Our time to learn

Real stories about offender learning
Front cover images from Shutterstock.com, left to right:
© Denisenko; © Falconia; © Antonov Roman.
Contents

Foreword .................................................................................................................2

1. About this publication ......................................................................................4

2. Background ..................................................................................................5

3. The stories ..................................................................................................6
   Helen .............................................................................................................6
   Frank .........................................................................................................10
   Sophie ......................................................................................................13
   Paul ..........................................................................................................18
   Billy .......................................................................................................20
   Stephen ..................................................................................................22
   Dell .......................................................................................................24

4. Conclusion ..................................................................................................28
Today, more attention and public resources are being directed towards offender learning than ever before.

Of course punishment of offenders upholds the values of law and order upon which all civilised society is based.

Yet a civilised society surely too must ensure offenders emerge from prison better equipped to become part of law-abiding communities than when they were sentenced, better able to reintegrate, and with the skills necessary to build useful and productive lives.

Since May 2010, the government has led positive change in how we tackle recidivism. But there is more we can and should do.

In reading the pages that follow, I hope you find the voices of offenders and ex-offenders, and their stories of the barriers that learning helped them to overcome, as moving as I do. They represent views and experiences that are common right across our penal system. Indeed, I hear similar opinions as a local MP when I visit Highpoint prison in my own constituency.

Wherever they originate, it surely makes sense to pay attention to constructive ideas on how we could change things to enable offenders, from the moment they enter prison, to start to build for the future through robust high-quality learning that will eventually give them meaningful employment opportunities and a larger stake in family and community life.

That is why I am so pleased that NIACE has decided to share these and similar stories through this publication.
The new strategy for offender learning that was launched last year addresses many of the same issues. It is designed to focus learning so that it operates swiftly to address basic maths and English needs at the very start of the sentence, to target provision more effectively on the skills employers want where prisoners will be released, and to ensure that the quality of the service increases.

Central to this are the changes that the government has put in place to give prison governors a decisive role in deciding who their learning provider should be, as well as the responsibility for working with the provider, the Skills Funding Agency and others to decide the curriculum, and assess the provider’s performance.

In this way we want to create a system freed from the errors of the past that has seen far too many offenders caught in the revolving door of offending and imprisonment. The stories in the pages below leave a vivid impression of just how urgent it is to make a reality of the long-cherished concept of prisoner rehabilitation and the extent to which our society will benefit if we succeed in doing so.

Matthew Hancock
Minister for Skills
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1. About this publication

The stories in this publication were written by individuals who bear the label of ‘offender’ and who have experience of learning while serving either a custodial or community sentence. Their stories highlight the ongoing challenges faced by offenders in learning, how they, with support, were able to overcome those challenges and the positive changes learning has made to their lives.

NIACE believes that the learner voice is key to advocating for effective learning and support for offenders. These stories will allow practitioners and policy makers to gain invaluable insight into the learning needs and experiences of this cohort of learners. We also hope that others who bear the label of ‘offender’ are inspired and motivated to take up more, different and better learning opportunities.
NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives, and has for many years contributed to debates about the nature, extent and quality of learning and skills available to offenders. This is in line with our primary aim of advancing the case for adult learning in public policy and debate and to influence and persuade others that improving, increasing and extending opportunities for adults to learn throughout their lives has real public as well as private benefits.

Over the past decade more attention and resources have been directed towards offender learning than ever before. Many important and positive changes are now being implemented. Notably, the new OLASS 4 arrangements should improve the way in which learning provision for offenders in custody is planned, organised, delivered and funded. Additionally, the arrival of the Virtual Campus should ease many of the barriers associated with using ICT in prisons.

These changes formed part of the discussion at the NIACE offender learning seminar, held in April 2012. The seminar was attended by the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, John Hayes, and a range of offender learning senior managers and practitioners. There was general consensus that the most powerful presentations came from the four learners who shared their experiences.

The decision was taken to share these and similar stories more widely, in the hope that stakeholders, practitioners and policy makers can gain a better understanding of the issues and that policy and practice can be enhanced as a result.
3. The stories

Then:

It all started 15 months ago, when I appeared in court on 13 May 2011 for benefit fraud. I was in so much debt and thought the only way out was to find work. I was a single parent claiming benefit. I knew it was wrong but felt I had no choice. I hoped I wouldn’t get caught. But looking back I am glad I was.

It took 18 months of waiting between the time I was under caution and my court date. In that time, I became so depressed, worried and very scared. I lived on antidepressants. Citalopram and Diazepam became my friends as well as the couch, where I was curled up most days. I lived those 18 months in a daze, doing things in a robotic way. Looking on the internet at what prison life was like in case I ended up there. I got myself into such a state that my family were really worried about me. I had never told them anything at first about debts. I didn’t want them to think I was a failure. I wanted them to think I was managing okay.

13 May 2011, the day I was to attend court. I prayed to God like I’d never prayed before; ‘Please God don’t let me go away to prison, who will look after John?’ John is my son and I am his carer. My daughter came with me to court; my eight-month-old grandson came too, as my daughter had no one to look after him at the time. We were sitting in the waiting area in the court. I was in a daze after taking more antidepressants, my daughter asked me to hold the baby whilst she got something out of her bag for him. I was in pieces holding him. I sat him on the edge of my knee with his back facing me. He was trying to turn to me to put
Voices of Young Adult Carers

his arms around my neck to hug me. He loves his hugs. I thought, ‘what if I go away? He won’t have his Nan to hug him’.

The court usher called my name. I stood and walked towards the doors not looking back at my daughter and grandson.

Everything that was going on around me in court didn’t seem real. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion. My barrister spoke first then the barrister for the prosecution spoke. What seemed like an eternity came to an end. The judge asked me to stand up. My hands were shaking and clasped together. He spoke to me in a calm manner. I told him I was so sorry and nothing like this would ever happen again. I had never been in trouble before. He passed sentence, 56-day imprisonment, suspended for 12 months’ probation. I was free to go. I thanked him from the bottom of my heart. I ran out through the doors hugged my daughter and grandson, cried, then cried some more. We then went for something to eat. I had not eaten properly for a long time. The pancetta, chips and salad tasted so good.

Now:

On 16 May 2011, I headed off to the probation office in Europa Boulevard, Birkenhead, unaware of what to expect. I walked in, feeling so embarrassed, wishing it wasn’t happening. There appeared to be people everywhere looking at me. I looked around thinking, ‘I should not be here’, then I thought, ‘well you did wrong, that is why you are here’.

I met with my Probation Officer and as soon as I spoke to her, the floodgates opened. I was convinced it was all a mistake and that I was going to be put away in
By the end of the course I had a feeling of, ‘yes I am me and I can do anything’.

The centre runs lots of different courses and I have gained lots of certificates. I took all of the courses that were offered to me. The first course I took was the ‘GOALS’ programme. It was all about gaining confidence (which I did not have much of), motivation and assertiveness. By the end of the course I had a feeling of, ‘yes I am me and I can do anything’. GOALS was run by very supportive staff from Achieve North West and I thank them for that. GOALS was followed by more courses. I went on the ‘Open Doors’ project, where I met more helpful people from Wirral Met College who ran some of the courses. The courses which I took were: Intro to Beauty, Floristry and Horticulture, Let’s Cook, Managing your Money, First Aid, Creative Writing, Finding a Voice and Mentoring Advice and Guidance. I cannot begin to tell you what it has done for me. I am a different person.
The courses which are close to my heart and which I have followed on with are Finding a Voice and Mentoring. I now write poetry. My first poem entitled *Then and Now* has travelled worldwide from Jamaica to Portugal. I have also recited it on Radio 4 with the Bishop of Liverpool. It has also been heard on Radio Merseyside. Unbeknown to me, it got selected for ‘Pick of the Week’.

On 26 April 2012, due to my good progress, I was asked to go to London to a NIACE conference. It was a brilliant experience, one I will never forget. We met HRH Princess Anne and John Hayes, the Minister for Adult Education. He read my poem *Then and Now* to the other guests there and I got a round of applause. I felt so proud when John said that he was going to frame my poem which I had given him and he’d asked me to sign it. “It’s going on my wall in my office”, he said.

My mentoring is going well too. I have finished two courses. I am now on my third course. I help other women at Tomorrow’s Women, who come in feeling how I once felt.

I know what I did was wrong and I am truly sorry. As John Hayes said to me, “Not everything in life is black and white”. Now my life is what I make of it. It is going well thanks to Tomorrow’s Women and everyone who has helped me along the way.
Frank

I was born in East London on 21 April 1960. I am the second oldest, with two brothers and three sisters, and we were raised by our mother. From a very early age, 11, I had been in trouble with the authorities. Crime and drug addiction led to a life in and out of prison and a period of homelessness. Until the age of 45 I had never had a job and had supported my family and myself by committing crime. In 2004 I was in prison again; it was to be a four-year sentence. I realised then I had to make a change somehow; I had had enough of letting people down, smoking drugs, going in and out of courts and prisons. But how would I go turn things around? All I knew was criminal activity and all the people I knew were into drugs and crime.

I had always enjoyed learning but having been expelled from school at 14 the classroom was not an environment that I had good memories of and so never saw the point of doing anything as alien as studying. When I decided to go to the education department at HMP The Mount, it was just so I could have access to the library. However, I found the environment totally different to what I had expected a learning environment would be. Better, even. I began to engage with the staff and they started to engage with me. Two of the tutors in particular were very supportive and after some months I sat my first ever exam, at the age of 45! It was GCSE English and I surprised myself by getting a grade A.

This gave me so much confidence, lifted my self-esteem and for the first time ever I had the feeling of being proud of myself. It was that feeling more than any other that
made me hungry for learning. It was as if I had suddenly become aware of all the learning that, I felt, I had been denied, and I wanted it all back. From here my life began to change.

Prior to leaving prison some months later, an organisation, the Foundation Training Company had visited me in prison. They suggested I contact them upon my release and they could help me to continue my education by giving me information on studying opportunities. I paid them a visit and I soon found myself enrolled on a course at the City Lit College in London, designed to help people with a background in homelessness and offending.

I enrolled at City Lit and completed my NVQ in supporting the needs of vulnerable adults. The UK adult education organisation NIACE awarded me the European Social Fund Outstanding Learner of the Year honour in 2009. This led to a number other awards including the regional student of the year award at the Adult Learners’ Week ceremony. I also was able to gain a placement with whilst working. When my course finished I was offered paid employment, my first paid job, in 2008. For the next three years I worked in the substance misuse field with a number of different organisations. At the end of 2011 I was made redundant and made the decision to go to university and study

“"I realised then I had to make a change somehow; I had had enough of letting people down, smoking drugs, going in and out of courts and prisons.""
Criminology and Youth Justice. This September I will be starting my second year.

I started my journey in education in prison and it has lead to a completely new life for me. Education has given me choices and the ability to take control of my life instead of being constantly in custody wondering how long the next sentence would be or how long before I would see my children again. Today, because of a decision I made to educate myself, I no longer have those fears. I now have stability in my life, I have a loving family and my children are no longer angry with me but proud of me.

“Education has given me choices and the ability to take control of my life instead of being constantly in custody wondering how long the next sentence would be or how long before I would see my children again.”
My life was full of numbers: TG699; Cell C1-17; 30 red entries; 10 days CC; 10 adjudications. All this after only being in this jail for 60 days! I could decorate my walls with the amount of ‘warning slips’, Incentive Earned Privilege (IEP) slips and ‘nicking sheets’ that were being put through my door on a daily basis.

I was by no means ‘bad’. It was my first time before the courts resulting in a hefty six-year, five-year and four-year concurrent sentence. I did myself no favours during my inauguration to life at HMP by informing the ‘screws’ that should they ‘bang me up’ with someone else I would ‘batter’ them (and not with bread crumbs). This slip of the tongue followed me throughout the three years that I spent within the confines of various 6ft by 8ft concrete boxes, all as scummy as the previous.

I travelled through three prisons in almost as many months, getting moved along only when I had used up all the ink in the red pens for that establishment. In my third and final prison, I was curtly informed by the governor that if my attitude didn’t change, I would be spending ‘as long as he could get away with’ locked up in the block. I found myself quickly marched down there, still cuffed from the prison transport, after telling him he was singing the wrong words to Islands in the Stream. Possibly not the smartest move of my HMP career but definitely the shock that I needed. I didn’t want to be blocked off. The cardboard table and chair did nothing for the décor of the segregation cells, the bare bed frame bolted to the floor and the mesh on the window filled
with rotten tea bags and manky apple cores shook me to the pit of my stomach. Remembering the dubious stains spotted along the floor and walls, I could not bear to think what part of the body they originated from.

Even though I was in my third prison my reputation as being, in the governor’s words, “the worst female offender in the prison system” had most certainly preceded me. Even nurses were now giving me red entries! I was sick of ‘basic’, sick of the boredom and I wanted my guitar back that was taken from me (whilst on basic). What I found out, though, is that I could write and with poetry being the general forte of prisoners I took to it like a duck to water; my note books were filling up, charting my days spent in jail and documenting the many lows I went through.

Writing awakened my craving for knowledge and really made me want to start my education again. I had a good education (compared to others in jail) so I took two A Levels in six months. It was not easy and I had to teach myself as there were no teachers available to give me one to one tuition. I also attended the education block as much as I could and did every course there until I had exhausted the facilities available to prisoners. Slowly, members of the education staff were coming on my side and now they were giving me good reports instead of the constant barrage of red entries on my ‘IEP’ (Incentive Earned Privilege).

“My confidence soared and with it so did my sense of self-worth. My behaviour calmed down and my attitude settled.”
Thanks to the education staff, my wing file was slowly filling up with positive black writing. I became a ‘Toe by Toe’ mentor, teaching others to read as well as being a teaching assistant in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. My confidence soared and with it so did my sense of self-worth. My behaviour calmed down and my attitude settled. Slowly, people were saying my name in a positive manner. I still had a quick tongue and a very hot temper but my slip-ups were not recorded as much anymore and I found myself becoming an enhanced prisoner, which meant I could access distance learning.

The Education Administration supported me in finding funding for distance learning which enabled me to undertake a two-year creative writing course funded by the Prisoner’s Education Trust and an Open University course funded by Women In Prison. Unfortunately there was no additional support available, no mentors for the distance learning. My family and friends were unable to support me financially to get the equipment or academically as by the time I had written to them and they had written back, the deadline for submission had passed. I never got to speak to a tutor or lecturer for distance learning and my resources were limited by the books that were available in the library to me and by which nice members of staff could print off at home for me to use. No internet access was a burden as all the tutorials were online and I could not access them. It was only down to my own stubbornness that I managed to complete the courses; I was not about to let the system beat me on an education I wanted, deserved and was capable of achieving.
I was approached one day by the Governor of Diversity and asked to become a diversity representative; in her words, “you need to focus your tongue on something positive.” I became the voice of a group of prisoners and represented them in meetings with staff and arranged focus groups for them to have their needs met.

I got told I could go for ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence) if I kept up the good work. So I did. I started to play the game the way they wanted it played; playing it my way had got me nothing other than a security file that took up half a filing cabinet! I got my first ROTL and went home to see my family for the weekend. This brief glimpse of freedom was what I needed. Upon my return to jail I was completely different, I had something to work towards every month and every month bar one for the remainder of my sentence I went home to see my family for five days.

After several months of going home my name was put forward to work for Koestler as an art curator. I was responsible for putting together an art exhibition at the South Bank Centre showcasing prisoners’ art work that I and several others had chosen to go to exhibition. People who came to this exhibition wanted to hear my story as a prisoner as it was a unique insight otherwise not afforded to the ‘free world’. Public speaking was where it was at for me. I had a thirst for it. A thirst for wanting to get the voices of the imprisoned to the minds of the free.

From working with Koestler I moved to the open wing and started volunteering for a mental health charity and eventually got paid employment in a hotel. I was no longer imprisoned fully, only at night when I would return from work; but the ball and chain that I was mentally shackled by was
slackening. I started approaching youth offending teams offering to mentor the young people on their case loads and got offered voluntary employment with Kingston Youth Offending Team. I got to work closely with the young offenders and shared my story of crime and imprisonment to try and steer them away from the path they were walking as well as mentoring them through offending related issues such as anger and drug abuse. From this work my name was referred to the Metropolitan Police to accompany them into schools and Pupil Referral Units to speak to and educate students there. My name started to be passed around these higher regions and my name started to carry a bit of weight, in a good way. I got involved with a charity called User Voice which is an ex-offender-led service for ex-offenders by ex-offenders, and advised the government on the Green Paper.

Since my release from prison in September 2010 I still volunteer with youth offending teams and I have recently been offered a job with Women in Prisons. I am approached for public speaking by varied organisations. I have advised the BBC on their new comedy Dead Boss (shown on BBC Three) and have had a meeting with Princess Anne where I was introduced as an expert on education in prisons. If someone had said to me five years ago that I would be sat in a room with Princess Anne, being treated as an equal, then I would have laughed in their face. I am proof that anything can happen as long as you believe in yourself. Don’t let negativity hold you back, transform your life into something positive through education.
I am 54 years old: I was sent to prison for the first time this year (2012) after I was found guilty of tax fraud. I was first sent to HMP Forest Bank, a Category B prison for 14 weeks, before I was sent to HMP Kirkham, which is an open prison.

When I was first sentenced, I spent a long time in the hospital wing, and ‘in-cell education’ was the only option I had, other than to watch TV or read. This was limited to one item per week but it made me think more about prison life and how I got here. One of the courses was about a student body in the USA who had been asked to split into two groups: one group of prisoners and another group of officers. I was asked for my view, which enabled me to see both sides of the operation – now I look at things from all sides.

I soon joined a business studies course; this was a 16-week course which I found very refreshing even though I have been in business since the early 1980s. The course will enable me to improve the way in which one would run a business. I completed this course, achieving an NVQ level 1 pass within two weeks thanks to the dedication of tutors who worked overtime to support me.

I have continued to learn a host of skills during my time in prison education. The experience has helped me personally; I have realised that I do have shortcomings that need sorting and that you are never too old to learn. But just as important is the role I can play in helping others.

“... you are never too old to learn.”
I am now a ‘Toe by Toe Mentor’, after realising, with some shock, just how many people of all ages and backgrounds cannot read, write or perform simple calculations. I find the method of using real-life situations to help someone understand maths or English very interesting and there is no greater joy than helping someone to read and write to the point where they can complete their own application forms.

You have to be non-judgemental to be able to help other inmates. When inmates feel that they are being judged or mocked, those who want to learn will stop.

“In the time I have left at HMP Kirkham I have signed up to do a Level 1 Computer Aided Design course and a Digital Photographic Design course. I never intend to stop learning and when I am released I will ensure that those around me take advantage of learning.

I think HMP should encourage all prisoners to learn; the facilities are good and offer prisoners many opportunities to continue learning and improving themselves.
I have come through ‘the ranks’, if you like, in terms of my academic journey. Starting with foundation courses, moving on to GCSE equivalent and then A Level courses, and now an undergraduate course with the Open University. I am now in the latter stages of a Criminology/Social Sciences postgraduate course with two modules to complete before I reach my MA (Hons) goal. It was never an easy task for me as I am not a natural academic, but I am a very diligent student who is prepared to make many sacrifices to get where I want to be.

I didn’t really go to school during my formative years. I guess I am paying the price for that now in the late nights and confusion. Knowing where I come from in Glasgow, people of my age left school and either went to work, on the dole or to prison. Nobody would ever consider the value of higher education; well, nobody would afford it the same value that I give it today. It’s a life saver, a reason to prove to myself that I am more than just a prisoner. I said to myself many years ago that I would come out of prison a different person, a better man and even wrote a wee maxim for myself to keep that focus. It’s simple: ‘Be something other than older when you leave prison’.

Winning the NIACE Regional Award empowered me with even more confidence in my willingness and ability to help others. So much so, that I undertook a counselling course. This is one of my ongoing projects, something that I can escape to when some of my more demanding work gets a wee bit too much for me. It’s a great leveller, it keeps me grounded and I have managed
to use it on myself as a means of monitoring how I feel about different types of situations. Most people only have a relative understanding of what prison is and how it functions. The truth of the matter is that I don’t have enough time to watch my non-existent plasma screen or use the non-existent swimming pool. I am working as a teaching assistant/class helper, acting as a representative for one thing or another, studying, revising or writing articles for various publications or letters for other prisoners.

The bottom line per se is that I cannot thank enough NIACE and everyone associated with it, prison education and the Open University tutors for putting up with me, believing in and supporting me throughout my academic journey. I know the power of prison education; my academic endeavours, a long slow trek that started in December 1988, are not over yet. I continue to learn something new each day, it may only be how to help somebody with spelling or motivating them when they are down, but its learning, it’s an education that I never had yesterday.

“It’s a life saver, a reason to prove to myself that I am more than just a prisoner.”
I spent seven-and-a-half months in prison which was half of a 15-month sentence. I spent most of that time in HMP Bedford, a local prison, doing every course available to me. I have always been very bookish and since I had so much time on my hands, I thought I’d use it to get back into learning in a concentrated way. I found that there was a lot of support available within prison, in particular from the tutors who I found very motivating and the therapist who was absolutely brilliant. What worked for me was the fact that prison was a one-stop shop with facilities and resources I could actually access! Outside I found it impossible to get the help which I desperately needed.

Whilst at Bedford prison I completed a Level 3 English course, a ‘Toe by Toe’ peer mentoring course, a counselling course for people with drug addiction and a music technology course which I would recommend to anyone with an interest in music. These courses helped me in my role as a mentor and in supporting others. Unfortunately there is very little on offer for anyone with more than just a basic education who is serving such a short sentence, or I would have gone on to do much more.

“Irrespective of how dark and tough and difficult the future seems, to be in education offers you a path to a better and sometimes unthought-of future.”
This frustration is felt by many others who have above Level 2 education and are serving short sentences.

I also became very interested in teaching English as a foreign language as there were so many people at the prison who needed help with their English. I found that I had a knack for it and upon my release I started looking for a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course. It took about seven or eight months to secure the funding and find sponsorship for a laptop but with a little determination I got it and shall be starting the course in October.

Irrespective of how dark and tough and difficult the future seems, to be in education offers you a path to a better and sometimes unthought-of future. With help you can explore your potential if you believe in your ability.

My dream is to teach and live in Italy.
I am a mature prisoner with a lot of miles on the clock. No spring chicken! I am six months into a drawing/painting course with the Open College of the Arts which will hopefully help me gain a BA Honours Degree in Fine Art.

I am a professional photographer by trade and hadn’t touched a paint brush since I left school (not even in the home, I loathe DIY!). But a few years ago, I had a stroke which left me with a paralysed arm and hand. I had a dedicated therapist for the first six months after the stroke, who worked with me and taught me exercises to try and regain use of my limb. This included painting and drawing simple shapes. I forced myself to do four to six hours’ exercises and regained moderate use of hand and arm. Then I ended up in prison.

I thought about what to do with my time: work or the education path. ‘Similar pay in both directions, why not try to improve myself whilst I am stuck in here?’ I thought. So I enrolled on the Business Studies, Computer Skills and Art classes as well as the Enhanced Thinking Skills Programme. Whilst the last is not education as such, I’d recommend anyone to go for this, as it helped me understand the inner me, come to grips with the damage my past offending caused to others and have empathy with the victims of my crimes. Not an easy task.

The Computer Skills and Business Studies courses seemed common sense to follow, as it is a fact jobs are not handed out on a plate to ex-cons. You need all the strings on your bow you can get. In truth, I only enrolled on the Art
class because I thought it would be a cushy number and drawing/painting seemed to help my fingers work better.

As I progressed, and on my tutors’ advice, I entered a couple of paintings in the Koestler Trust Competition. In time I won a highly commended certificate and a cash prize which boosted my self-confidence enormously. I progressed on to the next module and my tutor recommended me to the Prisoners’ Education Trust who gave me a grant to be spent on better brushes, paints and watercolour paper which improved the quality of my artworks. As my painting improved, two bonuses showed their face: 1. It helped me to focus and calm down; 2. I soon found I had gained a few mates I had not had before: all down to the arrival of painting in my life.

I had settled happily into an arts class and the other courses, when I was transferred to another prison. This proved to be a two-edged move: a benefit in one way; a real pain in the other. Allocation to education and courses seemed to be slapdash and dependent on whether you got on with certain officers or not. After four months of application forms/letters to try to get into the art class without success, I wrote a polite but no-nonsense letter to the governor of my quest, mentioning I thought I was being the subject of discrimination. I was in the art class the next week.

I had a wonderful tutor, who picked up on my artistic ability and pushed me. She was inspiring and a hard taskmistress to all in the class and I really enjoyed the challenges she set. I was introduced to the Burnbake Trust and started to submit works and
had several exhibited – a couple were sold on my behalf.

The Prisoners’ Education Trust (PET) came to my aid again when I needed a table easel to continue work in cell. Even though I got written permission from the governor to have this, it was ten months, three weeks (and a bitter red tape battle) before I received it. It helps to have the patience of Mother Theresa and still have the determination and stubbornness of a Jack Russell terrier with a bone.

As I had gone as far as the art curriculum went, my tutor recommended the Open College of the Arts to me. I applied and eventually the PET agreed to fund the quite considerable costs of the course. However, after months of battling over course materials, matters got so bad I had to write to the college asking for my course to be put on hold until I could make the transfer to another prison.

Fortunately I was able to transfer last September and although there are no art class facilities, the Education Manager and Librarian are very helpful with reference books and despatch of my art works. I have restarted my college course and prison staff encourage and support my painting endeavours.

The Burnbake Trust Project Manager had been also a constant ally in my battles with ‘gnomes of discouragement’ in other prisons and has spurred me

“Use your time inside to bring out your talents, to improve what skills you have or to learn new ones.”
onwards towards my goals. I have sold more paintings through the exhibitions, which have funded more paints, better brushes and paper.

What I want to say to other wannabe artists, poets, authors or just guys and girls is: Use your time inside to bring out your talents, to improve what skills you have or to learn new ones. It will be a bonus for you when you get back out. There will be delays, paperwork headaches and disappointments. It’s part of the journey when you are a prisoner, but set yourself a goal, a realistic one and use your time inside to better yourself.
Learning can play a vital role in improving an individual's life: personally in terms of enhanced health and well-being; socially in terms of better knowledge and understanding; and economically in terms of improved employability skills. These stories document the positive impact learning has had on individuals who took advantage of learning opportunities either whilst in prison or through accessing learning for offenders in the community.

Taking up learning is not without challenge within the offender learner system. Many learners in prison experience lack of appropriate resources, limited contact with tutors, no financial support and the rigours of the prison regime. Sophie recounts that it was down to her own stubbornness that she managed to complete the courses. Others like Frank have to address drug and substance misuse issues, before they can embark on a learning journey.

With support from dedicated offender learning staff many individuals have changed their lives for the better. Peer support is also a common theme throughout the stories; all of the learners supported other prisoners with their education or, in the case of Helen, other learners in the community. This demonstrates the effectiveness of programmes which use peer mentors to engage and support learners.

The stories bring to light the importance of listening to learners to improve the quality of offender learning. We hope they help policy-makers and learning providers to gain a better understanding of the needs and experiences of individuals who take up learning in prisons or offender learning in the community.
NIACE is continually researching good practice in learning and skills within offender learning. Our reports and publications can be found on the NIACE website.

We always welcome feedback on our work and if you would like to offer comments about this publication please contact: ama.dixon@niace.org.uk
NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

To download a PDF of this publication and for a full catalogue of all NIACE’s publications visit http://shop.niace.org.uk

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without the written permission of the publishers, save in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Acts 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.