

Welcome

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

The theme for this quarter is *Starting Out*, focusing on the reasons for and experiences of beginning study whilst incarcerated.

The decision to start higher education in prison is deeply personal, as our contributors powerfully demonstrate. Their stories reveal diverse motivations, from seeking personal transformation to preparing for future careers, from filling time constructively to discovering unexpected passions. These accounts offer insights into the courage required to take that first step.

We understand that beginning study in prison comes with unique challenges and uncertainties, but it is also deeply rewarding and transformative.

The theme for the December edition will be *Overcoming Isolation*; we would welcome submissions covering how you've maintained motivation, overcome obstacles, and developed effective study practices during your educational journey. See **Next Edition** for details.

Please share your stories and feedback via your Education Lead, by emailing us at info@dwrn.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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Finding time

Prison life runs on a strict schedule, leaving little flexibility for personal pursuits. Yet many incarcerated students successfully complete degrees despite these constraints. The key lies in creative time management.

For many, the early morning hours offer a sanctuary for focused study. Rising at 4a.m. might sound extreme but the quiet wing and mental clarity before daily activities begin creates ideal conditions. This strategy works particularly well for those sharing cells, as cellmates are typically still sleeping.

Speaking of cell sharing, open communication with your cellmate about study needs is essential. Establishing mutual quiet periods and respectful boundaries can make a significant difference. Some students find visual signals helpful – a specific item placed on the desk might indicate 'I'm in study mode' to others.

The prison environment presents unique challenges for concentration, especially for neurodiverse students. Many incarcerated students with ADHD report success using visual aids like colourful brainstorms and post-it notes to track information and deadlines. These tools serve double duty by brightening the cell environment.

Breaking study sessions into manageable chunks helps maintain focus. Incorporating movement breaks – even quick cell workouts – can reset attention spans. When possible, changing study locations provides mental refreshment. The library or other communal areas offer a welcome change of scenery that makes cell study feel less confining.

Remember that consistency trumps marathon sessions. Finding and protecting small daily study periods will build significant progress over time. The satisfaction of academic achievement extends far beyond professional opportunities – it offers new ways of thinking, improved self-esteem, and the powerful feeling of accomplishing a meaningful goal despite challenging circumstances.

Lauren B

How I started in education

I am a released life-sentenced individual, now out of prison for nearly five years. I'm a business owner and a final-year PhD student, with three degrees under my belt - all of which I began and completed while serving that life sentence.

I remember the first time I engaged with education in prison. I had extremely negative experiences of school and didn't want - at least I thought I didn't want - anything to do with education again.

I was in the education department of the first prison I was sent to after sentencing. I'd refused to complete my induction and was waiting to be taken back to the wing - or possibly to the segregation unit. As I sat there, unsettled by something I couldn't name, an education orderly came over and said, "I don't want to get in your business, but can I give you something to think about while you wait? I saw your name on the list—you're a new lifer. What's your tariff?" "Twenty years," I replied. "That's a long time. You'll need to keep yourself busy somehow. If you train your body and your mind, you'll get through anything."

Those words landed immediately. They spoke directly to the discomfort I felt in my gut. In that moment, something shifted. I said yes - not just to education, but to a different life. Yes to growth. Yes to being an active participant in my own future. I mentally jumped from the passenger seat to the driver's seat and took control. I remember receiving my first box of study materials when I started my degree. Walking into my cell with that box was terrifying. It was filled with academic books, guides, and a six-year commitment. I felt overwhelmed. So, I made it real. I emptied the box, broke it up so I couldn't return it, pinned my study planner on the wall next to photos of loved ones, placed the books on my shelf, and added the paperwork to the pile on my desk. Then I looked around—and my cell looked normal again. Now I was ready to begin.

One other moment stands out - the day I took the power out of my cell door. If you've been inside, you know that sound when the door shuts behind you. It rattles you. It did the same to me. But that changed. One evening on association, I had an assignment due and was waiting for my turn at the pool table. I decided to give up my spot and went back to my cell to study. I kicked the door shut behind me and sat at my desk. As I wrote, I heard a noise and glanced at the door—and I realised something profound. That door no longer felt the same. It no longer scared me. While I studied, the door lost its power. My mind was no longer confined to that space. I had changed enough to stop caring what other prisoners or staff thought about my choices. That moment was liberating. I completed my education induction and began a journey that took me from having no qualifications to entering the first year of my PhD as I walked out.

Today, I co-own and run DWRM which provides education and mentoring for people in prison and beyond. This is what change looks like. It starts with a "yes," even if that yes is scary or uncertain. It grows through persistence, purpose, and belief in something better. That life-changing choice has made all the difference for me.

Dan W

Starting out

At the beginning of my sentence, I was unsure how I could use my time wisely. I found it very difficult to adapt to this new environment. It took me a good 12 months to accept what was going on and then I said to myself "I have five years to better myself while I'm in prison". My background in technology gave me a good footing to work in the Education department as a mentor.

I was then transferred to another prison, so I had to start and establish myself again. I recall there was an Open Day at the prison and various companies and education professionals were advertising courses which were available for prisoners to start. One ex-prisoner stood out for me. He had done quite a considerable amount inside; completing his LLB law degree and he was then doing his PHD in law. That was the inspiration which really inspired me to do further education. Thinking that, if he can do it, I should be able to achieve the same thing too.

I signed up to a Foundation Criminology course with the University of Westminster via DWRM. The only thing that was going through my mind was whether I could give the time towards studying - approximately 12 hours a week on top of the workload and prison regime. I was given various textbooks with the course - one which really helped me was the Study Skills Handbook by Stella Cottrell. There was a section in that book that referred to time management. This book provided me with the skills to manage my time successfully .

I then decided to keep a logbook of my studying time. It consisted of columns which included the start time, the finish time, the subtotal and the total for the week at the end. This really worked for me as I could see the amount of time I was spending studying week by week and then also at the end of the month. Time management was a key factor for me. Once I mastered this, it was easy moving forward.

If I had any advice to other students, I would say when starting any education course, the key skill is to manage your time safely and wisely. Once this is mastered, the rest will fall in place. You will find a pattern that matches with the amount of time you can really study. Another factor - it is very important to remember to try not to run before you can walk. In other words, do not read ahead too much. For example, if you have a 10-week block, don't try and read ahead four weeks in front. This won't help you at all. You will likely forget where you are in the first place. Maximum time forward I would recommend is one week. Just to make you prepare for what is coming the following week.

Another key element is to give yourself ample time when writing documents or any essays and extra time when revising on exams. My last one most important advice is to take time to rest. I hope this helps in any future studies you may have. I am really enjoying my educational journey.

Dilip P

Practical guide: building your first essay

Starting written assignments can feel overwhelming, especially when you're faced with writing your first essay in years, or maybe ever. The good news is that most essays follow a similar blueprint that you can learn and use again and again.

Think of your essay as a house

A house is made up of a foundation, walls, a roof and a chimney. Your essay works the same way. The introduction is your foundation. The body paragraphs are your walls. The conclusion is your roof. Finally, the chimney is your list of references.

Foundation: Introduction - about 100-150 words

Your introduction has three key jobs.

1. You could start by grabbing your reader's attention with an interesting fact, question, or observation related to your topic.
2. Provide any background information your reader needs to understand your argument.
3. Your statement, one or more clear sentences that tells your reader exactly what you're going to prove or argue.

Supporting walls: Body - usually 3-4 paragraphs

Each body paragraph should focus on one main point that supports your argument. Think of the acronym PEEL: Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link.

- **Point:** Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that clearly states what this paragraph will prove. This sentence should connect directly to your essay question.
- **Evidence:** Provide specific examples, facts, statistics, or quotes from your sources that support your point. Don't just drop these in, introduce them properly.
- **Explanation:** This is crucial and often overlooked. Explain how your evidence proves your point. Don't assume your reader will make the connection automatically. Walk them through your reasoning.
- **Link:** End each paragraph by connecting back to your main thesis or transitioning to your next point.

Roof: Conclusion - about 100 to 200 words

Your conclusion should never introduce new information. Instead, briefly restate your thesis in fresh words, summarise your main supporting points, and end with a broader statement about why your argument matters. What are the implications? Why should your reader care?

Chimney: References - required for academic essays

Just as a house often needs a chimney to function properly, your academic essay needs a reference list to give credit where it's due and show your tutor where you found your information.

Every time you use someone else's ideas, words, statistics, or research findings in your essay, you need to cite them both in the text and in your reference list.

Here is an example of how to format references using the Cite them Right system:

Davis, L.M., Bozick, R., Steele, J.L., Saunders, J. and Miles, J.N. (2013) 'Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: a meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults', *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 9(4), pp. 553-571.

Your references show that you've done serious research and that your arguments are built on solid foundations. They're not just a requirement - they're a sign of academic integrity.

Practical tips for getting started

- **Start with an outline:** Before you write a single sentence, jot down your thesis and list three main points that support it. This roadmap will keep you focused.
- **Write your body paragraphs first:** Many writers find it easier to start with the meat of their argument, then craft the introduction and conclusion afterward.
- **Use transitions:** Words and phrases like furthermore, in addition, however and on the other hand help your reader follow your logic from one idea to the next.
- **Keep it simple:** Especially when you're starting out, clear and straightforward writing beats fancy vocabulary every time. Your goal is communication, not showing off.
- **Read it aloud:** When you finish a draft, read it out loud to yourself. Your ears will catch awkward sentences and unclear ideas that your eyes might miss.

Language that connects: using transitions effectively

Think of transitions as signposts that guide your reader through your argument. Without them, your essay feels choppy and disconnected.

- **To add information:** furthermore, in addition, moreover, also however, nevertheless, on the other hand, although.
- **To show cause and effect:** therefore, consequently, as a result, thus.
- **To give examples:** for instance, for example, specifically, such as
- **To conclude:** in conclusion, finally, overall, ultimately.

Writing is rewriting

No one gets it perfect on the first try. Your first draft is just raw material. The real work happens when you revise, reorganise, and refine your ideas. Give yourself time for this process. The strongest essays are built through multiple drafts, each one clearer and more convincing than the last.

Terms of Publication

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

Editing: We may edit for clarity and remove harmful language. Let us know if you don't want edits.

Copyright: You keep the copyright and can republish. Inform us if previously published.

Publication: Contributions might be held for future issues due to space.

Content: No discriminatory or violent content.

Next Edition

The theme for the December edition will be **Overcoming Isolation**; we would welcome submissions covering how you've maintained motivation, overcome obstacles, and developed effective study practices during your educational journey.

The deadline for submission is **7th November 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.

Level 4 (CertHE) in Business Management

Want to improve your business skills or even start your own business?

Our Level 4 (CertHE) course in Business and Management with University of Essex might be just what you are looking for!

This course will develop your understanding of the four main decision-making areas to consider in business and explores core topics within management such as HR, finance and marketing.

A Certificate in Higher Education (CertHE) is equivalent to the first year of a degree and is a fully accepted higher level qualification. On completion, you can opt to continue your study to complete a full degree. The Cert HE will take 16 months to complete and requires 15 hours of study per week. The course costs £6176 and can be paid for using a student loan.

Business management skills are highly transferable - leadership, planning, budgeting, communication and problem-solving expertise is valuable in almost any sector.

It also opens the door to self-employment. For people who might face barriers to traditional hiring due to a criminal record, starting your own business can be a realistic and empowering path. Courses start in October 2025 and January and March 2026. If you are interested, please call DWRM on 0800 9875953 or email info@dwrn.org.uk

From the Global Freedom Scholars Network

In 2024, the Incarceration Nations Network (INN) launched the Global Freedom Scholars Network, the world's first transnational network of justice-involved university students. The GFS Network has chapters in the UK, Italy, Argentina, Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Uruguay, Chile, Ireland, Spain, Australia, Jamaica, Mexico, Trinidad and Canada.

The network advocates for and supports educational opportunities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated university students. It emphasises that investing in education is more cost-effective than punitive measures while also providing long-term societal benefits. DWRM runs the UK Chapter of the GFS network, providing students another avenue to engage with peers & tackle criminal justice education issues.

A few examples of activities in other countries are :

Cape Town 2026 Launch

GFS Consulting launches April 2026 in Cape Town with 36 justice-impacted consultants from 21 countries leading global justice reform.

Historic First in Argentina

Global Freedom Fellow '24 Waldemar Cubilla made history addressing Argentina's National University at their prison campus, emphasizing building universities in prisons for true public safety.

New Global Resource Hub

The Global Freedom Scholars Network launched a worldwide educational hub featuring prison programmes, research, and stories globally. Can be found here <https://gfs.education/activists>