

# **An Investigation into the Essence of Short-Term Experiential Learning Field Trips to an Operational Prison**

*By Ger Coffey\**

Short-term field trips enable learners to bridge the pedagogical gap between academic knowledge (theory) and the practicalities of their discipline in a real-world setting. In Ireland, there has been a dearth of empirical research into the essence of short-term field trips as a teaching and learning strategy for criminal justice students. The purpose of this article is to bridge that pedagogical gap through thematic analysis of qualitative data of student learning experiences in the context of a short-term field trip to an operational prison. Research findings based on semi-structured interviews with students who participated in the active learning experience show evidence of the essence of experiential learning activities which could not be achieved to the same level in academic seminars alone. In essence, students contextualise their academic (theory) knowledge, which is a catalyst for gaining a deep and flexible understanding. In consequence of the sensitive nature of the operational prison, and compliance with security protocols, some limitations were also reported by participants, notably the short-term duration of the field trip and the use of conventional methods of documenting active learning experiences was not possible.

*Keywords:* higher education, participatory action research, experiential learning, short-term field trip, operational prison, reflection in action, reflection on action, thematic analysis of qualitative data

## **Introduction**

Experiential learning activities remove discussion from the abstract in academic seminars and facilitate students to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting. Enhanced learning in this context is achieved by flipping what normally occurs in academic seminars to active learning experiences. Short-term field trips are experiential learning opportunities to bridge the pedagogical gap thereby facilitating learners in making connections between academic knowledge (theory) and the practicalities of the discipline. In the context of a criminal justice module, the integration of field trips to an operational prison in the curriculum is designed to enhance the conventional and somewhat formulaic learning experiences for students. In academic seminars, students would typically ask about the practicalities of criminal justice and sentencing processes and were notably interested to learn more about the environment wherein convicted offenders would serve their custodial sentence, and whether non-custodial sanctions would be more appropriate for suitable offenders.

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This investigation into the essence of short-term field trips to an operational prison was conducted in the context of a postgraduate criminal justice module in an Irish university setting. The motivation for this investigation is the deficiency of empirical research into the essence of short-term field trips as a teaching and learning strategy for criminal justice students. Research findings show evidence that field trips provide a unique opportunity for students to gain a deep and flexible understanding of the practicalities of the criminal justice process, principles of sentencing and the functionality of an operational prison from the perspectives of prisoners and staff. Significantly, this level of understanding could not be achieved to the same level in academic seminars alone. Owing to the sensitive nature of an operational prison and compliance with security protocols, there were some limitations on student learning notably the short-term duration of the visit (approximately two hours). Moreover, conventional methods of documenting active learning experiences such as sketches, drawings, videorecording and photographs were not possible.

### Literature Review

The recommendations (core principles of improvement) of the *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* (Sullivan et al, 2007), with particular reference to the ‘anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry’ principle, underscore the benefits of integrating experiential or practical aspects of legal education with academic knowledge (Siegel, 2009). In the context of a postgraduate criminal justice module, the unique opportunity enabled students to make connections between their knowledge and theory gained in academic seminars (augmented by self-directed learning) with the practicalities of sentencing principles and disposition of offenders. In essence, criminal justice is a living discipline that requires students to interact with criminal justice institutions, professionals, members of the judiciary and fellow students.

A ‘new way of knowing’ (Schön, 1995b) the dimensions and levels of student understanding and abilities to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting underpins this investigation. Field trips are a type of participatory action research wherein students participate in experiential learning activities by integrating their knowledge gained in academic seminars with the practicalities of the discipline in a real-world setting.

Experiential learning correlates with Schön’s (1995) critique and augmentation of Boyer’s (1990) model of four scholarships (discovery, integration, application (engagement), teaching and learning). Moreover, with the impetus on Schön’s ‘new epistemology’ or ‘new way of knowing’ the dimensions and levels of student knowledge and understanding there is exciting potential for integrating experiential learning activities with particular focus on the purpose dimension of disciplinary understanding. This underscores the imperative of providing a purpose and structure for student learning incorporating short-term field trips.

This investigation is grounded in ‘experiential learning’ or ‘learning by experience’ cycle (Kolb, 1983; 2015; 2017) that involves students as active participants in their own learning through applying their knowledge in real-world settings (Kolb et al. 2001). Utilising this pedagogical tool is pivotal to teaching for understanding (TfU) and the

imperative of students learning by doing through performances of understanding (PfU). This approach serves to enhance student knowledge with a deep and flexible understanding as they progress on their journey of learning and discovery from apprentice to mastering the discipline (Boix-Mansilla & Gardner, 1998).

While experiential learning activities have been utilised as a teaching and learning strategy within cognate disciplines to law integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience (Sinha et al, 2017; Bogo, 2015; Wright, 2000; Scarce, 1997), field trips as an effective pedagogical tool enhancing student learning experiences have conventionally been underutilised across disciplines (Scarce, 1997; Wright, 2000). Indeed, many students who participated in the field trip commented that this was their first experiential learning opportunity to observe the practicalities of criminal justice.

The field trip was unique experiential learning activity that facilitated learners to reflect ‘in’ and ‘on’ their active learning experiences. In the context of an operational prison, experiential learning activities contextualise academic knowledge of the criminal justice and sentencing processes. Moreover, a deep and flexible understanding of abstract concepts is underscored during field trips (Wright, 2000), which are integrative, active learning activities. For criminal justice students, this depth of knowledge and understanding could not be attained to the same level in academic seminars. Significantly, active learning opportunities enable students to make connections between academic knowledge (theory) and practice, “at a depth that cannot be gained through books and lectures alone” (Wright, 2000: 117). Hence, the importance of looking to cognate disciplines for inspiration and innovative ideas for enhancing active learning experiences for criminal justice students. Drawing from cognate disciplines where experiential learning activities regularly feature in teaching and learning pedagogies (Payne et al. 2003), the essence of experiential learning is underscored for students where knowledge and understanding of the practicalities of the discipline are key to bridging the pedagogical gap between academic knowledge (theory) and operational prisons. This teaching methodology enhances student learning experiences through ‘learning by doing’ and prepares students as graduates with transferrable skills for their professional career within the discipline (Schön, 1983; 1987).

Bridging the pedagogical gap imbues students with a sense of excellence in their knowledge and depth of understanding, being socially responsible and ethical professionals, and their contribution will be meaningful to their profession and to society (Gardner et al. 2001). In the context of the field trip to an operational prison, respect for staff and prisoners was ensured through compliance with ethical standards and security protocols. The interactive visit did not objectify or oppress prisoners or staff, and the avoidance of voyeurism was maintained throughout the visit. While there are many benefits for students through experiential learning, these activities must be conducted with dignity and respect for prisoners and staff (Meisel, 2008).

The importance of carefully planned field trips is underscored through ensuring learners are prepared adequately in advance and encouraged to actively participate in the experiential learning activities. Careful planning and preparation in advance, especially for large groups of students, is key to ensuring an effective implementation

of field trips. The timing of the field trip within the curriculum, planning on the day of the visit, compliance with protocols mandated by the institution being visited and post-field trip discussions are effective approaches to alleviating potential logistical concerns (Muse et al. 1982).

Ensuring that effective pre-trip preparations are performed, overseeing insurance cover where applicable, expenditure where applicable, travel arrangements, punctuality, gaining access to institutions (which in the context of an operational prison required compliance with security protocols), gaining prior research ethics approval to conduct empirical research (this can be a laborious task) before post-trip data gathering, and insufficient administrative supports have been reported as the common logistical issues associated with field trips (Anderson & Zhang, 2003; Scarce, 1997). Moreover, time commitment from students can be challenging owing to their academic workloads. Educators should not underestimate the preparation involved in the planning and organisation of field trips, the field trip itself, and the post-trip evidence-based data (such as interviews or surveys) to document student individual learning experiences (which in the context of this investigation entailed transcription of audio-recordings with participants and judicious analysis of qualitative data) (Muse et al., 1982).

Significantly, field trips are integrative and rewarding experiences, facilitating learners to think critically and creatively (Scarce, 1997). The importance of preparing students in advance so that they know what to observe during the field trip and motivation to apply their knowledge is key to enhancing their reflective learning both during and following the field trip. These active learning events take place outside the confines of academic seminars (Boyle, 1995), thereby enabling students to challenge stereotypes and preconceptions (Scarce, 1997). Hence, the importance of ensuring that field trips are effectively synthesised within the curriculum, and most importantly that students are given a purpose and focus to structure their experiential learning activities (Grant et al., 1981; Wright, 2000); otherwise, these unique learning opportunities would be greatly diminished (Muse et al., 1982).

The benefits and limitations of experiential learning activities in criminal justice education have been copiously documented (Skaggs & Graybeal 2019; Belisle et al., 2020; Clevenger et al., 2017; Calaway et al., 2016; George et al., 2015; Beck et al., 2017; Smith 2013; Robinson, 2000; Wolfer et al, 2000), which include enhancing student understanding of the discipline and making the module content more relatable. These benefits are achieved through learners actively engaging with their academic (theoretical) knowledge, which has exciting potential to inculcate an enhanced motivation for self-directed learning of the discipline (Scarce, 1997). Moreover, the benefits of research in action gaining criminal justice student perspectives on active learning experiences in academic seminars (Baxter & Ely, 2019) also informs this participatory action research in the context of an operational prison.

Experiential learning enables effective transition between education and professional career choices, in addition to further studies related to the discipline which students might not have previously considered (Wright, 2000; Rippetoe, 1977). Research based on student surveys have reported that field trips also enable learners to focus and define their professional career objectives (Gore & Nelson, 1984).

The journey of learning and discovery through higher education should encompass more than learning in the discipline; the importance of students developing their social skills is also facilitated through engaging with fellow students during experiential learning activities (Cantor, 1995; Wright, 2000).

There is a dearth of published research into the essence of field trips to criminal justice institutions as a teaching and learning strategy in Ireland. Perhaps, this lacuna is because criminal justice modules have only been taught in Irish higher education institutions since the 1990's when teachers began to conduct research into the growing phenomenon of criminal justice as a discipline (O'Mahony, 2002). With the exception of Higgins, Dewhurst, and Watkins (2012), there is a deficiency of published on experiential learning in legal education. The context of short-term field trips that were the focus of their investigation included courts of criminal justice, professional training bodies and law firms. The methodology involved a survey of students who participated in the educational tour, and research findings reaffirm the benefits and limitations of experiential learning albeit in the context of legal education more generally. Empirical evidence showed that structured field trips in the context of legal education is a valuable short-term experiential learning pedagogy which could be strategically incorporated into the curriculum. The active learning event provided students with a unique opportunity to observe the law in action, contextualise their academic knowledge (theory) and develop important discipline and personal skills (Higgins et al. 2012). Moreover, the opportunity for students to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting increased levels of understanding in the context of the multifarious activities of legal professionals. Such learning activities are significant for students, and educators alike, to gain an appreciation of their levels of understanding. While their research was conducted in the context of legal education more generally, using student surveys as a research methodology, the research findings are relevant in the context of this investigation through semi-structured interviews into the essence of a field trip to an operational prison. Notably, gaining access to legal education institutions are relatively unproblematic, unlike the sensitive nature of an operational prison and compliance with security protocols.

The heart of this research is not in the literature review as such but rather it is in the unique qualitative thematic data set that has guided this investigation as to what to emphasise in the literature review. While there is a dearth of research into short-term field to an operational prison in Ireland, a review of pertinent literature on experiential learning reveals pedagogical benefits, and some limitations, for students in making connections between academic knowledge (theory) and practice.

### **Methodology**

The foregoing literature review into the use of field trips in higher education across cognate disciplines, and the reported benefits and limitations for learners, informs the research methodology for this investigation.

The application of core ethical principles to research activities underpinned the design and implementation of research methods. Research ethics approval was

granted by the university research ethics committee before conducting the semi-structured interviews with students that were audio-recorded and transcribed to document individual learning experiences. A gatekeeper (senior postgraduate administrator who was independent and impartial and not in any way involved in the research investigation) sent an invitation letter to students with a request to participate voluntarily in the evaluation of their experiential learning. The invitation was accompanied by an information letter explaining the purpose of the semi-structured interviews which expressly stated that participation was voluntary, and emphasised that students were under no obligation to participate in the empirical research, thus ensuring informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants was assured through the use of pseudonyms in accordance with research ethics approval (e.g., P1 = Participant 1). The information letter included contact details for the gatekeeper to address student queries or concerns, and details of student support services provided by the university in the event students became distressed before, during or after the semi-structured interviews (visiting an operational prison might have been a daunting experience for some students).

## **Research Design**

The bespoke part of this investigation was informed by participatory action research through collaboration with students who participated in the field trip, guided by Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1983). This involved a cyclical process of planning, action and reflection via collaborating with participants through empirical analysis of student knowledge and understanding (cognitive domain), attitudes and beliefs (affective domain), and motivation.

The field trip was an optional experiential learning activity for students and not a required part of curriculum. Discussions in academic seminars with analyses of criminal justice and sentencing law and policies, augmented through self-directed learning, are key to prepare students in advance for the unique opportunity to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting. During the semester, learning was enhanced by guest lectures delivered by a Public Prosecutor on the practicalities of the criminal justice process, and by a Court of Appeal Judge on the practicalities of the sentencing process, which many students alluded to in the interviews greatly enhanced their preparation for the field trip. Students were encouraged to watch institutional videos available on the Irish Prison Service website that provided insights into the internal functioning of an operational prison showing various aspects of prison life to gain broader perspectives and insights on the prison environment, culture, facilities and range of activities engaged in by prisoners.

A pre-trip information session with students was organised a week prior to the event when they were instructed on the imperative of compliance with security protocols on entering the prison, and were guided on what to look for during the visit including the security screening process, visiting rooms for family members of prisoners, size of cells and facilities within those confines (multiple prisoners were accommodated within each cell), recreation area, education centre and medical facilities. Significantly, students were given a purpose for the visit and were

encouraged to think critically and creatively beyond the confines of academic seminars, to challenge their preconceptions and to actively engage with the interactive field trip.

The field trip took place in week ten of a twelve week autumn teaching and learning semester and was the centre piece of the criminal justice module. At this stage of the semester, students would have had gained a sufficient knowledge of the discipline, and the timing also facilitated a post-trip discussion and feedback session. The conversational tour of the prison included the reception area, visiting rooms, exercise yard and recreation area, medical centre, education centre, and prospect for rehabilitation for enhanced status prisoners.

The logistics of travelling to and from the prison located in the city centre, punctuality in accordance with the prescribed timeframe for the visit, and what to expect during security screening were also addressed during pre-trip discussions. Visitors are subjected to screening procedures, including X-ray scanners, walk-through metal detectors, and canine screening to detect and prevent the introduction of prohibited items such as drugs, weapons, mobile phones and electronic devices. The visit could only take place when the prison was on lockdown at lunchtime between 12:30-2:00 p.m., therefore it was imperative for students to arrive on time so as not to cause delay especially in consideration of the strict time constraints, going through security protocols and ensuring respect for prison staff who facilitated the visit. Students were encouraged to participate fully in the experiential learning activities and to engage with individual aspects of the visit. The prison officer who led the conversational tour gave an informative account of the history of the prison, details of persons within the care of the prison (including gender, nationality, range of offences for which they had been convicted) and respecting the human rights of prisoners within the care of the Prison Service. Students also had a meeting with the Governor who emphasised the interrelationship between the implementation of prison policy within the relevant legislative framework governing the operation and management of prisons.

Reliable and valid qualitative data collection is key to the research design. All eleven students who attended the field trip were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews on a one-to-one basis. Eight students accepted the invitation and the conversation-based interviews were designed to elicit insightful data on individual learning experiences. The interviews were scheduled during the spring semester following the field trip. This approach was informed by 'reflective space' wherein students had time to 'reflect on' their learning, having 'reflected in' their learning during the field trip. Research findings were greatly informed by student diversity in terms of gender, educational background, and international profile: four male students and four female students; one full-time female student each from the United States, Nigeria, and Ukraine; four part-time male students (three police officers and one fitness instructor), and one full-time female mature student.

## **Research Method**

The key research method used to document and investigate the essence of field trips was one-to-one in person semi-structured interviews with participants to

document insights from their individual learning experiences. The interviews were based on open-ended questions to allow respondents to answer in their own words, capturing detailed and nuanced responses. Moreover, this method facilitated the combination of meanings behind responses within their particular context (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). This approach was augmented by a less direct method through my own observation of student engagement and transforming attitudes during the field trip.

Accuracy in analysis and reporting of participants' responses was ensured by transcribing audio-recordings of interviews. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was utilised when examining interview transcripts (dataset) to identify common themes showing evidence of transformative learning, which is the anchor for this investigation. Qualitative data analysis was the most appropriate research method for gathering and documenting individual learning experiences, as opposed to quantitative or mixed methods approach given the sensitive nature of this investigation (Cohen et al., 2018).

These were the most appropriate methods for analysing and documenting themes and finding common patterns across responses showing individual learning experience (Riessman, 2005). Significantly, the context is vital to the research methodology employed that was restricted by the sensitive nature of an operational prison wherein compliance with security protocols takes precedence.

## **Results**

Research findings are informed by the literature review documenting the benefits and limitations of field trips in cognate disciplines. The results of this investigation correspond to pertinent literature on experiential learning for criminal justice students, which enhance understanding of the discipline, module content is more relatable, removes preconceptions and transforms attitudes (Belisle et al., 2020).

Responses were incredibly positive with insightful comments that showed evidence of the impact of experiential learning on student knowledge and understanding (cognitive domain), attitudes (affective learning) regarding convicted offenders, prison staff, the prison environment/culture, recreational and educational facilities, medical facilities, criminal justice and sentencing policies and key areas for reform. All responses acknowledged the field trip experience directly correlated with their discipline and participants commented on the benefits of the experiential learning enhancing their understanding, contextualising their academic knowledge (theory), and further inculcating a motivation for self-directed learning.

The essence of field trips as a teaching methodology with thematic analyses showing the essence of experiential learning on transformative learning engendered in students are presented below, including representative comments.

### **Module Structure**

This question was designed to elicit responses on student understanding of the module sequence, and how criminal justice topics within the module interrelate culminating in the field trip to experience the practicalities of criminal justice and



sentencing processes. The end of the semester was the most beneficial time for the field trip as students had gained sufficient knowledge and understanding of the discipline in academic seminars augmented through self-directed learning. Responses clearly indicated that students appreciated and understood the module was structured sequentially and logically through gaining academic knowledge in academic seminars, initially focusing on the criminal justice process before examining the sentencing process for convicted offenders, culminating in the field trip in week ten of a twelve-week teaching and learning autumn semester.

*“...definitely ... because with anything you have to do the theory first ... it is not going to make sense if you do not, so I thought the timing was perfect, I think going in at the start and then trying to do the theory would not have worked. It is good to delve into the theory and really examine that before you go because then you can apply what you have learned in that setting .... To think in a different sort of mindset when you go into the prison whereas I think if we went in at the start [of the semester] to the prison you do not really understand a whole pile around the sentence ... you have to do the theory before you go into the prison....Definitely the timing worked well for me.” [P-8]*

A few students did comment however, that two field trips, one at the beginning and one at the end of the teaching and learning semester would provide more time to reflect ‘in’ and ‘on’ their experiential learning. This brings to light the enhanced benefits for students of having two field trips, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end of the semester (Sutton, 2024). Students could reflect on their first visit, their knowledge gained during the semester and what has changed (tipping point: turning teaching into learning) in their knowledge, understanding, perceptions, misconceptions during a subsequent experiential learning event. However, the prospects of multiple visits would depend on whether the Prison Service could facilitate such requests.

### **Module Learning Outcomes**

In terms of pedagogical steps, the field trip is synthesised with the module learning outcomes. Prior to the visit, students were encouraged in academic seminars to consider what they might see and observe such as the size of the cell and facilities (such as toilet washbasin, except for an old wing of the prison where prisoners continue to ‘slop out’). In terms of TfU and the thrust of it, the purpose of the field trip was to bring forth preconceptions and to bridge the pedagogical gap and facilitate students in making connections between theory and practice.

The guided inquiry phase of teaching and learning in academic seminars culminated in the field trip during which students could observe firsthand the practical realities of what their knowledge, the impact of sentencing policies on prisoners’ lives, and prospects for reform and reintegration back into society.

*“It is very important for the module to get a deeper knowledge and understanding .... See how it is and talk to prison officers and prisoners...” [P-1]*

*“... it helped me to get a deeper knowledge of the topic and I could explain the [discipline] better ...” [P-3]*

*“It has opened my mind to other aspects of the law and not just what is going on in the academic side of it ...happy medium between the academic side and the practical side especially with the prison [field trip] which really gave me an idea of ... how our study of the criminal justice and sentencing process actually affects the people who ended up in these places and how their day and their routines are structured ... [P5]*

Responses showed evidence that students enhanced their cognitive and affective domains of learning, notably from the perspectives of prisoners and the confines of the prison environment.

### **Guest Speakers**

Student learning and understanding during the semester was greatly enhanced by guest speakers (Public Prosecutor and Court of Appeal Judge) who inculcated real-world perspectives and practical knowledge, valuable insights of the criminal justice and sentencing processes.

*“We had a judge down from the Court of Appeal and he said they always try to operate on principles of proportionality and always try and give a rehabilitative element ....That became crucial what the judge said about proportionality and building in rehabilitation ... trying to listen to the circumstances [of the offender] is really important what you actually look at the prison and you look at what people end up with after conviction. It is really important that we try and give these people a bit of hope. It has really enhanced my knowledge around sentencing and around how the judges [impose a sentence] .... Why was the sentence so lenient, why did the judge go about it this way or give so much time or suspend so much ....But when you actually go to these places and you realise what these people are going to be in for ... for the length of their sentences, you realise then why the judges are building in this proportionality where there are trying to build in ... a rehabilitate element to the sentence ..... If we are going to incarcerate people without looking to what other ways we can integrate them to go back into society I think we have a problem so I think it explained to me how the Irish judiciary operate and why they operate in the way that they do .... [P5]*

Some students referred to the meeting with the Governor who alluded to the importance of defence lawyers to effectively advocate to an appropriate sentence, and suggested having a defence lawyer as a guest speaker in addition to the public prosecutor and appellate court judge who could provide different perspectives of the criminal justice and sentencing processes.

### **Transformative Learning**

This was a pivotal question was designed to elicit a broad response from students having reflected ‘in’ (during the interactive field trip) and ‘on’ (during the space following the field trip and before the semi-structured interviews) their experiential learning. All responses were positive and engaging in that this was a unique opportunity to visit an operational prison, see with their own eyes how the prison operates and the opportunity to interact with criminal justice professionals, and low-risk prisoners working in the kitchen and laundry.

Students learned firsthand about the daily lives and activities of prisoners, including prospects for reform, rehabilitation and prospects for being granted parole, albeit dependent on whether sufficient resources to facilitate rehabilitation were available. From simply observing the prison management and organisational structure, students learned about the roles and functions of prison staff overseeing prisoners daily activities.

Students commented on the day-to-day routine for staff and especially prisoners who are governed by an unwavering regime when to eat, sleep, exercise, family visits, all aspects of life which people generally take for granted. Students also commented on the fact that incarceration not only curtails personal liberty but also personal choices including prescribed meal times, recreation, use of shower facilities, and launder their clothes in accordance with schedules determined by prison regulations.

The following representative sample of responses demonstrate the essence of firsthand experience in a real-world setting and how the practicalities are clearly differentiated from academic knowledge (theory).

*What really strikes me is the bang of the door in the prison knowing that they [prisoners] cannot walk outside of that ... that their whole life is institutionalised and really opened my eyes and what we do in courts and what we do as solicitors and practitioners ...” [P-5]*

*“... to get more practical understanding of the topic ... in comparison to a bachelor’s degree where we just learned off legislation and case law .... What I liked most is that we could get a deeper understanding of the topic and the [field trip] was very educational as we could see with our own eyes what it looks like ...” [P-1]*

*“...It is to broaden our horizons more than what we learned just with theory ... [the field trip] is to try to get us think about what is happening in the real-world and what happens in practice rather than what happens in the books ... I think our experience has been structured well to give experience of both sides ...” [P-5]*

Significantly, many students commented on gaining internal perspectives of the prison, and appreciated how their academic knowledge (theory) was enhanced through a practical understanding in a real-world setting, especially during conversations with prisoners and staff.

*“It was interesting to see how it looked like inside and we got to talk to a few people there and to get to know their experience of punishment .... It was interesting for me as I come from a different country and as I had a tour to a prison in Ukraine and that was very different ...” [P-3]*

*“I did enjoy it very much as I was very interested in how the prison looks inside and the daily routine inside the prison and ... it gave me a bit of feeling of what the prisoner could face inside ... it made me think more about if the person will get this or that much sentence what he would face inside the prison...to think about the impact it [the sentence] would have on the person and I presume his future ... one of the prison officers talked about how some prisoners by the end of the sentence they have to go outside in the outer world and sometimes it is difficult for them ... I think that was interesting to think about ... as I personally did not think about it before...” [P-1]*

*"It is one thing to read from the book and just talk in theory of this person can get this much sentence and that but then when you see what [the prisoner] actually has to face inside the prison and like what conditions and then you actually start thinking about does he actually deserve this or not so I think the [visit] was useful in that way."* [P-7]

Contextualisation of academic knowledge (theory) was reported as an especially important feature of the field trip.

*"... it was very helpful ... and gave a very deep understanding of the sentencing process and what the person has to face inside the prison ... I decided to do my dissertation on the topic of sentencing and the alternatives to imprisonment..."* [P-2]

*"...going into somewhere where I have never been before, to see what goes on in it .... It opened my mind to other things; it is a break from the books ... its learning but in a different capacity and more of it is needed."* [P-3]

*"It makes you think about the accused, the person, more so if I did not go [to the prison] I would not start thinking about the feelings and like the life perspectives for the person and in theory sometimes the sentencing is much harsh not balanced correctly ... I think its important to look from different sides and not just the theory side ..."* [P-5]

These comments were interesting as they highlighted students' holistic approach to an understanding of their learning.

Students were able to apply their knowledge and understanding flexibly in a new context, an operational prison, as the field trip was an active learning activity. Students acknowledged the benefits of the field trip as experiential learning to enhance their knowledge and understanding that could not be achieved to the same level in academic seminars.

*"...seeing what happens in the real-world ... going out there and seeing what happens in the real-world is an imperative ... and going forward it is something that should be looked at for undergraduate because the law is a big thing .... more practicality makes me think better about what I am writing about it makes me open my eyes a bit more ... takes away the constant academic [learning] to more what's going on out there in the real-world and I think you can write the most insightful articles from spending a small bit of time in the real-world and then bringing it back....Practical visits will make for better scholars, better practitioners ...."* [P-2]

The Prison Governor, whom the students had a meeting following the prison tour, placed great emphasis on the imperative of competent legal representation to avoid the imposition custodial sentences for appropriate offenders. Significantly, the Governor impressed on students they would be practitioners representing offenders and the imperative of having a practical understanding of criminal justice and sentencing options available to judges. Moreover, the Governor highlighted the divergence between criminal justice and sentencing policies enacted in legislation (laws) and the disconnect with the practical considerations that is often experienced by prison staff in dealing with the multifarious issues presented by prisoners within their care.

A day in prison is a long time and many students' perceptions of sentence length were greatly informed by the experience.

*"... we got to see how it works and on a day-to-day basis the daily routine of the prison officers and the prisoners which gave me a deeper knowledge and understanding of how the punishment will be for the person ..."* [P-7]

Many responses suggested that suspended sentences, probation and other forms of non-custodial criminal sanction should be invoked by the courts when dealing with minimal risk offenders as opposed to incarceration. Responses also commented on the apparent disconnect between the sentencing courts and disposition of convicted offenders based on competing interests (offenders' right to a sentence proportionate to the harm caused must be balanced with public interests ensuring safe communities) whether to impose a custodial sentence or give more consideration to the welfare of prisoners ensuring the appropriate care facilities are provided. Interestingly, many students commented on victim participation that could be greatly beneficial through giving the victim a voice and facilitating restorative justice for appropriate offenders. Many students also commented on the cost involved in custodial sentences as opposed to non-custodial measures such as restorative justice, electronic monitoring (approximately €12,000 annually for each offender), and the average annual cost of an available staffed prison space in Ireland is approximately €88,000 for each prisoner. Students considered this approach would ensure a better outcome for all stakeholders.

### **Preconceptions**

A common misconception was that prisoners consumed their meals in communal areas, typically as portrayed in movies, however this is not the case as prisoners consume their food in their cells. Students were also surprised with prison overcrowding with most cells (about 6 feet by 8 feet) having three occupants, whereas the cell was originally designed to accommodate one occupant. The fact that many prisoners have addiction and/or mental health issue resonated with students and their knowledge of sentencing principles and range of sanctions available to judges. Responses to this question considered that many prisoners would be better catered for in a designated mental health facility instead of a prison. Students were also surprised with the length of a prison sentence and the impact on the prisoner's daily life and future prospects post-release.

*"It was important to ...see how the prison system works ... inside the prison ...we got a talk about how the prisoners for example are getting money [for work] and they can buy stuff that they need inside the prison [compared] to my tour of the prison in the Ukraine, that's not how it works there....I presume in Ireland their family or relatives can bring things to them but no they actually can't but they are getting money and can by it in the [prison] shop ..."* [P-3]

*"We do not think of these people in the same manner as ourselves. The misconception I had was that these [people] are separate to you and me but really, they are not they just people who made mistakes.... I think people have misconceptions they are having*

*a great time in their cells watching their television but really when you look at it these are very small cells, they are confined ... old buildings ... not great ventilation ... it is not the comfort of their living room ... they are told what to eat, what to do, that time to get up .... It would do away with the misconception that it is all happy days and they are in having a good time....It think they are quite scary places, quite institutionalised and I think to be honest they are really no place for anybody unless they have to be there.” [P-5]*

Student preconceptions about prisoners having a lavish existence while incarcerated was removed and students were enlightened regarding the day-to-day realities for most prisoners. Notably, prisoners who refuse to engage with activities generally become disruptive, breach prison regulations and engage in criminal activities (including assaults on fellow prisoners and prison staff), and therefore remain in their cells except during meals (and recreational activities unless this privilege has been suspended).

Students were surprised by most aspects of the experience especially the level of security screening including canine screening on entering the prison, the array of weapons made by prisoners, that many prisoners suffered mental health issues, the height of prison walls, 28-day lunch menu cycle with a different meal each day, and low-risk prisoners working in the laundry and kitchen. Students were impressed by the modern recreational facilities. Interestingly, students were surprised to learn that prisoners have access to TV in their cells, video gaming in the recreational area, modern dental surgery and educational section of the prison where prisoners are currently studying for state examinations including junior certificate, leaving certificate and open university courses. Prisoners taking home economics classes are permitted to bring food they have cooked back to their cells. Low-risk prisoners who engage with the opportunities such as working in the laundry or kitchen are generally given a single occupancy cell as a privilege, whereas most cells have two or three prisoners even though the cells were originally designed to accommodate one prisoner. Students were impressed by the professionalism, dedication, and willingness of prison staff to support prisoners who are willing to engage in reform and rehabilitation programmes.

Some students commented on the lack of adequate resources for prisoners who need ongoing professional psychiatric treatment, have emotional concerns, and need spiritual guidance. The available resources for prisoner well-being have not been expanded commensurate with the ever-increasing prison population in Ireland, an issue that students appreciated had a negative impact on many prisoners who need ongoing professional help owing to addictions and mental health issues.

Participants also commented on the dark grey stone buildings dating from the nineteenth century, uniform structure of buildings and regimental nature of the prison.

*“What surprised me about [the] prison is that it is really quite old actually it is an old prison ... and what also surprised me are the facts around it, it is the second highest ... [amount of committals] ... the fact that there is not many facilities for women ... What did surprise me is the level of education they put into their staff when it comes to female prisoners and the programmes that they do .... It is antiquated .... but they are doing their best to modernise, but it is quite a scary place really. I tried to put myself into the*

*shoes of someone who is walking in there for the first time ... and the quality of the staff is really what overrides the concerns that I would have ... because you really would be quite scared going in there ... the bang of the door, surroundings, the fact that you are going to spend a significant amount of your time in one of these small rooms ... it is quite a scary place so I think that's what really struck me..” [P-5]*

*“...the conditions are not as bad as I thought... but in some situations they are as in the old wing of the prison, but they are not as horrific as I thought like when you are reading from the book .... you get a different imagination of the place.” [P-4]*

An international student [P-6] was surprised by the location of the prison in the city centre, whereas in her home state (United States of America) prisons would typically be located some distance from towns/cities. Consequently, prisoners incarcerated far away from home are effectively denied the possibility of receiving visits family members. This student also commented on how the city centre location of the prison facilitated ease of access for family, relations, friends, solicitors, medical staff, religious among others to attend the prison for visits or consultations.

Many participants also commented on the forthrightness of a life sentenced prisoner (with whom they spoke) accepting responsibility, and advised fellow prisoners to accept responsibility for their crimes and make the most of their time while incarcerated by complying with prison rules, regulations and staff, and to engage with opportunities for reform and rehabilitation. This unique opportunity to speak with a life sentenced prisoner and the realities of daily life in prison greatly informed and transformed affective learning.

## **Benefits and Limitations**

It was reassuring for me as their teacher, to find that all students regardless of their academic or professional backgrounds equally benefited from the interactive field trip in terms of enhancing their knowledge through active learning with varying levels of ability to apply knowledge in a real-world setting. Interestingly part-time students who were criminal justice professionals (police officers studying part-time) were able to complement their extensive practical criminal justice experience with their academic knowledge. Students with an academic background could apply their knowledge in a practical setting and students with a professional background could further appreciate their knowledge and understanding of the practicalities based on their newly acquired academic knowledge.

Participants commented on the field trip as a unique experiential learning opportunity for students to visit an operational prison, speak with a life sentenced prisoner on perspectives of prison life, interact with prison staff, and to apply their knowledge in a real-world setting. Participants clearly identified the unique opportunity to experience firsthand the practicalities of their academic knowledge (theory) including the impact of sentencing policies on prisoners.

*“... it gives more practical experience ... [these activities] are very interesting and helpful for students on a master's programme as they are interested in more practical activities ...” [P-8]*

*“...differentiated the master’s programme from the undergraduate studies that I have done ... it will incite more people to be interested in a master’s programme ... visits and more practical [experience] gives them [students] more of a chance to settle into a master’s degree.” [P-2]*

All participants remarked on how their levels of understanding were greatly enhanced by this experiential active learning activity. Notably, many participants also commented that this was their first visit to an operational prison, and surprisingly their first experiential learning opportunity.

*“I have never been in a prison ... so from that point of view it was just unbelievable to get that opportunity to be able to go ... It is a huge advantage for anybody that is intending to go to work in ... a legal setting in that they see what actually goes on in the [prison] ... There are huge advantages both for my learning both for my practical side of things because I am not yet in the workforce, so I have not yet had experience [of a prison] so I think that it is hugely beneficial to any master’s programme to have these kinds of experiences.” [P-5]*

Limitations associated with the field trip were minimal. A common theme was the short-term nature of the field trip. Visits are scheduled from 12:30 until 2:00 p.m. as the prison is on full lockdown during this period as prisoners consume their food in their cells, not in a communal area. This facilitates more freedom to move about the prison to enhance the experience for students. Low-risk prisoners working in the kitchen and laundry continue with their tasks during lunchtime and students had the opportunity to briefly speak with them under controlled conditions. Many participants commented they would have preferred a longer visit to experience more of the prison facilities, culture and environment and suggested that in future years there might be two field trips, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end of the semester. Students could more deeply reflect on their initial perceptions, preconceptions and relate to their academic knowledge gained throughout the semester. This would facilitate students to revisit these issues during the second visit (perhaps to a different prison for comparison) and ‘reflect forward’ to the future as well as ‘reflecting back’ on their initial experiential learning (Sutton, 2024). A second notable limitation was the use of conventional methods of documenting active learning experiences was not possible owing to the sensitive nature of an operational prison.

### **Engaging with Criminal Justice Institutions**

One of the objectives of the field trip had been to develop student confidence in engaging with criminal justice professionals and visiting criminal justice institutions. Interaction with criminal justice professionals during this active learning experience has real potential to inform the affective domain of learning (such as an appreciation for the importance of respecting human rights of prisoners). All students expressed an increased confidence in dealing with criminal justice professionals and participating in field trips. Gaining a familiarity with the prison as a criminal justice institution was greatly beneficial for students to demystify an operational prison. One participant



commented “... *I feel more confident and comfortable now ...*” [P-8], while another commented on the approach of staff to students as visitors:

*“... I feel they way we were treated in general throughout the visit [by prison staff] was very professional, we were looked after very well, things were explained to us very well so I would have no problem in engaging with criminal justice institutions the future ... I thought it was quite professional and quite informative ...”* [P-7]

Responses to this question indicated a positive experience of prison staff in terms of their professionalism, dedication, openness, transparency, and support for prisoners who demonstrated a willingness to participate in vocational programmes that could facilitate their personal development, skills development and reduce recidivism.

*“... the prison officers talked us through their work and what they have to do in their daily routine ... we learned basically everything about their day-to-day duties ...”* [P-3]

*“What I learned about the criminal justice professionals is that they do their job fairly well, they are very structured... My only criticism of criminal justice professionals is that they are very set in their own way and personally I don't think they take to people coming in from the outside which could be very beneficial because we are dealing with very vulnerable people albeit offenders, they are very vulnerable people ...they could do with bringing in more people from the outside ... there should be a range of professionals not just prison guards ... I do think they would benefit from more broader resources ... like psychological resources, resources to speak to solicitors to explain different parts of law they are unsure of because that really struck me was sections of Acts [legislation] they weren't utilising because they didn't quite understand it ... that shouldn't be the way, it should always be the best way for themselves and the best way for the people coming in there.... But [otherwise] very professional....very helpful, answered questions to the best of their ability and doing a tough job.”* [P-5]

All students commented on the supportive attitude by prison staff towards prisoners reasonable requests, especially prisoners complying with prison rules and engaging positively with the prison regime and rehabilitation services.

Notably, the ratio of prison staff to an ever-increasing prison population also informed student understanding concerning the difficulties and lack of resources for staff in the performance of their multifarious duties, which include responsible for the safety, security, and well-being of prisoners and staff; supervision of prisoners; maintaining order; and assist with the rehabilitation of offenders. Prison overcrowding has significant negative impacts on staff, primarily increasing workloads and increased risk of violence between prisoners and against staff. In consequence of overcrowding, staff can be diverted from essential rehabilitation including vocational and education programmes.

### **Motivation to Participate in related Experiential Learning Activities**

From an experiential learning perspective a significant theme was that students also did not find the experience as intimidating as they first envisaged and this

inspired confidence and motivation to participate in other criminal justice field trips. Responses were overwhelmingly positive and a clear indication of the benefits of further integrating experiential learning into the curriculum.

*"I would be interested to doing something with criminal justice.... There were a few internships [recently advertised] I was not thinking of doing this before but after the [visit] I was more interested in criminal justice, so I was considering doing those..." [P-1]*

Significantly, the pedagogical benefits stimulated a desire to engage in related experiential learning opportunities.

*"...[these] activities inform yourself ... if you don't experience in a practical sense ... when engaging with education you also need to see it in a practical sense or it doesn't make sense ... makes the law more accessible, more explainable ... certain things I would be reading over and over again or I'd be checking from the Acts [legislation] yet in a couple of minutes the criminal justice professionals had it explained and how it operates and I would have spent hours trying to figure out... [field trips] makes things more explanatory ... explained in that kind of way and outside of the educational setting I think it would make a lot more sense to people." [P-5]*

Responses were incredibly positive with all students expressing a willingness and motivation to participate in extracurricular activities based in their firsthand experiences during the field trip that provided a deeper insight into the work of criminal justice professionals. While noting the importance of their academic achievements, students found that involvement in other experiential learning activities such as an especially important aspect of their academic studies, which enhanced their CV's and attractiveness to potential employers and internship opportunities.

This positive feedback greatly informs approaches to teaching criminal justice students in terms of how experiential learning opportunities can be further utilised to enhance their journey of learning and discovery from apprentice to mastering the discipline.

## **Human Rights Perspectives**

There is a direct correlation between the academic programme comprising criminal justice and human rights modules, and the field trip.

*"Human rights are important, we are all human beings you know people make mistakes and I think its taught me not to judge everything on the face of it and to look a bit more into what's going on underneath things...." [P-5]*

*"It really has opened my eyes ... when I now look at sentences ... I think to myself ... they [prisoners] have done something wrong, and fundamentally wrong in some cases, but there has to be some bit of humanity in the way we deal with them, so that is really what I have really learned from the prison visit." [P-7]*

An international student commented on the distinctive smell within the prison and how not having a choice to avoid the prison smell affected human rights of

prisoners [P-6]. An illustration of this was the old wing of the prison where prisoners were ‘slopping out’ (a practice where some prisoners do not have toilet facilities in their cell and therefore were required to manually empty their human waste from a container usually in the morning after being locked in their cells overnight). Students were surprised on how the inhumane and degrading treatment of prisoners continues to some extent and the urgent necessity for legislative reform and funding for resources cease this practice and ensure dignity of care for prisoners.

Postgraduate criminal justice students also study human rights modules, and were able to synergise their learning from related modules with the criminal justice module. Students were able to identify, appreciate and make connections between the complementary aspects of human rights modules and how this intersection between human rights and the practicalities of criminal justice enhanced their understanding.

*“... I am studying criminal justice and human rights modules so the [field trip] was very educational for me...” [P-1]*

Many students commented on the human rights centred approach, professionalism, dedication, transparency of staff in the performance of their multifarious duties.

*“... we are going from the sentencing stage [in class] to the prison and this really did ... open your eyes to what is actually going on post courts post-conviction .... I think that going forward for judges and even practitioners it should be very important to actually walk through a prison to actually see what goes on post-conviction and post sentencing to just give them a bit of an idea of ... the fact that these people are human beings and they have rights and they have feelings even though they have committed a crime ... so I think it was very fitting to go to the prison particularly with this masters course...” [P-5]*

Student knowledge based on related modules they had studied facilitated a broad understanding of criminal justice and sentencing processes from a human rights perspective. In this context, participants were able to make connections between rights of prisoners to psychological, medical, dental services, recreational facilities, and family visits, with the sensitive nature of an operational prison. Notably, the imperative of judges who impose sentences to experience firsthand the prison environment was highlighted from the perspectives of prisoners and their rights (albeit being convicted offenders and sentenced accordingly).

These learning experiences are reflective of many responses which acknowledged the imperative of safeguarding human rights of prisoners in the custody and care of the Prison Service. Students benefited greatly from the opportunity to speak with prisoners and appreciate the importance of human rights for convicted offenders.

Many students also commented on how the fundamental rights of criminal justice professionals could be affected by the subtle and overt threats of personal harm or to their families if they refused to comply with demands from certain prisoners.

## Career Focus

Responses to this question revealed were very distinct transformations in attitude by many students who appreciated the professionalism, openness, transparency and dedication of prison staff in the performance of their multifarious duties and responsibilities. A common response was the impact on possible career options and the field trip had given students the motivation to consider careers as criminal justice professionals.

*"It has really broadened my horizons when it comes to the law and opportunities around it."* [P-4]

The impact of the field trip on possible career options was transformative as to how the criminal justice process functions, the practicalities of sentencing and realities of life as a criminal justice professional. A few students commented that they were considering a career with the Irish Prison Service, or related criminal justice agency, whereas previously they were considering opportunities to work with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or pursue further professional studies to qualify as lawyer practitioners (Solicitor or Barrister). This underscores the benefits of field trips as a transformative learning experience for students as they transition from academic studies to their professional careers (Wright, 2000: 117-118; Chickering, 1977; Rippetoe, 1977; Gore and Nelson, 1984).

## Analysis

This unique experiential learning activity enhanced student knowledge and understanding, informed and transformed attitudes, beliefs, and values. Students would not have gained this deep and flexible understanding at the same level in academic seminars wherein discussions are confined to academic knowledge (theory) and policies. Significantly, the ability of students to generate knowledge from practice further evidenced the benefits of the interactive field trip. Moreover, the benefits of this experiential learning activity positively impacted on student learning and professional career plans.

Qualitative data analysis of student experiences reveals learning during the guided inquiry phase of the teaching and learning process during the semester. Wherein students gain academic knowledge and understanding in the classroom through discussions, guest speakers (Public Prosecutor and Court of Appeal Judge) thereby making connections between academic knowledge (theory) and practice. This correlates with the kernel of teaching for understanding – it is not just the ‘understanding’ of concepts per se, but it is the ability to apply knowledge in a new situation - flexibly. In terms of TfU the field trip emerges at the guided inquiry phase of learning as they are more beneficial at this stage. Students who participated in the field trip referred to the benefits of the experiential learning activity (and gave examples such as conversing with a life sentenced prisoner) in the final, culmination phase, of the teaching and learning process wherein students could relate their

experiential active learning in their final assessments for the module. Moreover, students appreciated and understood the pedagogical benefits of guest speakers in preparing for the active learning experience.

Discussions around the field trip in academic seminars the week before the visit as to what to expect and what to observe as they enter the prison, and during the visit, so that students had a purpose to actively engage with the learning experience. Pre-field trip preparation, the timing of the field trip towards the end of the semester, and post-field trip discussions are key to documenting the benefits and limitations for students. A debrief session was arranged the week following the field trip in which students discussed the impact of the experiential/active learning event had on their knowledge and understanding of the discipline. The debrief session also highlighted the impact of the field trip on their career plans and how their attitudes changed (affective domain of learning) towards the sentencing process, prisoners/offenders, disconnect between policy, law, and practical realities. The benefits of the field trip as part of the curriculum were also highlighted and this feedback is key to developing further experiential learning opportunities.

Student learning experiences were overwhelmingly positive and qualitative data analysis revealed remarkably interesting themes on student learning and understanding:

### **Experiential Benefits**

- students gained an appreciation of the practicalities associated with criminal justice and sentencing processes, including the intersection between human rights, law and policies
- human rights centred approach by prison staff engagement with prisoners
- prisoners are typically incarcerated in prisons in close proximity to their normal place of residence (with the exception of foreign nationals incarcerated in Irish prisons) and the city/town centre location of Irish prisons facilitates regular family visits, which in turn might inculcate a greater desire to engage in reform/rehabilitation in preparation for when a prisoner becomes eligible to be considered for parole
- dynamics between prisoners and prison staff was generally positive
- openness, transparency and professionalism of prison staff towards persons in their care
- vulnerability of prison staff to implied and overt intimidation and threats for non-compliance with prisoner demands
- regimental nature of the prison environment: personal liberty and individual rights are restricted
- impressive range and quality of modern facilities including medical centre, dentistry, education centre, and recreation facilities
- improved confidence engaging with criminal justice professionals were also advanced during the field trip.
- for all (postgraduate) students who participated in the field trip, this was their first experiential learning activity

The analysis of the qualitative data also shows evidence of benefits and some limitations of experiential learning activities to enhance student learning and understanding.

### **Pedagogical Benefits**

- unique active learning experience in a sensitive real-world setting
- practical approach to learning
- contextualises academic knowledge (theory)
- bridges the pedagogical gap between academic knowledge (theory) and practicalities of the discipline
- deep and flexible understanding
- experience not as horrific as had been anticipated
- unique opportunity to reflect ‘in’ and ‘on’ knowledge and understanding in a real-world setting
- demystifies the criminal justice and sentencing processes
- indelible active learning experience in a unique real-world setting
- curriculum vitae enhancement

### **Limitations on Learning Opportunities**

- not long enough to assimilate every aspect of the visit: the Prison Service can only accommodate visits between 12:30 and 2:00 p.m. when the prison is on lockdown during lunchtime, and persons entering the prison must first undergo security screening
- because of the sensitive nature of an operational prison experiences of the field trip could not be documented through conventional means such as videorecording, photographs or sketches/drawings; therefore, students had to rely on memory of the event
- only one visit, whereas a subsequent visit would provide the opportunity to reflect ‘on’ their active/experiential learning having reflected ‘in’ during the first visit; and the benefits of further visits to other prisons for comparison as to how they operate and experience cultural differences within prisons

Prior to the field trip, attitudes toward offenders and the criminal justice process might typically have been shaped by stereotypes and media images that the tour was able to debunk. The prison visit typically debunks myths and stereotypes of prison life and offenders and demystified an operational prison. This is important in terms of facilitating criminal justice students with an opportunity for affective learning and to experience how the visit impacted personal ambivalence toward offenders, criminal justice policies and practice.

All participants commented on the collegiality and bonding experience with student colleagues with whom they might not have previously interacted with in academic seminars.

## Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to address the ‘problem’ (Bass, 1999) of knowing the essence of short-term field trips to an operation prison for criminal justice students. The foregoing literature review reveals a correlation between academic knowledge (theory) and practical experience. In that regard, making connections is imperative for a deep and flexible understanding of one’s discipline (Higgins, 2014). The short-term interactive field trip to an operational prison clearly provide a unique and sensitive opportunity for students to make connections between academic knowledge (theory) and the practical implications of criminal justice and sentencing processes. Moreover, the unique opportunity to interact with criminal justice professionals facilitates students to apply their knowledge in real-world setting.

The multifarious complexities associated with teaching and learning at institutions of higher education, necessitates that teachers must remain vigilant against ‘pedagogical inertia’ in teaching and learning strategies within their discipline (Schulman, 2005). This approach to teaching and student learning is enhanced by utilising short-term field trips within the curriculum and will inculcate in students a desire to take ownership of their learning through self-directed studies. Significantly, the research findings informed the planning of experiential learning activities in subsequent academic years including a greater diversity of guest speakers.

The field trip was a reflective participatory action research activity for students wherein the short-term field trip to an operational prison was a teaching and learning methodology (Norton, 2019; Cohen et al., 2018; McNiff, 2016; Fetterman, 2015; Beaumfield et al. 2012). The importance of short-term field trips as a new way of knowing how and what our students understand is pivotal to ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’ and consequential enhanced approaches to our teaching pedagogies (Schön, 1991). Field trips are active learning experiences that have the potential to increase student knowledge, understanding and motivation for self-directed study of their discipline. Moreover, their informative, transformative impact on student learning is evident where students can apply and reflect ‘in’ and ‘on’ their academic knowledge and understanding in a real-world setting.

Participatory action research based on experiential learning activities inform and transform approaches to effective teaching, but only if we are willing to engage with and embrace this ‘new epistemology’ (Schön, 1995b). Hence the significance of incorporating field trips within the curriculum. While academic knowledge (theory) is invaluable, this needs to be augmented with relevant experiential learning activities. Bridging the pedagogical gap between theory and practice clearly enhances the student journey of learning and discovery deepens their knowledge base and understanding. Crucially, this process of ‘learning by doing’ facilitates students in applying their knowledge flexibly in new situations through performances of understanding, generating knowledge from the practicalities of the discipline.

Students were given a purpose and focus for the field trip which prepared them for their learning opportunities and to avail of this unique active learning opportunity to apply their knowledge in an operational prison. Students reflected on the sentencing process and principles of sentencing and how the field trip might inform, reform, and

transform knowledge and understanding, and remove any preconceptions that might have prevailed before the visit. Students were also encouraged to observe the environment on entry to the prison, observe the size of a prison cell typically holding three prisoners, facilities for prisoners including services for rehabilitation. Students were encouraged to reflect on whether the human rights of prisoners are being complied with, and consider whether prisoners have too many, or too little, facilities and services. Moreover, students were encouraged to consider these issues through the lens of relevant stakeholders including the offender, victim, public interest, criminal justice agencies or perhaps an amalgam of perspectives.

The field trip exposed learners to the practicalities of the criminal justice and sentencing processes, building a pedagogical bridge through making connections between knowledge (theory) and practice, which enhanced student levels and dimensions of understanding. Students were encouraged to think critically and creatively about what they see and observe and to reflect 'in' and 'on' their preconceived notions, stereotypes, preconceptions, and to actively engage with academic knowledge (theory) they had acquired and mastered. Significantly, this is what differentiated the field trip from academic seminars that cannot achieve the same objectives, at least not at the same level.

Student responses provided valuable qualitative data and insights into student experiential learning activities and show evidence their transition through the dimensions and levels of understanding. One of the most significant benefits, as reported in the research findings, is transformative learning in the context of a prison where students were able to apply their academic knowledge (theory) in a real-world setting.

Students have typically reported they are reluctant or feel intimidated to engage with the professions before completing their undergraduate education (Scarce, 1997, 224). Field trips in the context of this investigation facilitated unique opportunities for postgraduate students to engage in meaningful discussions with criminal justice professionals and directly observe the practicalities of criminal justice.

The timing of the field trip is also pivotal for enhancing student active learning. Notwithstanding, the limitation of the field trip to an operational prison and hence, thematic evaluations of student responses, is that they involve a single visit to a single prison by a particular group (Sutton, 2024). While the research for this investigation is based on a single visit, and the sample of learners interviewed is relatively small, the results show evidence of transformative learning and understanding that could not be achieved at the same level in academic seminars alone. Thematic analysis reveals key pedagogical benefits. Field trips clearly inculcate in students a desire to learn through applied knowledge in a real-world setting. The impact of the field trip in contextualising academic knowledge (theory) of criminal justice and sentencing law and policies was as an incredibly positive addition to the module. The field trip demystified the environment of an operational prison and exposed learners to the multifarious responsibilities of staff ensuring prison security and overseeing welfare for persons within their care in conjunction with medical staff. Students were impressed with professionalism of staff and the experience removed any preconceptions of daily life in prison for all persons. Students also reported how the experience removed any concerns they might have had previously



regarding engaging with criminal justice institutions and professionals, and a few students reported that they were considering careers with the Prison Service. Significantly, the experience removed any sense of intimidation in visiting with criminal justice institutions, and interacting with criminal justice professionals, and imbued students with confidence to engage in future experiential learning activities. Having observed student interactions with staff and prisoners during the visit, their affective and cognitive domains of learning and understanding were enhanced as indeed were their interpersonal skills. An illustration of this is the ingenuity of some prisoners in their abilities to make an assortment of weapons, and a device for tattooing (utilising an electric razor motor, USB wire connector, and diabetic hypodermic needle); whereas if this ingenuity were used for legitimate purposes offenders, such as learning a trade or pursuing educational opportunities, offenders would have real potential to be rehabilitated and reintegrated as law-abiding and productive members of society.

Field trips empower students to take ownership of their learning and understanding and facilitate learners to relate active learning with academic knowledge (theory), or indeed practical experience for part-time students working full-time as criminal justice professionals. The unique opportunity to bridge the pedagogical gap, make connections between criminal justice policies, theory, and practice was evidenced during the interactive field trip wherein students demonstrated various levels of ability to apply their knowledge. The contextualisation of academic knowledge (theory) in a real-world setting and the ability to think critically and creatively are examples of the multifarious benefits.

The success of field trips is largely dependent on planning for the experiential learning event well in advance, preparing students through enhancing their academic knowledge. Pre-field trip preparations to inform students on the sensitive nature of the prison environment with particular emphasis on security protocols, and what to observe during the visit, are key to enhancing the experiential learning activities for students. Utilising a diversity of guest speakers with expertise and relevant experience will greatly enhance student learning and engagement, contextualising real-world practicalities to enhance discussions in academic seminars through introducing new perspectives, and will inspire students prior to field trips.

The use of short-term field trips as experiential learning activities are well-established as a teaching method with outcomes that benefit learners and teachers alike. While the incorporation of field trips in the curriculum is conventional in cognate disciplines to law, and criminal justice programmes particularly in the United States (Kakar, 2025), there is a deficiency of empirical research in Ireland measuring the benefits and limitations for criminal justice students. This investigation has aimed to fill that pedagogical gap.

## **Conclusions**

This investigation was conducted in the context of a postgraduate module on criminal justice and sentencing processes in an Irish university setting to evaluate the essence of short-term field trips as a pedagogical method. Thematic analysis of

qualitative data revealed the essence of short-term field trips as experiential learning in the context of an operational prison for (postgraduate) criminal justice students. Student learning experiences showed transformations in cognitive and affective learning on perceptions regarding criminal justice and sentencing policies with particular emphasis on punitiveness, functionality of prisons, daily lives and activities of prisoners, and prospects for rehabilitation.

The benefits of field trips in the context of criminal justice education facilitate students to make connections between academic (theoretical) knowledge and practicalities of the discipline in a real-world setting. This serves to remove discussions from the abstract in academic seminars and enables students to gain a deep understanding of the practicalities associated with the criminal justice and sentencing processes. These experiential (active learning) events play a significant role in the education of criminal justice students. Significantly, the field trip brought the criminal justice module alive and students were able to enhance their knowledge with a deep and flexible understanding of the discipline, demonstrating an ability to think critically and creatively. In essence, the field trip was a catalyst for learning and understanding, bringing everything together.

The result of this investigation supports existing literature on the essence of short-term field trips. Moreover, this investigation has revealed significant transformative learning and understanding for students with particular emphasis between the intersection of criminal justice and human rights in the context of an operational prison. While thematic analysis of experiential learning short-term field trip to an operation prison hold their own intrinsic interest for the purpose of this investigation in the context of an Irish tertiary institution setting, research findings might also inform teaching and learning strategies in a broader context.

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