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The Open University and Prison Education in the UK – the First 50 Years

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Abstract: *In 2019, The Open University (henceforth, The OU), based in Milton Keynes in the UK, celebrated its 50th anniversary. Since 1971 it has pioneered the delivery of Higher Education in prisons and other secure settings. Some 50 years on, in 2021 there is much to celebrate and still more to learn. In this article we briefly review the establishment of the OU in 1969 and explore how it has maintained access to higher education in the prison system. It draws from a collection of essays and reflections on prison learning experiences developed by OU academics and former and continuing OU students in prison (Earle & Mehigan, 2019). We begin by outlining the unique features of the OU and the circumstances of its establishment in the post-war period in the UK. We then present an account of its work with students in prison in the UK (and elsewhere) and conclude with some critical reflections on the place and prospects of higher education in an expanding Higher Education sector and an escalating preference for carceral punishment in the UK. No country on Earth can match the penal preferences of the United States, but the UK's habit of slipstreaming behind its massive carceral bulk tends to obscure the fact that the UK punishes more people with imprisonment, and with longer sentences, than any other Western European state. It also manages to exceed the United States in rates of racial disproportionality in its carceral population (Phillips, 2013). Despite these outlier features in incarceration, a silver lining to the carceral cloud can be found in The OU's pioneering work with imprisoned men and women.*

Keywords: *education, prison, prisoner, The Open University*

A University of the Air? The Foundation of The Open University

Widely regarded as one of the world's greatest educational innovations, the origins of the OU are less widely known than they should be, both in the UK and internationally. Although correspondence courses and the use of radio and television for educational purposes were becoming familiar features of the post-war educational landscape in the UK, it was only in 1963, after the leader of the Labour Party, Harold Wilson, promoted a 'university of the air',

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that the idea properly took flight. In 1964 as Prime Minister of the Labour government Wilson appointed Jennie Lee to take his sketchy idea and make it a reality.

Jennie Lee was the youngest woman ever to be elected to the UK parliament when she won her seat in 1929. Aged 25 she was herself too young to vote, but she was radical and eloquent, with family roots in Scotland's working class socialist and communitarian cultures. At age 60, she became the motive force behind the plan and ensured that the Open University overcame the scepticism and ridicule that initially confronted Harold Wilson's proposal. It was an idea aligned with Wilson's faith that, in the 1960s, he could modernise an ailing post-Imperial Britain using 'the white heat of the technological revolution' that was sweeping the richer countries of the West. This was a period when scientific intellectuals and rational planners with technocratic expertise, were increasingly influential. There were substantial efforts to restructure, on scientific lines, the civil service, industrial relations, and the criminal justice system. With his idea for a 'university of the air' Wilson wanted television and broadcast media to deliver higher education to anyone who wanted it rather than just 'the chosen' ones of the upper classes rich enough to afford it. Readers outside the UK may not fully appreciate how deeply and fully implicated university education in the UK is in the reproduction of the privileges of its enduring class hierarchy (Reay, 2017). Within the UK, class-based inequalities in education have persisted for decades. In 1961 around 25% of undergraduates were from manual backgrounds, compared with 28% in 2008 (Bolton, 2010). Since that time, while the number of students has increased, the socioeconomic disparities have remained (Machin & Vignoles, 2004).

Although Wilson himself was a rare working-class graduate of Oxford University, graduating with some of the highest marks ever achieved in its Politics, Philosophy, Economics degree, he had reasons aplenty to shake the traditional university system's grip on higher education (see Weinbren, 2014; Weinbren, 2019). Jennie Lee's skilful management and vision for a full university, rather than a technical or vocational training college, that would have national reach into parts of the population left behind by the post-war expansion of universities was as essential as it is under-sung. In the early 1960s, the UK lagged well behind the rest of Europe, the USA and the USSR in expanding and extending university provision. Only about 4% of school leavers went into the university system and its routine neglect of working-class young people was increasingly exposed as an enduring and profoundly consequential social injustice. The new universities subsequently established in the first phase of post-war expansion succeeded mainly in extending provision to more of the white middle class, notably "the daughters of the sharper-elbowed middle class" (Hollis, 1997, p. 146).

Much of the UK's well-heeled, university-educated establishment scoffed at Harold Wilson's 'pipe dream', suggesting it did little more than reveal a typical socialist's idealism, at "their most endearing but impractical worst" (cited in Hollis, 1997 p. 148). A recurring theme of the sniping and condescension was that an open university would be a 'haven for housebound Guardian housewives' (McIntosh, 1975, p. 12). The Controller of BBC, Stuart Hood, compared the idea to an animated 'historical fossil' lumbering inappropriately out of the dismal socialist fog of the 1930s (Hood, 1967). Nevertheless, Harold Wilson, to his lasting credit, backed Jennie Lee and the Open University became his proudest achievement and a legacy no Prime Minister in the UK since has come close to leaving (Haines, 1998).

In the early days, the OU quickly established a reputation for radicalism. Although this attracted the hostile scrutiny and direct threats of a Conservative government in the 1980s (see Weinbren, 2014), it was initially the result of academically and politically conservative scholars in the UK's most prestigious universities advising their promising post-graduate students to avoid applying for positions in the OU's early recruitment drives 'because it clearly has no long-term future' (Hollis, 1997, p. 150). This advice skewed the recruitment toward a cohort of younger and indeed radical academics emerging from the new universities who were sympathetic to the University's egalitarian mission statement: 'To be open to people, places, methods and ideas'. Its official mandate, secured by a Royal Charter, is 'to promote educational oppor-

tunity and social justice by providing high quality education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential'. Another unusual feature of the Charter required the OU 'to promote the educational well-being of the community generally'. This is significant because although the OU was not specifically obliged to accept prisoners (the decision was made by the first Vice-Chancellor) it could refer to the Charter's implicit endorsement of such an approach.

In 1975, an activist for penal abolition, Dr Mike Fitzgerald, joined the OU Faculty of Social Science (Fitzgerald, 1980). In a 1975 *Review Symposium on Changing the Penal System* and building on the ideas of Thomas Mathiesen (1974), Fitzgerald cautioned against investing in the easily identified *positive reforms* of prison that 'improve or build up the system so that it functions more effectively' but fail to impact on the underpinning ideology. By contrast, he advocated *negative reforms* that 'remove greater or smaller parts on which the prison system in general is more or less dependent' (Fitzgerald, 1975, p. 94). Such reforms constrain expansion and diminish penal options but may appear to lie outside the penal domain. In the Netherlands, for example, and some of the Scandinavian states more influenced by this approach to addressing general social conditions rather than investing in penal solutions to social problems, prisons stand empty and others have closed (Boztas, 2017). Looking forward, the radical visions of critical scholars such as Mike Fitzgerald are needed more than ever to challenge the sweet-toothed preference for positive reforms that deliver penal obesity on the back of a short-lived sugar-rush of philanthropic optimism.

From the Chartists in the mid-19th century, to the Workers Educational Association (WEA), and left-wing summer-schools that grew up in the hard, depression-hit 1930s, radical pedagogies have been linked to various freedom struggles. Women's and Black liberation movements in the USA and the UK have long recognised how emancipation starts in the head as well as the heart, and so it is with prison learning. The front cover of the book the authors of this paper were involved in producing, *Degrees of Freedom* (Earle & Mehigan, 2019), suggests this experience. People sometimes say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but the editors were more than happy for their book to be judged in that way. The cover art was donated by the artist, 'Ben', who was serving his sentence in a Scottish prison. His work has been acclaimed and displayed by the Koestler Trust, a charity that promotes arts and humanities activities in prisons across the UK. He was invited to produce an image for the cover of the book and without much briefing – except that it was about the OU's work in prison – he produced the stunning image on the front cover, a life- and learning-affirming painting of light breaking out of a smiling man's head. As one of the contributors to the book, Erwin James, a former prisoner and established author, has said 'in prison you live in your head' (James, 2012, p. 3). Anyone who has been imprisoned knows the truth of that statement and might also recognise the light that in dark times helps you through time lived without its flow: prison time (Riley, 2019).

Opening the University to Prison Learners

The basic principles of OU teaching have remained reasonably consistent over the last 50 years but are not typical of most universities invested in face-to-face teaching and learning. The OU is a distance-learning institution, unusual in having no entry requirements. Almost anyone is welcome to study anything in the prospectus. Recognising that many people may not know exactly what they want to study as much as the fact that they want to study, OU students can begin studying without a predetermined pathway to a specific qualification. The most popular degree is still, 50 years later, the Open Degree, an assemblage defined and decided by the student's choices, it takes advantage of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) to secure sufficient academic credits at each level. Many students benefit from the flexibilities of this system by using the OU to 'test the water' and establish their confidence to study before moving into the conventional university system with their CATS. This can be particularly attractive to students in prison.

Clear guidance is provided by OU staff and pre-entry support is available to advise

prospective students on the challenges ahead. With no expectations of prior levels of academic achievement, OU learning resources are developed with extraordinary attention to the learner's needs. Many learners may have been failed by their school or left fulltime schooling as soon as it was legal to do so (16 in the UK from the early 1970s). As a result, many will harbour thoughts that they are 'not good enough' for university level study. The OU has from the outset, addressed this false sense of inadequacy by offering 'a second chance' to mature learners. The sense of 'a second chance' resonates even more deeply with students in prison.

All OU students are assumed to have no access to libraries, or to laboratories and specialist technical equipment. These included microscopes, dissection kits, comprehensive reading anthologies, and sample press cuttings. They were provided, traditionally, in a large cardboard box delivered to the student's doorstep and received with much anticipation, excitement, and anxiety by the new student. Prior to the OU being established, nobody believed you could study and practice university-level science without access to a laboratory. Against expectation and prediction, it has enabled prisoners to study science and engineering subjects, if the equipment was allowed through security which wasn't always the case. Kamul Abdul recalls his struggles to study engineering:

> The journey into mathematics and engineering was very difficult within the secure environment… However, perseverance would be rewarded, understanding would unveil itself, and a flood of confidence, enthusiasm and passion would return (stronger). I learnt to become very resourceful. Eventually I was permitted to study an engineering course and, in an aim to bridge theory with practice, I joined the welding workshop, which proved to be equally as important as the OU course material… Although my subject was uncommon, being around other students who had worked equally as hard, and had faced similar issues, reassured, and encouraged my resolve. In spite of this, nothing would have been possible without all the wonderful librarians (non-prisoners) who have encouraged, supported and provided the security of a close OU community – something not easily achieved in prison (Abdul, 2019).

The Open University has a reputation for excellence. It has consistently achieved more than 90% in the National Student Survey, 80% of FTSE 100 companies have sponsored staff to take OU courses, and the UK's latest audit of research found that 72% of OU research was world-leading or internationally excellent (FutureLearn, 2021).

Its teaching materials are collectively produced by teams of OU academics and advisers, editors, producers, external contributors, and learning design technicians. Rigorous testing of both the learning material and assessment procedures are a necessary defence against the widespread suspicion that opening access to non-conventional students without proof of prior educational achievement would result in second-rate, or even bogus qualifications. The OU's commitment to robust assessment and extraordinary levels of quality assurance in its learning design have secured its reputation for providing opportunities to gain not merely qualifications but ones recognised as a first-class higher education. It is an early and continuing example of what can be achieved if sufficient resources are providing for 'levelling-up' in place of cheap rhetoric that only levels down.

Once learning materials have been produced, in all their diverse and changing forms of media, they are presented to students by Associate Lecturers (also known as tutors) who usually convene and support regionally based groups of students. Because students in prison cannot participate in these groups, they are allocated a dedicated OU tutor to support their learning. OU tutors use their expertise to curate centrally produced OU content, and as necessary, they arrange graduation ceremonies in prisons. Whenever possible these may include relatives, suitable refreshments, and academic staff wearing, and providing graduates with, gowns.

Learning New Identities

Most prisoners come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and many have experienced family breakdowns, periods in local authority care, physical abuse, trauma, drug and alcohol abuse (Light et al., 2013; Ministry of Justice, 2010: Williams et al., 2012). Prisoners have often also had disrupted school attendance with 63% of adult prisoners having been suspended or temporarily excluded and 42% permanently excluded or expelled from school (Williams et al., 2012). Added to which, a third self-identify as having a learning disability (Coates, 2016). In this context of multiple and compounding deprivation, a sustained period of relatively fixed and predictable accommodation and stable access to sustenance means a prison sentence can sometimes offer a first opportunity at 'the second chance' of an education. Acknowledging education as a basic human right, the Council of Europe states that education in prison should aim to develop the whole person; to limit the damage done by prison, to provide support to address educational disadvantage and to support them turning away from crime (Council of Europe, 1990).

In the UK, prison education departments frequently prioritise basic literacy and numeracy programs, which are clearly important to address the prevalence of this form of educational deficit. They often cannot adequately provide prisoners with the specialist skills and qualifications required to address the profound personal and social development needs that many prisoners require to get close to expectations of social integration and sustainable employment (Clark, 2016). Since a lack of previous education does not equate to a lack of intelligence, when provided with the opportunity and the necessary support to progress many prisoners serving longer sentences flourish in their studies, rising quickly to higher levels (Pike & Hopkins, 2019).

Prisoners may start their learning journeys for many reasons – survival of a long prison sentence, boredom, making loved ones proud and making the best use of their time inside (Hughes, 2012). Some prisoners work their way through all the basic education available from the prison itself and OU study is simply a logical progression. Other prisoners may have previous qualifications and choose to study for their well-being or to re-skill for a change of employment on release (Champion and Noble, 2016). Frequently, interest in OU study may be sparked by seeing other prisoners studying, by participating in a promotional OU seminar, or by being involved in other university-led activities such as Prison University Partnerships that do not match the range or continuity of curriculum provided by the OU. While the initial motivation to start studying is important, what matters most is maintaining progression. With progression comes confidence and with higher level learning comes the ability to critically reflect on a situation; the life that led to prison. Eventually, students begin to see a different future:

> Never in a million years would I have thought I would undertake a degree – yet here I am, doing it! What is most striking is how it turns from something to do with my time in prison into something I do with the rest of my life. (Nic, HMP Parc, 2018, cited in McFarlane and Pike, 2019)

The OU encourages learners to create their own study spaces. After interviewing 53 student prisoners, Forster (1976) concluded that many saw studying as an 'escape from routine'. One prisoner said that he applied to study at the OU 'so that for just a few hours a week I could get away from the obscenities, the prison gossip, the scheming'. Another called studying 'a lifeline – it reaches outside. I'm a member of the University and that means that I'm still a member of the human race'. Moving into and remaining in the alternative space was not always straightforward, and prisoners would often come to an OU tutor session in a disturbed or distressed state after a difficult visit or following bad news from outside. Tutor Jackie Watts explained:

> During my three years as a higher education tutor in prison I was never once able to move straight into a teaching role at the start of the session. This was

> because before the student could move into the student 'self' to be fully engaged in the learning situation, it was necessary for [the student] to actively, if only temporarily, leave and 'unlock' the prisoner 'self' (Weinbren, 2020, p. 14).

Studying with the OU enables prisoners to develop a positive sense of themselves and their potentials. They develop skills in self-management and forward planning that are necessary for OU study and these have collateral advantages in helping them to partition themselves from the more damaging effects of prison (Behan, 2014). As they progress with their studies they increasingly feel they belong to a learning community and develop an identity as students, rather than prisoners. Prisoners themselves observe how they find themselves seeking different interests and conversations from their fellow inmates:

> It's opening up my eyes to a lot of things. It's changing me as a person. It's giving me the way out. My interests are different. I don't necessarily entertain certain conversations as I'm not in that frame of mind. Andrew (in Pike and Hopkins, 2019, p. 57)

Research evidence indicates that developing a positive identity as a student is a key benefit for improving post-release outcomes (Pike, 2014). This is because it helps to overcome the stigma of the criminal label that is so difficult to get beyond. Penal stigma is reinforced by the labels commonly encountered by ex-prisoners on release, in other universities and seeking employment (Eris, 2019; Gough, 2019; Schreeche-Powell, 2019). Longitudinal research which investigated the impact of higher-level learning for prisoners after release found that prisoners who fully engaged with their studies in prison had high hopes and strong, realistic aspirations for a decent, crime-free life upon release. Becoming a student had offered them a sense of hope and a realistic means of realising their aspirations. By comparison, those who expressed an interest in the OU but had not been able to engage in OU study, had very few aspirations or protective factors (Pike, 2014).

Successfully overcoming the challenges in completing distance learning in a prison environment provides OU students in prison with determination and develops a resilience that has the capacity to see them through the prison gate and on to the challenges they meet outside (Hughes, 2012). That resilience, along with an often newly found ability to reflect on difficult situations, reduces the likelihood of returning to prison:

> There have been days when I've thought, sod it, I'll just go and do something that'll send me back to prison and it'll just be easier, but I know that in the long term I won't be doing anybody any favours …so I have got my head about it … I'm determined not to go back. (Released student in Pike, 2014)

Positive identity change can lead to lasting or 'secondary' desistance from crime (McNeill, 2014) not least because Higher Education increases both prisoners' employment prospects and their rates of pay upon release (Costelloe, 2014; Duwe & Clark, 2014). The Longford Trust reports that the targeted financial support it provides for serving and ex-prisoners to undertake higher education modules at universities, results in fewer than 5% of recipients of its awards reoffending (Coates, 2016, p. 38).

Continuity of study after prison is very important for maintaining a positive student identity. As the OU is a national university, students are able to continue with their studies wherever they live in the UK when they are released, and even if they move abroad. However, when OU students leave prison, many aspects of their life change and even if they are able to overcome the many challenges facing ex-prisoners generally, they still have new priorities and new pressures on their time. Despite the best of intentions, many students find it very difficult to continue their studies. The OU now provides a support pack for released students which contains a range of resources to accomplish the transition from studying in prison to studying in the community. The pack provides them with information on OU resources that will be

new to them, such as a university library blessed with one of the finest collections of online subscriptions of any university in the UK. In addition, a 'Through the Gate' support leaflet provides information about agencies which focus on supporting people with convictions back into employment. There is also a dedicated OU website with additional online resources supporting the transition to OU study on the outside.

The First Decade

Although the OU's devolved national and regional structure was not designed to support the learning of prisoners, it has meant that whenever and wherever a prisoner is moved to another prison, support can be organised and delivered. Even so, in the early days the scarcity of available tutors meant long distances to travel. A tutor in the 1970s who lived in Milton Keynes where the main OU campus is located, recalled supporting a student in a prison 260 miles north, HMP Acklington, in Northumberland (Regan, 2003, p. 5). Other tutors have travelled to Continental Europe to teach British subjects in overseas prisons.

The design of OU teaching materials intended for people learning from home and unsupported by the infrastructure of a campus university, meant the OU's 'everything-in-a-box' packages were ideal resources for isolated prison learners. In 1970, starting with two prisons for men, the Home Office agreed to make finance available to prisoners to pay the fees and provide facilities for OU modules. This was a period when support for prison education was relatively high. HMP Blundeston, 'resembling a school or university campus' opened in 1963, reflected the shift in attitudes 'from detention and retribution towards training and rehabilitation' (Jewkes & Johnston, 2007, p. 188). In 1971, six prisoners in HMP Albany and 16 in HMP Wakefield started their OU studies. By the end of that year two had gained distinctions, 15 gained credits, four failed, and one had dropped out. The following year, 1972, 13 students continued their studies and they were joined by 27 more students, including eight from HMP Gartree. The scheme was extended beyond England with a further prisoner in Belfast and two in Scotland (Perry, 1976). The prisoners' pass rate in 1974 was relatively low at 45% of those that started the course as many withdrew before they reached the examination. Those who sat the examinations had what the Vice-Chancellor, Walter Perry, called 'reasonably good' results (Perry, 1976, p. 173). In 1974 the first prisoner graduated with an OU degree. By 1975, there were 109 students at 11 establishments and by 1976, 142 prisoners in 14 establishments studying 197 subjects (Forster, 1976, p. 7).

Expansion of OU provision since the 1970s has steadily increased. In the 1980s there were approximately 150 students spread across 31 prisons. In the 1990s this had more than doubled to around 300 prisoners studying in 80 prisons. This upward trend continued, and by 2005 there were 1500 students in 120 prisons, but the positive trend was then reversed by a number of factors. Among these were the OU's accelerating shift to online delivery, prison service reorganisation, new education providers' priorities, and most significantly, changes to the personal loan funding scheme for Higher Education Institutions. The Government's requirement that students must be within six years of their release date to be eligible for a tuition fee loan, was particularly devastating for long-term prisoners. in 2014/15 the number of OU students in prison had fallen to below 1000 (McFarlane & Pike, 2019). Although many issues remain unresolved, by 2019, its 50th anniversary year, the OU had approximately 1800 students on more than 130 modules across all faculties in approximately 150 prisons (covering all security categories) in the UK and Ireland (Open University, ND).

The scale of the OU's accomplishments, especially in the early years, are easy to underestimate. Fitzgerald's (1980) account of prison conditions in the late 1970s, alongside the first-hand testimony of some of its survivors, such as Jimmy Boyle (1977), John McVicar (1980), and Trevor Hercules (2019), should leave no one in any doubt about what was achieved by these OU students and those that supported them. The appalling conditions arising from institutional neglect, overcrowding and, in some cases, the brutality of prison staff led to widespread

riots, disturbances and other forms of protest during the 1970s and 1980s (Fitzgerald, 1977). In Northern Ireland where people were interned without trial from 1971, protests included arson and hunger strikes. In 1972, the OU began to teach prisoners in the Long Kesh Detention Centre (later HMP Maze) and other prisons. Estimates as to the numbers taught vary but the OU's Regional Director, who himself taught in the Maze, noted that 'at one time there were as many as one hundred students following our courses and being visited by tutors' (Macintyre, 2013). A number of OU-educated prisoners were closely involved in the process which culminated in the 1998 Belfast Agreement (McKeown, 2019; O'Sullivan & Kent, 2019; Weinbren, 2020). As Billy Hutchinson, one of the first to engage in the Peace Process negotiations, concluded, 'The Open University taught me how to actually do that' (Hutchinson, 2011).

Prison wings and prison cells are difficult places to study. A cell may be shared, there is precious little desk-space, let alone shelving. Locks on doors and metal bars on windows, and the pervasive focus on punishment and correction rather than rehabilitation, signal just a few of the many ways in which prisons are different to other learning environments. They are a world away from a university campus. Universities are regarded as convivial environments, benign elective, youthful communities supportive to learning and extending the boundaries of experience. No one chooses to get sent to prison and alongside austere living conditions, there is intrusive surveillance, corrosive fear, suspicion and mistrust. This is how one prisoner described studying to his tutor:

> In prison there is rarely another inmate following the same course and visits from a tutor can be infrequent and sometimes impossible. There is noise, arbitrary interruption, tension and sometimes the threat of violence […] The student in prison can face prejudice, jealousy and ridicule in an environment which is often hostile to intellectual activity. (Regan, 1996)

In the early days of OU provision much depended on the creativity of OU staff based in the English regional and Celtic nation (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) offices to negotiate initiatives with prisons in their area (see O'Sullivan & Kent, 2019, in relation to the conflict in Ireland). Developing the availability of OU modules to students in prison while ensuring parity in the education service provided to those outside, was often accompanied by proliferating and distinctive logistical challenges. For example, students in prison could not attend the residential schools or tutorials that regular OU students were encouraged to attend. These residential events have themselves become part of HE folklore, legendarily social, transformative, and sometimes transgressive for those that attended. At least one prisoner attended a mainstream Residential School (Weinbren, 2019, p. 59). In 1976, a student counsellor arranged a version of a summer school in a prison and also for students from outside the prison to join those inside in tutorials. There was a five-day programme to mimic the residential school attended by other students studying the same module, an early precursor of the Prison/University partnerships that are now becoming much more widespread.

The OU's slowly growing presence in prison through the 1970s was not without controversy for while critics of imprisonment, such as Mike Fitzgerald, highlighted brutal conditions and harsh deprivations, those from the other end of the political spectrum thought prisons were at risk of becoming soft and easy, holiday camps where incorrigible rogues and villains exploited liberal misgivings. To those holding these perspectives the introduction of OU degrees for prisoners exemplified their suspicions of this tendency. The OU presence in prison provided easy punchlines for comic sketches and story lines in popular TV programmes. A typical exchange occurred in the first episode of a comedy-drama series *Minder* between Alfie, a seasoned 'con,' and Terry, a charismatic, but slightly simple, bodyguard.

> *Alfie:* Did all my bird 20 years ago when it was hard. Look at 'em now. All in the OU. Big Bob Whitney. You know he's got a bleeding degree.
>
> *Terry*: I never knew that.

Alfie: Sociology. Still at the thieving game. But now he knows why he's doing it (Euston Films, 1979).

Screen Time Learning

The OU has faced immense challenges in providing a high-quality learning experience comparable with mainstream students whilst respecting the security requirements of prison settings. Those challenges for prisons, prisoners and the OU have evolved continually over the last 50 years. Most significantly, developments in information, communication and media technology over the last 50 years have led to major changes in the way distance learning study materials are prepared, shared and used. As a result, efforts to narrow the gap between the learning experience of students in prison and mainstream students has been a recurring challenge.

In the early years, bridging the gap involved fairly modest adaptation of learning resources. OU teaching materials were mostly books with radio and television programmes, tutorials and residential schools (Forster, 1976). Prisoners received identical paper-based materials as other OU students, and later the same audio or video tape recordings were made available to them. Experiment kits, calculators and CDs were rarely permitted (Weinbren, 2018, p. 52). Prisoners could not attend residential schools or indeed view live television programmes, since in-cell television was not introduced until 1990's (Jewkes, 2002; Knight, 2016). However, all other study materials were the same and very few alternatives were required. In fact, the reality was that many OU students, even those in the 'free world', could not necessarily watch all the OU broadcasts because they were at work, or because their household dynamics precluded it, or because the VHF broadcasting signal was locally very poor or non-existent. As a result, the module teams ensured that credit-bearing assessment tasks were usually focussed on those parts of the module not supported by television broadcasts, so as not to disadvantage students in such constrained circumstances. Gradually, delivery through radio and television declined with the final TV programme linked to a specific module being broadcast in 2006.

As the OU turned to new communication technologies offering modules with online elements, opportunities for digital interaction increased accordingly. Prisons, on the other hand, had little reason to respond to the changing realities of online learning. As access to radios and television have become part of prison infrastructure, so they have declined as vehicles for OU learning delivery. As the 'university of the air' has evolved toward to the internet and come to resemble more closely its original radical vision, delivery to carceral spaces has become increasingly challenging. Prisoners are increasingly becoming a group of people almost entirely disconnected from the 21st-century digital 'network society' (Castells, 2004). As all forms of social, personal, commercial, and cultural interaction have become more dependent on social media technology such as smart phones and tablets, which themselves evolve at an accelerating rate (Kitchin & Fraser 2020; Wajcman, 2016), the traditional isolation of prisoners is becoming more unpredictably consequential, if not unintentionally punitive. Most prisoners still have no direct access to internet-enabled computers. Digital skills are vital for everyday existence; without them, prisoners are significantly and additionally disadvantaged, and less likely to successfully integrate back into society upon release (Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2020). Many prisoners have been left stranded on the wrong side of the digital divide, unable to study some modules because considerable periods of internet access are required. Prison policy tends to prioritise security concerns and they have been quick to adopt new technologies that serve such purposes, but their risk-averse approach to the use of learning technology has become a serious obstacle to rehabilitation. Johnson and Hail-Jares (2016) cite this risk-averse approach as contributing to an increasing digital 'isolation' among prisoners with limited access to technology.

In response to the growing tensions of fulfilling its mission 'to be open to people, to places, methods and ideas', the OU initially adopted a "traffic-light system" to identify in the OU prospectus which modules might be precluded because of the extent of digital study which would not be viable from prison ('green' modules fully available, 'amber' modules difficult

to study and 'red' modules unavailable as interactive or fully online (see McFarlane & Pike, 2019 for a full account)). Pike and Adams (2012) and Hancock (2010) highlighted significant inconsistencies in student experiences as the number of 'red' modules grew rapidly, leading to a review of OU provision and support. As a result, a specific learning support team was created, replacing the terminology and infrastructure of the ad-hoc Offender Learning Group with the more appropriately titled Students in Secure Environments team (SiSE). SiSE was central to the success of gathering contributions to *Degrees of Freedom* with nine of its 14 chapters authored by OU students in prison or released, supplemented by nine further, similar contributors offering shorter vignettes of their OU study in prison (Earle & Mehigan, 2019).

SiSE operates from the OU's Milton Keynes campus to improve overall communication with the Government Ministries of Justice, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) for England and Wales and their equivalents in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The team manages online module adjustments that are possible for prisons, often involving the assembly of comprehensive and voluminous 'print packs' of non-interactive on-line resources. These seek to provide a learning experience for students in prison that is reasonably consistent with those on the outside with access to on-line resources. An OU 'Guide to Learners in Secure Environments' (Open University, n.d.) is now published annually, listing the available study units and what support is available for OU study, both in terms of access modules and full degree study programmes.

Prison security requirements and protocols have established that all communication between the OU and its students must be via an intermediary within the prison, often the prison-based education manager (see Ministry of Justice, 2012). In the 1970s, prison education fell under the remit of different local education authorities who had responsibility for resourcing education provision of residents in the local area. For people in prisons, this meant patchy and inconsistent education opportunities across the country. Sometimes this resulted in good local support for 'extra-mural' activities such as OU study (Forster, 1976) where particular individuals and coalitions of support could drive positive initiatives. More recently, a trend toward centralisation and standardisation resulted. In 2006, the Skills Funding Agency's Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) was introduced which contracted out the prison education to college providers. This development led to some improved technology provision for learning and greater consistency across prison education departments. However, as OLASS focused on school-level study rather than college level, it has tended to result in less support for OU students (McFarlane & Pike, 2019).

Techno-prisoners in a Revolving World

Pike and Adams (2012) found the embrace of digital access was inconsistent across prisons and somewhat contra-intuitive in that high security prisons appeared to be more supportive than lower security prisons. For example, at HMP Whitemoor, one of only five high security prisons with a Close Supervision Centre (for prisoners considered particularly dangerous), the provision of the Whitemoor Wide Web intranet, provided, for a short time, a learning environment which looked very much like the internet but was totally secure. However, these ad hoc developments and technologies were gradually closed down as the prison service sought a more consistent (secure) system. The first iteration of this was POLARIS, a 'proof of concept' trial of online computers in London prisons supported by an external server (Schüller, 2009). The system worked well but was considered difficult to roll out across the secure estate because it required implementation over so many prisons in diverse physical settings.

OU students outside secure environments access online teaching materials via the internet. There are facilities on module websites for them to chat and links to many external websites. For students in prisons platforms are available, notably a 'Virtual Campus'. These include the OU teaching materials and exercises but exclude external links and communication with other students. The Virtual Campus (VC) was developed to provide secure access to

selected employment and education websites. After initially promising trials this was extended to most prisons and intended to streamline and modernise the system of delivery for education, training, and employment in the secure estate (Turley & Webster, 2010).

The OU makes module materials available on the prison hosted Virtual Campus, and any other secure platform available in a prison, via a 'walled garden'. The 'walled garden' replicates the OU's normal Virtual Learning Environment but removes access to student and tutor forums and other collaborative activities, as well as to external hyperlinks. Ideally, the intention was that students should be able to directly access all leaning materials, including online audio and videos, submit assignments and securely message their OU tutors. Unfortunately, the value of the Virtual Campus has been compromised by the use of outdated technology and inadequate infrastructure in prisons which render many of its intended benefits unusable (Coates, 2016). Access to the Virtual Campus is often restricted by OLASS's education provider priorities and localised regime requirements. Despite these limitations, persistent promotion and widespread recognition of the positive benefits of OU study has resulted in over 120 modules being made available for study on this platform.

Lack of access to online facilities and social media increasingly detaches prisoners from their families and wider social support networks and undermines their capacity to maintain digital literacy skills. These effects compound and exacerbate the conventional 'pains of imprisonment' and ensure it is more difficult for people leaving prison to integrate themselves into the 'free world' when released. People who are sent to prison now experience a kind of highly consequential and additional form of digital exclusion (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016) that revives the notorious 'revolving door' of repeat offending and repeat imprisonment (Maguire, 2020).

It does not have to be that way. In-cell technologies already exists in a few prisons in England and Wales, such as HMP Wayland and HMP Berwyn (see Burgon, 2018), providing direct access to the full benefits of the OU's Virtual Campus for students in their cells. The demand for in-cell devices is growing, but availability is dependent on individual prison authorisation processes and budgets. This technology should be rolled out to all prisons, allowing all students in prison direct access to their learning materials (Centre for Social Justice, 2021; Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2020).

The 2020/21 Covid-19 pandemic has proved seriously damaging to education, particularly higher education in prison (Davies, 2021 forthcoming) but has also highlighted how prisons cannot remain compliant with international obligations to uphold human rights if they neglect technological opportunities to maintain communication across the digital divide. In some UK prisons, video calling of relatives using smart phone apps such as the Purple Visits app (see Purple Visits, n.d.)) has been enabled during the lockdown regime imposed in response to the pandemic. By May 2020, this facility had been rolled out in 26 prisons in England (Centre for Social Justice, 2021). The introduction of broadband facilities in prisons that enable features of digital justice, such as virtual court appearances and 'visual legal visits' that have become more widespread because of the pandemic could be extended to other essential outside contacts, such as OU tutors. A few prisons have also introduced video-chat facilities for family communications involving several locations and participants, which could be used to support online tutorials involving other prisoners and tutors. The development of increasingly sophisticated virtual reality emulations of real-world contexts used by the OU for online science teaching and research could also reach students in prison. Recent research by McLaughlan and Farley (2019) identifies promising results from the use of virtual reality to teach literacy and numeracy in a prison in New Zealand.

The Future – Vision, Commitment, Resources, Courage

Rising to the opportunities of delivering on-line learning in prison and maintaining its commitment to openness, equity and access to all who want to learn presents the OU with per-

haps its biggest challenge since its original vision was picked up by advocates and enthusiasts in prison in 1971 (O'Sullivan & Kent 2019; Weinbren, 2019). The withdrawal of major components of government funding for universities in 2010 and their replacement with a student fees and loans system resulted in dramatic increases in the cost to students of an OU module. Students in prison now pay this full cost of a module whereas in the past OU costs to prison students were covered from central government funds. The digital transition to teaching and learning materials designed for on-line delivery increasingly means that students in prison receive a different learning experience. Learning is a collaborative, social, experience and while enormous effort and expense is involved in narrowing the gap, paper copies of on-line materials do not, and cannot, fully reproduce the intended OU learning experience. Prison students may justifiably feel they are getting less for their money.

Despite the best efforts of both the OU and prison services in the UK, access to the OU Virtual Campus and ICT equipment within prison education departments is rarely at the level that it needs to be for it to be meaningful to OU students. It is widely recognised that prisons need to do more to make mobile technology available to students. This has been further highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the resulting widespread closure of prison education departments and restricted computer access (Centre for Social Justice, 2021; Davies 2021, forthcoming). In February 2021, fifty years after OU teaching began in prison, a motion was tabled in the UK Houses of Parliament, sponsored by Labour MP Zarah Sultana and the University and College Union (UCU), highlighting how the impact of the pandemic had damaged prison education and the way relatively modest investment in digital educational technologies could mitigate some of its worst effects for prison students. It reflects growing recognition that prisons without adequate education facilities become little more than penal warehouses.

The OU has now partnered with Coracle, a Ministry of Justice approved ICT provider, to implement a mobile technology strategy. This takes the form of providing Chromebooks loaded with OU content to OU students in prison. Coracle has already successfully trialled approximately 70 Chromebooks in over 17 prisons. An OU pilot project is in motion to supply, in 2021, all students on the three OU Access modules with a Chromebook that will facilitate their studies at the beginning of their learning journey. It will reduce the need for (and ideally eventually replace) most of the OU print materials. It will give the OU student an enhanced learning experience much closer to that of students in the 'free world' and develop their digital literacy. A number of additional and ancillary benefits are that it can also deliver material to address specific learning difficulties for prison students with disabilities or additional learning requirements. In the OU pilot project being rolled out in 2021, it is anticipated that learning materials will be easily portable and therefore remain with the student at all times, including if they are transferred to another prison. Currently, during such moves prison students often lose their learning material, such as books, study notes, essays, feedback from tutors and so on, because they do not fall within the eligible quantities of print material allowed by prison service 'property within cell' requirements at the moment of transfer. With a laptop provided by the OU a student would have vastly improved opportunities to study outside of prison education department working hours, in their cell or when it suited them.

Distance learning can be a lonely activity and students in prison often experience severe isolation. McFarlane and Morris (2018) found that when students in prison were actively involved in a study community or a representative body which allowed them to suggest improvements to the system, their levels of engagement increased, leading to increased confidence and higher overall assignment scores. Hopkins and Farley (2014) identified a wide set of social and cultural issues associated with learning in prison and with prior experiences of learning, recognising that social interaction is fundamental to learning, but is often missing in a prison setting due to security restrictions.

Many OU tutors go to great lengths to support their students in prison, even when students are transferred across the country with little warning. The importance of this support

is fully acknowledged by students: "The determination of the teaching staff and tutors when faced with the realities of a prison security department and the rules and restrictions was quite inspiring. It encouraged me to persevere and I am glad I did." (Liam, former OU prison student, cited in McFarlane & Pike, 2019, p. 19). These tutors channel the vision, commitment and energy that Jennie Lee found in Harold Wilson's idea of a 'university of the air'. The OU was not designed for prisoners, but its larger vision of access and inclusion of those traditionally denied and excluded from higher education intrinsically challenges much of what prisons stand for – isolation, exclusion, retribution, pain and punishment. It was a vision blending pragmatic, technical and managerial priorities driven by cold war tensions as much as it was by romantic utopianism. The OU was designed to have central control of the 'production' of 'units' (teaching materials) with the delivery of these teaching materials focused on students in their own homes. Teaching has had to be adapted to make it appropriate for prisons. There has been an additional barrier to prison education. The long-running criticism in the press and Parliament of people being permitted to study for degrees while in prison. In the face of constraints, Open University staff have found ways to support learners in prisons and prisoners have found ways to create spaces for learning. As a result, there have been significant benefits for everyone – individual prisoners and for our society as a whole.

The current UK government's Prime Minster, privately educated at Eton and Oxford University, has indicated his commitment to increasing prison places and decreasing university places. As another technological revolution sweeps the planet, The Open University will need all the vision, commitment, and energy of its founders if it is to continue opening the doors that prisons close.

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