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Supporting Open University students in prison: a case study

Geraldine Huzar
Open University, UK

Hossam Kassem
Open University, UK

Abstract

The Open University (OU) has around 1800 students studying in prisons (Students in Secure Environments, 2019) with no internet access. They study offline with no access to the OU library's online resources. This case study explores the student volunteer scheme introduced to help students in prison to indirectly access online library resources. It looks at how and why the service was set up, the experience of running the service and an initial evaluation. Due to the small number of students taking part in the pilot and Covid-19 interrupting the service, further research is needed to assess the full impact on students studying from prison. This will be the next stage of our work.

Keywords: studying in prisons; library support; online library; library resources; no online access; volunteer.

Introduction

To understand the context of this case study it is essential that we give some background about the OU. The OU's Mission is to be:

> open to people, places, methods and ideas. We promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. . . . Most of our undergraduate courses have no formal entry requirements. . . . We are committed to promoting equal opportunities for all, and close monitoring makes sure that we live up to our ideals. (The Open University, 2019a, p.7).

The OU is one of the largest universities in Europe with 129,611 students mainly studying part time, which is a FTE equivalent of 68,204 (The Open University, 2019b). Before 2010, the OU delivered distance learning to students, including those in prisons, by sending hard copies of the course materials. Access to online resources was non-existent. However, from 2010 onwards the OU started moving its courses online using a Virtual Learning Environment. This was not unique to the OU; other institutions did the same. Access to library materials moved online too and became an integral part of module content. However, because students in prisons have no access to the internet, for security reasons and/or due to lack of or varying facilities in prisons, they continued to receive printed materials. Other distant learning institutions who offered courses to prisoners faced the same issue.

Students in prisons are often moved between prisons at short notice and may not be able to carry a lot of printed materials with them, thus putting them at a considerable disadvantage (Farley et al., 2016).

This case study describes how the OU library worked with colleagues in other OU departments to set up a service providing students in prison with printed library resources. To ensure the service could be evaluated, data was collected on involvement and individual experience. The progress of each request was monitored using a spreadsheet, mailbox and forum, and feedback from the student volunteers and prisoners was gathered using a questionnaire. Because there was a small number of participants and a risk of individuals being identified, more in-depth analysis was not possible. The case study outlines the next steps in gathering research data once more students have used the service.

OU students in prison

The OU works closely with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to deliver education to students in prison. Providing higher education in prison has many benefits including helping to reduce reoffending and providing prisoners with the means to improve their life once they have served their sentences (Farley et al., 2016; Ministry of Justice, 2019).

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To support the work of organisations like the OU, the MOJ has a team of analysts, Justice Data Lab (JDL), who provide access to the central reoffending data. This helps organisations to assess the impact of their work. In the July 2019 quarterly statistics publication, the JDL provided an analysis of the impact of four organisations, including the OU. It found that 14% who were studying an OU module reoffended following their release from prison as opposed to 18% from the comparison group (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

The OU started delivering courses in prisons in 1972. Not all courses are available to study. As of March 2019, there were approximately 1800 students on more than 130 courses in 150 prisons (Students in Secure Environments, 2019, The Open University, 2021a). Some students have access to the OU's Virtual Campus (intranet site) depending on the facilities available at their prison. All students in prison are sent printed module materials. Some courses require students to carry out independent study which requires online library access, thus, limiting the choice of available courses to study. For example, students in prisons cannot study law courses from year two onwards as they are expected to access databases such as Westlaw UK and Lexis Library for their independent studies. For some courses, students were reliant on their personal tutors or educational officers to obtain independent study material for them with varying results.

Overcoming the obstacle

In late 2018 the Head of Student Support and Head of Volunteering, at the Open University (OU) Students Association, suggested a student volunteer scheme. Under the scheme, the OU student in prison would send an anonymised request detailing what information resources they were looking for and a volunteer student would then carry out the research, using the OU library's subscribed resources, on their behalf.

Within the library, meetings involving the Head of Intellectual Property and Senior Library Manager for Content and Licensing were held to discuss any potential copyright and licensing implications of providing the service.

Refining the proposal

While the proposal would not give students in prison direct access to online library resources, it would allow them to obtain the materials with the help of the volunteers. The suggested idea was positively received by both the Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) team, who are responsible for all students studying in prison, and the OU library. Work began immediately to refine the proposal by identifying which students in prison were likely to benefit from the service and who could volunteer. Discussions identified that master's level students and year three students would benefit the most due to having projects and dissertations requiring independent research.

Setting the service up

The service was set up in two months, mainly because it was able to utilise and expand on existing relationships. For example, the OU Students Association provides many opportunities for students to volunteer. This established means of attracting volunteers was used to set up the new service. To express the importance and value the volunteers would be adding to the study experience of OU students in prison, a student who had studied in prison featured in a recruitment video. The student has since been released and is now one of the volunteer students.

Additionally, the OU has a warehouse in Wellingborough which sends print module material to students including students in prison. Few adjustments were required to expand this service to include printing and sending library material to these students.

Volunteers needed to be existing students in their third year of undergraduate study or above. This ensured they had the necessary study experience and library skills to provide the service. As part of their application each volunteer was asked to explain why they wanted to be involved with the service. These statements provided a good indication of their understanding and commitment to supporting students in prison. Volunteers had to attend three training sessions:

- One session run by the SiSE team and the Students Association covered how the volunteer would receive the request from students in prison, the administrative work required, where to seek help, and more importantly how their work would help students in prison.

- Two sessions were delivered by the library. One on how to conduct a search on the OU library website or other library subscribed databases was based on existing OU Library training sessions (The Open University Library, 2020). The other session made student volunteers aware of issues surrounding copyright.

The training sessions were delivered using online rooms used by the university for all tutorials, therefore the volunteers would be familiar with this medium.

In the pilot, 22 volunteers were recruited and trained.

Ongoing library support is provided for the volunteers. Volunteer students can contact the library's helpdesk directly if they experience problems locating material or have copyright queries. The library web chat service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to OU students and staff. A dedicated forum is also available and checked by librarians as part of their helpdesk shift. This has the benefit of other volunteer students seeing the answers to queries and potentially having their own question answered. There is no limit on how many requests a student can make.

The chart below explains the process for requesting study materials by students in prison.

Figure 1. Diagram of process for requesting study materials.
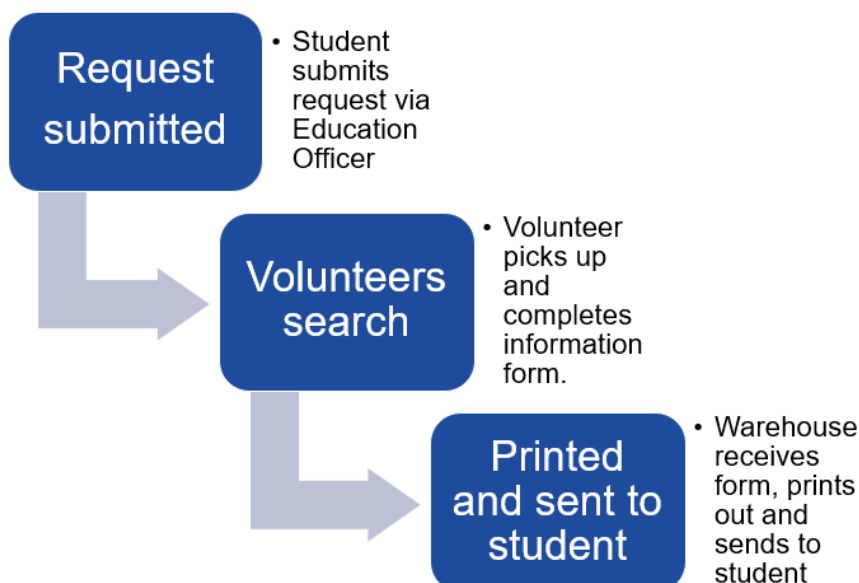
Experience of running the service

There was rapid take up of the service: 27 requests were received within the first four weeks. A total of 200 requests were received between the start of the service on 25 January 2019 and April 2021. The average request took 3.8 days to turnaround. The service level agreement is ten days. The OU warehouse processed every request within two days.

The OU could control the turnaround time, however once the printed material was delivered to the prison the length of time it took to reach the students varied. Challenges included requests received not being clear enough, necessitating correspondence between librarians, volunteers, and prison education officers. This has led to the initial request form being updated to be more explicit about the information required. It has also been difficult for librarians to find time to monitor the forum and some requests have been for material that is not available online from the OU library.

Whilst some requests were for specific resources such as articles and book chapters, others required a subject search; the students would ask for materials on a certain topic and the volunteer would search for them. The volunteers posted 22 requests for help on the library forum, such as how to deal with a request for materials in German, how to search for a specific topic, and what to do about resources to which the OU library has no access. Additional requirements sometimes needed to be considered, for example, one student had a disability and needed material to be printed in 14 to 16 size fonts on yellow paper.

The service was certainly appreciated by students and found to be a valuable one. On an OU Students Association page advertising the opportunity to be a library study volunteer, a quote from an anonymous student demonstrates how valuable studies are to students in prison. The additional help provided by the volunteer service will allow more to feel like this:

> I'm unsure how long I will remember the Latin or literary theory I laboured to understand, but my eyes have opened to a multi-textured world rich with history and beauty and my degree has given me the confidence to believe I can yet claim a

place in it and thrive. Those are Open University lessons I will never forget. (The
Open University, 2021b).

Evaluation of service

In the first six months of the service, the level of demand was manageable, and all
requests were responded to within the service level agreement. A questionnaire was sent
to the student volunteers together with a thank you card and a goody bag. The
questionnaire asked for their feedback on the support they had received, as well as the
impact on their time and their own study experience. Student volunteers were appreciative
of the support they had received and in particular commented on the training sessions.
Some said they would have benefited from attending these to support their own studies as
it improved their research skills. Digital and information literacy is one of the nine Open
University employability skills (The Open University, 2021c) students are supported to
develop as part of the role. Other employability and transferable skills developed include
collaboration and global citizenship. Volunteering can be particularly useful if students
have a gap in their employment history. A Certificate of Volunteering which gives a
summary of the role, duration, and the impact the role has had for the Association, is
available on request.

The service did not have a detrimental impact on volunteers' time as they only picked
requests when they knew they had the time to answer them. This did result in a varying
engagement with the service, with some volunteers picking several queries and others
none.

The aim was also to measure the impact of the service on the module results obtained by
students in prison before and after the service was introduced. However, further
investigation showed that our potential sample was too small and specific to produce any
meaningful data. Individuals would have been identifiable, and we would have needed to
write to each student to ask for permission to use their data. We have not yet had the
opportunity to follow this up.

In July 2019 existing volunteers were asked if they wanted to continue and adverts for new
volunteers placed on the OU Students Association website. Due to the success of the

initial pilot, it was decided to provide the service as part of the library's business as usual and extend it to include year two courses delivered to OU students in prison as well as year two volunteer students. The aim is to extend the service to all OU students in prison and potentially to broaden the choice of courses that can be studied. Currently courses that include a large component of research are not offered.

As a result of the Covid-19 lockdown the OU warehouse was shut temporarily in March 2020 so resource requests could not be printed and sent. The warehouse reopened in June 2020 and the service resumed in October.

Next steps

Feedback from the volunteer students and students in prison indicated how much the service is valued. Obtaining more in-depth data has proved to be difficult due to the small number of participants, as noted above. The aim will be to carry out an analysis when a larger cohort of students have used the service. The break in service due to the Covid-19 lockdown meant this was not possible for the academic year 2019/2020 but should be for 2020/2021. This data is not currently available (August 2021), but when it is, analysis could involve:

- Comparing the grades of cohorts of prisoners who have completed courses before and after the service was introduced. This would aim to identify any value added.
- Identifying prisons where eligible students are not using the service to investigate why.
- Investigating whether students who have used the service are more likely to continue their studies and graduate.
- Comparing module grades of volunteers with non-volunteers to monitor the potential impact of additional training and experience.

The aim is also to conduct further empirical research using questionnaires. The need for feedback has to be balanced with the time constraints of the volunteer students, who like other OU students are often working, bringing up families, and caring for others as well as studying.

Potential topics to cover include:

- What specific aspects of the volunteer training could be useful for all OU students?
- How do the volunteers see themselves using the skills gained from this experience?
- How would students in prison like the service to develop to support their unique needs?

The service could potentially be expanded and offered to year one students and those undertaking research as part of a master's degree or PhD. Before any decisions are taken, capacity to support these developments would need to be reviewed, along with need. Year one students are provided with the majority of the resources required to study, to ensure their research skills are developed gradually. Providing students on higher degrees with resources could have ethical implications, as they are not conducting the research themselves. This service supports students by sending them print-outs of online resources. An ongoing challenge is how to develop the digital skills of students in prison. These skills are essential to function effectively within the work and personal environment but are difficult to replicate on paper and without having access to the internet. The teams involved in the service are having ongoing discussions around how they can help with this. Within the library, one proposal is to create an offline learning activity which can then be piloted with students and staff to evaluate how effective it is in teaching digital and information literacy skills.

This case study is a specific example of how training students to support their peers can benefit both the students providing the service and those receiving it. Other higher education institutions may not support students in prison but could still have students unable to access the internet for a variety of reasons. These students might benefit from a similar service. Alternatively, there may be other services which student volunteers could support. As already mentioned, it is an opportunity for student volunteers to develop their employability and transferable skills. This can be particularly useful if they have little employment experience.

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Author details

Geraldine Huzar is a Learning and Teaching Librarian at the Open University (OU). Her passion is helping OU students to make the most of the library services and resources available during their studies. She is part of a team that does this through helping to develop digital literacy skills and enabling access for groups that are unable to study online. She has supported disabled students since joining the OU in 2002 and students in prison since 2016.

Hossam Kassem is a Learning and Teaching Librarian at the Open University Library. He specialises in delivering online teaching in Information Literacy and supporting disabled students and students in secure environments. Kassem is passionate about supporting disabled students and students in secure environments to become independent learners. He has been supporting these students since 2018.