

Art scheme can help prisoners to develop and feel positive about their futures, research shows

University evaluation of the Koestler Arts Awards reveals the competition's positive effects for prisoners

Prisoners who take part in a longstanding arts awards scheme - whose judges have included artists Grayson Perry and Anthony Gormley - are more likely to exhibit good behaviour and feel positive about their futures, new research shows.

Prisoners who entered the awards in 2017 had higher levels of self-reflection, hope for the future, resilience, and a greater sense of wellbeing.

Researchers from the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) at Manchester Metropolitan University evaluated the Koestler Arts Awards by speaking to former participants.

Sally Taylor, Chief Executive of Koestler Arts, said: "We know that, to this day, prisoners still use the annual Koestler Arts award cycle to help navigate their way through a long prison sentence and we routinely hear from prison staff that students in their art or creative writing classes become more sociable, self-analytical and self-aware and that many move on from these classrooms to other educational opportunities within the prison.

"We are delighted, therefore, that this in-depth research undertaken by the Policy Evaluation Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University shows that entering the Koestler Awards has a significant positive impact on self-reflection; hope; resilience; and wellbeing. In the current climate knowing we make this impact makes our work even more vital."

PERU's criminal justice researchers surveyed 345 prisoners across six prisons, who were all either Koestler Awards entrants, arts participants who did not enter the awards and those who did not do any art. This was complemented by observations and interviews with awards entrants and prison staff at other prisons.

Scheme entrants reported that the Koestler Awards provided opportunities to undertake self-directed work, gain redemption and pride in receiving recognition for their work, allowed them to re-cast negative self-identities and offer them the prospect of change, and provided them with motivation they had previously lacked.

Kevin Wong, Reader in Community Justice and Associate Director of the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University, said: "Our evaluation has shown that the Koestler Awards which celebrate the artistic endeavour of prisoners can help their well-being and relationships with prison staff and prisoners; additionally, it has helped to develop the evidence base for the role of arts and in this case the Koestler Awards in supporting the journey of prisoners through their sentence.

"I have known of the Koestler Awards for over 25 years, ever since I have worked in the criminal justice system. To lead this evaluation of the Koestler Awards was a privilege. We are grateful to Koestler Arts for having the foresight to commission the research and to the prisoners and prison staff that made it possible."

Koestler Arts is Britain's oldest and best-known UK prison arts charity, awarding, exhibiting and selling artworks by prisoners for 50 years, some of whom later go on to pursue arts degrees and careers in the field.

It receives 7,000 entries each year from prisoners across all art forms: fine art, craft and design; film, music and creative writing. The 2017 Awards exhibition was curated by Angel of the North sculptor Anthony Gormley, while more than 100 experts from their various fields have judged the competition over the years, including Louis Theroux, Grayson Perry and Carol Ann Duffy.

Sally Taylor added: "When Arthur Koestler looked to set up the Koestler Trust (now Koestler Arts) in 1962 he reflected back on his own prison experience and how he had gone on hunger strike for pen and paper; aware that, as a creative, he could only survive imprisonment if he could keep his mind both free and occupied through writing."

Notes to Editors

For more information, please dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk.

A full copy of the report can be found here:

About the Koestler Arts Awards

Possible outcomes for any submission include: a certificate of participation - provided to all entrants; written feedback from a professional artist; and a cash prize. In addition, some artworks are sold through Koestler Arts and/or displayed at art exhibitions. As such, the scheme therefore aims to recognise the contribution and talent of individuals creating artworks in prison and/or the community. Engaging in the scheme can take a range of forms. Some participants may have been encouraged by tutors - forming part of a broader programme of educational and skills development activities. For others, submitting a piece of artwork may have involved private, solitary work and personal initiative. Further details about the Awards can be found at:

<https://www.koestlerarts.org.uk/>

More information:

<https://support-us.koestlerarts.org.uk/research-reports/the-impact-inside>

<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/12495/>