The Virtual Campus - is this the future?

Articles in previous issues of Inside News have highlighted the need to break through the internet barrier to enable students in secure environments to participate fully in Open University courses. The OU recognises that this barrier places a severe constraint on students and is dedicating considerable resources to ensuring that their courses are widely available in these environments.

The OU is participating in the Virtual Campus pilot project being delivered by a partnership of organisations including the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS). The Virtual Campus is an online system, which allows prisoners to access resources to help them in their rehabilitation and their journey back into the community. The system is being piloted in prisons and a probation area in the West Midlands and East of England regions. The project was specifically designed to increase employment opportunities for prisoners on release, by providing them with a range of support mechanisms to aid resettlement. It gives prisoners the opportunity to view relevant education and training courses and apply for jobs within their relocation area.

The Virtual Campus is now live in several prisons in both pilot areas but not yet able to connect to the OU. However, the OU has worked hard to provide all the necessary information to the Virtual Campus developers in order to test the secure connections and testing should start very soon. The OU will also be testing this information themselves to ensure that all the necessary links work.

Initially only one course will be available (M150) but if this is successful many other courses should follow. Once the system goes live, students will be able to access their course material directly from the OU website. It is also hoped that students will be able to participate in interactive assessments, access study support material and submit assignments through the e-TMA system.

Discussions are ongoing about how much of the StudentHome site will be visible through this link but the OU is trying to ensure that the experience for students in prison is as good as possible.

Some of the other services the Virtual Campus will provide are:

- Access to other education such as Learndirect, other distance learning providers and college courses.
- CV writing, using a CV builder which helps prisoners to identify key activities and learning undertaken in prison. (This may be extended to a Prisoners Education Trust letter writer.)
- Search and apply for internal job vacancies and mentoring.
- Search and apply for jobs in student’s home area when nearing release.

There are also plans to deliver the Virtual Campus to the London prisons through the Polaris system.

The OU is working towards the day when all approved courses are fully available to students in secure environments.
November 2008 saw the inaugural Mike Batty Award being presented to James Crosby in HMP Stocken.

Mike Batty was one of the first OU tutors in prisons and continued to teach foundation and second level courses throughout the 1970s and 1980s. He finally retired last year, still committed to the idea of prisoner education.

This award is for all students in prison or secure accommodation in the East Midlands, and will be presented annually to the person who has shown the most outstanding level of academic achievement during the previous 12 months.

On receiving the award, James wrote the following piece describing how he feels about Open University study:

Essentially, it is a profound awareness of responsibility. During March 2004 and faced with the cold prospects of spending the next decade of my life behind bars, I felt compelled, genuinely motivated not to allow my unattractive living conditions and the heavy sense of guilt I felt to plague me. However, I was consumed by a fanciful urge to advance forward and actively achieve something of academic excellence.

After successfully completing three Open University courses, and finding them all enlightening, I have developed a sincere depth of appreciation of the arts and culture. Now my efforts are recognised. Receiving ‘The Mike Batty Award’ has motivated me even more, I want to drive myself forwards and to make the intended Bachelors Degree seem even more obtainable.

Furthermore, I also feel a deep seated sense of gratitude to my previous Open University tutors who were positively charged with enthusiasm and reassurance. Also to those whom I disappointed and to those, far too many to name, who believe in me – they know clearly who they are.

You see, studying in prison for me is a collective effort, whether it be my family’s lengthy searches of the internet or the prison librarian leaving no stone unturned in finding a specific text for me. It is this awareness of unselfishness and open handedness I find so motivating. Moreover, I feel that the Open University study means so much to those who are tirelessly bettering their lives.

If you feel like giving an Openings course a go, talk to staff in your Education Department – you’ve nothing to lose and a great deal to gain.

James Crosby (right) receiving his award from Mike Batty
Study before...during...and after

The Open University can play a significant role in the lives of those who intend to go on to a traditional university on release and those who have come from this kind of university background and wish to continue their studies whilst in prison.

In the first case, potential applicants to traditional universities may feel put off by the paperwork and application process required to secure a university place. But such worry is misplaced.

John (not his real name) from HMP Risley was recently released on parole, in time to enter his chosen university in October and begin full time studies. The process of applying to UCAS, securing accommodation and a student loan was successfully completed by the prison’s Education and Guidance Departments working together.

John used his initial 60 points, from A103, ‘Introduction to humanities’ to submit his application in lieu of A-levels and prove his capability. He went on to study MU120, ‘Open mathematics’ and T173, ‘Engineering for the future’ thereby acquiring a further 60 points. His total of 120 points enabled him to apply for a two year HND, of which he will have to do one year before converting to a degree course in engineering.

In the second case, students entering prison after completing some fulltime study at university are naturally anxious at the prospect of being unable to complete their studies. Experience at HMP Risley shows students can be reassured that they can still study for a degree and use their existing points. Anyone in such a situation may be able to import up to 240 points, equivalent to two years’ full time study, and can often follow a similar or related course to obtain a degree with the OU.

It is essential to get a full statement of modules studied and points achieved from the original university (this is called an academic transcript) plus a syllabus where possible. This can be done by the student or by the Education Department, but the request for release of information must be signed by the student as it involves confidential material covered by the Data Protection Act. This statement and a claim form is then passed to The Open University’s Credit Transfer Office, who award the appropriate credit.

The Open University’s Regional Advisers can assist with the selection of relevant courses and appropriate modules to enable completion of an OU qualification. The process is clearly laid out in a pamphlet sent out to the applicant by the Credit Transfer Office and can be discussed with regional staff.

A high score makes it all worthwhile

Ben has been at HMP The Wolds for a little over three years. Since then he has turned his life around by engaging in distance learning and hopes to obtain a degree in Modern Languages. He is currently studying A207, ‘Enlightenment to Romanticism’.

“Despite being more than academically capable I left school with no qualifications, and less than two years later was serving a life sentence. Near the beginning of my sentence I vowed I would utilise my time in prison so that one day I could look back and see that I had achieved something permanent and lasting. The Open University has become the medium through which this is being made possible.

In September 2006, I embarked upon my degree studies in Modern Languages (English and Spanish) with A103, ‘An Introduction to the humanities’. My main objective is to get out of prison at the earliest possible opportunity to build a new life, but completing my undergraduate studies before that has become a ‘goal within a goal’.

“It has been thoroughly enjoyable learning with the OU. The course material is well-written and the assignment questions stimulating. Learning has widened my outlook and interests, and to receive a score of 85 or 90 for an assignment is tremendous validation for the hard-work put in.”

“Studying in prison has both obvious benefits and frustrating downsides. There is an abundance of time to devote to the material and assignments but the time is not always quiet. In some prisons it is a struggle to find a computer to type up work. But it is a lack of Internet access for research material that is often the fundamental problem for OU student inmates. However, to have overcome these challenges with the same level of motivation to continue my learning with the OU gives me great satisfaction and confidence.”

“I am sure this confidence in my ability to overcome challenges to achieve a personal goal will continue to benefit me upon release and beyond.”
Completing the jigsaw

Social science courses are the most popular OU courses in prisons, with more than a quarter of students taking them. Of these, almost half are on the Level 1 course DD100, ‘An Introduction to the Social Sciences’, which prepares students for a wide range of study options.

Martin at HMP Manchester reckons there are other benefits to be gained from studying DD100. “In addition to the course objectives, I have a greater understanding of society, the environment and what is happening out there in the big wide world. The course has opened my eyes to concerns and problems that were once invisible to me, especially the environment.”

Before starting the course Martin admits he wasn’t confident about passing, believing that this kind of study was more for “brain boxes” with a list of GCSEs and A level qualifications. However, the support and encouragement of both the OU Coordinator and his tutor have given him the confidence and self-esteem to succeed.

Martin describes his tutorials thus: “My tutor has given me more confidence than I have ever known. I was a wreck inside myself each time I went to a tutorial. When I came out I walked back to the wing on air!”

He explains the benefits he found from OU study:

“Through education and the important skills and ideas I have learnt, I have been able to take a step back and have a look at my life. I used to go to work every day and take things as they came. There was no structure because I was unable to form any; in fact I had no social awareness. The themes in DD100 are: structure and agency, uncertainty and diversity and knowledge and knowing. I have learned how to apply these themes into my own lifestyle. My life was like a jigsaw, but was made up of more than one puzzle; the pieces fit but were a mismatch. Take a mismatch out and you are left with a blank space. This is where I have to apply the themes into my life, using the new tools and skills I have been taught to remove the certainty of coming back to prison.”

“The course, which was initially unappealing, turned out to be one of the most interesting and enjoyable academic courses I have ever done. As a result, I am hungry for more knowledge and more material.”

“I have not only achieved all the learning outcomes in DD100, but I have also learnt valuable social and life skills, very important character-building skills and I have a greater understanding of feelings and emotions. I just wish other inmates could pay attention to what I’m achieving. It really is turning my life around and I am seeing part of life, to which, through ignorance, I would otherwise be blind.”

Martin intends to continue his studies to fulfill his tutor’s prophecy, of getting an honours degree. Martin concludes, “This prophecy is working wonders for my confidence, self-esteem and belief. It’s great to feel part of something where someone can see I am worth something and not socially excluded as I was at school.”

Offender Learning Group update

Much has been achieved for OU Offender Learning since the last issue of Inside News.

An audit of services across all 14 OU locations has been completed which has highlighted areas for sharing good practice.

We have investigated the achievable degrees and diplomas and identified key courses which will require the highest priority in finding alternatives until they can be accessed directly.

A new agreement with the Prison Service is being negotiated which should ensure more consistency of service across prisons in England and a new procedure to improve continuity of support for students released on licence is being trialled in Scotland.

There is also now a growing awareness across many OU units of the access issues (including requirements for the VirtualCampus), an internal website has been set up and an external website is planned for the spring.