

Lee B

The Howard League for Penal Reform is the oldest penal reform charity in the world. We always value hearing the testament and experiences of people in prison and their families, so much so that we offer free membership to anyone in prison, or anyone who has been to prison and their families.

If anyone would like to become a member of this wonderful organisation, please write to us at: Howard League for Penal Reform, First Floor, 75-77 St John Street, London, EC1M 4NN.

The honest reality: when a Degree doesn't open doors

I'd like to share my experience about my degree and life after prison.

The Open University makes it clear that a degree doesn't guarantee a job, and sadly, that's been true for me. I earned my BSc Honours while I was in prison. Studying really helped me get through my time inside and led to me becoming the prison's distance learning peer mentor. I worked closely with the OU, other prison education charities, and the prison's education staff.

I read a few success stories of former prisoners using their prison education to find work after release, and I hoped to one day share my own success story too.

But it wasn't to be. After release, I faced huge barriers. Just sorting out housing and benefits, dealing with a difficult probation officer, and finding my way in a world that had changed while I was locked up proved harder than I expected. And employers weren't interested. I worked with several charities that support prison leavers and followed all their advice. Employers liked me and made job offers, but these were taken back when I had to tell them about my criminal past.

My degree didn't impress anyone. Employers were more interested in my previous job experience than my prison degree. I tried everything – volunteering, redoing my CV for each job, applying to 'ban the box' companies, applying for roles with prison support charities and looking for work in other areas, you name it. But my criminal offences were too serious for employers.

During my job search after prison, I even looked for minimum wage manual labour jobs. But even these employers were put off by my criminal past. At one point, the jobcentre suggested I remove my degree from my CV as manual labour employers might be put off by it.

I've even looked into self-employment, but people with serious offences face just as many barriers there as finding traditional work.

So it's been several years now and hundreds upon hundreds of job applications later and still no job. I've used the writing skills from my degree to write a few books, which have won Koestler Awards. I'm volunteering on a couple of projects that might lead to a paid position, but there's no guarantee.

Would I recommend higher education to serving prisoners? Yes, I would. But not for employment reasons. Learn because you want to understand the world better and improve yourself. And who knows? It might lead to employment.

Jay W

Curious Minds Practical

Guide: effective handwritten note taking

The ability to take comprehensive notes by hand remains an essential skill in your educational journey. Without digital tools, handwritten notes become your most valuable study resource. Consider adopting the Cornell Method, which divides your page into three sections:

1. A wide right-hand section for detailed notes

During lectures or readings, record information in the right column. Capture key concepts, definitions, and examples using complete sentences or bullet points. Include diagrams that explain the material, organizing related information through indentation.

2. A narrow left-hand margin

Create questions in the left margin for self-testing by covering the right column. Include cues and keywords that help trigger your memory. When reviewing, attempt to answer these questions, transforming passive notes into active study tools.

3. A bottom summary area

The bottom summary consolidates main concepts. Write 3-4 sentences that capture the essence of the page. This reflection cements understanding and provides a quick reference during later review sessions.

For subjects with interconnected concepts like philosophy or literature, mind mapping can be effective: Begin with the central theme in the middle of the page, then draw branches for subtopics, adding smaller offshoots for supporting details. This visual organisation helps reveal relationships between ideas that might not be apparent in linear notes.

Abbreviations preserve precious writing space and speed. Develop personal shorthand for frequently used terms in your field of study. Common abbreviations like w/ for with or b/c for because conserve energy during lengthy note-taking sessions.

- Actively engage with your notes rather than passively recording.
- Leave space between concepts to add reflections or connections.
- Write questions in the margins about content you don't fully understand.
- Practice regular review and condensation. Weekly, distil multiple pages of notes into single-page summaries that extract core concepts for exam periods.

With deliberate practice, your handwritten notes will evolve from mere transcription to powerful learning tools.

James S

The power of stubborn persistence

Despite receiving my master's degree prior to leaving prison, I found it a struggle to get an interview never mind a job. I sent out countless applications, most met with either silence or polite rejection. The weight of my past seemed to overshadow my achievements. It was a demoralizing cycle, but I refused to let it break my spirit. Each rejection letter (if I even received one) only fuelled my resolve.

Occasionally I would get feedback, giving me advice on what I was lacking. I was told that I was overqualified and under skilled. So, I enrolled in online courses and attended workshops. I networked tirelessly, seeking advice and mentorship from professionals in my desired field. Slowly, I began to build a portfolio that showcased not only my academic prowess but also my growing skill set.

I used many different skills in my job search. My degrees evidenced that I could apply myself for a long time, at a high level, under stress. It showed that I could focus and work to long-term and short-term targets and act with discipline. It also showed that I could plan for my own future, which was helpful with my parole. Yet one of the most valuable was stubbornness.

That stubbornness that I used at every recategorisation and sentence plan. When they told me no, I sought out a reason. I took that reason, and I addressed it so they couldn't use it again. Eventually they ran out of reasons to say no, and I got a yes. I used this approach with feedback from interviews. If I was told why I didn't get the job, if I needed a qualification in something, I went and got it. It may not get me a yes, but it makes it harder to say no. Eventually they run out of reasons.

The journey was hard, filled with weeks and months of self-doubt and frustration. Yet, each small victory – a positive response, a freelance opportunity, a constructive interview – reinforced my belief that perseverance would eventually pay off. I learned to adapt, to be patient, and most importantly, to believe in my potential despite the odds stacked against me.

Eventually I secured an interview. It was two trains and a bus ride away, but I was determined. It went well and, for the first time, I had a second interview. I didn't get the job, but I was put forward for a different role. In an office with my own desk! I had attended so many practice interviews that I was prepared and relaxed.

The interview was on a zoom call, and I was sent a contract after 15 minutes. I was to become a contractor using the skills and knowledge I had learned. Recently, I signed a new contract; I will no longer be a contractor, but a full-time employee. I now have a job for life and the security to begin to make long term plans for my future.

James F

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Typing: Handwritten work will be typed unless you request otherwise.

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Content: No discriminatory or violent content.

Next Edition

The theme for the next edition (September 2025) will be *Starting Out*. We would love to know what inspired you to start studying, your experience and any practical advice that you would like to share with *Curious Minds* readers.

The deadline for submission is 7th August 2025.

Send to DWRM, PO Box 6219, Sheffield, S2 9JQ or to info@dwrn.org.uk through your Education Department marking it *Curious Minds Submission*.

Work should be your own and clearly written or typed, with your name, prison and prison number on the document. 600 words maximum.

Distribution

We will send paper copies to all students registered with DWRM as well as the list of people who responded to our article in *Inside Time* about Learning Communities.

We will also email it to all the Prison Education departments. If you would like to be a named person to distribute copies, please let us know and we'll send you a batch of printed copies to distribute.

We need your help getting the message out: if you can, speak to your distance learning facilitator in your prison and work with them to ensure that your fellow students get to be a part of our community and receive a copy of our newsletter.

The strange business of starting again

When I was released from prison after sixteen years, I knew more than most about some things, how to survive on a wing, what it meant to study under bang-up conditions, but the 'real world' felt alien. I'd earned two degrees inside and even taught maths at a college on ROTL. Yet, stepping out, I was riddled with doubt. There were things I didn't know like tax, expenses, even what a 'normal' job or life looked like. That initial period after release was full of possibility and marked by quiet panic.

Studying inside gave me tools, but outside I realised how hard it was to be taken seriously. I'd done two years volunteering with a local firm in open prison, yet after release I was regularly told I should "try volunteering" as if those years didn't count. I did eventually get paid work, including the college job, but even then I was told not to disclose that I was serving a sentence. It felt dishonest, like I was betraying the very strengths that education had helped me cultivate. I left the job just before I was released, with pride and shame in equal measure.

Self-employment was next. I fumbled through, made mistakes, got some things right. Probation didn't block me, but nor did they help. I often didn't share my worries with them, fearing that financial stress might be translated into "risk."

Some roles came from charities who valued my lived experience, but it was hard to know what to say at interview. Disclose too early, and you're out. Too late, and you feel deceptive. I sometimes wondered whether the "thanks but no thanks" emails were about my CV or my conviction. Pay was another issue—work that leant heavily on my lived experience was often unpaid, or I'd be offered only expenses.

And yet, something kept me going. Maybe the same gumption that drove me to study inside, when I'd choose a textbook over more light-hearted weekend distractions. I knew that to find a place in the world post-release, I'd have to shape shift a bit, to lean into different identities. It helped that eventually I got onto a PhD programme at Nottingham Trent University, fully funded. That legitimised my work in a way my sentence never could.

Doing academic research, especially a PhD, was easier in some ways than prison study, more support, fewer practical barriers, but emotionally it was harder. Lecturing sometimes felt surreal. Would students be okay knowing their tutor had a serious conviction? Would colleagues see me differently? Lived experience gives you credibility in some rooms, makes you suspect in others. And after a while, you wonder if it's enough. Does it become a trap, this 'former prisoner' tag?

I now work full-time for a national charity. I no longer worry about the next invoice or chasing payments. I don't have to hide my history, and that's a relief. I've come to believe that my ability to self-motivate in a cell with no support, to sit down and learn when everyone else is watching telly, is no small thing.

If there's a lesson in all this, it's that education gave me more than qualifications. It gave me a way to start again, awkwardly and imperfectly, but honestly. And somehow, over time, I built a life that feels finally like it might be mine.

Simon S