

THE IMPACT OF 'GAISCE - THE PRESIDENT'S AWARD' ON YOUNG ADULTS IN IRISH PRISONS

A qualitative evaluation report

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, and do not represent the views of University College Dublin, Gaisce, or the IPS.



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Executive summary

This report provides a qualitative evaluation of 'Gaisce - The President's Award' for young adults in Irish prisons. Building on previous research on Gaisce, this report makes space for a vulnerable

and marginalised group to provide their own feedback on the programme they participate in while in custody. Both strengths and limitations in undertaking a positive youth development programme in prison are identified, and recommendations detailed.

The research methodology was qualitative in nature and involved conducting ten semi-structured, qualitative interviews with young adults in custody in Ireland in 2021. Prior to data collection, the research protocols underwent a rigorous ethical review and were approved separately by the Human Subjects Ethics Board at University College Dublin, the Irish Prison Service (IPS), and Gaisce. One guiding principle in developing and formulating the interview questions was not to traumatised/re-traumatise the participants, who are considered a 'vulnerable group' in research. With this key principle in mind, questions related to: prisoners' awareness of Gaisce prior to and during their

confinement; their motivation to join Gaisce; how Covid-19 restrictions affected their participation; what achieving a Gaisce Award meant for them; the most challenging and most useful parts of Gaisce; their recommendations on how to improve Gaisce for people in custody; how their relationships with others developed as a result of their participation; changes in attitude, self-esteem, trust, and problem-solving; and their hopes for the future.

While the lack of positive relationship development while undertaking Gaisce in prison – particularly in the context of Covid-19 – appears as the most obvious weakness of the programme, research participants' testimonies of Gaisce in prison generally point to a transformative experience that can be life-changing. Yet, participation in self-development and educational programmes cannot be expected to change someone's life alone.

It can only be one element of a holistic youth justice strategy that encompasses interventions to prevent people from offending by breaking cycles of violence, inequality, and abuse while giving them hope and pathways for a different future.

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About Gaisce

'Gaisce – The President's Award' (hereafter Gaisce¹) is a youth self-development programme in Ireland.² Young people who wish to participate in Gaisce must be at least 15 years old and apply before they turn 26. There are three levels: Bronze, Silver, and Gold. There are four challenges that must be completed to achieve a Gaisce Award: Community Involvement, Personal Skill, Physical Recreation, and an Adventure Journey.³ The Bronze and Silver Awards take a minimum of 26 weeks to complete, and the Gold Award takes at least 52 weeks to complete.⁴ Gaisce 'has been proven to enhance confidence and wellbeing through participation in personal, physical and community challenges'⁵ and to support positive psychological attributes.⁶ Gaisce is run in Irish secondary schools and youth organisations and has also been available to young people in prison since 2004. During this time, almost 300 awards have been achieved by young people in prison.⁷ For many prisoners, a Gaisce Award is the first positive recognition they have ever received.⁸ While the Adventure Journey component cannot be undertaken in a closed prison, a similar version of it is possible in an open prison. In closed prisons, Gaisce participants are asked to undertake a group or team project instead of the Adventure Journey, where similar goals are achieved. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, however, Bronze and Silver participants in custody could not partake in a group or team challenge.

Rationale for the research

As an evaluation of the Gaisce programme in a custodial setting had not been done before, the current study fills a research gap. This research was concerned with a) the subjective experience of young people in prison who participate in Gaisce, and b) the impacts that Gaisce had on their attitudes, behaviours, future plans and pathways. This research builds on a previous study by Clarke MacMahon and O'Reilly⁹, which evaluated the impact of the Gaisce programme on young people in the community. Furthermore, this research incorporates the perspectives of young people in prison as the clients or participants in the Gaisce programme. The researchers were guided by an inclusive, emancipatory and participatory approach. This evaluation can be used as a tool to inform the operation of Gaisce in Irish prisons going forward. It may also inform the direction of similar youth development programmes in custodial settings elsewhere.

Methodology

Empirical data were gathered via 10 semi-structured interviews with young adults in custody in Ireland between June and July 2021. The interviewed sample represents 5% of the potential research population, i.e., young adults undertaking a Gaisce award in custody in Ireland.¹⁰ Participants all identified as male and came from four Irish prisons; Loughan House, an open, low security male prison, and Cork Prison, Midlands Prison and Mountjoy Prison (Progression Unit), which are all closed, medium security male prisons. The lack of female participants attests to the very low level of females and self-identifying others, not only in custody¹¹ but also taking part in Gaisce in prison.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 27 at the time of interview, with an average age of 24 years. The research for this article received ethical approval separately from University College Dublin, IPS and Gaisce. Out of the ten research participants, four were working on the Gold Award; four were working on their Silver Award; and two had completed their Bronze Award. The regulations associated with the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a shift from planned in-person interviews to online interviews. The interviews were transcribed by the researchers, and reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data.¹²

Study limitations

- **Sample size:** The small sample size (n=10) limits the ability to draw generalisations from findings.
- **Social desirability bias:** Despite the researchers affirming in each interview that were not affiliated with either the IPS or Gaisce, participants may still have been reluctant to criticise how Gaisce operates in prison.
- **Power dynamics:** Both researchers identified as women working in academia, while the research participants all identified as men in prison. This may have hindered a more genuine and collegial conversation on a wider range of topics.¹³

Key findings

1. Accessibility

Gaisce was described as ‘straightforward’ in numerous interviews. There were no reported barriers or unnecessary bureaucracy impeding young people in prison from volunteering to take on a Gaisce challenge. However, some participants suggested that Gaisce should be advertised more within the prison walls and advertised to prisoners sooner upon their arrival into prison. Prior knowledge of Gaisce was low. Only two out of 10 participants had heard about Gaisce before they came to prison. Comparable awareness levels were found in a study of young offenders who completed the similar Duke of Edinburgh Award in the UK.¹⁴ A stated aim of Gaisce is to reach communities ‘most in need of opportunity’.¹⁵ The lack of prior awareness among young adults in prison about the programme indicates that information about Gaisce is not sufficiently distributed to those who need it the most. Furthermore, despite a sense of prestige felt by some participants, there was also a general sense that participants did not grasp that Gaisce is a nationally recognised award, equivalent with a Gaisce Award completed by young people outside prison.

Recommendation #1: *Gaisce should be advertised more within prison settings and among marginalised groups, in order to achieve its stated goal of reaching vulnerable groups.*

2. Added value

Participants reported acquiring new skills as a result of completing a Gaisce challenge. These ranged from physical skills to academic achievements. Three participants mentioned having taken part in the Story Exchange Project¹⁶ in Mountjoy Prison as part of their Gaisce challenges and provided positive feedback about it. It was suggested that this project be expanded across the prison estate and that there should be more variety in the activities available for young people in prison to engage with as their ‘personal skill’. Gaisce was sometimes considered to not have much added value, as the activities that made up the different components of Gaisce were already on offer to the general prison population. Furthermore, Covid-19 restrictions necessitated a scaled-back or postponed Awards ceremony for some



interviewees, which may have decreased the sense of value or specialness participants felt about their participation. There also emerged a sense that completing a Gaisce challenge was a ‘box-ticking exercise’ for participants for them to demonstrate in a later court or parole hearing. This is not to take away from the value of the Gaisce programme, as it gives participants who are ready and willing to put in the work the opportunity to quantify it with a Gaisce medal.

Recommendation #2: *Due consideration should be given to expanding the available activities for young people in prison to engage in as part of a Gaisce challenge, noting the particular success of the Story Exchange Project.*



3. Positive Relationships

In stark contrast with research conducted on Gaisce in the community¹⁷, there was a lack of reported positive peer relationships fostered by participation in Gaisce. There was, however, evidence that participation in Gaisce improved prisoner-staff and prisoner-President's Award Leaders (PALs)¹⁸ relations. Staff facilitation of the Gaisce programme was appreciated by participants. This has also been noted in similar studies.¹⁹ The limited opportunity for Gaisce participants to work collectively, exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions, constrained the fostering of trust between participants. The lack of positive relationship development while undertaking Gaisce in prison appears as the most obvious weakness of the programme. The qualitative assessment by the research participants suggests the need for Gaisce to investigate possibilities to adapt and amend the programme in the future and for the remainder of the pandemic to

better ensure the social element of the programme. This is particularly relevant for fostering meaningful social contacts and trust in others.

Recommendation #3: *The operation of Gaisce in prison should be adapted so as to encourage the development of positive peer relationships and meaningful social connection on a scale similar to that in the community.*

4. Attitude

Most participants felt that Gaisce had a positive impact on their overall attitude towards themselves, others, prison, and life in general. No participant expressed that Gaisce was a negative or detrimental aspect of their prison experience. A general theme that emerged was one of maturity and confidence. However, prison itself may have been the catalyst for a shift in attitude. Many participants placed this shift as happening after they arrived in prison but before they volunteered for a Gaisce challenge. This implies that a mature attitude plays an important role in undertaking a Gaisce challenge in prison, perhaps as it is voluntary extra work and may not appeal to those who do not wish to develop personally. Thus, it may be inferred that young adults who participate in Gaisce in prison might be those who have already committed to turning their lives around, suggesting that participating in a youth development programme in prison does not cause maturity or a change in attitude, but rather is a result of such a change.

Recommendation #4: *Further research should be undertaken into the motivations behind volunteering to take part in a self-development programme in prison.*

5. Wellbeing

Interviewees associated participating in Gaisce, particularly the physical activity therein, with increased mental wellbeing. Participants were highly motivated in this regard, with the physical activity generally being the use of gym facilities in prison. Gaisce also

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contributed to participants' psychological wellbeing in so far as it helped them to manage their experiences of time in prison. Participating in Gaisce was often described as a distraction or reprieve from the monotony of prison life by participants. This echoes previous research that argues that people in custody experience time as a burden.²⁰ Participating in Gaisce contributed to a structure on their time in prison. In relation to wellbeing, participants also expressed happiness at the thought of receiving an award from the President, and simply in terms of feeling generally better about themselves. Participants reflected that participating in Gaisce, and other courses run in prison²¹ allowed them to distance themselves from negative coping mechanisms and approach challenges differently. It was clear that some participants viewed their participation in the Gaisce challenge as a form of resilience.

Recommendation #5: *Continuation and diversification of the physical activity component for participants of Gaisce in prison should be considered wherever possible.*

6. Self-efficacy

For many people in prison, the ability to develop self-efficacy is



especially important to break cycles of poverty, marginalisation, and negative coping strategies. For most participants, Gaisce acted as external motivation and an accountability mechanism that helped them to achieve their goals and took them out of their comfort zone. All but one participant talked about feeling a sense of achievement after completing a Gaisce Challenge.

Thus, Gaisce demonstrates to participants that they can achieve something positive, even in a prison setting. Five participants referenced feeling a sense of prestige associated with Gaisce being 'the President's Award'. The majority of participants in the present study reported an increase in their self-esteem attributable to



participation in Gaisce. Nurturing self-esteem is an aspect of education that can be 'marginalised' in prison, despite it being of particular importance in a prison context.²² The sense of engagement and personal achievement that comes from completing an Award programme can help to restore self-esteem and act as a stimulus to engage fully in prison services.²³

Recommendation #6: *Ways to further engage and empower participants in prison through activities that can bolster self-efficacy should be explored.*

Conclusions

- The feedback from participants on the structure of the Gaisce programme was overwhelmingly positive.
- Few participants expressed an interest in continuing with Gaisce once released from prison. For some participants, engaging in Gaisce in prison had been of limited added value, as participation therein does not enable partaking in activities other than those which are already offered to the prison population in general.
- While partaking in Gaisce appears to generally benefit participants, one must be conscious of the forces at play that may influence their decision to volunteer for a challenge.²⁴
- This research suggests that participation in a self-development programme in prison does not cause a shift in maturity or attitude, but rather is a result of that change.
- Participants reported leaving behind negative coping mechanisms such as anger, violence, and drug use because of participation in Gaisce and other courses on offer in prison and adopting positive coping mechanisms informally as a form of heuristic learning, e.g., physical activity was linked to mental health benefits.
- Participants reported increased levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and overall sense of well-being as a result of participating in Gaisce.
- The sense of achievement associated with completing a Gaisce challenge was of huge value to participants, who statistically achieve less conventional educational and other milestones than young adults outside of prison. Those with less conventional educational milestones achieved appreciated and needed Gaisce the most.
- Research participants' testimonies of undertaking Gaisce in prison points to a transformative experience that can be life changing. Yet, participation in self-development and educational programmes such as Gaisce can only be one element of a holistic youth justice strategy that encompasses interventions to prevent people from entering prison in the first place by breaking cycles of violence, disadvantage, and inequality.

Footnotes

¹'Gaisce', an Irish word, translates to 'achievement.'

²<https://www.gaisce.ie/about-gaisce/>

³Gaisce – The President's Award (2015). *The Gaisce Handbook*. Dublin 8:

⁴Gaisce – The President's Award. Gaisce – The President's Award (2021). Award levels, available at <https://www.gaisce.ie/award-levels/>

⁵See <<https://www.gaisce.ie/>> accessed 13 October 2021.

⁶Clarke MacMahon N. & O' Reilly, G. (2015). 'It made you feel you had self-worth': Does Gaisce – The President's Award act as a catalyst in the enhancement of the psychological attributes of hope, self-efficacy, self-esteem, happiness, and psychological well-being in its participants? UCD School of Psychology and Gaisce – The Presidents' Award, available at: <https://www.gaisce.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Research-Synopsis-Branded.pdf>

⁷Mountjoy Prison Maynooth University Partnership (MJMU) (2021). Evaluating the Story Exchange project: A participatory arts-based research project with Mountjoy Prison inmates and Maynooth University in partnership with Gaisce – The President's Award, available at: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Story_Exchange_Report.pdf

⁸Healy, G. (2018). The Award in custody: 'A shared perspective'. Symposium Report, Dublin: Gaisce – The President's Award.

⁹Clarke MacMahon N. & O' Reilly, G. (2015) n 6.

¹⁰Email from Gaisce to the principal investigator (28 January 2022).

¹¹Irish Prison Service (2021). Yearly statistics: Persons committed each year from 2007 to 2020 by nationality group – persons committed classified by gender from Years 2007 to 2020, available at: <https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/yearly-statistics/>

¹²Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4): 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

¹³Arendell, T. (1997). Reflections on the researcher-researched relationship: A woman interviewing men. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20(3), 341-368. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024727316052>; Pini, B. (2005). Interviewing men: Gender and the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. *Journal of Sociology* (Melbourne, Vic.), 41(2), 201-216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783305053238>

¹⁴Dubberley, S. (2010). *Young offenders, imprisonment, and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award*. PhD Thesis, University of Wales, UK.

¹⁵Clarke MacMahon N. & O' Reilly, G. (2015), p.23.

¹⁶The Story Exchange Project was a collaboration between Gaisce-The

President's Award, Mountjoy Progression Unit and the Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) and the first action in the Mountjoy Campus and Maynooth University Partnership (MJMU). The Story Exchange Project used 'peer to peer empathy building workshops between inmates and university students to challenge stereotypes and create a sense of shared endeavour'. Participants could count these workshops towards the 'community involvement' element of their Gaisce award. See MJMU (2021). Evaluating the Story Exchange project: A participatory arts-based research project with Mountjoy Prison inmates and Maynooth University in partnership with Gaisce – The President's Award, available at: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Story_Exchange_Report.pdf (MJMU, 2021), p.8

¹⁷Clarke MacMahon & O' Reilly (n 6).

¹⁸'A PAL is a President's Award Leader who is responsible for motivating, advising, assisting and generally supporting Gaisce participants throughout their award.' See: <<https://anoige.ie/gaisce-pal-training/>> accessed 27 January 2022. In the context of prisons, PALs are prison staff.

¹⁹Dubberley, S. (2010). Young offenders, imprisonment, and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. PhD Thesis, University of Wales, UK; Meek, R. & Lewis, G. (2014). The impact of a sports initiative for young men in prison: Staff and participant perspectives. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 38(2): 95-123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723512472896>.

²⁰Cohen, S. & Taylor, L. (1972). *Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long-Term Imprisonment*. New York: Pantheon Books; Goffman, E. (1961). On the characteristics of total institutions: The inmate world. In: Cressey DR (ed) *The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization and Change*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Meisenhelder, T. (1985). An essay on time and the phenomenology of imprisonment. *Deviant Behavior*, 6(1): 39-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.1985.9967658>; O'Donnell, I. (2014). *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²¹Namely, the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and Merchant's Quay Ireland (MQI).

²²Costelloe, A. & Warner, K. (2014). Prison education across Europe: Policy, practice, politics. *London Review of Education*, 12(2): 175-183. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.12.2.03>, p.180.

²³Healy, G. (2018). The Award in custody: 'A shared perspective'. Symposium Report, Dublin: Gaisce – The President's Award.

²⁴See Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5): 509-529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474511422172>