From being in prison to working in probation via higher education and the Longford Trust

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Fifteen of our Longford Scholars graduated this summer just gone, a happy result after the disruption to their university years caused by Covid and lockdown. Better still more than half got firsts, or distinctions, and went on to jobs in data analysis, programming, theatre production, finance, media and health care with the support of the Longford Trust’s employability project.

So, plenty of reasons to celebrate, but what caught my eye in particular was how one was joining the Probation Service. Why? Well, the Longford Scholarships scheme, which has been running since 2005 and has to date given almost 500 young men and women financial and mentoring support to go on to university, is open only to those who have served a prison sentence within the past five years. Or are still serving one. Or are about to be released.

That means that this new recruit to the probation service - I am going to call him Lawrence to spare his blushes as he finds his feet with new colleagues - has gone in a short period of time from being under the supervision of a probation officer to becoming one. Or as he himself put it:

“after two years in prison and a chunk of time on probation, I, with a First-Class Honours degree, am now employed as a probation service officer. I am as surprised as anyone.”

His initial dealings with probation had not been happy. After he was sentenced, Lawrence reflected on what had landed him in prison and became convinced that,

“my successful future depended on going to university after prison. A degree was the key to avoiding life as an unemployed ‘former criminal’ who had disappointed family and friends.”
He applied and was offered a place once released. “I felt I was about to get life back on track. And then probation suggested I might have no choice but to refuse the offer due to restrictions and licence conditions. Any hope I’d had for the future swiftly faded away.”

He experienced a severe mental breakdown. In his anger, he blamed probation. On release, now with no plans, he went, as instructed, to his local probation service office, expecting very little. “Wearing a suit, which I’d last worn on my day of sentencing, I walked into a large office, where I was told to sign in and ‘choose a desk’. It quickly became clear that the probation staff had mistaken me for a new member of their team – not a newly released prisoner.”

But things quickly looked up. Lawrence’s probation officer listened to his failed plan to go to university and supported him in his reviving it - up to and including providing the reference that convinced the university authorities to accept him despite their misgivings about his conviction. That was where the Longford Trust stepped in, and gave him financial and mentoring support to ensure that he made the most of the opportunity and wasn’t deterred by that initially lukewarm welcome he had received from the university.

One day, Lawrence recalls, his probation officer suggested that he could maybe work for probation. “To be honest, I took that with a pinch of salt. After all, I had been convicted of, and imprisoned for, a serious offence; I wasn’t aware of anybody with such a history becoming a probation officer in this country. I pretty much ruled out the idea from the start.”

But it is now happening. And Lawrence isn’t the only Longford graduate that has joined the Probation Service. Another of the trust’s “success stories” (80% of those it works with go on to graduate and get good jobs, with fewer than 5% returning to prison) went down the same route earlier this year, albeit after doing a couple of other jobs in the criminal justice system first.

Lord Longford (Frank to his friends and family), after whom the trust is named, was for those with long memories a controversial figure. Not particularly during his long political career as Deputy Foreign Secretary in Clement Attlee’s post-war Labour government, and later as a Cabinet minister under Harold Wilson from 1964 to 1967, but because of the support he gave to a handful of high-profile and notorious prisoners. Yet the headlines made by those very few cases distracted from the 71 years he spent as a prison visitor, and those prisoners he supported right up to his death in his mid-90s in 2001.

What underpinned his work was the belief that everyone deserved a second chance, that all were capable of reform and rehabilitation, and that to fail to try and help them towards that (with all the pitfalls it entails) was to show a lack of humanity. That spirit is what the trust set up in his name works to uphold.
Our particular focus is higher education. There are many very good organisations working in different ways to boost rehabilitation, but no-one else exclusively in this area. And, of course, university isn’t for everyone. Currently around 24% of the UK population has a university education, but in the younger demographic that figure is around 50%. So, if half of all late teen/early twenties can see the benefit of a university education in setting their adult life on the right track, then surely that opportunity should be more readily available to those who have served a prison sentence.

No reliable figures exist for the number of serving prisoners with degrees, or having started them, but they are most likely in single digits. There are all sorts of reasons for this - and it is not, in our experience of the past 15 years anything to do with lack of potential. They include the absence of any real financial incentives to deliver higher education in the contracts that the government hands out to the four main providers of education in our prisons, and the restrictions around internet access for serving prisoners that make it impossible for them to access, even in a carefully supervised way, the vast majority of digital distance-learning degree-level courses that are now multiplying in the wake of lockdown.

Even with the Open University that is available in prisons and sees around 1800 prisoners study degree-level modules each year, there are acute funding challenges; to get a student loan to cover the tuition fees, you must be within six years of your earliest release date. Any earlier and you have to find £3,200 per module yourself - or apply to the Longford Trust for one of our Frank Awards, designed for those in such a fix.

But what also holds back prison-learners is a sense that universities will not want them if they have a criminal record, or will make it hard for them to gain a place by their dizzying variety of disclosure processes, plus a more general feeling that university is for those with more supportive, financially secure backgrounds where siblings, parents and even grandparents have gone to university as a matter of course.

Sidelineing such negative ideas, and navigating any real obstacles, is where the Longford Trust comes in. Our scholarship awards – roughly 75 per cent go to those who have been released or are in Open conditions and can attend a local university on ROTL prior to their release – are designed to address financial fears with termly payments that supplement student loans and one-off payments to enable the purchase of lap-tops, now a pre-requisite for any degree course but at a minimum of £350 a go are beyond the budget of those who emerge from prison with £75 in their pocket to cover all necessities.

The awards also try to encourage and nurture a sense that university really is “somewhere for them” by giving each award-holder a trained volunteer mentor. They meet regularly and talk about anything that is troubling the award-holder: for example academic work; fitting in at university; when to disclose to fellow students; or accommodation challenges when their criminal conviction means they are not offered places in the first year in subsidised university halls but instead have to brave the more expensive private rented market.
And when thoughts start turning, as inevitably they do mid-degree, to what all the hard work and financial sacrifice will ultimately bring in terms of job prospects, the Longford Trust has an employability project, led by one of our award holders, where we offer a range of training days, internships, work placements and employment advisers to help navigate the transition between graduating and getting a graduate-level job.

What we know is that the sort of support we provide works. We see it daily among the cohort of 70 award-holders we are working with at any time. It contributes towards changing lives and futures - and cutting reoffending. And so it makes us keen to reach others who could benefit from what we offer.

Now that prisons are opening up, we are once again going back in, often accompanied by some of our recent graduates, to talk to prison-learners about going to university, getting a degree, what help is available, and what the outcomes can be in terms of a better life going forward.

But we also need to do better in reaching those newly-released - which is why I am so pleased that our two ex-scholars are now working in probation, joining those current probation officers who volunteer to train as one of our mentors. Ours is a hopeful, empowering message. Yes, there are obstacles, though in our experience both universities and employers are now more thoughtful and open than ever before around issues of disclosure, and therefore more willing to embrace the notion of second chances.

The past 15 years have taught us how to support those who want to go to university to translate that ambition into reality, and how to stick at it when the going gets tough. We can use our accumulated knowledge to help those probation sends in our direction in the same way that Lawrence is now using his lived experience to encourage others to walk the same road towards second chances.

“I feel that my opportunity in the world of probation is, perhaps, an experiment of sorts, but I’m OK with that,” he says. “I’m ready for the challenge. I have found a meaningful and fulfilling role and I intend to stay at probation for the long haul.”

You can find out more about Longford Scholarships on www.longfordtrust.org or by contacting office@longfordtrust.org.