Learner voices contributed to Offender Learning Conference

The Open University played host to over 150 attendees on 5th November when it held a conference on Offender Learning entitled “From the Inside Lane to the Open Road”.

The day comprised speakers, workshops which included
- The Student Journey for Offender Learners
- Motivations and challenges in Higher Education in prisons
- The Virtual Campus – A demonstration of the Secure Moodle site and VLE currently being implemented across the prison estate
- Group Teaching Across Faculties - A joint workshop held with prison education staff from HMP Ranby
- Distance Learning Practice and the Implementation of PSI 33/2010

and a Panel Question and answer session with a panel comparison representatives from NOMS, DBIS, PET, The OU and The Manchester College.

Amongst the attendees were Heads of Learning and Skills and prison education staff from over fifty prison estates, representatives from The Manchester College and Kensington and Chelsea College (both key organisations in supporting Open University students in prisons) staff from the Careers Information and Advice Services within prisons, colleagues from the St Giles Trust, the Prisoners Education Trust, the Government department of Business Innovation and Skills and the National Offender Management Service. Open University faculty staff, tutors, regional co-ordinators and research students.

The Conference was opened by the university’s Vice Chancellor Martin Bean and speakers were; Pat Jones the Director of the Prisoner Education Trust, Humanitarian and Broadcaster Terry Waite (Terry is an OU Honorary graduate who has expressed a particular interest in Offender Learning), Conor and Raymond both students at HMP Maghaberry (studying Environmental Sciences and Humanities respectively), John a Masters student from HMP Maghaberry, Robert a prospective PhD student and Trevor a Social Sciences student from HMP Shotts.

You might be wondering how so many of our students managed to join us to speak on the day. That was courtesy of our colleagues from the OU broadcast unit, one of whom visited both prisons to interview students specifically for the conference so that the views of our students in the prison estate could be heard along with those of other speakers on the topics of Routes Into Study; the Learner Journey and Outcomes and resettlement.

Our thanks to all of them for agreeing to be interviewed and for lending their voices to the day. We were also delighted to welcome Tim whose voice was amongst the “learner voices” and who is an ex-offender and able to join us on the day.

Although students in prison were represented through the recorded learner voices played throughout the day – of course there were none of our students in prison present to hear the Conference speakers so here are some soundbites of the presentations made and views expressed:

“… views of our students in the prison estate could be heard …”
Learning with the Open University can help change your life

**Inside News**

Prisoners’ Education Trust

“It is a paradox for me that we normally associate education with freedom not with captivity. ...but these students are finding a freedom through learning whilst their physical freedom has been taken away”.

**Martin Bean**, Vice Chancellor of the Open University:

“Offender Learning is at the heart of our mission to be open as to people, open as to places and open as to ideas and to provide high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential”

**Trevor**, OU student, HMP Shotts

“The end result is that it’s not just to do with the certificate with your name on it and the letters or anything like that there. It’s the fact that, the sense of achieving something. I hope that’s going to break down the barriers. Education for me, hopefully I’ll be employable, but it will break down the barriers, that I can hold a conversation with somebody like you here today. Years ago even outside I couldn’t do this. I think this is what the OU has given me.”

**Conor**, OU Student HMP Maghaberry (talking about routes into study)

“I had a real dislike of education when I was in secondary school. This was due to lack of confidence in my own ability: begin afraid to speak out for fear of being wrong and getting embarrassed. I never ever had the confidence to go and do a university degree when I was outside.”

**Raymond**, OU Student HMP Maghaberry

“I got back into it (education) and I’m glad I did. I really am ‘cause I’ve done a lot more stuff on top of my Open University, you know. I was actually teaching myself, I was teaching a couple of boys to read down in the young offenders centre. It was rewarding I have to say.”

**Pat Jones**, Director of the Prisoners’ Education Trust

**Terry Waite CBE**, Humanitarian, Broadcaster and Honorary Graduate of the Open University

“I have the strong belief that if we wish to curtail re-offending it is vital that more considered attention is given to education within the prison system……education cannot just be seen as a bolt on extra…”

**Tim**, former OU Student and Ex-Offender

“I was doing a very long prison sentence, I was serving 12 years, and I believed that by doing education, it would change my circumstances. And help me to reshape my character, and help in my personal development. I now deliver adult literacy and numeracy. And basically I’ve sort of found and created my own work. And that’s what I would encourage anyone to do. If you’re coming out from prison, look at the avenues of opening up a company that will help or assist you to attain a job. Because I’ve done that. And although I’m only on part time hours, I do get paid a reasonable wage. It’s sustainable. People are starting to listen. ….. and there are people that are interested in me, and I will go forward and at some point somebody will offer me a full time job.”

**Robert**, OU Student HMP Shotts

“There are little obstacles. The everyday running of prisons creates obstacles in themselves, but after what, 12 years of studying I’ve learned how to navigate around them. Or under them or over them. And my experience I pass on to new students, you know with the hope that they will perhaps have an easier time of their study than I did, certainly in the early days.”

**John**, OU student, HMP Maghaberry

“The time from TMA to TMA every month, it just passes in the blink of an eye. It’s ‘because you have something to focus on. You know I’ve served 13 years, and for the last 6 or 7 of those I’ve been doing coursework, and I just didn’t see it go by.”

The conference was a great success in bringing together University staff and partners – and our learners whose voices joined those of our keynote speakers on the day.

“... there are people that are interested in me, and I will go forward ...”
Dear Editor

As a “long-term” prisoner, I thought I would share my experiences with others, if only to show other such prisoners that incarceration doesn’t have to be the end of your time in the classroom.

However, after some three years spent “vegetating” in my cell, I finally decided that it was time to try and continue with my education and so enrolled on the Openings course Understanding Health (Y158). What a good decision that now proved to be. Apart from focusing my little grey cells on something other than Diagnosis Murder and Eastenders, good though they are, it also rekindled the flame of desire within. I desired to learn all about myself and how I come to be. To this end, I then completed the short course Human Genetics and Health issues (SK195) in January 2008.

To celebrate my transfer to a category C prison, HMP Featherstone, I decided to throw myself fully into my studies and registered on two degrees, BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care and the BSc (Hons) Open Degree.

Thankfully, my previous studies resulted in the award of 240 points of credit transfer and so having just completed the Level 3 course, Managing Care (K303), I now find myself just one level 3 Course short of completing the Open Degree. I will complete this in October 2011 when I study Promoting Public Health (K311).

Just to annoy those of you having to study the full 360 points of modules for your degree yet further, I am then able to credit transfer the 120-points from K303 and K311 to the Health and Social Care degree with the 60 points of “free study” credit that I gained from my previous study, this means that half of the required 360 points for this B18 degree will have already been achieved. I will complete the Health and Social Care degree by October 2013.

So, not too shabby an achievement for someone who simply stared at a TV screen for half the day!

The thing is if I can do it, so can you. For those reading this who are just starting out with their studies – don’t be daunted, just persevere and never give in to these little mind demons saying “give up, it’s not worth it. Who’s gonna give you a job anyway?”

When I get out, which could take until 2014 – or longer – I intend using my two OU degrees to prove that I am capable of returning to full-time University study as a mature student. Despite my record, I have used my MP to discover that I can still train for, and then work as, a private or NHS Radiotherapist. But this would take the study of a fourth degree in Radiotherapy for three more years!!

Don’t ever give up, even with a criminal record, education opens doors – and jams (!) them from closing on you!

Craig from HMP Blundeston reflects on his experiences of study
Dear Editor

I've served in eight different establishments in England and Wales and now Northern Ireland all on the same sentence. I'm currently on DD208 and have been fortunate enough to have completed an Openings course in England and progressed to DD101 which I passed last year.

I'm a great advocate of the increasingly popular theory that knowledge/information is freedom of the mind and is not only beneficial in an academic form, but has a re-habilitating effect on the individual. Personally my self confidence and general well being has been achieved through realisation of potential and a sanctuary of sorts through the education departments of most of the prisons I have visited. I started with a simple IT course three and a half years ago at HMP Lewes and am now on Level 2 OU study- something I never thought in my wildest imaginations would be possible and one that I relish.

I have nothing but praise for the many individual teachers and OU co-ordinators who have assisted and nourished me along the way. However I feel I need to air my disappointment at the lack of willingness of the prison institution in backing OU study. Most governors and deputy governors will shake hands with beaming political smiles and take credit for and with the beleaguered OU student who has had nothing, but trouble from prison staff from the day and hour he started to try and make a difference to his life. I'm not going to rant on about how tough we get it because we have the biggest advantage over all others who take up OU in the fact that we have time, much more than a single mum trying to hold down a part time job or the likes.

My problem is with the collectiveness of the OU catering for the individual needs of the prisoners. Why can't a collective security package be created tested and stamped by the OU and pushed out across the UK if not the world. The OU – does it not – has the ability and tools within its student body to create a viable secure package with the assistance of prison security for the use of prison? We all know we can't use Facebook or send and receive E-mails so it is an increasingly infuriating situation that every OU student in prisons faces the same old cry of "you can't do this because of security". One of my current beefs is that I can buy the Guardian newspaper but cannot view the relevant links to the guardian newspaper on the DD208 website.

Surely the OU and the Government, NOMS, Secretary of State can look at the success rate of the past forty years and understand the risk of re-offending is reduced dramatically if a prisoner has self worth, motivation and back up of knowledge through OU work when he leaves any establishment. The individualism and selectiveness of prison governors and prison staff has been hindering the progress of countless numbers over the years, people who have simply given up because they haven't got the strength to battle through the obstacles that staff and certain prisons will put in our way.

Would it not be more beneficial with the ever increasing reliance on computer technology to have a more user friendly package for prisons? In my experience as soon as a governor or more senior member of staff hears the word computer they have a minor heart attack and think we are running a mass criminal empire through the ether and the internet. The Internet has become an essential tool for open learning and for the OU to survive within the prison estate it needs to be liberated and fine tuned giving a safe, secure, information pathway for prisoners and one that the prison can see is not a threat to its reputation or security, but one it should and can embrace.

I live in hope and will continue with my studies using the tools I have at my disposal- tools that I am extremely grateful to have by the way. I just know that more could be achieved and more men and women could leave prison, contribute to society and never come back if they had an easier path to follow initially.
Dear Editor

I have been a student with the OU since 2003. I have done a variety of courses including DD100; S198, SK195, S187, MT262, W200, W201, M358. I am currently doing a level 3 law course W300. I should hopefully have my law degree by next year if I complete and pass W300 and W301 next year.

I started off hoping to do a computing degree but due to lack of internet access I could not continue with that so I changed direction and started to study for a law degree.

This has also come with its fair share of problems. During W200 I had to do an Internet TMA, which, for obvious reasons I couldn’t. I failed that TMA but what surprised me more was that I didn’t get any credit towards that TMA and the OU would not allow the tutor in the prison access the internet for me and download the necessary information. That TMA was worth 10%.

The problem that I have now is that I start my next course - W301 it’s one of the compulsory courses I have to do in order to achieve my law degree.

Two of the four TMAs require extensive internet research. The TMAs are worth 40% in total therefore in order for me to achieve my pass a mark of 40% from a total of 60% instead of the normal 100%. There is a good chance I could fail my course and not achieve a law degree.

I am not asking for prisoners to have any special treatment but we should be able to have prison staff to go on the internet for us and print the necessary information, especially for someone who is coming to the end of their degree.

More and more courses are requiring internet access so prisoners are left with a limited amount of courses they can do. I think one of the major obstacles for prisoners who want to study with the OU is the use of the internet and internet access. There has been talk of an intranet but nothing has come to light.

Another obstacle is funding. From what I hear the OU will now only fund 6 courses for each prisoner. That means 6 x 560 = 360 credits for a degree. But what about prisoners who want to do 30 credit point courses like many I.T. courses. A prisoner might need to do 12x30 point courses in order to achieve the 360 credits required to achieve a degree with honours.

These are some of the problems of studying with the OU but studying with the OU has been brilliant over the last 7 years and I would not change it for the world. I have always wanted a degree and now there is the possibility that I will come out with 2 degrees. One Open University degree and one law degree with Hons (hopefully).

However a further problem myself and other prisoners face is what to do after a degree. The OU does not fund Post Graduate studies. The OU does have the Crowther Fund but that does have problems as it only funds you once and that’s it. So where do we get further funding from as the Prisoners Education Trust normally does not fund you for more than £500 and the Postgraduate courses cost a lot more than that.

If these problems could be overcome especially the internet access then it would save a lot of problems studying with the OU. Thank you for taking the time and listening to my problems and the problems other prisoners face and to care about what we think. Like I have said before studying with the OU has changed my life and I would not change that experience for anything. I will hopefully next year achieve my goal of getting an Open University degree LLB with honours.

Editor’s response:

Firstly many thanks for your letters and for raising these issues – we are very much aware of the challenges raised for students in secure environments by the on-line elements of courses – these are issues that need to be carefully considered at course choice stage. We are also very grateful for the work done by Education and HMPS staff, OU tutors and staff in the work they do to make on-line materials accessible – via hard copy- for students who have no on-line access. We are working closely with partners to ensure an OU presence (which currently includes all of our Openings courses) on the Virtual Campus – a secure Virtual Learning Environment which seeks to address some of the issues raised here. We are also developing a core curriculum based on accessible qualification pathways for students in secure environments so please watch this space!

Funding is subject to Government regulations which require that part-time students complete their qualification in no more than twice the time of a full time student (usually 6 years). We are aware that due to circumstances outside of students control there may be inevitable disruptions to study for students in prison. Our staff will consider applications for funding taking such exceptional circumstances into account within the scope of the regulations.

Statutory funding is not available for any Postgraduate students (not just for those in prisons). There are a number of charitable organisations who will consider applications for PG funding (as well as PET). The Open University Students Educational Trust has in the past funded PG study for individual students in prison. Details of OUSET and how to apply can be obtained from Regional Co-ordinators or the Central Offender Learning Team.
Dear Editor

I am a serving inmate at one of Her Majesty’s prisons. I am studying DD101 Introducing the Social Sciences and have also completed Starting with Psychology which I found most fascinating and interesting. I would like to raise a few issues many of my fellow OU students in the prison estate tirelessly are up against when trying to complete TMAs and the like.

Having spent some time in a number of establishments whilst I can say with some experience that the main aim of prison education is basic English and Maths and their targets of bringing inmates to a basic level of academic knowledge which can be time consuming as you can imagine, the inmates who are doing higher education are constantly struggling to access computers and to actually see the Open University Co-ordinator.

I would like to add the majority of OU students in the prison estate are dedicated to their studies if not all and it strikes me as odd that inmates showing signs of self improvement and interest in education are not being encouraged. I wrote a piece for the Prison Reform trust in 2008 and won a prize of £75. My piece was on smart and intelligent approaches to the criminal justice system in favour of the victims of crime and the perpetrators. In that piece I said that “knowledge shall set us all free” with the likes of the Open University and all it has to offer in terms of education how is it possible that only a small number of inmates actually get on the courses and when they do their achievements are not recognised yet if an inmate in the workshop sews more prison socks he is eligible for a bonus in pay. Are we missing something? This ideology is across the prison estate and until it is addressed against when trying to complete TMAs and the like.

We are moving into economy and computer knowledge and service based literacy being paramount in the world we live in – the workshops of the 1980s are somewhat obsolete. I’d like to see an inmate who has worked in the sewing shops which dominate the prison estates workshops get a job sewing on release – not that sewing is any more glamorous than working on a computer its just the way the UK is going in terms of job opportunities and the quicker the prison system gets up to speed than frankly rehabilitation will actually be worth doing.

Before ending I would like to thanks the PET “Prisoners Education Trust”, secondly the PRT “Prisons Reform Trust” and most of all the people who tirelessly try to help prisoners’ access Higher education – even Margaret Thatcher who maybe saved the OU in the 1980s.

Mike Rookes retired this Spring after seven years as Regional Director of The OU in the West Midlands.

At the recent OU Offender Learning Development Group meeting, Mike said: “My offender learning journey was very educational for me and hopefully allowed me to make some impact, albeit small, on the OU’s offer to students in prison. You know better than me that we are nowhere near journey’s end but we have made and, I have no doubt, will continue to make, progress.”

We hope you will join us in thanking Mike for all his hard work over the years and we wish him all the best for a long and happy retirement.
Assignments

When your latest assignment is due, do you ever find yourself staring at your assessment handbook for hours, hoping that inspiration will suddenly hit you like a bolt of lightening?

Writing an assignment can be a daunting task, especially if you are new to OU study, and knowing where to start can be a particular stumbling block. This issue’s study skills section gives you some handy hints on getting started from the ‘Skills for OU Study’ series.

Before you begin to tackle your assignment, you need to make sure that you understand what it is asking you to do.

Every question has key words, and identifying them will help you decide what the assignment is about and what you have to do. ‘Content’ key words tell you about the topics to be focused on and ‘process’ words tell what you must do with the content.

First look carefully at the question and identify the key words or phrases.

**Content words:**
Here are some examples of content words in two assignment titles.

- **Compare your own education** to date with that of one of your parents, one of your children (if you have any) or a friend from a different generation. Which points of comparison seem important to you and why?

- Using examples from the case studies of Jean and Emma in Chapter 5 show how the local environment, including housing, can influence health and well being.

**Process words:**
These are the words in the question title that tell you what you should do with the subject matter. For example, you might be asked to compare two theories or to justify someone’s ideas. Some of the most common process words are shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process word</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Show the similarities and differences and, perhaps, reach conclusions about which is preferable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>Focus on the differences, although you may also note that there are similarities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticise/Evaluate</td>
<td>Make a judgement (but don’t give a personal opinion) about the merit of theories, or opinions, or about the truth of information, backed by a discussion of the reasoning involved and by evidence from the course materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define</td>
<td>Give the exact meaning of a word or phrase. In some cases you may need to give different possible definitions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Explain, then give two sides of the issue and any implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Give details about how and why it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Give reasons for a point of view, decisions or conclusions. Also mention any main objections or arguments against.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here are those question titles again, this time the process words are in bold.

- **Compare your own education** to date with that of one of your parents, one of your children (if you have any) or a friend from a different generation. Which **points of comparison** seem **important** to you and why?

- Using examples from the case studies of Jean and Emma in Chapter 5 **show how the local environment**, including **housing**, can influence **health and well being**. As you can see content words are those that contain the ‘content’ of the question. The process words are those that tell you what to do with the content. Note that there is an implied process word in the final sentence of the first question but the question is essentially asking you to explain why you think the points of comparison you’ve chosen are important: ‘**Explain which points of comparison seem important to you and why?**’

Hopefully this will give you that little bit of inspiration required to knuckle down and write that assignment. Stop staring at the assessment handbook! It’s time to write…

Good luck!

• Just as this issue went to print the Government has launched a report “Making Prisons Work: Skills for Rehabilitation” outlining plans to break the cycle of reoffending, by developing a stronger link between learning in prisons and the vocational and employability skills that employers require.

The report sets out the Government’s commitment to:
• Increase the range and relevance of learning, focusing on the skills employers need.
• Support more work opportunities in prison.
• Improve links with employers, ensuring where possible a relationship with employers has been established before release.
• Boost activity to prepare prisoners for apprenticeship opportunities on release.
• Focus learning delivery towards the end of prisoners’ sentences – linking it directly to needs in the labour market on release.
• Reshape careers advice provided in custody.
• Trial outcome incentive payments – giving colleges and training providers a greater stake in delivering learning successfully.
• Restructure the delivery of offender learning around the clusters of prisons within which prisoners normally move to bring more coherence to the system.

The report is the culmination of a review of Offender Learning which began with a call for evidence for which the Open University (amongst many other organisations) provided a response. The Open University’s response detailed the achievements of OU students in prisons and the benefits of HE study in a secure environment – from statistical evidence and the feedback we have obtained from students in prison and ex-offenders who have studied with us. We were particularly pleased to see the report acknowledge that “There is strong support amongst those who responded for continuing access to higher education for prisoners. We agree that higher education is an important learning progression route for some prisoners ... We think it sensible to consider how we can encourage more part-time access to HE through the wider work following the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, making sure arrangements for prisoners are aligned with mainstream changes from autumn 2012.”

Congratulations to Bobby Cummines OBE

• Inside news would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Bobby Cummines Chief Executive of UNLOCK The National Association of Ex-Offenders, and a former Open University Social Sciences student on being awarded an OBE in the Queens Birthday Honours List.

Bobby served 13 years in prison and whilst there embarked upon OU study. He has always been a supporter of OU education in prisons and commented in an interview by the University in 2009 “Education is a liberation and that has been my catchphrase all the way through. The OU is giving people back a life.”

Unlock of which Bobby is a founder member is a charity which represents reformed offenders. It works in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies within the criminal justice system, as well as the private sector to overcome many of the issues faced by ex-offenders. As well as being a former OU student Bobby has a specialist adviser on Government Committees on the rehabilitation of Offenders and a House of Lords Select Committee dealing with prisoners with disabilities.

“Education is a liberation and that has been my catchphrase all the way through.”