The Offender Learner Steering Group - a prisons education initiative

This group has recently been established by the Director, Students of The Open University in recognition of the University’s commitment to supporting and progressing offender learning.

The steering group has been given a timeframe of six months, and is tasked with identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the University’s current provision for offender learning (including inmates in HM Prisons and offenders in the community – such as those “on licence”). The group’s activities will consider our existing partnerships in this area of work, and the University’s future role as a provider of Higher Education to offender learners. In addition, the group will identify both short-term actions, and a longer-term strategy, to improve the operation and development of the current OU Prison Scheme.

The opening meeting of the Offender Learning Steering Group took place on 1 October 2007, and the group will continue to meet on a monthly basis until the end of March 2008.

The group is made up of a small number of staff (all of whom are already heavily involved in supporting students in prison and widening participation), and is being led by the Regional Director of the Open University in the West Midlands, Mike Rookes.

“This is a significant initiative from the OU and underlines the importance we attach to educating offenders. I am confident that the group’s work will lead to very considerable developments in this field building on the work we are already doing,” he says.

Omar inspires students at The Mount

HMP The Mount staged its first-ever degree ceremony earlier this year when social science student Omar collected his degree from Angela Schofield, recently retired Regional Director of The Open University in the East of England. The ceremony was organised by education manager Rosemary Pettman and guests included prison governors, education staff and other students taking OU courses.

Dr Schofield congratulated Omar on his hard work and dedication and expressed the hope that he would continue his studies in the future.

Omar encouraged his fellow OU students to work hard for their degrees, saying that he had gained a great deal from his studies.
The Open University Prison Scheme

The Open University provides opportunities for inmates in UK and Republic of Ireland prisons to study OU courses. The origin of this successful collaborative scheme with the prisons authorities dates back to the 1970s, and reflects the OU's founding mission.

The OU Prison Scheme is run from the 13 Regional Centres, and is co-ordinated by the Student Registration & Enquiry Service at Nottingham.

This central team deals with the majority of queries and processing relating to students in prison. This includes basic course choice, the reservation/registration process and funding.

However, if you are a student, or working with a student, in Scotland or Ireland all your queries should be directed to your own Regional Centre, (with queries relating to Europe going to the Open University in the North East). The more in-depth course choice and careers advice are referred to the specific Prisons Adviser in each Regional Centre.

The Prisons Team processes financial awards for students in prison (for those who have previously studied a 30 or 60 point OU course), and works closely with the Prison Education Trust (PET) regarding the sponsorship of courses for new students.

The Centre Manager and Team Leader in Nottingham liaise with Course Teams, regional OU Prison Advisers and Prison Education departments to classify the availability of courses to study in prison - in order to provide students with the most accurate information for their course choice and study pathways.

For further information please contact the Prisons Team directly on 0845 366 6059.

The Keith Jessop Award

Keith Jessop worked as a tutor with The Open University for over 30 years. From 1998 until his death in 2006, Keith was the prison adviser for The Open University in the South East. He developed strong relationships with the Education Officers and prison students in each of the fourteen prisons in the region and prisoners would ask about Keith long after they had finished their studies.

In recognition of Keith’s work, The Open University in the South East has inaugurated the Keith Jessop Award.

Earlier this year tutors were invited to nominate students they felt were performing particularly well – and this doesn’t simply mean they are getting good marks. All the nominees were asked to submit a short piece of work explaining what studying with The Open University means to them – what changes they think it’s made or might make. A panel including Keith’s widow, the Chair of The Open University’s Prison Liaison Group – a group which Keith often illuminated with his dry wit during policy discussions - and the Regional Director were convened to select a winner. There were seven nominations spanning a range of courses and including people new to the OU and those with more experience.

Each supporting statement emphasised the positive impact that education was having and more than one commented that they felt more able to take control of their own destiny because of the confidence that learning gave them – it seems that whether studying humanities or the social sciences was less important; studying something was what was important. Each of the nominees has received a certificate to celebrate their nomination and the winner will receive a book of their choice which will help with future studies. The prize will be presented by the Regional Director at a small ceremony in the prison.

Everyone who knew Keith is sure that he’d be pleased to have his name attached to an award celebrating the achievements of those studying in prison and also that the award involved OU tutors. He famously said: “For prison students the OU tutor is about the future. This is one of the few people a prison student meets who has nothing to do with the past.”

We hope that Keith’s name will continue to mean something to prison students and that studying with the OU will continue to help prison students shape their future.
The Rev Elizabeth Waller, OU education co-ordinator at HMP Whitemoor, has been working with students there since the top security prison opened in 1992 and is an OU graduate.

We have between about 15 and 30 prisoners studying a wide range of OU courses each year. There are currently 29, some taking Openings courses and others in the final year of their degree.

Our successes

Over the years we have had several students gaining degrees, including some who entered the prison system unable to read and write. This year there have been three graduates – a straight pass degree, a 2:2 in astrophysics and a 2:1 in social sciences.

The graduation ceremonies take place in the prison chapel and the new graduate invites members of his family and a favourite guest. Last year we had Jeffrey Archer and the year before Sir David Ramsbottom, then chief inspector of prisons. It’s always an emotional occasion.

The challenges

Whitemoor students study in the education department half time, which means two and a half hours for five days a week. They also work in their cells, reading and making notes. Many get up very early in the morning to study when it is quieter. As anyone who has been in a prison will know, they can be very noisy places!

For prisoners on long sentences, time can have an elastic quality. They can have trouble with deadlines, and academic discipline is helpful as it anchors people to the real world. It helps them to get through a prison sentence in a constructive way.

And of course personal issues can intrude. Prisoners are often unable to act in response to events outside the prison walls. This can lead to a feeling of isolation and marginalisation.

Furthermore, the dispersal system means that students can be moved to the other side of the country with no notice. Study materials may become separated, which is often a source of anxiety, and education staff spend a lot of time chasing materials which appear to have evaporated in the system.

Generally speaking, few students drop out of their courses once they have made a start. We try to prepare them well for Level 1 study; prior to becoming undergraduates, many take basic skills and access to HE courses where appropriate, and many start with Openings courses.

But of course some students do drop out, and for a variety of reasons. They may arrive at Whitemoor already studying a course on which we would not have enrolled them, and then they may find the going really tough. Dispersal prisons like ours manage prisoners early on in their sentences. They may be very raw and may need time to settle before returning to study.

Outside contact

At Whitemoor, OU tutorials are arranged in classrooms and are supervised by a member of the prison education staff. They are eagerly awaited by the students. Seeing their tutor makes a massive difference to their self-confidence and enjoyment of the course. One-to-one tutorials are intense but generally enjoyable for both student and tutor. Prisoners are just human beings and they are most grateful for all the help and support that OU tutors give them.

We also have a long termers group where we invite speakers to give a presentation and chair a discussion. This gives students a glimpse of the outside world and makes OU study a little closer to the university experience elsewhere. Among the well-known faces who have visited us in recent years are Jeremy Paxman and Kate Adie.

The future

It is hard to predict the future of OU study at Whitemoor. There are issues about access to the increasing number of courses requiring Internet access and issues about funding, especially for postgraduate students. However, we receive every support from the governor and his team.

And all the research shows that the higher the achievement the less likely the prisoner is to return to prison. This is another important reason why we hope to continue encouraging and supporting Open University study at HMP Whitemoor.
Information for students

Three leaflets aimed at prisoners, either current or potential students, have recently been produced: *Opening Doors for Study, Courses for Prisoners and Study After Prison.*

*Opening Doors to Study* is aimed at prisoners interested in studying with the OU or who are about to start an OU course. It provides an introduction to The Open University and explains how OU study is organised, how the Prison Service Scheme works and how to apply for a course.

*Courses for Prisoners* lists the Level 1 courses available to prisoners in 2007/2008. The leaflet gives a brief description of the Openings short introductory courses and other Level 1 courses.

*Study After Prison* is aimed at prisoners currently studying with the OU, who want to continue their studies after leaving prison. It includes advice on how to make the transition to OU study on the outside and what help is available.

The Prison’s Education Department will have copies of these leaflets but further copies can be obtained from your OU Regional Office.

Ask the education manager for a paper copy of The Open University’s *Dyslexia Toolkit* which offers useful tips for study.

Coping with dyslexia in prison

Dyslexia affects students as well as the general public. Here are some quotes from Open University students:

“
I feel so embarrassed about my spelling and worry that my tutors will think I am lazy as they did when I was at school.”

“I never seem to be able to put down what I want to say”

“Sometimes I feel angry that it is so hard to write it down when I know I understand it just as well as the others.”

Associated with difficulties in reading, writing and comprehension, dyslexia perhaps more accurately relates to different ways of processing in the brain and links to short-term-memory which underpins a lot of activity. Some dyslexic individuals are in fact particularly talented – and exceptionally creative – Leonardo da Vinci or Einstein, for example.

Some people have struggled for years and even decided that they were not up to the work/study they wanted to do. Being assessed for dyslexia has made them feel quite differently and appropriate support has led to successful study and increased confidence everywhere. Ask for advice on getting assessed if you suspect this might be an issue for you. The assessment can be a life-changing event and although the cost can be from £250, relations, prisoners and others may be able to find the money to get one.

Ask the education manager for a paper copy of The Open University’s *Dyslexia Toolkit* which offers useful tips for study.

Some tips for study

Make short notes of the points you want to write and then go back and turn them into sentences.

**Try to write something** every day – short periods of study can be more effective.

**When you have finished** writing something, go through it sentence by sentence afterwards to check it says what you want it to say. Check your spelling and punctuation then.

**Decide what you want to read** – keep it short and give each piece you read a title or heading to summarise what it is about.

**Keep a diary of your work** and you will see how it gradually accumulates and shows you how much you are progressing.