Investigating the Digital Divide for the OU Offender Learner

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1. Aims of the Research

1. Investigate the experiences of the Open University student in a prison environment
   ▪ What effect does learning have on their prison life and visa-versa?
   ▪ What are the key motivators or de-motivators

2. Determine what influences students to embark on an Open University course
   ▪ What factors have encouraged or inhibited progress?

3. Identify how lack of technology affects learning, choice of study and future decisions

4. Lack of Support

Many dedicated staff, internal and external to the OU, provide excellent support to students but insufficient resources, funding or policy to adequately meet student needs:-
▪ OU relies too heavily on prison education staff who have insufficient resources and are forced to bend rules
▪ LSC priorities are for education to level 2 so insufficient funding for HE
▪ Regional variation in student support and guidance
▪ Lack of prison-trained OU tutors.

2. The Methodology

35 in-depth, semi-structured student interviews (M, S & T initially, broadening to all faculties).
Triangulation with prison and OU staff interviews

10 prisons in 5 OU regions, covered all security categories (A – D), Male & Female, Public & Private

3. Educational Qualifications before entering prison

4. Access to Technology

3/35 (<10%) of students in the study were allowed access to the internet but even those were given insufficient access to the OU site
Wide variation in availability of technology to students
▪ Access to computers varied from 1 hour/week to a full Open Learning suite with open access most days or in-cell laptops
▪ Variation is Prison specific (not always related to Security Category)
▪ One Cat A allowed DVDs in-cell, but Cat C did not.
Software license problems restrict use

5. Course choice

Lack of course choice seriously affects the students’ ability to complete a chosen degree in a prison

Only 18% of Undergraduate Named Degrees fully available [April 07]