

Paul Dale

I'm Paul, the academic lead for the Open Justice project at HMP Oakwood in Wolverhampton; a joint venture with the St Giles Trust. Over the course of March and April, I was delighted to lead three final year law students to present legal education at Oakwood. The scheme is very much in its infancy, so our remit was to have an initial meeting with St Giles 'prisoner mentors' to discover any general legal issues that our students could research and present findings on. Three students were chosen out of some thirty applicants.

Our first prison visit in March was a real eye opener for students. We met Steve and Tammy, from the St Giles Trust, who gave the students a tour of the prison. We were able to see inside the wings and meet prisoners, one of whom offered to show us his cell. Any hesitations or stereotypical views the students had of prisoners were soon dissipated.

We then had a more formal meeting with six 'prisoner mentors'. These were guys who were on longer term sentences and assisted others within the prison not only for rehabilitation purposes, but with day to day life. They were a very positive bunch of guys and enjoyed engaging with the wider community – two were OU graduates who had studied in prison! They identified nine issues for us to research, with a deeper concentration on joint enterprise, indeterminate sentences, the destruction of Crown Court transcripts and racial bias in sentencing. The meeting went well, and we stayed behind afterwards for coffee and a chat. On our second meeting we presented some initial findings and were also guided by their own research. Our third meeting was the presentation of our research and we gave them a folder of our findings.

Overall, we established a good rapport with these guys, on all of our meetings we stayed behind for a more informal chat. The students were able to research new areas of law, but now from a more practical point of view instead a purely academic one. The prisoner mentors were already very knowledgeable on the law and these issues, and though they knew many of the fundamental issues involved, we were able to provide some nuanced views and introduce new lines of research for them to follow. Our remit was not to give legal advice, but to point them in directions for further legal research.

It was a privilege to be given the chance to be able to meet people who had been directly affected by the legal issues that have been studied on the LLB. For instance, a number of them were convicted under old 'joint enterprise' rules that have been changed in the recent Supreme Court case of *R v Jogee* (2016). Lord Neuberger held in this case that previous court decisions 'had taken a wrong turn' for some thirty years in their application of joint enterprise. So, now meeting offenders who had been subject to this misapplication of law brings knowledge learned from studies to whole new level. Additionally, one of the prisoner mentors, Malcolm (an OU graduate who has authored a blog post here) was a party on the prisoner voting cases that have been back and forth in the Supreme Court and ECtHR. It was

informative, for both the students and myself, to get an understanding of practical application of the legal issues that we have researched.

If there is one thing that I will take away from the project, on a more personal level, it was the realisation that these guys were something more than their label. It is easy to categorise offenders based on their crimes, and label them because of a serious crime that they have committed. However, I got a sense of the individual behind their crime and subsequent label; they were a delight to meet, all had very positive attitudes to life in general, relished in their own personal development and had hope for their future. I do not think that I have met such a positive group of people and I feel privileged to have been part of the Open Justice project. As an added bonus and a direct result of the project, one of the students has a potential opportunity of working with offenders through the St Giles Trust in the future. Though the project is in its infancy, we can hopefully take it forward in years to come so that more students can gain benefit on both a professional and personal level.

I'd like to thank HMP Oakwood for their support in the project, Tammia and Steve from the St Giles Trust for their organisation and enthusiastic approach, Jon, Lucy and Sean for their hard work and professionalism in their legal research and the St Giles Trust 'prisoner mentors' for their welcome and hospitality. Everyone worked together to create what turned in to worthwhile project.