

**Insider Perspectives in Higher Education
Within the British Prison System**
*Aisha Bint Faisal, Molly Dean, Mustafa Demirtas,
Sahana Dharmarajah, David Hinde, Moses Mathias,
George Milner, Megan Raynor, Muzzaker Shah,
Ashley Stanford and Gary Taylor*

INTRODUCTION

“A University should be a place of light, liberty and of learning”.

– Disraeli (2012, p. 120)

This contribution will describe the journey so far for the joint students of both the Westminster University and Grendon Higher Education Learners here at this democratic therapeutic community prison. Their personal stories account for shared journeys into higher education and will draw on ideas from Freire (1970) who highlighted the oppressive nature of incarceration and, in particular, the commonly referred to ‘banking system’ of learning that most learners in prison are obligated to partake in. “The banking system of education is paternalistic and narrative in character” (Freire, 1970, pp. 73-74). Unlike many other forms of education within the prison system, our reading group way of working is based on critical thinking. We are not told what to think or how to be, but valued for how we see life and encouraged to relay our lived experience. The British Convict Criminology (BCC) reading group attempts to achieve this through open discussion and critical analysis of relevant texts and honest debate in the field of Convict Criminology this year drawing on *The Felon* by John Irwin (1970) for inspiration.

This is seldom the description of learning within a UK prison, where the oppressed are told how to think, when to eat or sleep and most subtly relevant, how to learn. Moreover, this is despite the fact that “University has been demonstrated by research to be the single best means to post-prison success” (Richards, 2004, p. 70). And yet for many of the colleges within the British criminal justice system, critical thinking is almost discouraged in favour of menial ‘functional skills’ classes further compounding an oppressed way of learning.

Muzzaker begins by discussing his experience of rehabilitating himself and his transformation of identity. Freire (1970, p. 167)

describes oppression as “overwhelming control – as a love of death not life”. Despite his sentence being one of the longest in the UK, Muzzaker describes discovering hope through a less oppressive form of education encountered during own path of choice for education. David continues with the theme of identity observing ‘hypermasculinity’ (Steven cited in Bennett and Shuker, 2018) as a protective factor for most of the oppressed, and interestingly the ability of education to instill hope, liberating one into a less oppressed way of thinking and being. Mustafa and George identify the benefits of correspondence university degrees (e.g. at The Open University) currently being undertaken by a collective of students and the early experience of banking style education versus critical thinking courses we are engaging with through University of Westminster. Gary discusses the barriers faced by learners, likely the most relevant text when considering the areas where oppression is still rife here in the UK prison system. As Piché (2008, p. 5) emphasizes, citing MacLean (1992), “opportunities to learn are often used as tools to manage” prisoners. Finally, Moses discusses the birth of the reading group, its evolution as a democratic concept, and the motives behind the group being the benefits of higher education in reducing reoffending in addition to the gap in knowledge identified by having very few convicts and ex-convicts involved in criminological academia as a whole.

To add context, Muzzaker has a BSc in Combined Social Sciences with Criminology, David is studying for a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, Mustafa is studying for a BA in Criminology and Psychology, George is planning to start a degree, Gary is studying for BA in Arts and Humanities and Moses is studying for a BA in English Literature. Most of us plan to undertake an MA in Criminology and all plan to use our life experiences in prosocial ways. We are serving long-sentences ranging from 15-35 years. The different topics of higher education that will be discussed are: identity, skills learned, difficulties in starting a degree in prison, some of the challenges faced when studying and academic socializing. All accounts are based on personal experiences. The article will finish with a reflection on the reading group written by five University of Westminster students involved (Megan, Aisha, Ashley, Molly and Sahana). As the lecturers on the project have recently written about this and similar projects they operate in two other prisons, a main aim of the reading group is for inside and outside

learners to study with each other in a way that “replicat[es] a collaborative, university learning environment in prison” (Darke et al., forthcoming).

HIGHER EDUCATION AND IDENTITY WITHIN THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

PART I

Muzzaker Shah

I am Muzzaker Shah BSc (Combined Social Sciences with Criminology). I choose to introduce myself like this because on my prison card I am named A6205AC. I no longer identify myself with a prison number alone.

Rehabilitation is a word that does not sit right with me because it suggests an idea as if I was put on some form of a conveyor belt, on an assembly line by force and became who I am today. Rather I would say ‘I-habilitated’ through a journey of higher education that helped me to apply a third person theoretical underpinning to a first-person experience of the criminal justice system. This helped me to undertake group therapy with an inquisitive approach and a deeper understanding of the origins of my makeup.

Being acknowledged as an academic by students and professors alike has redefined my identity. Graduating and being embraced as alumni made me feel like I was being reintegrated into society, helping me to overcome the stereotypical labels often placed on felons. By studying with students and professors from BCC/University of Westminster I feel part of a movement where my opinions formed from 13 years in prison out of a 35-year life tariff does not fall on deaf ears nor is it undermined. Instead, my opinions are valued and discussed through concepts and theory. This allows my identity to feel aligned with theirs, which leads to a sense of greater belonging to a pro-social group.

Another prisoner and I were the debaters in the recent 20th Anniversary Debate at HMP Grendon with Birmingham City University (BCU). Prisoners had to oppose the BCU houses argument which was that only people convicted of violent offences should be incarcerated. I had a chance to bounce ideas with the BCC group discussing wider social harms and the inequality in the classes of offences and sentences. I then used the feedback from this discussion in my argument on the debate. And who would have

thought we would win? But we did. It is this new identity as a pro-social member of society that I am striving to build, applying to undertake a Master's in Crime and Justice. It is this identity that helps me to distance myself from criminality and gives me the belief in the reality of me one day being a convict criminologist in society.

PART II

David Hinde

There is a particular form of identity I recognize within a prison setting, which helped to form a pattern of repeat offending. This, in turn, led to reoccurring progressively longer sentences of incarceration that date back 20 years to when I was a juvenile. My self-realizations, studies with The Open University and involvement with the BCC movement with the University of Westminster has empowered the transition in my identity from a career criminal, labeled and stigmatized in society, to a reformed ex-criminal now on the path of education, reintegration, and growth as an academic.

In 2014, I returned to prison with a 15-year sentence for armed robbery. Frustrated and scared, once again the mask of masculinity and deception re-emerged to remain safe, to get through the prison day. This form of identity Stevens describes as "hypermasculinity" (in Bennett and Shuker, 2018).

In my experience, prisoner identity can create a warped sense of self. I think prison by its very nature creates this by segregating society from those sentenced by the courts. In my experience, this can make one dishonest, often needy, expectant of handouts, demoralized, hopeless and lonely – although some might never admit that – culminating in a person's character becoming insular, angry and somewhat unwilling to engage with an outsider's way of living, especially after a significant period of time incarcerated. Inside some are constantly clockwatching, dreaming of freedom, often finding no means to rehabilitate through menial prison employment and countless '23 ½ hour bang ups' as the saying goes, leading to copious amounts of self-pity or outwardly facing resentment and blame. For myself, I had reached the end of a life of taking from others. Being hopeless, I began to study.

My identity has begun to positively transform through my involvement with higher education. This is further compounded by my studies with BCC under Dr. Sacha Darke and Dr. Andreas Aresti. My vocabulary has

improved. I read. I am engaged with current affairs, and receive regular journals and academic papers from BCC. For the first time in many years, I am able to call home and tell my family the things academia is offering me. Furthermore, I am adding to my self-worth and granting the people I care about things to be proud of. Most importantly, research engagement through shared learning with other university students, alongside inside learners, has given me belief in my ability to become a scholar. I am more aware I can add to the pool of vital research knowledge and build a pro-social and worthy identity for myself moving forward.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND LEARNING SKILLS

Mustafa Demirtas

Building on the identity discussion, I would like to share some of the skills I have fostered since I ventured on my academic journey inside and how these apply to my day-to-day life.

I am in the process of refining an analytical mind. Looking at issues from different perspectives, angles and weighing them up is a skill I think every person should have to run their life more efficiently. The more I am involved with university studies, the more I feel I am using parts of my brain I had not been engaging in years. I can process information and think more efficiently, and I may state boldly that this has benefitted my emotional intelligence. Using how I learnt to analyze degree level concepts deeply, I try to think about my life situation more deeply and the effects of my actions.

A lot of people serving life sentences like me, or in prison in general, have had negative experiences with education and left school without adequate qualifications. As stated by Prison Education Trust (2015), the average prisoner enters prison with lower levels of education in comparison to the general population. BCC can promote education beyond Level 2 (usually studied at high school from ages 14 to 16). Learning important thinking skills I missed out on in earlier education settings allows me to regain this opportunity.

Another skill I am gaining is a broader understanding of the world and how I can be a part of enhancing my surroundings. The first module I studied with The Open University was “Investigating the Social World”. It was phenomenal to learn about justice, inequality, economic processes

and globalization, and how these factors have consequences on the world. For example, I was unaware of the inequalities that arise through coffee farming (Open University, 2016). Learning about this made me reflect on my own actions in the world and want to be a part of creating change by purchasing fair trade products that could help to create more fairness for farmers in other countries. More directly though, the module made me want to enhance my closer surroundings, as well as those further afield.

Developing my own surroundings is achieved by the motivation levels I am gaining from higher education. I have learnt to meet deadlines, manage time and plan goals more efficiently. These transferable skills are ones I am using in other areas as well as studying. Meeting deadlines creates a sense of purpose and builds confidence in higher education, where I previously lacked experience.

Moreover, the BCC sessions importantly bring skills in higher education that my Open University degree cannot as an integral part of learning comes from group discussions and debates. Distance learning in prison fails to develop this form of communication where one learns to argue points through with their voice and listen to lectures. With students from the University of Westminster, along with Dr. Sacha Darke and Dr. Andreas Aresti, I have been able to practice this skill by sharing opinions on academic criminology papers and the book *The Felon* by the late John Irwin (1970).

INSPIRED TO BECOME A HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNER

George Milner

I have also been a part of the BCC discussions and like the above writers am enjoying creating a pro-social identity and learning new skills. One aspect I would like to focus on is the negative experience of early education many prisoners have had that Mustafa briefly mentioned. More importantly though I wouldd like to share the shift I experienced that led to my own involvement in higher education settings.

I was excluded from school at the age of 15. I had dyslexia and the reading and writing of a seven-year-old child, and no enthusiasm to take part in further education. In 2006, when I was 18-years-old I entered the UK prison system. Due to my difficulties learning, I was placed in an education

class with disruptive young men where I felt not much attention was paid to the learners, leaving our educational needs unmet.

After many years on the road of rehabilitation, I decided I would try education again. It was difficult, but I gained level 1 (usually studies from ages 11 to 14) and then level 2 in English and Math, and started to enjoy formal learning. I then had the confidence and drive to take part in a “Learning Together” criminology course with the University of Cambridge. In this course, I learnt about and discussed criminological concepts with students from the University. My outlook on education changed and I learnt how wonderful and inspiring it can be. I wrote my first essay for the course and once I got a taste for degree level study, I wanted to continue academic learning.

I wanted to start a degree with The Open University (OU), but was unable to take out a loan because I had more than eight years left to serve in prison. This year, I should be able to start my studies with the OU though. In the meantime, my work with the BCC reading group is giving me insight into what is possible if I choose a career path as a criminologist. I have learnt how much support is available for those studying degrees in prison from BCC, “Learning Together” and other learning communities. This is encouraging for a new learner.

A LOOK AT THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THOSE STUDYING DEGREE-LEVEL COURSES IN PRISON

Gary Taylor

The difficulties faced by anyone studying at degree level are challenging to say the least. When someone is studying for a degree in prison, those difficulties are magnified by a lack of access to resources, extremely limited correspondence with tutors and non-existent access to the internet (Piché, 2008). By looking at the difference between what is available to students at a university and that which is available to those studying whilst in prison we may begin to understand the uphill struggles faced by an individual studying for a degree in prison.

The benefits of studying at a university in the community are something that can be sometimes taken for granted by the students. At the beginning

of the academic year, the student is given the course materials along with a list of times that they are to attend lectures and tutorials. There is also a vast library containing the majority of the reading material needed and the students have the support of the other people on their course. Those students that study whilst in prison lack even these most fundamental amenities.

One of the biggest issues highlighted by the students I have spoken to in prison is the lack of access to online material. The internet is a vast source of research material and information that could be used as a support to students studying for a degree. However, the major difficulty created by a lack of access to online material is receiving online information in hard copy. In an interview with one inside learner it was noted, "Without access to online material, there have been a number of occasions where I have not been sent hard copies of the online materials in time to do the reading of them for the essay that the material related to".

Access to the online world can not only have an impact on a student's ability to study the material when needed, but it can also create a feeling of isolation. Studying with The Open University is a solitary endeavour in as much as the student engages with the study material independently of other students. However, there are forums on which the students can 'come together' to discuss the course they are studying and offer advice and guidance to one another. When studying in prison this option is not available to the student and can lead to them feeling demotivated and lacking in confidence as they are unable to relate their experience to that of others on the same course.

Another recurring barrier I came across when speaking to students in prison was that of being able to engage with the study materials. One inside learner described to me an instance in which his essay score was directly affected by the inability to use a computer with a DVD-ROM as follows: "In some prisons I have not been had access to DVD-ROM. I had an essay that was based on a film that I could not watch and had to basically make up my essay as if I had watched it, this caused me to get a grade that was almost a fail".

The infrequency of tutorials for those studying in prison is another difficulty worth taking into account. Relating this to my personal experience of studying with The Open University is the best way I could find to highlight this obstacle; in the four years I have been studying for my degree, I have had two tutorials. For me, this means that I do not get to know my tutor as a

student in the community would, which has impacted on my ability to fully understand what my tutor was looking for when marking my essays.

Studying for a degree in prison has advantages; one thing that there is no lack of in prison is time. A student in prison can dedicate more time to their studies than the average student and just as differing prison facilities can negatively impact a student's work, these differences can also be positive. Here at HMP Grendon, we have access to many different things that are not available at other prisons. One of the most productive examples of this is our current engagement with the University of Westminster. Once a month we get together with undergraduates from Westminster and discuss criminology papers. This experience has given us the opportunity to exchange information and experiences, which highlights that there are benefits for both inside learners as well as those that are at university outside who are also on an academic path.

THE BCC READING GROUP AT HMP GRENDON

Moses Mathias

There are two significant problems the BCC reading group helps to remedy. One is the gap and challenges faced when a prisoner is involved in higher education in the British prison system such as the breakdown of communication between prisons and universities, as well as the lack of access to personal tutors, basic academic information and reading recommendations (Darke and Aresti, 2016). The second problem is the desperate shortage of educated current and former prisoner voices within the discipline of criminology (Darke and Aresti, 2016).

In what I see as an attempt to shorten the gap in prison higher education and bring the 'prisoner voice' into criminology studies more, a prison reading group was set up by BCC. In this group, six prisoners who are engaged with higher education and six criminology students from the University of Westminster (UW) met with senior lecturers Dr. Sacha Darke and Dr. Andreas Aresti once a month at HMP Grendon throughout the 2017-2018 academic year. Our aim was to discuss papers and combine personal and theoretical knowledge to enrich our understanding of criminology. Guest academics from Brazil and Italy also attended sessions, along with a PhD student from UW.

In the first few sessions, we studied the origins of Convict Criminology (CC) by reading “Introducing the New School of Convict Criminology” (Richards and Ross, 2001) and “The First Dime: A Decade of Convict Criminology” (Jones et al, 2009). All members of the reading group supported the CC position that criminology authors who have been imprisoned could as a collective create a realistic paradigm that challenges conventional research findings of the past (Richards and Ross, 2001). Dr. Aresti shared this view during one session: “the inside learners are experts by experience”. It made me think of the importance of ethnographic research and how those who have served time in prison like Dr. Aresti could gain an understanding of certain areas of the criminal justice system that might be difficult for researchers who had never experienced the full oppressiveness of this system. Equally as important, the theory that the outside learners from UW brought to the discussions gave us a theoretical framework to explore our personal experience. It was recognized that some of the most important members of CC were critical criminologists who although are not ex-prisoners significantly contribute to the content and context of the school (Richards and Ross, 2001).

Once we gained an understanding of the history of CC, and critical criminology, we democratically chose to read *The Felon* by John Irwin (1970). This choice seemed relevant, because John Irwin, a CC supporter, had served time in the American prison system before gaining a PhD and conducting criminological research in American prisons (Richard and Ross, 2001).

During each session, we discussed one or two chapters from *The Felon* and compared the findings to our perception of modern prisons. Irwin’s categorisations of criminal identities in prison were: ‘the thief’, ‘the hustler’ (explained as the theft system used mainly in urban settings), ‘the dope fiend’ (an opiate addict), ‘the head’ (those whom use other psychedelic drugs), ‘the disorganised criminal’, ‘state-raised youth’ (those whom were young ‘offenders’), ‘the man in the lower class’ and ‘the square john’ (those whom had no contact with criminal behaviour systems prior to offending) (Irwin, 1987). There was much discussion on how criminality has changed since *The Felon* was first published. We thought the attributes associated with many of these criminal identities had changed due to modern technology, laws and politics. However, we could all still categorize certain of these identities in relation to contemporary beliefs, cultures, financial and moral attitudes. It was collectively noted though how vague these categories

can be and that individuals might hold beliefs or accept parts of different identities. Much debate also covered the differences between the American and British criminal justice systems.

To understand the importance of the BCC group it is important to state some facts about the British penal system. The prison environment can be seen as criminogenic: it separates a person from his or her non-offending network, reduces employability and forces those with convictions to associate with other criminals, some of whom are intent on continuing to commit crime (Mann et al, 2018). Adding to this, the Lammy Review recently revealed the inequality people from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds experience in prison (Review, 2017). Moreover, for prisons to be rehabilitative (and not criminogenic) they need to be procedurally fair (Mann et al, 2018). Reading groups such as BCC help to create a rehabilitative climate by giving those who are in prison, as I am, space where they can associate with a non-offending network, increase employability through academic study and encourage one another in a pro-social setting. In the group our ethnicity does not create unfair treatment, rather we are all valued for our unique life experience, culture and understanding. This humanizing experience motivates us inside learners to engage with our higher education studies more seriously.

The importance of this is that higher education is instrumental to many on their journey of surviving in prison and desisting from crime (Darke and Aresti, 2016). This, I hope, was shown in the writing of the other fellow BCC reading group members. Involvement with higher education improves employment prospects. Yet what the reading group provides that The Open University lacks is the social aspect of learning within a group. With The Open University there is limited contact with a tutor and you study alone (Darke and Aresti, 2016). The BCC reading group, however, involves group discussion and the formation of more personal academic relationships. This kind of structural change within a social network is important (especially in a prison environment) because it presents new possibilities for human agency (Farrall et al, 2010). Through the reading group, inside learners were able to recognize and strengthen our non-criminal identities as Muzzaker explained. The structural shift in social networks happened more formally during the reading group through the mentoring scheme that BCC launched in 2013 for current and former prisoners studying for degrees (Darke and Aresti, 2016). A couple of inside learners from the reading group have

been provided with mentors from BCC to assist in their studies and to help develop the 'prisoner voice' in the field of criminology.

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER STUDENTS' REFLECTION

Criminology students read endless material on the various aspects of prison from its history, political influence, country comparison and so on. Books, articles and other resources we used during our studies aided our understanding, but the accuracy of their representation of prison is limited. Through the dedicated work of our lecturers in growing BCC, we were provided with the opportunity to interact with other students from a variety of disciplines who are completing degrees whilst incarcerated. This experience enabled us outside learners to witness the power of education for the inside learners, not only as they worked towards a future degree, but also as being a positive catalyst towards rehabilitation in its own right (Torre and Fine, 2005). The experience allowed outside learners to witness the determination, passion and desire for an education in prison, which was inspiring to those on the outside. Through our monthly sessions, we were able to learn first-hand about the prison experience in the UK beyond a theoretical understanding, through a new perspective, looking beyond the associated stigma with 'offenders'.

While carceral tours are frequently used by criminologists to expose their students to imprisonment in a brief and fleeting manner often without contact with prisoners (Piché and Walby, 2010) or with limited contact where they may be quite wary and careful of what they say (Waldram, 2009), the opportunity afforded to us through the BCC reading group stands-out as unusual. On each of the nine occasions we visited the prison, we spent around three hours alone with the inside learners and university teachers. Officers did not listen in. Moreover, we studied on a prison wing. During breaks, we had unlimited access to other common areas used by prisoners on the wing, so long as we were accompanied by one of the lecturers.

Of course, there are still barriers. Entering as outside students, we do not live there, experience everyday life nor the struggles of being separated from society. The inside students could discuss topics openly in a safe environment, yet we were aware there were limitations to how they would share with people they did not know that well coming once a month from the

outside. Regardless of the limitations, however, we believe the opportunity for both inside and outside learners was invaluable in the inside and outside experiences and knowledge that were shared.

As discussed above, education within prison is filled with obstacles due to the purpose of prison failing to align with academic needs (Farley and Pike, 2018). The contrast between the accessibility for inside and outside learners is quite remarkable and highlights how reliant outside learners are on the wide range of resources available to them, ranging from digital resources, to academic supervision, to the social aspect of education. BCC allows for the opportunity of social learning rather than solely solitary learning, which benefits the inside learners. Group study is a social opportunity to learn from others and this can often be overlooked or taken for granted by outside learners. University is enriched by diverse perspectives. Being able to participate in the reading group with inside learners has broadened the scope of discussions and truly enriched our learning and vice-versa. The BCC reading group has allowed for students to apply theoretical concepts to practical settings, seeing the barriers in place and how opportunities such as the reading group facilitate a university education that can be replicated into an otherwise oppressive institution. Overall, this experience not only enhanced our prior understanding, but allowed us to develop our critical thinking as we were provided with a whole new perspective to further understand the complex nature of prisons.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the work by BCC with the reading groups are rewarding to all involved and truly inspired, changed and developed one's academic understanding. BCC provides academic material, discusses topics and offers support through mentorship, fulfilling the aims of BCC. The project can unify learners in an environment that breaks down prejudice. This article touches on how important the education system is within prison, being able to provide hope and adapting a new identity. As covered by the inside learners, the project enables access to education with helps with the rehabilitative process of changing one's identity. BCC helps promote communication between university and prisoners, which enables a range of expertise. Outside learners do not appreciate opportunities such as guest speakers until witnessing learners who achieve with limited resources. Whether it be

developing a critical perspective, discussing content through experience or ideas, or providing a place which the insider learners lend their voice, the reading group helps establish a pro-social mindset valuing their experience alongside academic expertise. These sessions gave outside learners insight into the world that others labelled “too dangerous” to explore (Sykes, 1958, p. 77). Every inside learner had differing circumstances that lead them to their current position, but each took positive actions to change using education as a catalyst. As highlighted, education in prison is difficult, the work of BCC can help assist in overcoming the barriers to education. The experience was a valuable opportunity to understand prisons and breakdown the stigma. Outside learners saw how important education is in providing hope, stimulating the mind and as a tool in overcoming the harms of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). BCC inspires those involved into higher education including Masters degrees and PhDs. The success of this reading group at HMP Grendon has been replicated at HMP Coldingley, with a total of 13 students from the University of Westminster involved in both projects. It is our hope that more projects of this kind can take form and promote change in other prisons across the UK with BCC as an agent for change in developing the field of criminology. Education should promote freedom (Disraeli, 1873), and this project enables debates, learning and opportunity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Aisha Bint Faisal completed a BA in Criminology at University of Westminster. She is currently in the Master's program in Law, Society and Religion at the University of Westminster.

Molly Dean completed a BA in Criminology at University of Westminster. She is currently in the Master's program in International Relations and Security at the University of Westminster.

Mustafa Demirtas is currently a BA Criminology and Psychology student at The Open University.

Sahana Dharmarajah completed a BA in Criminology at the University of Westminster.

David Hinde is presently a BA Politics, Philosophy and Economics student at The Open University. Following the completion of his undergraduate studies, he plans to pursue a Master's degree in criminology.

Moses Mathias is a BA English Literature student at The Open University. Following the completion of his undergraduate studies he plans to pursue a Master's in English Literature and become a writer.

George Milner is currently completing an Open University Access Module in Science, Technology and Maths. Following this, he plans to apply to earn a degree in Environmental Studies or Criminology.

Megan Raynor completed a BA in Criminology at the University of Westminster.

Ashley Stanford completed a BA in Criminology at the University of Westminster.

Muzakker Imtiaz Shah completed a BSc Social Science at The Open University and is planning to start a Master's in Criminology.

Gary Taylor is currently a BA Arts and Humanities student at The Open University.