Overcoming the digital divide

1 November 2007 was an important day for Open University (OU) students in prison. They were the focus of discussions in a conference, held at the OU main campus in Milton Keynes. The event brought together researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to discuss issues surrounding on-line access and support for students in prison. It was also designed as a briefing meeting – to brief the OU about the plans within the prison sector to improve facilities for students, and to brief the prison sector and other external colleagues about the University’s plans to develop new technologies which could be used in prisons.

Research highlights failings

The conference was initially planned as a result of research, carried out over the previous six months. The research had involved interviews with OU students and education staff in ten prisons (Cat A to D, male and female, public and private), across five OU Regions. The research investigated the experiences of the OU student in prison and how technology, or the lack of it, was affecting their learning, choice of study and future decisions. Interim results showed that, as the OU moves on-line, there are an increasing number of courses, degrees and support mechanisms, which are not accessible to learners in prison. It also highlighted how many dedicated education staff in the prison and the OU, work tirelessly to overcome the resource and funding issues. Access to technology varied widely and was prison-specific.

Positive results

The day was a great success. All those who attended were struck by the enthusiasm and positive energy, which was generated by the participants. Through a programme of presentations and workshops on key themes, experts from inside and outside the OU discussed the challenges being faced. A new Offender Learning Steering Group (OLSG) had been established to investigate the issues, and outcomes from the conference provided the key priorities for that group and the OU future Offender Learning strategy.

There have been several positive outcomes from the conference above and beyond the original aims. New initiatives have been developed such as the intranet at HMP Whitemoor, which is running an off-line version of the OU Moodle system. (Moodle is the software behind the OU web based Virtual Learning Environment pulling all the University’s teaching systems into one integrated system.) Other prisons are keen to follow suit. An on-line discussion forum has been established, on Openlearn, for prison and OU staff to discuss specific problems.

POLARIS, the on-line proof of concept trial, which is now live in several London prisons, will soon be running its first OU course (see page 2). Continuation talks have taken place within the OU to increase the number of alternatives to on-line components. Negotiations with Government organisations to improve the funding situation have also commenced.

What next?

Another conference is being planned for 4 June 2008. This will be a smaller, more strategic meeting and the guest speaker, from Germany, will be discussing the European solution to Internet access in secure environments.

Yes, it’s slow and no, we can’t solve all of the problems yet, but the OU is committed to its overarching strategic objective, which is to promote fair access for all.
Prison’s approach raises standards

Students taking higher level OU courses at HMP Gartree have been increasing both in numbers and quality. It is arguable that the principal reason for the very encouraging number of students who are now taking these OU courses is that the education department has adopted the policy of only allowing students to enrol for undergraduate study once they have passed a prison education Level 3 (AS Level equivalent) qualification. This ensures that they are more than capable of studying at Level 4 (1st Year Undergraduate).

The Open University caters for all under- and post-graduate students in the prison. Currently there are 30 students studying a range of subjects from eight of the university’s faculties. However, over half of those studying are on a science, maths or social sciences course. In terms of the overall spread of OU students, there are presently nine at Level I, 17 at Level II and three at Level III. There is also one person who is studying at Masters Level.

Shaun McMann, responsible for prison students in the East Midlands Region, endorses the prison’s approach: “I have taught at the prison for nearly seven years, and can confirm that this policy has had a very positive influence on the calibre of students that are registered every year on Open University courses.”

HMP Gartree is a Category B prison two miles north of Market Harborough in Leicestershire. Originally built as a Category C training prison, it was reclassified as a Category A high security institution before it opened. The prison then became a Category B in 1992. It is one of 14 prisons in the East Midlands region, and many of the prisoners are serving life sentences. According to The Carter Report, released last December, Gartree has an operational capacity of 666. At the time of writing, there are 574 prisoners, but this is due to increase to maximum capacity by autumn 2008. The prison employs approximately 300 staff, 44 of whom work within the education department, including eight full time and 36 part time employees.

In line with the National Offender Management Service’s requirement that all prisoners be engaged in ‘purposeful activity’, the prison workshops and gardens are both part of the offending behaviour programme. Another key element of this is the education department, which has approximately 300 people enrolled on various courses. The prison education manager estimates that there are fewer that 100 prisoners who have not taken part in education at some point during their time at HMP Gartree. It is noteworthy that approximately 54% of Gartree’s students have achieved Level 2 or above in English and 46% in numeracy, higher than in many other prisons.

POLARIS: a bright new star for prison students?

“The vast majority of courses require internet access which we prisoners are unable to obtain”. This is a typical comment and the OU is now addressing the issue.

POLARIS, the Programme for Offender Learning and Resettlement Information Services, is a project running in seven London prisons through which education departments can give a form of secure Internet access to prisoners. If it succeeds, the project – currently a proof of concept rather than a pilot scheme – will be extended nationally.

POLARIS is a managed and secure network for delivering content – a pipeline through which organisations like The Open University can provide courses and other material.

But the system has to meet the security requirements of the prison service. If and when this is done, POLARIS could give prison students access to a wider range of OU courses. It will also help solve study problems when prisoners move from one prison to another.

After a few teething problems, the system is up and running at Wormwood Scrubs and Latchmere House, an open prison. Services using it so far include LearnDirect, Meganexus and Jobcentre Plus. And now POLARIS is working with the team behind the OU’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to try to make online access for OU prison students a reality.
Cracking codes behind bars

The ancient African language of Meroitic has never been deciphered. But a database created by OU graduate Tony Benfield is now being used by the British Museum to crack the linguistic code. Tony relates how he created this ground-breaking database while serving a sentence for armed robbery.

(Reprinted courtesy of Sesame)

“HOW many of us have started on a course of action that has taken a different route and changed our lives forever? One for me was robbing a bank and getting eleven years’ imprisonment. But rather than waste the time sitting in a maximum security cell pondering the error of my ways, I wanted to use the opportunity that this gave me, so I enrolled on an OU degree programme, leading eventually to a BA Honours in Humanities.

The inspiration
In 2004 I read an article in Current World Archaeology about Nubia, focusing on an exhibition of artefacts. One of these was a stela (an ancient stone slab) to the goddess Amescemi and Queen Amanishakheto. The language of Meroitic hieroglyphics and demotic script had still not been translated despite the work of academics world-wide, even though it bore similarities to its Egyptian neighbour. More intriguing for me was that there had also been Greek and Roman contact periods with the then Nubians. This captivated my attention and, always being up for a challenge, I wanted to understand more.

Reading through hundreds of archaeology articles and journals trying to piece together some understanding of the script made me realise that it was an impossible task without it being computerised.

To resolve this I designed a relational access script and hieroglyphic. It was then a matter of inputting every word from all the artefacts I could find recorded. After three years solid work, I am still at it with over 11,000 entries. Little did I realise that what was just a project to understand something obscure has totally taken over my time and is still with me today.

I could not have done this work alone so thanks to those at the British Museum’s Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, the CNRS_LLACAN group in Paris, the interloan library system and the archaeology department at Worcester County Council.

Plusses of an OU degree
Undertaking the Open University degree helped me a great deal. Not only did it give me purpose and a direction but I actually feel that by broadening my horizons and outlook it made me realise a lot of my own failings in how I saw the world as a whole. The numerous tutors who had to obtain security clearance to visit me in the prison, then allocate a full day to travel to visit for a few hours to review my work, really motivated and helped me more than I could ever express in words. To those tutors I say a big thank you.

The thing that I really try to get across to people inside and outside prison is that no matter what the circumstances, it is still possible to do some real good from a prison environment that can actually help others. The lucky thing for me is that all the work that I have done over the years on the database, as well as the reports and analysis, all count towards my PhD.

The Future
I will have opportunities of working in a number of countries, be it at a museum or university in an archaeology aspect, or I could just carry on with my IT contracting and use my Meroitic work as a hobby. Either way my imprisonment has not been wasted and has actually been put to good use for the benefit of not just myself. Thank you, OU, for the opportunity and having faith in me.”

Challenge yourself!

“It’s a pleasure to write this concerning how much I have achieved whilst in prison.” says Linda from HMP Morton Hall.

She took up the challenge of doing something educational with her time by signing up for K100 in Health and Social Care. Her aim is to become a nurse.

“At first I thought I would not meet the requirements, but no - you can do it as long as you ready to achieve it. My results give me joy and hope.”

Linda encourages others to follow in her footsteps; “You will be surprised how much you will achieve. Stay positive.”
Regional Profile - The OU in the North

The Open University in the North, based in Newcastle upon Tyne, is responsible for OU students in prisons in the North East and Cumbria (and students in secure institutions in continental Europe).

We currently have sixty-seven students over six adult male prisons (Acklington, Durham, Frankland, Haverigg, Holme House and Kirklevington Grange) and one female prison (Low Newton).

Hilary Jupp is a member of the OU’s Prison Liaison Group and coordinates the academic and advisory support in the region. She is responsible for ensuring that students are allocated to the course tutors who will facilitate their academic study. She provides tutor briefings, and support for staff and students throughout the year. Regionally-based OU staff, Angie Whitfield and Sophie Turnbull, undertake a range of activities to support prison students.

Many of our tutors make visits for tutorials. This often means setting aside half a day for a 2-hour tutorial as the necessary security procedures make entering and leaving a prison a lengthy business. It can be a daunting experience, especially for tutors new to it, but our prison education staff are very helpful. At a recent awareness-raising event several tutors commented that once begun, a prison tutorial is a teaching experience like most others, and yet often more rewarding, perhaps because for both student and tutor more effort has been required for it to happen. And, of course, prison students have less straightforward access to their tutors so the opportunity to talk to them makes a big difference.

It’s clear that the process of higher education is as important as the quantitative measures of successful course results. Both contribute to the transforming effects we regularly witness amongst our students.

Our students greatly benefit from both the practical and motivational support given to them by education staff in prisons. We have an OU coordinator in each of them. They are dedicated professionals, committed to working with their students and OU colleagues as part of the Offenders Learning & Skills Service contract.

Information about OU study for prospective students, and specialist advice to help students move on to their next course are offered by three ‘location’ academic advisers who visit the prisons to see students individually, and in groups. Peter Blachford (Acklington and Durham), Sheila Lawes (Haverigg, Holme House and Kirklevington Grange), John Stobbart (Frankland and Deerbolt YOI) are happy to discuss any OU-related matter.

We bring our prison and OU colleagues together at our annual staff development seminar. It’s a good opportunity for everyones to meet, and it’s invaluable for all concerned to learn more about each others’ perspectives, and the roles we play in fitting together this particular jigsaw.

Local successes!

Congratulations to Angus, studying with the OU in Frankland prison. In 2007, he achieved over 85% in both the continuous assessment and in the end of course assessment for his course S103 Discovering Science. Angus received special commendation from the S103 Exam & Assessment Board: ‘We would like to acknowledge your excellent performance in the course and to offer you our congratulations for this result.’

Particular congratulations go to Carl, Adrian and Tony who now have degrees with the OU.

During 2006/2007, twenty-three students successfully completed a 60-point level 1 course and achieved a Certificate: 6 in Arts and Humanities; 9 in Social Science; 1 in German and 1 in Spanish; 3 in Maths, and 3 in Natural Science. Five students gained Diplomas.

It’s good to talk

Those involved in prison education now have a new place to talk - http://labspace.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=3427.

The aim of this area is to share news and ideas and good practice. It’s open to the OU community and also colleagues working for the prison service, education departments and the wider education community.