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# **IMPROVING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN PRISONS**

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## **Summary**

This paper discusses barriers to higher education and distance learning in a prison environment and suggests innovative pedagogical and technological improvements.

Offenders are an extremely vulnerable layer of society; they are far more likely to have truanted or been excluded from school and are more likely to have left school with no qualifications. Often the standard classroom environment offered in prison is not appropriate or is not at the required level to meet their individual educational needs. Access to higher education (HE) and distance learning (DL) are required to develop the confidence and skills to gain meaningful employment on release and to open new doors to rehabilitation.

The authors of this paper each completed longitudinal offender learner studies evaluating HE pedagogy within a UK prison setting. Pike conducted in-depth & informal interviews, observational studies, questionnaires and longitudinal studies with 91 prison learners and staff (tutors, co-coordinators, managers, and librarians) across 15 UK prisons. Irwin's ethnographic study collected 35 prisoner biographies within the Maghaberry Prison in Northern Ireland over a 5 year period. The findings of these studies (Pike, 2007B, Irwin, 2008A) identified barriers for educators in a prison environment and potential pedagogical and technological routes to engaging prisoners in HE learning (e.g. flexible pedagogy, safe yet innovative e-learning platforms and distance education models).

The authors have used their knowledge from their independent research and their experiences as practitioners, to discuss the issues identified at a series of international workshops at the 5<sup>th</sup> Pan Commonwealth Forum on Distance Education in July 2008. The presenters at the workshops, which included the authors, came from England, Northern Ireland, Spain, France and India. They formed a study group to debate the benefits and the barriers to HE and DL for offenders, security staff and educators. This paper links some of the findings from the international workshops to transnational research and develops arguments for 'best practice' which are debated within a national and international policy context. Recommendations for improved pedagogy and technology are proposed.

## **Findings from the International workshops**

The workshops, which took place at the 5<sup>th</sup> Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in London in July 2008 (Pike, 2008) within the conference theme of governance, conflict and social justice, included presentations and discussions on the role of higher and distance education in prisons. Three main areas of concern were identified in the workshops, as follows:-

1. **Prison:** There is a poor media and public perception of the distance learner in prison; the sensational media coverage provides the public with a very negative image. The prison service, whose prime purpose is to protect the public, does not attempt to dispel these myths. The study group suggested a number of actions, aimed at raising awareness of the benefits of higher education but these are not discussed in this paper.
2. **Pedagogy:** There is the need for an adapted pedagogy which effectively identifies the unique prison culture and environment. The study group postulated on a number of existing education models, investigating the links between formal and informal education and suggested changes to the role of prison officers and training for all staff involved in the education process.
3. **Technology:** There is a need for appropriate use of modern technologies and the internet in a prison environment. The study group discussed the digital divide for the offender learner, suggesting the need for flexibility until the digital divide is bridged. Some of the latest developments for prison connectivity were

highlighted and the innovative concept of virtual or physical campus models of distance education in prison, were discussed.

The issues of pedagogy and technology are elaborated below. In each case the study group suggested remedial actions for relevant stakeholders (governments, prison and probation services, higher education institutions and researchers).

### **Pedagogy: Adequately acknowledging the unique prison culture and environment.**

The challenge in providing effective educational programmes in the prison is compounded by the uniqueness of prison culture: routines such as lock-downs and head counts, inmates' hearings or meetings with lawyers, all disrupt regular studies (Mitra, 2008). Present models of basic prison education are traditionally classroom based in dedicated educational facilities. The EURODESIP project which studied higher education in prisons in nine countries within the framework of the European Union, identified varying levels of development, ranging from systematic implementation with widespread higher education courses in all prisons, to zero implementation where there were no students of higher education (Callejo & Viedma, 2007). In countries with greater implementation, the educational model used was predominantly distance learning, with only a few students having classroom based study or being released to attend lectures in Universities. The distance learning model enables a major part of the work by the student to be carried out autonomously, which evens out the differences of opportunities between a student in prison and one who studies outside. Viedma (2008) questions, however, whether there may be a place for generic classroom based higher education in a prison and if basic skills education really needs a classroom environment, as guiding people to become autonomous learners is applicable across all levels.

It is acknowledged that 'prison and offender education is extremely demanding. It requires committed and properly qualified staff' (NATFHE, 2004, p.10) and often 'the teaching staff handle extremely disturbed prisoners, some of whom should be in secure mental institutions, some have severe personality disorders, others unpredictable behaviour' (Bayliss, 2003, p.166). There is a wealth of material highlighting and sharing good practice in the lifelong learning and adult education sector (Tummons 2007, Wallace 2005, Crawley 2007); invaluable references for practitioners working in this area. However there has been a dearth of practical information to guide the actions of those who find themselves employed in prisons, youth training centres and other custodial establishments. Recent changes in employment practices have resulted in UK prisons contracting out much of their basic educational provision. As noted by Braggins and Talbot (2006, p.13) 'contracting out such services has meant the entry of new providers, with much to offer in educational expertise, but often little or no experience of working in prisons'. Reliance on part time staff 'leads to a fragmented service' (UCU, 2006, p.110) with marginalised staff being described as 'floating academia that drifts in and drifts out' (Braggins & Talbot, 2006, p.47). The Open University in the UK employs Associate Lecturers who visit students in prison, providing face-to-face tutorials which enrich their distance learning. Often these lecturers have little or no awareness of the prison environment or the special needs of their learners. The study group suggest that specific initial induction and orientation training may be appropriate for all new educators working within the prison educational system,

The day-to-day running of any custodial establishment is dependent on the good will of prison officers – at the very practical level unlocking the prisoner so that they may get to class and escorting them there, yet much of the contemporary research on prison education has neglected this key group. Indicators (Braggins & Talbot, 2006) are that many prison officers would welcome a more proactive role in the rehabilitation of offenders. Exploratory, initial work carried out with officers in Northern Ireland (Irwin & Wilson, 2008) confirms that the use of prison officers as facilitators of learning or learning advocates may be an area worthy of further consideration. The extension of innovative schemes such as the 'groundbreaking adult-learner support module, accredited at level 2, currently being delivered to 100 Probation Service officers and ten prison officers as part of their initial training' (Home Office 2005, p.29), could be rolled out across all penal establishments nationwide.

Although participation in the formal accredited higher education programmes is low, prisoners do engage in learning activity, often unknown and invisible to the prison authorities (Irwin, 2008b). Inmates indicate that they engage in a range of informal learning procedures such as self-directed learning, reading (Wilson, 2002) and reflecting. Frequently these are private activities undertaken in the solitary confinement of the cells, but there may be engagement with prison comrades inside the jail, as well as family and friends outside the prison walls.

Perhaps most significant, however, is the role that such informal learning may have in reorienting and motivating learners towards more formalised modes of study. Coffield (2000, p.8) describes informal learning as 'a means of sparking off curiosity in all types of apparently useless knowledge (at least from an economic perspective) and in all types of formal and informal settings. Such curiosity, when aroused, spills out into all areas of life'. Forthcoming research (Irwin 2008b) indicates how an interest in a topic, fostered and developed by personal study can be translated into more formalised participation in Open University study, leading to considerable success for the individual student at degree level. Recent research (Pike, 2007b) shows that the decision to take up higher level distance education, and later encouragement to continue, often involved one or two 'special people' who the prison student identified as life-changing. Pike explained that almost all students spoke very highly of the support they received from their prison education staff and many felt that they could not have completed the course successfully without their dedication. The students' views of prison officers, however, was very different; considering them to be 'indifferent' or 'obstructive'.

Recent work (Irwin & Wilson, 2008) highlights the role that prison officer learning advocates may play in translating self study into accredited and formalised modes of study. If officers observe that prisoners are accessing library books on a specific topic or discover through conversation that prisoners have a particular interest, they could alert learners to the opportunities available for formalised programmes, and both encourage and set up participation. Also, if HE courses and qualifications were more readily available to prison and probation officers, they would be more able to appreciate the benefits and difficulties in self-supported higher level study. Experiential evidence (Wilson & Irwin 2008) indicate that there is indeed an untapped interest in learning from the prison officers who resent opportunities currently provided to the inmates. The study group suggest that prison officers are provided with easier access to higher and distance education and that their role is developed to allow more participation in the rehabilitation of offenders; giving particular consideration to learning advocacy and links between non-formal and formal education.

### **Technology: Appropriate use of modern technologies in a prison environment**

Equality of access should be at the core of any strategy for social justice and, in this context; provision of flexible education widens access and improves equal opportunities (Mitra, 2008). The programs designed for prisons should have effective and appropriate use of ICTs but should be flexible. The prison population in the UK has more than doubled since Fitzgerald and Sim stated that, in the adult prison system, pressurized and overcrowded local prisons effectively became transit camps (Fitzgerald and Sim, 1979). This 'churn' of inmates and the large differences in the IT facilities of prisons (Pike, 2007b) necessitates a flexible approach by providers when designing the ICT content of the course. Callejo & Viedma (2007) identified that a large majority of higher education students in prisons in Europe evaluated the availability of computers and internet access as inadequate or very inadequate, and students in all countries considered libraries to be inadequate. Hughes states that "research on distance learning has broader implications for our understanding of prisoner education in general" (Hughes, 2006, p4) and demonstrates that "exploration of the prisoners' motivations for, and experiences of, taking [distance education] courses provides insights into the opportunities that education can provide for prisoners, both in terms of their current situation and their long term prospects." The OU in the UK has had a recent review of its Offender Learning and is working, with other organisations, to provide reasonable alternatives to its online elements until the prison service is better resourced.

In a world with internet, physical space no longer has the same meaning. People can be wherever they want to be, wherever they want to be. Many researchers allude to the strange perception of space and time in prison. Wilson & Logan describe the concept of education in prison as 'working and learning in bubbles'. Jewkes (2007) explains that, without internet access, even "relatively 'media-rich' institutions still feel profoundly isolated from the wider society". It is necessary to recognise the importance of appropriate use of ICT to learning in the prison. It is also important to recognize that the introduction of e-learning in prisons raises sensitive questions about the safe use of e-learning technologies in a secure environment. Fears around using technology in prison should be clearly identified and addressed (Mitra, 2008).

Physical difficulties in dispersing prisoners from residential accommodation to sites of learning (education blocks, workshop provision) have been documented in many accounts of prison life (Braggins 2004; Braggins & Talbot 2006; Scraton & Moore 2006). These affect, detrimentally, the learning experience of a student within the prison environment. In response to these difficulties of dispersal, proposals have been posited to develop 'educational

wings' (Braggins & Talbot 2006). All prisoners engaged in the learning process would be housed together in these dedicated wings for learning allowing a 'community of practice' (Boud & Middleton 2003) to be formed. Other policy documents go even further proposing the redefinition of the prison as a 'campus of offender learners' (Home Office 2005, p.29). The re-conceptualisation of the prison in this way may be a stage too far for some at present, but 'the vision of the prison as a 'secure college'' (Braggins 2004, p.2) has begun to find its way into the debate. Indications from practitioners working in this field indicate that learning on the wing can have the distinct advantage of forging and developing links between tutor and learner, as well as providing in-depth one-to-one provision (Irwin 2003, 2008a). This may be one way of attracting learners who would otherwise not avail themselves of learning opportunities. NATFHE suggests that 'prison education departments [should] become learning centres that could be used by all in prisons, staff and inmates alike' (NATFHE 2004, p.11). Shared learning could be a means of ameliorating the resentment felt by prison officers, mentioned previously.

Englebright highlighted that a significant benefit of internet access was that the offenders could gain the technological skills to enable them to use IT appropriately and effectively on release. The key barrier was seen to be the attitude of the prison service and the fear of misuse. There are now many successful trials across Europe which are introducing e-learning to prisons through secure platforms. Shared knowledge of these trials is expected to alter gradually the attitude of the prison and probation service. For example, the Swedish Virtual Campus model is a completely new system of Internet-based education in the Prison and Probation Service (Nordic Prison Education, 2005). They have successfully integrated all their prisons within one network, enabling specialist distance education through 'email' across prisons. Trials are ongoing in prisons in two English regions based on the Virtual Campus model (Home Office, 2006). The Programme for Offender Learning and Resettlement Information Services (POLARIS) is a proof of concept trial, managed by the UK's National Offender Management Service (NOMS), with secure web access in 7 prisons in London. If successful it will be rolled out to other prisons in the UK, and the OU is seeking to become an accredited provider. The German e-LiS Development Partnership (Friedrich, 2007) was launched in 2002 to promote the employability of ex-offenders and to prepare them for their re-integration into society and the job market. It piloted a network involving 19 prisons, a number of training providers, two universities and focused on new forms of learning and support. It has now been extended to provide an IT platform for knowledge and experience interchanges between institutes and non governmental organizations working in the prison education field. This could enable a European-wide pilot project in online prisons, through which virtual spaces such as Second Life, Facebook and Elluminate and even mobile technologies could be investigated. Since the research would be a European collaboration, it may be eligible for funding through the Grundvig programme (part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, supporting the Bologne process (EC, 2007)).

## Conclusion

Three main areas of concern were identified from research findings and their related linkage with discussions at the workshops of the 5<sup>th</sup> Pan Commonwealth Forum. Each theme has suggested recommendations for future strategy for the relevant stakeholders (governments, prison and probation services, higher education institutions and researchers):-

1. Prison: Punishment versus rehabilitation and public/media perception. Workshop concerns and the study group suggested a number of actions aimed at raising awareness of the benefits of higher education, such as quantitative research and role models, but these have not been discussed in this paper.

2. Pedagogy: The challenge in providing effective distance education programmes in the prison is compounded by the uniqueness of the prison culture. This paper recommends the following actions to help provide a learning support system which will be more effective in the demanding environment:-

- Initial induction and orientation training for all new educators working within the prison educational system.
- Provide prison officers with easier access to higher and distance education
- Develop the role of the prison officer to allow more participation in the rehabilitation of offenders; giving particular consideration to learning advocacy and links between non-formal and formal education.

3. Technology: The introduction of e-learning in prisons raises sensitive questions about the safe use of the internet in a secure environment but safe platforms now exist. This paper recommends the following actions to provide a sustainable system with appropriate use of modern technologies and the internet in prison:-

- Provide flexible distance learning programmes for a prison environment which use modern technologies and secure web access but allow for variability in prison resources in the short term.
- Develop the campus model of education in prison, either physically or virtually, allowing the formation of communities of practice in dedicated learning centres for use by all learners in prison (including staff).
- Encourage the use of linked e-learning networks to trial virtual spaces and develop distance education in other languages

Beyond the recommendations above there is an added requirement for multi-stranded collaboration to develop and deliver an effective service. Collaboration is required between probation services, employers, education providers and international non-governmental organisations in order to build more powerful networks with shared responsibilities and adequate means of delivery. Collaboration between employers and higher education providers is required to identifying key curriculum needs which would help to drive engagement. Until now there has been insufficient sharing of ideas on offender learning between higher and distance education institutions. The study group has highlighted areas of good practice in individual countries which could be disseminated further through enhanced trans-national collaboration. To aid this, a forum for collaborative online research on distance education in prison (CORDEP) has been created, using the Open University's open source site 'Openlearn'. The forum will enable the sharing of ideas and dissemination of good practices, for example in the use of ICTs to sustain and improve access to higher and distance education in prison, helping to show that international collaboration can promote change.

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