The Open University's Centre for Widening Participation manages the production and presentation of Openings courses. These short, introductory courses are very popular with students in prison with nearly 2000 students studying whilst in prison during the last 3 years. They are designed especially for people who have no experience of study or it’s been a long time since they studied.

Openings courses focus on developing key study skills as well as introducing students to one of a range of fascinating subjects. The most popular courses to prison students in the last 2-3 years have been Understanding society (Y157), Understanding management (Y159) and Starting with maths (Y162). Other courses are offered in the arts, environment, law, health and psychology.

The Centre is currently working on enhancing Openings courses by adding an ICT element at the end of each course. The aim of this is to give students the opportunity to develop some basic IT skills as well as learning about their chosen subject. One course, which is worth 15 credit points, is currently being piloted with this model – Understanding health (Y178).

Students who don’t have access to IT can still complete the main part of the course and gain 10 credit points. It is hoped that with initiatives such as the Virtual Campus, access to IT will in the future not pose as much of a problem for students studying whilst in prison and they will be able to access many more OU courses.

Talk to staff in your Education Department about Openings - you've nothing to lose and a great deal to gain.

Julie Gowen, CWP

Inside News wants your views: We’re asking for your opinions, comments, questions, concerns, success stories... in fact anything you want to ask us or tell us and other students in prison about your experience of Open University study, for a new letters page.

What did you think of the last course you studied, what do you feel you are gaining from your studies, how has it changed your views or your situation, what would you like to achieve and how can the OU help you do this?

We welcome feedback on courses, suggestions for courses you would like to see available, accessibility issues, or any other topic related to your OU study – or if you would like to write an article about your experiences of OU study - the address to write to is: The Editor, Inside News, The Offender Learning Team, Teaching and Learner Support, The Open University, Hammerwood Gate, Kents Hill, Milton Keynes MK7 6BY.
Scottish Prison Scheme

The OU in Scotland has been working with the prisons for over 10 years, and the results of this are now showing; we have seen a significant increase in the number of applications from students in prison. For 2009/10 we already have over 80 students registered for OU study. Of these, 26 are registered for Openings courses, and the rest studying a range of courses, from Arts and Social Sciences to Languages. We’ve had our share of successes too, with students achieving Postgraduate, Honours and Ordinary Degrees, together with a clutch of Certificates and Diplomas.

The Higher Education Access Scheme (HEAS) operates between the OU in Scotland (OUiS), the Scottish Prison Service and the two private prisons. Separate application and funding arrangements operate in Scotland, as follows:

Where to start
If you are interested in studying with The Open University, the prison’s Learning Centre staff have information on course choice – there are copies of our prospectuses at all the Learning Centres. Once you’ve had a look at the prospectus, you may also want to speak to an OU educational adviser about your future study and career plans.

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

Application Process
Students should complete the HEAS application form which is available from the prison’s Learning Centre, and staff there will guide you through the process. Please note the deadline for applications which is Friday 14th May 2010 for courses starting in Sep/Oct 2010 or Jan/Feb 2011.

Funding your Studies
For undergraduate level study, most prison students are eligible for a fee waiver under the Scottish Funding Council’s fee waiver scheme for those on lower income groups. There are specific student and course eligibility requirements that must be met, and further information is available from the OUiS.

The fee waiver scheme does not extend to postgraduate study, however students may elect to self-fund at this level.

For further advice and information please speak to your prison’s Learning Centre staff in the first instance.

Amanda Molloy, The OUiS

Chemistry prize awarded to OU student

An OU student was recently awarded the top prize by the Liverpool & North West branch of the SCI (Society of Chemical Industry) as the best part-time chemistry student in the North-West. He was nominated by his tutor as he was the strongest student in both continuous assessment and exam performance - scoring over 90% overall. His tutor said “This would be extremely impressive for any student, let alone a student who has studied in prison, without easy access to the online support that many students rely on”.

Here is part of his acceptance speech made at the presentation.

“It is a big honour for me to receive this award; I never expected that something like this would happen to me. “First, I would like to express my gratitude to the education staff from HMP Garth and HMP Risley and in particular to the Acting Co-ordinator in Higher Learning, whose help and support means so much to me. “The biggest thanks today, however, is to The Open University and its staff for providing an exceptional opportunity for all of us to improve ourselves, to acquire excellent education and change our lives. It is the establishment which has a special place in my heart and I will be ever grateful to you. “My tutor is one of the best people I ever met in my life. Without his professional help and moral support I probably would not be here today. It was my honour to be one of his students and I would like to thank him for everything he had done for me. “What I can see here is great diversity, people with different backgrounds, of different ages and nationality, people with different lives. However, the fact that we are gathered here means that there is at least one very important thing we have in common. It is the desire to improve ourselves, to acquire knowledge and to use this knowledge to benefit humanity. “In my opinion this illustrates the power of education to unite people all around the world by giving them a single and honourable purpose. The purpose of making this world, in some small way, a better place.”
A personal account

I felt I had to write and highlight the course (DD208: Welfare, Crime and Society) I have just studied with the OU. Our teacher, Mark, is a fantastic person and the level of enthusiasm and commitment to our learning structure is second to none. The course has totally changed my attitude and perspective on what I will do when released into the community. The course and teacher have had a profound effect on me and I feel it has done more for me than any of the offending management courses I have attended.

The course was very interesting and engaging, highlighting the key theories and concepts of social justice and injustice. It also shows how “security” has become a key motif in the modern world, justifying both punitive justice and the surveillance society. I was also introduced to the issues surrounding the idea of “community” related to social policy and the complex processes of policy formation and implementation with a “community” dimension.

A particular strength of the course is the inclusion of material from outside the immediate context of the UK and the use of examples from colonial and past colonial practice in the management of “problem population”.

The course will be of great value to anyone - it certainly broadened my horizon. If it was not for the course, I would probably be full of resentment against society but I now have a genuine reason to try and sort my life out.

I hope my testimony brings hope to others in the face of their adversity.

Tunde, HMP Littlehey

Learning to reform

Each year, OU degree ceremonies take place inside UK prisons. How different are they from the other graduation days? Here is an account of a typical ceremony held at HM Prison Swaleside, Kent...

This was a degree ceremony very different from the normal celebrations: no music, no cameras, no cheering family. Gowns were worn by both OU staff and the graduate, but the box of gowns was searched on the way into the prison.

The ceremony was held in the prison chapel, which by the addition of an OU banner became part of the OU for a few hours. In the same way that any other degree ceremony is conducted, the graduate was robed and presented to the Regional Director and a representative of the regional academic staff group. The governor and the education, training and employment manager joined the OU staff on the stage. The audience was made up of prisoners and staff, who clapped and cheered as enthusiastically as at any other ceremony.

Students who had been awarded certificates and diplomas were also presented. The prisoners and prison staff were surprised by the ‘informal formality’ and many commented that they hadn’t realised how seriously the OU takes the preparations, even to the extent of checking how to pronounce each name and ensuring the use of preferred names rather than the name under which the student is registered.

After the ceremony, there was a buffet lunch and the opportunity to meet men who might be spending the next ten or so years in prison. OU staff and students talked about studying and assignments and the frustrations of doing a course. While some of the issues are specific to the environment, many are common to all students; time management, space to study, finding someone to talk to who understands what distance learning really means and complaining about word limits and referencing.

We were reminded again of the value of OU study for prisoners. One man commented that completing “An introduction to the social sciences” (DD100) had given him a better understanding of himself and the society in which he did the things which led to him being in jail. A number also said that completing a course gave them the confidence and self-esteem which, in other circumstances, they might have been trying to find through less acceptable means.

Nigel Gibson, Student Services, OU in the South East

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Bridging the IT gap

Sydney, a student at HMP Whatton is studying S216, Environmental science, a Level 2, 60 point course. Despite all the frustrations of computer-based courses, he is full of praise for his tutor:

“This has been an amazingly interesting module for me but incredibly frustrating in trying to complete the TMAs. Computing actions which would be straightforward in any normal situation present a variety of challenges in a prison environment. Among other things, it’s difficult to arrange sufficient hours on the equipment to complete the virtual field trips etc and storage is restricted to a single floppy disk.

“As a result, it simply hasn’t been viable to incorporate many of the charts, images and other data that I would have liked to. However, you seem well aware of the limitations we work under and your encouragement, support and positive feedback have been inspirational. It has given me the incentive to want to continue my studies and I very much look forward to continuing with the next module in 2010.”

Liberation through education

‘Education is liberation’, that has been the catch phrase I have always used when talking to prisoners, young people from deprived backgrounds and politicians when advising them on the way forward in reducing crime and giving a person direction to become a valued member in our society. A voice that can be heard and respected in what is the silent minority.

After a life of violent and serious crime, society’s nightmares being my living realities that brutalised me, I found education and thanks to the OU and Greenwich University, my eyes were opened to the beauty of this society and my potential within it. I served 13 years out of 20 years and became brutalised but thanks to those who supported me in my education, I became humanised. My life is now much more rewarding and I am able to pay back to society in a small way for some of the terrible things I have done.

I wake up in the morning and look at myself in the mirror and I like what I see; now that my life has a real purpose to it, it is like putting on a new pair of glasses and seeing the world with a clearer vision, not the old distorted one. I am glad I went into education and not just Specsavers. Go to bed tonight with a dream or a set of works under your pillow in place of a weapon and instead of living a fantasy, grab a beautiful reality. I did and I am nothing special.

Let education be your liberation, you know it makes sense.

Bobby Cummines. FRSA
Chief Executive, UNLOCK

Educating Rita at HMP Swaleside

In 2009 The Open University celebrated 40 years of innovation in learning. To mark this special birthday, the OU teamed up with Pitchy Breath Theatre to offer audiences the opportunity to enjoy a brand new production of Willy Russell’s life-affirming play Educating Rita.

This tale of transformation through a shared passion for learning helped inscribe The Open University into British culture. With live music and a fresh adaptation, this production is as relevant today as when it was first performed.

The November performance at HMP Swaleside was an affirmation of the OU’s commitment to learning in all areas of the community. The Open University’s work with prisons dates back to its inception 40 years ago and there are currently approximately 1500 students in prisons undertaking OU courses.

As well as viewing a performance of the play, attendees could take part in a drama workshop, which formed the basis for ongoing drama projects at Swaleside.

Sharon Whiting, whiting pr