The Virtual Campus comes closer

The March Issue of Inside News described in some detail the development of the Virtual Campus. Since then, there has been significant progress made in making courses available through this system.

The premise behind Virtual Campus and The Open University working together to bring online Open University courses to students in secure locations has been widely praised. The OU has always been very aware of the constraint on students to learn in environments where the Internet cannot be used and has been working hard to break down these barriers.

Virtual Campus is a secure online system which helps offenders’ resettlement back into the community. Features include: CV building, course, workshop and job search, access to interactive resources on housing, money, family and relationships and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to study accredited courses online in a secure environment. The system is being piloted in several prisons across the West Midlands and the East of England and has been a considerable success. A national rollout is hoped to follow.

The partners involved, The Open University, the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS), Ministry of Justice, National Offender Management Service (NOMS), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and Meganexus, have been participating in regular workshops and meetings to ensure that access to Open University courses through the Virtual Campus becomes a reality. Substantial progress has been made to date; the first OU Openings course ‘Making Sense of the Arts’ has been rolled out onto the Virtual Campus test system and is currently being reviewed by the OU, NOMS and LSC to ensure that the learners’ experience is as smooth and as positive as possible.

There are a further eight Openings courses in the pipeline including ‘Understanding society’, ‘Learning to change’ and ‘Starting with maths’. These should be soon under test on the Virtual Campus, approved by the end of the year and the first learners enrolled and piloting the courses from HMP YOI Swinfen, HMP Hewell, HMP YOI Werrington at the next course start date in March 2010. As well as Openings Courses, OpenLearn courses are currently being made available on the Virtual Campus test environment for testing and approval.

It is hoped that this will be a stepping stone for further degree level Open University courses to be made available through the Virtual Campus.

Madeleine Reed, Meganexus
From Cleopatra to Madonna - AA100 has them all!

As Richard Danson Brown (Course Team Chair) has commented, AA100, The arts past and present, is for ‘anyone who’s interested in the arts, especially people who haven’t studied at university level before.’

The course has the great advantage of including the full range of subjects taught in the arts faculty. History, music, art, philosophy, and literature are studied through four thematic course books: Reputations, Tradition and Dissent, Cultural Encounters, and Place and Leisure. In the first of these, figures as diverse as Cleopatra and Madonna are examined, while the last part of the course looks at ways in which we spend our spare time have changed over the last 250 years, with a particular look at the seaside holiday.

Working through these themes will give you the opportunity to try out disciplines that may be unfamiliar: you may discover an unexpected interest in music, for example, and you will find that AA100 prepares you either for more interdisciplinary work at Level 2, or more specialised study of literature, history, and so on. It offers the best forum for finding out where your interests lie, and you will develop and add to your academic and study skills as you do so.

AA100 is a 60 point Level 1 course which runs over nine months, from February until October, or from October until June, every year. To help you get the best out your skills and knowledge, there are seven assignments and a longer end of course assignment (there is no exam). AA100 is based on four text books, plus two books of illustrations, DVD video, DVD Rom and audio material. Internet access is not essential.

If this mixture of academic ideas and topics sounds appealing, do look at the the course description in the new prospectus for more information and talk to your Education Department.

Lindsay Crisp, AA100 AL

Meeting your needs

The Disability Discrimination Act defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. It aims to end the discrimination that many disabled people face and offers protection to disabled people in matters of education, employment and access to goods and services.

The Open University is committed to offering disabled students access to many of our courses and the support and facilities they need to succeed in their studies, whether their disability is physical, medical, mental health-related or a specific learning difficulty (such as dyslexia). We ask students to let us know about their disability using the Facilities Request Form (FRF1), which your Education Department can request from the university. You can use this form to request alternative format materials (e.g. comb-bound, transcripts) and other support. The information is used to create an ‘Additional Requirements Profile’, which is a document that tutors can see so they are aware of your support needs. The information you give is subject to data protection legislation so it will not be passed on to a third party without your permission.

If you would like any further information you can ask a member of education staff to request our brochure ‘Meeting Your Needs’.

Lucy Jones, OU in the West Midlands

What course can I do?

The prospectus for students in prison, now available from Education Departments, gives details of nearly 200 OU courses, with subjects ranging from the arts and social sciences to mathematics, science and law.

There is also information and advice on how prisoners can become successful students and on how they can make use of the knowledge and skills gained from study after their release.
What next - third degree?

Following his recent degree presentation in Arbour Hill Prison, Dublin one Open University student shares how his studies gave him a real thirst for learning and a long term objective.

“Having never considered third level education before I came to prison, the Prison Education Service sparked my interest in further education and ultimately in studies with The Open University.

“My first year gave me a thirst for knowledge of all things ‘computer’ when the course material kept me engrossed, challenged, and to my surprise, extremely motivated. Despite the long lonely hours of study, and occasional problems, I found myself always eager to return to the books at every opportunity, fascinated with each new concept and keen to expand my knowledge.

“That first spark, in 1997, ignited a passion for learning in a subject that continues to captivate me. Now, some 12 years later, having gained a BSc. (Hons) in Computing and my Masters Degree in Computing for Commerce & Industry, I can say that the OU has captured the interest of a very inquisitive mind and helped to develop a real passion for learning, Thank You.

“I am proud of my achievements and members of my family and the dedicated and ever supportive staff in my local education centre have shared in my success. To them I will always be indebted.

“What next? Maybe a PhD! Maybe …”

An incentive for others

“On reading a copy of Inside News it occurred to me that my own route of study may serve as a good example of what might be achieved with a determined and positive use of prison time.

“Since being sentenced to seventeen years, I’ve had to seriously reassess my circumstances, seeking to make any positives I could out of such a negative situation. I was a builder in my previous life but, finding that age was beginning to tell against me in the cold and damp English winters, resolved to study for a new and more secure career. Being away from family obligations would allow me to aim for maximum qualifications in minimum time.

“At 50 years old I was acutely aware that I would have to over qualify and outperform to counter any possible prejudice when seeking employment in the future. Whilst others may aim for 30 or 60 credit points per year towards their degree, I decided to aim higher, at 90 or 120 points.

“Despite many and frequent temptations to give up and slide back, I have managed to maintain the impetus of my academic studies. My overriding aim in all this is to be able to support my family again as quickly as circumstances permit.

“My record shows I have taken nine OU courses, seven of them in the last three years, passing them all at an average mark of around 70% and gaining a total of 420 credit points. My current tranche of courses will add a further 105 points. I have been offered a BSc (Honours) Open degree and would hope to go on to complete a Masters degree in criminology and psychology and then concentrate on building a career base.

“I think that what I have done shows that with determination and resolve, you can do almost anything.”

Peter, HMP Stocken

Being positive

“Whilst being in prison is a very daunting prospect for most, finding yourself with lots of time on your hands and nothing to do, studying with the OU has helped to occupy my time positively and make the most of a bad situation.

“It gave me a great boost in helping to change the way I look at things, enabling me to be more confident and better educated for the future. The support of the OU staff in prison has been a great help and I am now looking forward to starting my 60 point sociology course in October.”

David, HMP Holme House

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Why teach in prison?
Simon Kear has been teaching Social Sciences in prison for four years. He explains why this has proved such a stimulating experience.

Teaching in prison has been, for me, something of a quiet revelation. I’ll be honest: it’s a source of considerable pride to me that I am part of an institution that values offender learning.

The OU has a very good practical guide to supporting students in prison. So good, in fact, that it mirrors exactly my experiences at a number of different prisons in the East Midlands region. But for anyone still unsure whether they would like to take on this form of tutoring, possibly because the environment might appear threatening rather than because of moral objections, I would say this: without exception, the six or seven prison students that I have taught thus far – men and women – have been among the best tutees I’ve ever had.

Why? As was pointed out to me by the Education Manager in a particularly sombre category B prison, the main reason for this is actually quite simple, yet crucially important. In what is – let’s face it – an awful environment for the human soul, undertaking an OU course and contact with an OU tutor, whether face to face or not, is a part of an offender’s life that is unconnected with the prison regime. It is something that belongs to that prisoner alone. I can’t imagine what that feels like. In return, you get a student that is always well prepared, engaged, respectful, diligent and, best of all, eager for knowledge. If you are a serious and professional educator, it really doesn’t get any better.

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Malcolm, a student at HMP Wolds, was very proud to receive his BA (Hons) in Literature at a formal degree ceremony at the prison. Although initially reluctant to take part in such an event, believing that such events belonged to those leading normal lives, he was very pleased to have been persuaded to do so.

The Director of the Prison, Dave McDonnell, spoke about the motivation required and the particular barriers faced by those studying at this level within a secure environment. He particularly emphasised how overcoming these barriers proved an ability to cope well with the challenges faced on release and greatly enhanced employment prospects for those determined to break the pattern of re-offending.

Malcolm paid tribute to the support received from his family which enabled him to continue, even when he had problems.

He continues, “The ceremony was carried out with due respect for all involved and allowed my family to see the other side of prison life. That we can, if allowed, achieve great things within prison walls and set our lives firmly back on track. This for me was an important element of the day.

“For those just starting their OU journey, a graduation ceremony may seem a distant goal and, like me, not one they would relish. However, I am extremely pleased I agreed to attend mine and would encourage all students to acknowledge their own hard work in this way.”