A celebration of OU offender learning

The Open University’s contribution to offender learning was celebrated at a conference earlier this summer which coincided with its 40th anniversary.

Among those attending were representatives from the OU, the Prison Service, the Learning and Skills Council, Prisoners Education Trust, Unlock, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

In his introduction, Will Swann, the OU’s Director Students, said: “We are well on the way to offender learning becoming a mainstream part of what the University does.”

He then read out a speech by Lord Ramsbotham, who was unable to attend the conference.

Lord Ramsbotham, the former Chief Inspector of Prisons, said: “The great thing about OU courses is that their modus operandi overcomes all the problems put in the way of education in prisons by overcrowding, shortage of staff, lack of classrooms, etc.”

The next speaker was Richard Ward, Social Mobility Unit Manager for the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, who said there had been a significant increase in the number of prisoners studying at all levels – with 43 per cent studying every day.

Pat Jones, of the Prisoners Education Trust, said: “The Prison Service so often talks about purposeful activity. OU study enables purposeful use of time inside and changes attitudes to their time inside.”

Former bank robber Bobby Cummines (below) told the conference how the OU helped him turn his back on crime.

Bobby, who founded Unlock - a charity which campaigns for prisoners’ rights – said: “I never knew what I was capable of, because I was never given the opportunity. Education should not be something that a prisoner applies for – it should be a human right.”

The conference concluded with a presentation on the Virtual Campus, a secure network currently being trialled at 11 prisons, which enables prisoners to safely access course material via a PC. The OU is close to enabling its students to study through the Virtual Campus system.

Once ministers have approved the system, it is hoped to roll it out across all prisons.

It was also announced that the OU’s Offender Learning Co-ordinator Anne Pike, was leaving. Margaret Hart, currently Assistant Director (Widening Participation) in Student Services, will oversee the offender learner programme as a whole; in October, a new Offender Learning Co-ordinator, Helen Maxwell will join the team.

Richard Cooper, Communications
Looking at a changing world

October this year will see the first presentation of DD101, a new 60 point Level 1 course ‘Introducing the Social Sciences’ which replaces the hugely popular DD100. The reason for replacing DD100 centres on three areas of significant change. Firstly, change in the social world the course explores; secondly, changes in the ways social science academic disciplines understand and interpret those changes; and, thirdly changes in approaches to teaching and learning.

Three sets of concerns form the framework for the course: the ways in which the material objects we use make us part of much larger and more powerful global processes; the ways in which people interconnect in a variety of relationships with other people and communities or institutions; the different ways in which social life is ordered or even controlled. The course looks at these questions using ideas and concepts from across the social science disciplines whilst also supporting students to develop good study practices and the academic skills to both understand and write about the world as a social scientist.

The course uses a mix of resources including two text books, DVDs, web-based activities and supporting booklets. There are seven assignments and no exam. The course has been developed bearing in mind that some students do not have internet access and therefore includes alternative paper-based resources.

DD101 is aimed at anyone who is interested in understanding the basics of the social sciences and has no previous experience in this field. It is ideal preparation for Level 2 courses in a range of social science and related qualifications. After this course, further study in the social sciences could open up employment opportunities in a wide range of occupations in, for example, business, education or health professions. It also builds a strong basis of skills that are transferable to the job market including clarity of written communication, critical thinking, ability to analyse, problem solving, self motivation and basic numerical skills.

Troy Cooper, Staff Tutor

Terry Waite praises the OU

Terry Waite CBE has been awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of The Open University.

The award was conferred on him at a degree ceremony held in the East of England at Ely Cathedral, where he praised the OU’s work in prisons.

He said: “The last degree ceremony for the OU I attended was in one of Her Majesty’s Prisons when a prisoner serving a life sentence received his PhD.

“It was a moving occasion and the officers of the University took that event as seriously as they take this event today.”

Waite was held in solitary confinement for 1,760 days after being taken hostage when he visited Beirut in January 1987 as the Church of England envoy.

Coming soon . . .

. . . a prospectus with details of OU courses and qualifications aimed specifically at students in prison. These include Openings – a range of short, introductory courses for people who have not studied in higher education before – and other courses that can lead to degrees and other recognised qualifications.

The new publication contains lots of useful information so that you can have informed discussions with your education department about your choice of course and study pathway.

As well as descriptions of course content, dates and recommended starting points, there’s information on how to apply, answers to common questions and details of the support the OU can give you in your studies to supplement the help you’ll receive from your education department. There’s also guidance on how you can continue your OU studies if you move between prisons and after your release.

The prospectus should be available in late September. Ask your Education Department for a copy.
A tutor’s view

Maye Taylor, a psychologist, who has been a Social Science Associate Lecturer for over 25 years gives her view of working in prisons.

I count working in prisons as a valuable and significant part of my work and am also a passionate advocate of the power of education to change lives. This passion has kept me firmly committed to The Open University and particularly to my work with ‘students in custody’ and I do prefer this description to ‘prisoner,’ because it gives a centrality to the student role and highlights my unique involvement - we are tutor and student.

I am lucky – I can meet my students regularly for personal one to one tutorials and this allows for a way of working which offers infinite possibilities for learning and thus personal development. I appreciate that not all tutors and students can have this arrangement. My task is to engage the student in the reflective process, essentially what tutorials are, and thus together, create ‘our’ learning environment, which can range from an animated and heated discussion of cultural imperialism to making friends with epistemology. From my point of view, tutorials are a vital part of being a student (and tutor) and I enjoy every one of them, feedback from my students in custody suggests they do too, they are certainly always lively.

How does this affect the student? When I tutor my students in custody, taking a course such as Understanding Social Change, I am asking them to find new ways of understanding and explaining society, and thus I challenge a lot of their common sense explanations and assumptions about the social world. This often raises difficult and uncomfortable issues for adult students, and may involve painful challenges to cherished ideas.

So, is it worth going through all the security clearance, the searches and being accompanied through locked doors by a warder? For me, undoubtedly yes; I acknowledge how much I get out of working with students in custody. It is my experience that they take this challenge on and engage both with the process of learning and the knowledge itself. I never feel I have wasted my time when I go back out through the prison gates.

Being creative helps!

Ann Cawood is an Open Learning Tutor at Rampton Secure Hospital. She has strong feelings about the value and also the frustrations of study in a secure setting. Rampton is run by the NHS and houses patients who have been detained under the Mental Health Act 1983.

There are specific challenges to working with these students as Ann points out; “Key issues are the student’s fluctuating mental health, the stress of being the only contact with outside tutors and the lack of internet access for our students. I work on the basis that just because a subject has not been attempted before it doesn’t mean that we reject it but look at ways of making it possible. I have a student doing a science course. It’s often very difficult to think up creative ways of meeting the criteria but that’s part of the challenge. I’ve got used to rocks soaking in vinegar on my window sill and building things from shoe boxes! The shorter courses are popular because the state of the patients’ mental health may vary over a long period but we do have some students who are working towards degrees. “The great part of working here is the delight of students in achieving qualifications they didn’t think possible and being part of a much bigger OU family promoting the feeling of connection to the outside. They especially like meeting with OU tutors, which, whilst challenging, is a real self esteem booster.”

It seems that for these students OU study is truly beneficial. Ann’s student Gail (not her real name) says: “The education team helps as much as they can ... to the extent of doing experiments for me at home in their own time. It is nice to feel part of something beyond this place and to feel that I am doing something ‘normal’.

“I like to think of the secure hospital as a ‘locked University’. There are fewer distractions than outside. But it can be depressing and so motivation may be an issue. IT access is limited and so course planning is more of an issue. We are also limited to one A4 box file for all of our paperwork, which can be a bit restricting.

“Other than this, my course is going well. I have had a visit from my tutor, which I found useful and interesting.”
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Inside News is published quarterly
by The Open University.
We welcome your ideas and articles
which should be sent
to the Editor.

Educating Rita and beyond

This is an edited version of an
article by Keith, a prisoner, and is
reprinted by kind permission of the
Prisoners Education Trust.

I can remember sitting in a
prison ‘Access’ class one day
watching Educating Rita and
wondering if all Open University
tutors would be driven to sporting
beards and consume copious
amounts of drink at the prospect of
visiting prisoners.

“The OU seems to have recognised that prisoner
education is a unique opportunity.”

Now after more than five years
of study, the image of a libatious
Michael Caine has all but
disappeared completely, despite
the odd passing similarity.

So then, what can I really say
that I have learnt so far from the
experience? One thing I can
definitely say is that without the
Prisoners Education Trust, Prison
Education co-ordinators and The
Open University, none of the
experience would probably have
occurred at all. Together they form
an interdependent alliance which
creates funding, can enthuse and
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courses that meet both our
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There are certainly wearisome
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A cure for boredom

Edwin is currently serving a five
year sentence at HMP Chelmsford.

After my conviction I discussed
my learning needs with an
educational representative. Having
left school many years ago with a
good secondary school education
in favour of exploring the big, wide
world, I did not feel she had
anything to offer me. After a
lengthy discussion she
recommended I talk to a distance
learning representative, who
explained the options available to
me. I was amazed there were so
many opportunities and eventually
decided to follow The Open
University degree course in
psychology, starting with the Level
1 course in Social Science, DD100.

Having been a very active
person outside prison, I found the
course a huge release from the
boredom created by the prison
regime. The course is dynamic,
extremely interesting and engaging
giving me a new perspective on my
life. It has helped me rationalise
my time in prison leading me to
investigate and develop
opportunities I would not previously
have explored.

I am most grateful to those who
took the time to explain the
openings provided in prison for
further education. If it was not for
the time spent by these individuals,
I would not have been inclined to
take part in further education,
which has given me a positive
focus, which I did not have before
coming to prison.