From prisoner to student

Book Section

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Degrees of Freedom: Prison Education and The Open University

Chapter 2 From Prisoner to Student

Ruth McFarlane and Anne Pike

1. Introduction

The Open University (OU) has a long history of championing access to Higher Education for people whose prior experiences of education have not always been positive. In particular, almost since its inception, the OU has supported people who wish to study for a degree whilst serving a prison sentence, many of whom have had troubled pasts and been excluded from school. In 1974 HMP Wakefield celebrated the first OU prison graduate and since then thousands of students have gained a degree while in prison, with thousands more gaining certificates and diplomas or simply beginning their learning journeys. There are currently almost 1800 OU students in prisons and secure hospitals across the UK, with degree pathways in all Faculties. For many of these students, the OU is life-changing, providing a new perspective on life and an opportunity to become a valued member of society upon release. This chapter discusses the benefits of OU study in prison, stressing the importance of developing the whole person and of having a positive, pro-social student identity. However, there are huge challenges to studying in prison which are also discussed. Key milestones over the last 50 years highlight how legislative changes and rapid advances in digital technologies have influenced delivery over that time. Despite some advances, there is still limited access to digital study materials in prison, most students use offline printed packs, often amounting to several hundred pages, which they study within the confines of a small cell. Yet their academic achievement is on a par with mainstream students, with many earning exceptional results. Continuing to provide a learning experience which is comparable with mainstream students, whilst still adhering to the strict requirements of the secure estate is extremely challenging for the OU. This chapter explores the students’ journey and the practical issues involved in developing and delivering the OU curriculum in prisons and introduces some of the exciting digital opportunities just emerging which may enable many more students in prison to transform their lives.

2. Open University in prison: The benefits

Students first, not prisoners: Positive personal and social identity

Many prisoners come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds having experienced family breakdowns, periods in care, physical abuse, drug and alcohol abuse (Light et al., 2013; Ministry of Justice, 2010; Williams et al., 2012). Consequently, prisoners have often had disrupted educations with 63% of adult prisoners having been suspended or temporarily excluded and 42% permanently excluded or expelled from school (Williams et al., 2012). Added to which, a third self-identify as having a learning disability (Coates, 2016). So, a prison sentence can offer a second chance for an education. However, prison populations are diverse, and education brings different benefits for some prisoners. Acknowledging education as a basic human right, the Council of Europe state that education in prison should aim to develop the whole person; to limit the damage done by prison, to provide support to address educational disadvantage and to support them turning away from crime (Council of Europe, 1990).

Prison education departments prioritise literacy and numeracy programs which are clearly important to address basic skills deficits, where necessary, but often do not adequately provide prisoners with the skills and qualifications required to address personal and social development needs, essential for social integration and sustainable employment (Clark, 2016). Since a lack of previous education does
not equate to a lack of intelligence, many prisoners excel at their studies, rising quickly to higher levels, if provided with the opportunity and the necessary support to progress (Pike and Hopkins, 2019).

Prisoners may start their learning journey for many reasons – survival of a long prison sentence, boredom, making loved ones proud and using time usefully (Hughes, 2012). Some prisoners work their way through all the basic education available and OU study is then a natural progression. Other prisoners may already have previous qualifications and need to study for their well-being or to re-skill for a change of employment on release (Champion and Noble, 2016). Interest in OU study may be sparked by seeing other prisoners studying, by participating in a general OU seminar¹, or by being involved in other university-led activities such as Prison University Partnerships². The initial reason to start studying rarely matters but progression is vital. With progression comes confidence and with higher level learning comes the ability to critically reflect on a situation; the life that led to prison.

Eventually, students can develop a new perspective on life and begin to see a different future:

“Nover in a million years would I have thought I would undertake a degree – yet here I am, doing it! What is most striking is how it turns from something to do with my time in prison into something I do with the rest of my life.” Nic, HMP Parc, 2018 (taken from Guardian Awards submission)

Studying with the OU enables prisoners to develop positive personal and social identities, to redefine themselves and develop new horizons. They learn to partition themselves from the more damaging effects of prison (Behan, 2014). They belong to a learning community and develop an identity as students, not prisoners, seeking different interests and conversations from their fellow inmates:

“It’s opening up my eyes to a lot of things. It’s changing me as a person. It’s giving me the way out. My interests are different. I don’t necessarily entertain certain conversations as I’m not in that frame of mind.” Andrew (in Pike and Hopkins, 2019, p57)

The potential for a crime-free future post-release
Positive student identity, along with realistic hope and resilience are key benefits for improving post-release outcomes for students, negating the undesirable labels commonly encountered by ex-prisoners on release. Longitudinal research, which investigated the impact of higher-level learning and explored factors that contributed to a readiness for learning (Pike, 2014), found that prisoners who fully engaged with their studies in prison had high hopes and strong, realistic aspirations for a different life upon release. Their sense of hope was raised as they were provided with the means of realising their aspirations. However, by comparison, those students who expressed an interest in OU study but had not progressed, had very few aspirations or protective factors.

OU students in prison also develop resilience through successfully overcoming the challenges in completing distance learning in a prison environment (Hughes, 2012). That resilience is found to help them to overcome the immense difficulties faced in the early weeks and months after release.

¹ Promotional seminars presented by OU academics to groups of potential students with opportunities for discussion and questions
Firstly, it enabled them to seek out support that was needed but not immediately forthcoming. Secondly, it helped them to “tread water until that support arrived” and thirdly it “stopped them from taking the easy option of going back to prison” (Pike, 2014, p285).

Positive identity change or cognitive transformation can lead to lasting or ‘secondary’ desistance from crime (McNeill, 2014) and therefore the potential for a crime-free life upon release, not least because Higher Education increases prisoners’ employment prospects and rates of pay in employment upon release (Costelloe, 2014; Duwe and Clark, 2014). The Longford Trust reports that the targeted financial support it provides for serving and ex-prisoners to undertake Higher Education courses at universities, results in fewer than 5% of recipients of its awards reoffending (Coates, 2016, p38). Also, a Justice Data Lab report highlights that receiving a grant from the Prisoners Education Trust to undertake an OU course in custody leads to a reduction in re-offending of between 4 and 8 percentage points (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

3. Challenges to studying OU in prison

Milestones over 50 years
There are immense challenges to providing a learning experience which is comparable with mainstream students whilst still adhering to the strict requirements of a secure environment. Those challenges for both prisons and the OU have evolved over the last 50 years and the table on page XX shows key milestones during that time, from the prison and the OU perspective, indicating how legislative changes and rapid advances in digital technologies have influenced delivery of education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Government policy</th>
<th>Prison Technology</th>
<th>OU Technology</th>
<th>OU prison education management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Home Office prison education scheme developed.</td>
<td>TV/Radio programmes to support printed teaching materials</td>
<td>1971 First courses available 22 students in 2 prisons. By 1976, 142 students/14 prisons in England &amp; Wales (Forster, 1976)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Prison governors control their own education budget. Education run by Local Education Authorities</td>
<td>TV/Radio programmes supplemented by video/audio-cassette</td>
<td>150 students/31 prisons (Weinbren, 2014). Printed materials and video recordings of TV programs. Regional links with prisons and visits from tutor-councillors</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Prison Service Instruction (PSI) defines delivery of higher education</td>
<td>TVs in cells. Some computers in education and libraries. Education prioritised (min 10 hours per week)</td>
<td>300 students/80 prisons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000+</td>
<td>Local colleges responsible for prison education</td>
<td>Good Intranets and other inconsistent, ad hoc technological solutions</td>
<td>1500 students/120 prisons Printed offline study packs and CDs Prison Liaison Group works across the country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Green paper published. Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) formed</td>
<td>Technology more controlled. Polaris (proof of concept) in 8 London prisons</td>
<td>Traffic light system developed to identify which OU courses can be offered in prison.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2006-7</td>
<td>OLASS rolled out. OLASS assessment by DfES</td>
<td>Virtual Campus trialled in East region (with off-line Access courses)</td>
<td>Rapid reduction of courses available. OU review of prison education provision and new government contract for HE delivery in prison</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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3 Intranets were good, especially in stable high security estate. Eg. HMP Whitemoor Wide Web
4 Various ad-hoc technology. eg. Internet-ready computers in locked cupboards, laptops, memory sticks, CDs
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-9</td>
<td>Government report “Meeting needs”? OLASS Phase 2</td>
<td>Virtual Campus rolled out across most prisons</td>
<td>Central coordination for prisons and OLASS. OL Development Group and first bespoke prison prospectus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>New PSI for HE(^8): Complex Sift &amp; shared support. OLASS Phase 3</td>
<td>Secure version of VLE developed as “Walled Garden” – online Access courses available via Virtual Campus</td>
<td>Introduction of tuition fee loans (end of subsidised study except for Access modules), OU moves to centralised administration and closes regional offices.</td>
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<td>2012-13</td>
<td>PSI updated for new funding, 6-year rule restriction on loan eligibility OLASS Phase 4</td>
<td>Increased use of online tutorials to replace face to face delivery in regional centres.</td>
<td>New OU team refers to students in prison as ‘students’ rather than ‘offender learners’ and offers specialist study support from registration through to graduation</td>
</tr>
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<td>2014-15</td>
<td>Prisons Minister, Chris Grayling, bans books being sent into prisons - overturned after appeal by prisoner in HMP Send.</td>
<td>Learn 7 platform developed to host secure VLE</td>
<td>OU prison student numbers fall below 1000 due to funding changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-17</td>
<td>Coates (2016) Review of education in prison</td>
<td>Standalone laptops made available to some OU students for use in education centres</td>
<td>Free OpenLearn short courses made available in offline format in some prisons</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free OpenLearn short courses made available in offline format in some prisons</td>
<td>Central team (Students in Secure Environments) grows to 12 staff. New Scholarship funding for first level 1 module. 1450 students/ 120 prisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-19</td>
<td>New Prison Education Framework(^9)</td>
<td>Investment in IT infrastructure across the estate to make it fit for purpose.</td>
<td>Commitment to provide laptops for students once MoJ approval for devices is agreed. 1800 students / 120 prisons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^8\) PSI 33/2010: Open University, Higher education and distance learning. Very detailed Sift (permissions/application process) and support requirements

\(^9\) New Prison Education Framework with greater governor control of budgets and expectation of use of technology in education.
Developments in technology over the last 50 years have led to major changes in the way distance learning study materials are prepared, shared and utilised, and as a result the gap between the learning experience for students in prison and that of mainstream students has widened. In the early 70s, OU course materials were mostly books with additional television programs, tutorials and residential schools (Forster, 1976). Prisoners received the same paper-based materials as other OU students. Obviously, prisoners could not attend residential schools or indeed view live television programmes10 but all other study materials were the same and very few alternatives were required. The OU, as a global university, embraced the rapidly developing technologies and by the 1990s had a growing number of online, interactive courses, in a gradual move towards a ‘digital by design’ methodology. Prisons, on the other hand, were slow to manage security implications of new technologies. As more courses required the use of digital technologies, the OU devised a “traffic-light system”11 to assist staff and students in prison to make appropriate course choices, by explaining requirements for digital study which was not accessible from prison. Research in 200712 highlighted significant inconsistencies in student experiences as the number of ‘red’ courses (which were not accessible from prison) grew rapidly, leading to a review of OU provision and support, as well as a bespoke prospectus being published in 2009 and now updated annually.

Changing responsibilities for prison education over the 50 years have also had an impact on OU studies. The Prison Service Instruction (PSI) on Higher Education (Ministry of Justice, 2012) requires that all communication between the OU and its students must be via an intermediary within the prison, often the education manager. In the 1970s prison education was run by different local education authorities, which meant inconsistent education across prisons, but with good support often available for ‘extra-mural’ activities such as OU study (Forster, 1976). Conversely, the introduction of the Offender Learning and Skills Service’s (OLASS) contracted college providers in 2006 led to improved technology for learning and greater consistency across prison education departments but, as OLASS focused on lower level study, less support for OU students.

The strict and diverse prison regimes: Learning and Working

Forster (1976) suggested there were discrepancies between distance learning provision in different prisons and that some participants appeared misinformed about how much face to face support they could expect. While his study was more than 40 years ago, many researchers have since found that the learning environment varies significantly across different prisons. The concept of ‘learning’ and ‘working’ prisons was introduced by Pike and Adams (2012) as two ends of a spectrum of different learning environments. A ‘learning’ prison is the students’ perceptions of a good supportive environment which actively supports independent learning. A ‘working’ prison describes a prison in which work, or prison-based interventions, take priority and where there is little time or space for learning. OU students consider themselves almost invisible in such an environment; usually required to attend workshops during the day and unable to use libraries as they are rarely open in the evening or at weekends.

Understandably, the ethos of a prison is also heavily dependent on the senior management team. Some governors acknowledge the importance of education, some are OU graduates themselves and others encourage their staff to study, thus reducing the divide between staff and prisoners (Worth, 1996). However, much of the good work in prison education is carried out by individuals who work

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10 In-cell television was not introduced until the late 90s (Jewkes, 2002; Knight, 2016)
11 ‘Green’ courses fully available in prison; ‘Amber’ courses difficult to study in prison; ‘Red’ courses were unavailable in prison (eg, interactive, fully online)
12 See for example Adams and Pike, 2008; Hancock, 2010
“in an atmosphere of good will and cooperation, often in spite of rather than because of prevailing regimes” (Hurry et al., 2012, p28) and OU coordination is no exception.

Distance learning can be a lonely activity and students in prison may experience severe isolation. Researchers (eg Hughes, 2012; Pike 2014) have identified the support of ‘significant others’ can help to overcome this isolation and alleviate some of the many difficulties to studying in prison. These ‘significant others’ may be family, friends, peers, staff within the prison or OU tutors. McFarlane and Morris (2018) found that when students were actively involved in a study community or a student council, which allowed them to suggest improvements to the system, their levels of engagement increased, leading to increased confidence and higher overall assignment scores. Hopkins and Farley (2014) identified a wide set of social and cultural issues associated with learning in prison and with prior experiences of learning, recognising that social interaction is fundamental to learning, but is often missing in a prison setting due to security restrictions.

This interaction is offered in part by the OU tutor, the main academic contact for the prison student. The distance learning model adopted by the OU allocates a tutor to every student so although prison students are not able to participate in group tutorials, either online or in the community, they do receive individual support from a tutor, with detailed feedback on each assignment and, depending on the module, through face-to-face or telephone tutorials. Students on many level 1 modules can typically expect 3 or 4 tutorials and these visits can help them to feel part of a wider learning community.

Key challenges for tutors relate mostly to communication, as contact with their student is always via an intermediary in the prison. Arrangements for face-to-face visits can take a long time to organise and with many students still hand-writing their assignments, tutors sometimes need to adjust the way they mark assignments and provide feedback. Many tutors go to great lengths to support their students in prison, even when students are transferred across the country with little warning. The importance of this support is fully acknowledged by students:

“...the drive and determination of the Open University tutors I have had during my studies. Without a doubt, without them and their constant, active engagement with me and their encouragement when I wanted to give it all up I would not have completed my studies. The determination of the teaching staff and tutors when faced with the realities of a prison security department and the rules and restrictions was quite inspiring. It encouraged me to persevere and I am glad I did.” (Liam, former OU prison student)

Further social interaction may be offered through Prison University Partnerships (Prisoners Education Trust, nd), in which university students, including some OU students, join with prison students for seminars and short courses. These have been running in different forms for many years and are increasing in popularity, as institutions recognise the mutual benefit for participants. The OU offers accreditation pathways which enable prison students to build on the learning they gain from these partnerships and help them to select appropriate progression opportunities.

Learning in a digital world
Prisoners are a group that remains almost entirely disconnected from the 21st century digital “network society” described by Castells (2004). Most prisoners still have no direct access to Internet-
enabled computers although there have been moves to improve access in prisons for many years. Digital skills are vital for every-day existence and without them prisoners are significantly disadvantaged, and less likely to successfully integrate back into society upon release.

It is understandable that prison policy-makers prioritise security concerns and therefore adopt a risk-averse approach to the use of technology. However, the ubiquitous use of technology in modern life has led to a competing agenda for policy-makers, who are also required to consider how people in prison are equipped to lead law-abiding lives upon release. Johnson and Hail-Jares (2016) cite this risk-averse approach as contributing to an increasing digital “isolation” among prisoners with limited access to technology.

In the 1990s (and early 2000s) there was ad hoc development of technologies for learning, dependent on individual governors and technology-enthusiast staff in their employment. Pike and Adams (2012) found that this access was contra-intuitive in that high security prisons were more supportive than the lower security prisons. For example, the Whitemoor Wide Web, which was an intranet in a very high security prison. It provided, for a short time, a learning environment which looked very much like the Internet but was totally secure, even allowing students to use the Moodle forums (internally), which encouraged a learning community (Pike, 2009). However, these ad hoc technologies were gradually closed down, as the prison service sought a more consistent (secure) system. The first iteration of this was POLARIS, a ‘proof of concept’ trial of online computers in London prisons with an external server (Schuller, 2009). The system worked well but was considered difficult to roll out across the estate because it required implementation over multiple prisons. Instead, the Virtual Campus (VC) was developed to provide secure access to selected employment and education websites. After initial trials it was extended to most prisons and intended to streamline and modernise the system of delivery for education, training and employment (Turley and Webster, 2010). The value of the VC has been undermined by outdated technology and inadequate infrastructure in prisons which render many websites unusable. Access to the OU’s secure VLE (learn7) which is hosted on the VC is often restricted by OLASS provider priorities and regime requirements. However, there are early indications that recent upgrades and developments in secure solutions will facilitate improved digital access and the OU is instrumental in driving these changes.

Post-release challenges and support networks
Longitudinal research (Pike, 2014) found that although OU students expected some difficulties upon release from prison, they were unprepared for the intensity of those difficulties, and the challenges to maintaining the positive benefits of their prison education. The stigma of being labelled an ‘ex-con’ can severely challenge a student identity and homelessness can reduce inbuilt confidences. Other difficulties included a lack of structure to life, lack of easily accessible information and lack of technology and the skills to use it. Since 21st century living is digital, from job application and shopping to claiming benefits, lack of digital skills is a major barrier to integration into society. Some students become alienated from their family and social background but have not yet fitted into a life to which they aspire, with one foot in and one foot out of their previous life. Belonging to a learning community post-release, helps to maintain a positive student identity and eases integration into society (Forster, 1976; Hughes, 2012; Pike, 2014).

In order to continue studying post-release, students require much support ‘through the gate’ and a support network is vital. This support should start before release and continue for as long as required after release. Peer mentoring both in prison and post-release is found to be especially successful as the mentor values the responsible role and the mentee has trusted support. The OU
has recently developed a scheme to lend laptops to released prison students and the OU Students Association has dedicated support for its ex-prison students. The opportunity to belong to a learning community can also develop via the Prison University Partnership pathway (Prisoners Education Trust (PET), nd) and successful schemes such as the PET Alumni group, are demonstrating good practice in this area. Indeed, the academic voice of those who have studied in prison is increasingly recognised as offering an informed perspective on the criminal justice system based on first-hand experience (Aresti and Darke, 2016; Honeywell, 2013); the Prisoner Policy Network co-ordinated by the Prison Reform Trust is an example of how such experiences are starting to influence government policy (Wainright et al, 2019).

4. The student journey – from enquiry to graduation and beyond

Distance learning is a complex activity, requiring many stages of input and support to guide the student through initial enquiry, course choice, funding applications, development of study skills, assignment submission and eventually to graduation and celebration. For students in prison, all these stages of the journey must be completed via an intermediary, staff within the prison who act as gatekeeper, advocate, administrator and often timekeeper for the student journey. The vital role of these staff is often under-acknowledged, and yet this support can be crucial to students’ success. Moreover, the rapid change of responsibility for prison education and the numbers of different organisations involved, has often resulted in confusion in staff roles and an inconsistent level of support to students.

Becoming a student

The journey to becoming a student is a long and often emotional one, requiring a level of self-belief, plenty of support and encouragement from ‘significant others’:

“I soon realised that for once in my life, I took the right course of action and made the correct decision to study. Furthermore, with the OU, it changed my life and suddenly I felt better inside. It made all my everyday problems, prison and other adversaries easier to accept and solve. I had a purpose’. (Student A)

Prisoners applying for OU study, must first seek permission through the Sift (the prison’s complex screening procedure). Then, they must either fund themselves or apply for funding through charitable trusts such as the PET or, since 2012, for a Government tuition fee loan, as they are required to pay the same tuition fees as mainstream students. This raises several issues relating to higher education provision within the secure estate (Champion and Edgar, 2013) including the range of courses available, access to learning materials, and value for money, as well as the requirement for additional support to complete the funding paperwork since this can be daunting and cannot be done online.

Not all students can apply for a loan. Current loan repayment requirements dictate that students must be within six years of their release to be eligible for a tuition fee loan. This Government restriction reduces the possibilities for prisoners serving longer sentences to gain access to higher education and is being strenuously challenged.

However, the introduction of tuition fees has led to students in prison developing their identities as discerning consumers with high expectations around levels of study support and access to library resources. This presents further challenge for the OU in trying to meet these expectations within the designated security restrictions. Creative solutions have been developed which build on the benefits of collaborative working and seek to minimise the difficulties of studying in prison. One example is
OU Research events, in which OU academics deliver a short seminar and Question and Answer session with a group of students in prison. Feedback from all participants has been very positive, with one academic describing it as “one of the most profound educational experiences I have been involved in”. Increased understanding of restricted educational environment in prisons also helps academics to consider how they write teaching materials to meet the needs of this diverse student body.

Since 2009 there has been a dedicated OU prospectus¹³ for students in prison which provides details of the pathways and qualifications available across all faculties. There are currently 130 modules offered for study in prison, with the most popular being social science, business management and maths (see Figure xx).

Learning how to study
Once the learning journey has begun, the student must learn how to study at a distance. Historically, study materials were provided in print format and today, many students continue to express a preference for books (Ellis et al., 2017). The OU is a global university, its distance learning model is designed for scale and, as there is no entry requirement, is designed to cater for a variety of educational needs. This has led to a Universal Design for Learning approach to develop learning environments, including online programs, to meet the diverse needs of students (Seale, 2014). This enables accessibility issues to be factored into the study materials design (Galley, 2015) but also leads to a competing agenda to deliver a technology-enhanced learning experience whilst not excluding those students with restricted access to technology (Cross et al, 2015). This is particularly relevant in the prison setting. Whilst paper-based activities lend themselves easily to offline study; collaborative, online and research-based activities are a huge challenge, with alternatives required to ensure OU students’ experience in prison is comparable with that of mainstream students.

Most OU students in prison are now offered study materials both in print and via a reduced version of the Virtual Learning Environment (Learn 7), hosted on the Virtual Campus (VC) (see table xx). This

is based on the original materials but adapted to remove activities deemed inappropriate or requiring external internet access via hyperlinks, student forums or collaborative activities.

In a study carried out before the introduction of the VC, Hancock (2010) tested the provision of alternative activities to students in prison, with encouraging results, concluding that it enabled students to succeed in the course without disadvantage compared to their peers. Hancock adapted her study materials in direct response to student feedback, capitalising on her role as a tutor, having particular success with the incorporation of anonymised forums to allow students to participate. Alternative collaborative activities are now sometimes provided to replicate online forum discussions which help to provide a sense of learning community (McFarlane and Morris, 2018).

Study Skills sessions, to assist groups of students with notetaking, essay writing and exam techniques, are also now being offered in a number of prisons by OU tutors. This brings the benefits of a face-to-face teaching session, as well as helping to establish a learning community within the prison in which peer-support can be offered. Provision of these sessions is encouraging more students to take up higher-level study and improving the assignment scores of participating students.

A particular concern of the discerning student consumer in prison, is the lack of access to the OU online library and to address this, a library support scheme has been developed in partnership with the OU Students Association. Student volunteers respond to written requests from students in prison for assistance in sourcing articles from the online library. Some of the volunteers are ex-prisoner students who are acutely aware of the situation, are keen to support their peers, and are seeing benefits to their own study too.

Some prison education departments employ an OU Orderly, an OU student in the prison, who assists with administration and promotion of distance learning activities. These roles offer students a responsible position and a greater sense of ownership of their learning and has led to increased study success (McFarlane and Morris, 2018). Assignment submission dates are tracked and reminders given, meaning all students are more likely to submit on time and to ask for help when needed.

In learning how to study, there are many barriers to be overcome and a key factor in determining future success is ‘readiness for learning’ described in section 2. This highlights the importance of initial assessment to establish the most appropriate level of education and Coates (2016) describes how a rigorous assessment process, subject to regular review, can help to set aspirational targets. It is right to be aspirational, because in spite of the challenges of prison-based study, success rates are equivalent to those for general population students, with some prison students achieving distinctions (over 85%) even on modules which are largely digital in content. This is how one student described their experience:

“My new addiction was studying and the adrenaline coupled with that meant I was now experiencing a new high. Every time I opened an envelope from the OU containing the results of my coursework or essay, I felt good within myself”

Successful students adopt a range of strategies to allow for their personal circumstances, such as completing assignments a week before deadline to allow time for postage or choosing to study at 4am when the wing is quiet. Any contact with OU tutors is highly valued and students normally relish the opportunity to ask questions and discuss their thoughts.
Progressing and moving on

Within the prison estate, transfers between establishments, sometimes with very little prior notice, are common and can cause additional challenges for OU students and their tutors, especially if the student’s printed study materials do not move with them. Since the support for distance learning can vary so much across the prison estate, some students have been known to try to refuse a move when they have an assignment or an exam due imminently.

Preparing for release whilst engaged with OU studies can be similarly problematic. OU data indicates that module pass rates for released students are about half those for students in prison, when they do not benefit from pre-release information and the learning community support described in section 3. A range of additional support has recently been introduced for released students including the loan of a laptop to support development of digital skills, additional tutor support to facilitate integration into the tutor group and use of the inter library loan scheme (SCONUL14) which allows access to a local university library.

Support and recognition of the individual circumstances of each student is vital, as highlighted by this OU student:

“I had served 15 years ... feeling that no-one cares and I did not know where or even if I would fit into society. I have been released just over a year now and it has been difficult at times. I found the readjustment after so long overwhelming.

However, many students manage to complete their studies in prison. In the 2017/18 academic year, 213 achieved higher education qualifications (certificates, diplomas or degrees) and 17 degree ceremonies were held in prisons to celebrate these achievements. Some students were permitted to attend a public OU degree ceremony (eg at the Barbican in London) as part of their day release arrangements, while others chose to delay their celebrations until they were released. As with all OU students, this is a momentous occasion, often with friends and family present and students wear their gowns with pride. It is an important way of recognising their achievements, as reflected in this extract from a speech made by a student at his degree ceremony:

“Open University study has coincided with radical change in the trajectory of my life since I started in 2008...Now I have a first-class honours degree proudly displayed on the wall, years of consistent ‘model’ prisoner behaviour behind me and a progressive transfer imminent as I work towards release...My degree has given me confidence to believe I can yet claim a place in the world and thrive. Those are Open University lessons I will never forget.”

5 Conclusion: onward and upward

As the Open University celebrates its 50th anniversary, there is inevitably consideration of what the future holds for the institution and for its students. A key priority for students in prison is the development of secure in-cell technology which will enable students to access the same high quality, digital study materials as all other registered OU students. Developments in this area are gathering pace and there is an optimistic view that within the next year laptops will be provided to OU students in prison, albeit on a small scale to begin with. This will have benefits to the OU, as well,

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14 SCONUL Access is a reciprocal scheme which allows many university library users to borrow or use books and journals at other libraries which belong to the scheme. The scheme covers most of the university libraries in the UK and Ireland.
enabling a greater focus on developing digital skills and moving away from the costly process of adapting materials to a printed format.

When in-cell technology becomes more widely available, it will be possible to offer OpenLearn courses on a range of subjects. These free short courses are available on open license so that others, including colleges and other providers, can copy and re-use the content for their own teaching and learning. They might serve as a taster, an introduction to higher and distance education, or just to bridge the gap between compulsory and post-compulsory-level learning, and will be delivered in partnership with the education providers under the new contract arrangements starting in April 2019. In particular, the development of new Everyday English and Maths courses which cover Functional Skills level 1 and 2 will offer an experience of supported digital learning to a much wider group of students.

The OU is a proud member of the Prisoner Learning Alliance, representing the voice of the prison education sector, including small organisations, charities and people with lived experience of prison. This alliance is campaigning for better use of technology within prisons for educational and social purposes. It is also supporting staff training, seeking improved ways to share good practice across establishments and will be monitoring impact of the new funding arrangements on education provision in prisons.

Many hundreds of OU students will testify to the benefits of higher-level study in prison, as evidenced by the chapters in this book. Higher education has an important place in the prison education system just as it does in mainstream society. Increasingly, the academic voice of these students is contributing to policy debate and influencing change, bringing a new dimension to the benefits of a positive student identity.

“Study with The Open University has given me the sense of new direction, a new future. All the years of struggling and perseverance have paid off. Knowledge is power, and I know that I can go a lot further than I ever imagined I could. I know I can fulfil any ambition”

Currently only about 2% of the prison population are studying at university level and it is hoped that the eagerly anticipated developments in technology as well as changes to funding regulations could allow OU study to be ‘opened up’ to many more students, with the introduction of OpenLearn courses meaning that this is not restricted to those at HE level.

Meanwhile, many of the challenges of navigating the delivery of HE across inter-organisational barriers remain. It is likely that a study experience completely equal to that of mainstream students will never be fully achieved, but as the use of technology develops and attitudes change, there is the potential for the gap to reduce, with an increased focus on compensating for the disadvantages of being in prison. Pursuing this ambition is consistent with the OU’s mission to be ‘Open to people, places, methods and ideas’.
There are some clear milestones to aim for over the next 10 years, notably the introduction of in-cell devices, including connectivity to allow more established links with family members; use of an online study library; access to free OpenLearn courses to offer pathways into formal learning; and improved learning communities. There is a lot to be optimistic about, as well as much to celebrate.

References


