Campaigner Bobby Cummines calls for greater access to OU materials in prisons

Former bank robber Bobby Cummines, who now campaigns for the rights of reformed prisoners, has called for greater access to Open University educational material in prisons.

Cummines - who was once named Britain’s most dangerous prisoner - told OU staff on the University’s 40th anniversary in April that he would “personally” take up the issue with the relevant authorities.

He said: “Education is liberation and that has been my catchphrase all the way through. You are giving people back a life and I want every one of you to know that we are so grateful.

“We are grateful to our students for going through, coming out and getting degrees, because it gives us a voice and it shows other kids that we can do it.

“Education is liberation...I want everyone of you to know we are so grateful.”

For everyone that comes out of a prison with a degree or goes on an OU course when they have come out of prison and reformed, that’s three victims of crime that are not going to happen.”

At the age of 16, Cummines was convicted for possession of a sawn-off shotgun, at the beginning of a career in crime which saw him serving 13 years in prison for offences including manslaughter and bank robbery.

The ‘most dangerous prisoner’ title came from organising prison riots, sit-downs and even a hostage-taking.

However, he decided to put all that behind him when he embarked on an Open University course after his release in 1988.

Cummines is the founder member, now chief executive, of Unlock, a charity that represents reformed offenders (www.unlock.org.uk).

The Open University welcomes Bobby Cummines’ support in its drive to bring wider access to study material to its students.

Articles in previous issues of Inside News have highlighted the developments in this field, in particular the Virtual Campus (see Issue 6) and the OU looks forward to the day when all approved courses are readily available to those studying in secure environments.

Richard Cooper, Communications
Understanding the planet

A new course, Environment: journeys through a changing world (U116), examines some of the most pressing issues facing the world today.

Barely a day passes without environmental issues featuring high on the international media’s agenda, and Environment: journeys through a changing world (U116) helps students understand the background to these stories and develop their own opinions.

U116 looks at some of the iconic places and issues around the world, including the Amazonian rain forests, the region of the Nile, the Arctic ice caps, plus industrialisation and mass migration in China. It shows how people are striving to manage and protect their environment with sustainable solutions. And it helps make sense of some of the stories in the media, from endangered wildlife and climate change to plans for new, greener cities.

Students will acquire the knowledge and skills to become more informed about both the causes and concerns of environmental change, as well as providing an ideal foundation for a range of environment, science, social science and technology courses, diplomas and degrees.

The new flagship Level 1 course, which assumes no prior knowledge, has been the cooperative work of authors with many different interests: social science, ecology, science and technology.

If you are looking for a single course that offers a general introduction to studying the environment, then U116 is the course for you.

For more information, talk to your Education Department.

James Warren, Staff Tutor

Make your choice – now!

Although it is only June, it is not too early to think about applying for your next, or perhaps, first, course with The Open University. Indeed the earlier you apply the better, as this gives you time to sort out things like financial support. Here are some simple pointers on how to go about the application process.

Where to start

If you are interested in studying with The Open University, ask your Education Department for a prospectus - we offer general and subject specific prospectuses – or look at the leaflet Courses for Prisoners.

Many prisons host information and advice sessions where prospective students can view course materials and prospectuses. It may also be possible to speak to an OU adviser about your future study plans.

If you are new to university study you may wish to consider one of our preparatory Openings courses. These courses are designed to introduce new students to study, or to act as a refresher for those who have not studied for some time.

The leaflet Opening Doors to Study contains useful information about studying with the OU, finance, exams and what support is available.

Once you have decided on an area of interest, your Education Department will advise you about the suitability and availability of courses in that area and help you complete the necessary paperwork.

All study must be approved by your Prison Governor and you will be advised on your application by your Education Department.

Funding your studies

If you are a new student you may be able to get funding from the Prisoners’ Education Trust or from another charity. It may also be possible for you or a third party to pay your course fees via the prison. Please discuss this with your Education Department if you would like to explore this option.

Once you have successfully completed your first 15, 30 or 60 point course (or science short course) you will be able to apply for Open University funding for future undergraduate study whilst you are in prison. If you move to another prison or are released, you can complete your current course without paying additional fees. Upon release, you may be able to apply for financial support to help you complete your undergraduate qualification via the OU’s Financial Support scheme.

For further advice and information (including course start dates), please speak to a member of your prison’s Education Department.

Nicola Ball, Nottingham SRS
OU students are playing a major part in a project run by the Prisoners Education Trust (www.prisonerseducation.org.uk) to develop peer mentoring for distance learners.

So what are peer mentors and why is peer mentoring needed?

Peer mentors are prisoners who have themselves been successful learners or who show a genuine interest in education, and are willing to provide support to other distance learners in prison (their mentees).

There are two reasons for recruiting and developing peer mentors. Firstly, feedback from students shows that distance learning is challenging and that these students are often alone in their studies. They want and need more support. Secondly, the Trust believes that peer mentoring could help increase the completion and success rates of distance learners.

The training provided by the Trust results in an accredited award so that, not only is the course to a recognised standard but mentors have a qualification they can use after release.

The course includes the following topics: the role of the mentor, the benefits of a peer mentoring for learning relationship, mentoring skills, power and boundaries, communication skills, study skills and how to run a mentoring session.

Following successful courses at a number of Young Offender Institutions, the scheme is now being extended to adult prisons.

OU students have participated in courses at HMP Ford, HMP High Down, HMP Maidstone and HMP Swaleside. All of the students felt that they had something to offer their fellow prisoners. “I’ve got a lot of patience and my skills could benefit others.” was one typical comment. Having been an OU student, another was keen to learn the skills to support others through education.

The participants really enjoyed the fact that the course allowed them to gather with others and share ideas as, being distance learners, they often spend a lot of time on their own. And, as one pointed out, the mentoring course is all about life skills and could be useful in other areas.

Both mentors and mentees benefit from this scheme. Mentors develop a sense of responsibility for their students and have the satisfaction of seeing someone become a successful student. Mentees gain from being able to bounce ideas of someone with experience; their motivation and confidence will increase while their sense of isolation will decrease. They will become more effective students as they draw on the expertise of their mentors.

The project is run in the South East but if you feel it could benefit your prison, please ask the Education Department to contact the Prisoners Education Trust for more information.

Inside News gratefully acknowledges the help of the Prisoners Education Trust with this article.

Peter (pictured below), a student in the Republic of Ireland, received his degree in Social Sciences from Dr Rosemary Hamilton, National Director, The Open University in Ireland. Here’s what Peter had to say about his OU experience.

“Journey’s end

I started a journey a long time ago. Some would call it a prison sentence. I like to call it a quest for knowledge. I came to prison a social misfit. I will leave it a Social Scientist! I learned early on in DD100 about what is called a ‘circuit of knowledge’. I have brought this circuit to a close today but not to an end because one other thing that you learn in social sciences is that the circuit of knowledge is forever changing.

“I have finished my first lap. Along the way I have picked up a Certificate in Social Sciences, a Diploma in Criminology and Social Policy and a Degree in Social Sciences. I won’t lie – it has been hard, it has been lonely and sometimes it seemed impossible but with self-belief and pure determination, it has been achievable.

“Through the opportunities afforded me by the Prison Education Service, with The Open University, I have now opened up a huge range of possibilities not previously available to me. I would like to offer sincere and heartfelt thanks to The Open University for making my dreams possible.”
Postgraduate achievement in Scotland

The first postgraduate qualification for a student in the Scottish Prison Scheme has been awarded to Robert, a student at HMP Shotts.

Robert achieved his BSc (Hons) Psychology degree in 2002 and then went on to study at postgraduate level, successfully completing courses in ethnography, psychometrics, discourse analysis and social policy to gain his MA in Social Sciences.

Robert gives his thoughts on this achievement.

“Throughout the last ten years or so I have been asked on numerous occasions why I spend so much of my time, and indeed ‘waste’ my time studying so hard and over such a long period. My response has always been firstly, it enhanced my knowledge in fields that interested me, secondly it would give me qualifications that would assist me upon release, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, it occupied my time in a useful and constructive manner.

“It hasn’t been an easy road. From the very start I faced many challenges which, at the time seemed insurmountable. However, with support from people who believed in me, and with the professional and honest work from a whole host of OU staff, from tutors to office support staff, I was able to achieve my honours degree and then my MA.

“The whole learning experience has taught me so much, not simply about the subjects I studied, but also about myself and the world around me. Before I started the first course, I had reservations about my ability to study at university level, but now my next pursuit, a PhD, is a challenge I look forward to with few if any reservations, having grown in both confidence and academic ability.

“My OU education has not only developed my mind but also taught me to challenge....”

Offender Learning Group update

The second Offender Learning Conference takes place on the 16th June at Walton Hall.

This invitation-only event forms part of the University’s 40th Anniversary celebrations and will celebrate the success and dedication of our:

● students in prison, who continue to have a retention and success rate comparable with the norm, despite the barriers to their learning;

● teaching and support staff, who have continued to provide an excellent service through many changes and difficult times;

● external partnerships which enable us to provide an improved service and support for new technologies to bridge the digital divide for students in prison.

External speakers include Lord Ramsbotham, (former Chief Inspector of Prisons and Vice Chair of the All Party Penal Affairs Group), Bobby Cummines (see lead article) and key staff from our partner organisations.

The theme of the conference will be story telling and we are seeking views from students and staff to be delivered on the day. If you would like to contribute to the conference, please tell us your story or answer one (or more) of the following questions (in no more than 100 words):

“What’s it like to study with the OU in prison?”

“What difference does it make?”

“What is the best and the worst about studying with the OU while in prison?”

“How can the OU improve its provision in prison?”

Please send your contribution (including whether you are a student or staff (Prison or OU), and which prison where applicable) by 11th June to the editor (contact details to left).