

The Impact of ‘Gaisce – The President’s Award’ on Young Adults in Irish Prisons: A Qualitative Evaluation Report¹

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Key points

- This paper provides a qualitative evaluation of ‘Gaisce – The President’s Award’, a self-development programme for young adults, in Irish prisons.
- Drawing on ten semi-structured, exploratory interviews with young male prisoners, and a review of previous studies, the paper highlights Gaisce's strengths and weaknesses as identified by its participants and paves the way for further reflection on self-development programmes in a custodial setting.
- With data collection taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic, this report provides a unique insight into the experiences of young adult prisoners participating in such a programme during a pandemic.
- While the lack of positive relationships development while undertaking Gaisce in prison 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.
- More research with young adults in prison is recommended to further improve youth development programmes and thus enhance their opportunities for self-development and psychological wellbeing.

Introduction and background

‘Gaisce – The President’s Award’ (hereafter Gaisce²) is a youth self-development programme in Ireland.³ 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 (Gaisce 2015). 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 (MacMahon and Reilly 2015). 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 (MJMU 2021). For many prisoners, a Gaisce Award is the first positive recognition they have ever received (Healy 2018). 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.

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'Reilly (2015), 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.⁶ 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 custody (Irish Prison Service 2021) 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 paper received ethical approval separately from University College Dublin, the Irish Prison Service 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 thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke 2019).

In terms of study limitations, the small sample size (n=10) limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, despite the researchers affirming in each interview that were not affiliated with either the Irish Prison Service (IPS) or Gaisce, participants may still have been reluctant to criticise how Gaisce operates in prison. Third, 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 (Arendell 1997).

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 (Dubberley 2010). A stated aim of Gaisce is to reach communities ‘most in need of opportunity’ (MacMahon and O’ Reilly 2015). 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.

Proposed intervention: 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 Project⁷ 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.

Proposed intervention: Wherever possible, due consideration should be given to expand 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.

Proposed intervention: Award ceremonies delayed because of Covid-19 restrictions should take place as soon as possible.

3. Positive Relationships

In stark contrast with research conducted on Gaisce in the community (MacMahon and O' Reilly 2015), there was a *lack* of reported positive peer relationship fostered by participation in Gaisce. There was, however, evidence that participation in Gaisce improved prisoner-staff and prisoner-President's Award Leaders (PALs)⁸ relations. Staff's facilitation of the Gaisce programme was appreciated by participants. This has also been noted in similar studies (Dubberley 2010; Lewis 2014). 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 to better ensure the social element of the programme. This is particularly relevant for fostering meaningful social contacts and trust in others.

Proposed intervention: 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.

Proposed intervention: 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 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 (Cohen and Taylor 1972; Goffman 1961; Holt and Meisenhelder 1985). 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 prison⁹ 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.

Proposed intervention: Continuation and diversification/strengthening 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 (Costelloe and Warner 2014). 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 (Healy 2018).

Proposed intervention: It is advisable to look into ways to further engage and empower participants of Gaisce in prison through activities that can contribute to heightening a sense of achievement and self-efficacy.

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 (Crew 2011).
- This paper 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.

Summary of Proposed Interventions/Recommendations

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. Wherever possible, due consideration should be given to expand 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. Award ceremonies delayed because of Covid-19 restrictions should take place as soon as possible.
4. 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.
5. Further research should be undertaken into the motivations behind volunteering to take part in a self-development programme in prison.
6. Continuation and diversification/strengthening of the physical activity component for participants of Gaisce in prison should be considered.
7. It is advisable to look into ways to further engage and empower participants of Gaisce in prison through activities that can contribute to heightening a sense of achievement and self-efficacy.

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² ‘Gaisce’, an Irish word, translates to ‘achievement.’

³ See: <https://www.gaisce.ie/about-gaisce/> (accessed 18 October 2022).

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

⁵ See: <https://www.gaisce.ie> (accessed 18 October 2022).

⁶ Email from Gaisce to the principal investigator (28 January 2022).

⁷ The 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

⁸ ‘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.

⁹ Namely, the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and Merchant’s Quay Ireland (MQI).