Inside News

The Open University Newsletter for Prisons

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OU committed to offender learning

“We are determined to find a way of reconciling the need to move to online learning with the need to maintain access.” These were the words of the Vice Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley, in her speech to The Open University’s 2nd Offender Learning Conference.

The OU Director (Students) told the conference that the Offender Learning Steering Group’s review was complete, their report had been submitted and all their recommendations had been accepted by the OU. There will be a new OU-wide coordinator for a year in the first instance, and a new Offender Learning Group which will have input from the prison and probation service, other external bodies, OU Nations and Regions, Associate Lecturers, and staff from other OU units.

Work has already started on the secure web access trials. There will be further consideration of IT accessibility during course design and an attempt to offer some reasonable alternatives and adjustments until the prisons are better resourced. Some prison intranets which have the correct platform and are adequately supported, now run Openlearn (the University’s Open Content initiative, making educational resources freely available on the Internet). It is not a substitute for the OU material and tutorial support a student receives when registered on a course but it can give offender learners a flavour of OU courses and contains workable sections of courses at all levels from Foundation to Postgraduate study.

HMP Whitemoor has been one of the first prisons to successfully load and use this material.

Discussions took place on improved models of support for OU offender learners across the whole learning journey; including initial advice and guidance, peer mentoring and post custodial continuity.

The results of the conference were shared with academics from around the world at an International Forum in July. The OU’s international study into the role of higher and distance education in prisons is now a growing collaboration aimed at identifying development and progress in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and disseminating good practice to promote change across the world.

Keep up to date

The set of leaflets aimed at current and potential students in prison has recently been updated.

Opening Doors to Study provides an introduction to studying with The Open University while in prison.

Courses for Prisoners lists a small selection of courses that may be available to prison students for 2008/2009.

Study after Prison is a guide for students who want to continue their OU studies after leaving prison.

Copies of these revised leaflets can be obtained from your Prison Education Department.
M150 now ‘amber’

M150, ‘Data, Computing and Information’ has recently been re-listed as ‘amber’ on the approved course list. This absorbing course explores how modern day computers transform meaningless data into useful information and provides an introduction to designing and writing computer programs. As with all ‘amber’ courses there are limitations and prison education managers must decide on its suitability for individual students depending on their particular circumstances.

To successfully complete the course a student will need a computer with a CD-ROM drive and a JavaScript-enabled browser, such as Firefox, to carry out programming activities. A suitable browser is supplied with the course materials and can be installed if one is not already available. The programming activities do not require access to the Internet so they are available to everyone. But for those without Internet access up to 9% of the overall course marks may be unavailable although there are plans to reduce this percentage.

Offender learners who have registered for the presentation of M150 starting in October 2008 will be invited to take part in a trial of alternative approaches to those M150 activities requiring Internet access. A few students will be interviewed to discover which parts of the course they envisage being problematic and to discuss how these problems might be overcome.

At the end of the course all participants in the trial will be asked to complete a questionnaire to establish which alternative approaches have been successful. The successful approaches can then be incorporated into future presentations of M150 or adapted for other courses thus enabling students in prison to overcome the problems they face resulting from lack of Internet access.

Give yourself an early Xmas present...

...and enrol on an OU course starting in the New Year. Here’s how you can go about applying and paying for a course.

How to apply

If it’s been a long time since you did any studying, we would advise you to ask your Education Department about our preparatory courses such as Openings. Many prisons have information and advice sessions where you can see course brochures and examples of course materials. You may be able to talk to an OU Adviser about appropriate courses and receive information about the list of approved courses. Ask your Education Department for a copy of our leaflet Courses for Prisoners or you can discuss other options for study with them.

When you have decided which course you would ideally like to study, please check the availability of your chosen course with your Education Department and arrange to complete the necessary paperwork. For Openings courses and short courses you will be required to register to secure a place but for other courses it is possible to reserve a place and register later (but before the cut-off date and in sufficient time for any financial assistance awards to be processed).

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

How to pay

If you are a new OU student you may be able to get funding from the Prisoners’ Education Trust or another charity, or you can pay your own course fees by a third party cheque.

Once you have successfully completed your first 30 or 60 point course you will be able to apply for financial support from the OU for the rest of your study whilst in prison.

If you move to another prison or are released you can complete your existing course without paying additional fees, and then apply for funding for any further courses as a continuing student whilst still in prison or via the OU’s Financial Support Scheme upon release.

For further information and advice on studying with the OU, please speak to a member of the Prison Education Department.
A first for Wales

The first ever degree ceremony in a Welsh prison has been held at HMP Usk. The successful student, Boris, commenced his studies in 1995 with Open University course M101, ‘Mathematics, a foundation course’, and then carried on with maths at Level 2 and Level 3, finally graduating with a BSc Honours.

The audience at the ceremony included fellow prisoners, Boris’s prison visitors and Jackie Rinaldi from the Hardman Trust. Also present were the Governor, David Ward, the pan-Wales Head of Learning and Skills, John Griffiths, Wendy Hill, the Education Manager and the Distance Learning Tutor, Carl Evans as well as five members of OU staff.

After he had presented the graduate with his certificate the Director of The Open University in Wales, Rob Humphreys, addressed the audience explaining that he and his colleagues were following the same format that is used at the thirty ceremonies that were taking place across the UK and Europe this year. He congratulated Boris on his achievement and welcomed him into The Open University family of some quarter of a million graduates living all over the world. He also highlighted the special arrangement that the OU has with the 150 prisons across the UK which enables some 650 prisoners to study each year and thanked the Governor and education team in the prison for their commitment and support.

Boris had decided that he didn’t want to speak but he asked that the Director should publically thank on his behalf the Prisoners’ Education Trust and the Hardman Trust as well as the Prison Governor. Rob Humphreys went on to say that Boris’s achievement showed how education can change people for the better, and he wished Boris well for the future. Finally, Mr Humphreys pointed out that Boris would be an inspiration to other learners in the prison, at whatever level they were studying. David Ward, the Governor then briefly thanked the OU along with his education staff and Boris’s prison visitors for their support.

It is hoped that this is the first of many such occasions.

And success at Whitemoor

HMP Whitemoor staged its fifth degree ceremony in May when Ricardo, one of its large group of OU students, received his Bachelor of Arts degree from presiding officer Ormond Simpson, Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Educational Technology at the OU. Also present were the prison’s Education Co-ordinator Elizabeth Waller, Education Manager Cherry Hawkins, Head of Learning and Skills Maria Bristow and Lorna Poll, Regional Manager for A4E, all of whom congratulated Ricardo on his achievement.

“What studying means to me”

The first recipient of the Keith Jessop Memorial Award (Inside News, Issue 1) is Michael Keeves, who received it in May this year.

Michael has been studying with the OU since 2005 and hopes to finish his degree in the next couple of years.

As part of the award process, Michael wrote a short piece, which very powerfully captures the significance of OU study.

“Having left school at 16 with few qualifications I never thought I would study at university level. That is, until I was introduced to The Open University.”

“Studying with the OU has opened my eyes to the opportunities that are available to me. No longer do I think of myself as only able to do menial jobs. In fact I am only limited by my own self belief in what I am capable of.”

“My self confidence has risen since I have started studying. Each time I get the results back from a TMA with 85 or 90, plus the tutor’s comments on how well I have done, I feel proud of my achievements. Even though they may only be small steps in the journey of life, they are steps in the right direction.”

Michael (centre) receiving his award from Assistant Regional Director, Juliet Bishop and Student Services Manager, Shaun McMann

“Studying with the OU has given me an insight to my future, one where I can make a success of my self. A future where my family and friends can be proud of me. But most of all one where I have the feeling of accomplishment and self worth.”
Maurice Dingwall prize winner

Each year The Open University awards the Maurice Dingwall prize to the highest-achieving new student on a Level 1 course in the North West. In 2007 the award went to Tony Hughes for his excellent results on DD100, ‘An Introduction to the Social Sciences.’

Tony began and completed his DD100 study while in prison, linking the course to an Honours Degree in Social Sciences. Since then he has gone on to achieve a Distinction in his first Level 2 course and outstanding marks in his current study.

The OU cake, baked by Tony

prison. Over a dozen students attended, along with Tony’s mother and partner, Prison Governor Jayne Blake, John Cochrane (DD100 tutor), and staff from both the Prison Education Department and The Open University in the North West.

To make the event a real celebration, the students prepared a hot and cold buffet, with a wonderful cake baked and decorated in OU colours by Tony himself.

Mrs Lynda Brady, Regional Director of The Open University in the North West, presented the prize, honouring Tony as a very exceptional individual of great commitment and diligence, who had truly “taken the opportunity to study by the scruff of its neck”. She went on to praise the education culture in the prison, the support offered by Education staff and OU tutors, and the students themselves, who had demonstrated strong determination, flexibility and motivation in pursuing courses of study and developing their academic and transferable skills.

After the presentation, Tony said that upon completion of his degree and release he would like to get involved in crime prevention work with teenagers, stating:

“OU study has completely changed me as a person. As well as being more knowledgeable about social issues, more aware and more analytical about how society and its problems are constructed, I am much more confident and optimistic about the future.”

From left to right: Maxine Valenta (Student Services Manager), John Cochrane (DD100 tutor), Tony Hughes, Lynda Brady (North West OU Regional Director) and Jennifer Hendry (Study Support Adviser)

The Education Department of HMP Wymott arranged an event in the prison library to mark both Tony’s achievement and that of other men currently studying at the

We’d like to hear from you

If you are studying with The Open University and feel that this has been of benefit to you, why not encourage your colleagues to do the same by writing about your experience?

Or perhaps you are an Associate Lecturer who has a student who has been particularly successful.

Inside News is happy to consider articles about OU study for publication but please note: Inside News reserves the right to edit any contribution.

Any contribution submitted must be clearly marked “For publication”.

All contributions must be approved by the appropriate authorities.

It is the policy of Inside News to use only first names unless authorised to do otherwise.

Please send any items to the Editor, (see left panel).