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## Supporting learners in prison

*Vincent Worth*

*Make no mistake, education does change people. More should be done to encourage people to pursue educational ventures. (Open University prison-student)*

In reviewing the provision of degree-level work for learners in prison and the kinds of support that can contribute to their educational aspirations and achievement, this chapter focuses on the Open University (OU) distance education programme. This programme makes available a distinctive curricular package and a delivery system that can transcend institutional as well as geographical boundaries. Many of the principles and practices that the chapter reflects on or recommends are relevant, however, to a much wider area of provision of open and distance education which is directed towards the intellectual progress of incarcerated students.

### Background

Before the OU opened, it was possible for a few, exceptional students to follow an external degree programme. Most other institutions of higher education had formal entry requirements and few prisoners possessed these. By contrast, the OU was founded on an open entry policy and the modular, independent learning system that the OU offered promised to extend the possibility of degree study in prison to a considerably wider audience. In 1972, the year after courses were first made available to the country at large, an Open University-Home Office Scheme was initiated in four prisons (Tunstall, 1974). Since then, the Scheme has expanded so that a large number of prisons can now offer Open University programmes of degree-level study to inmates approved by their prison education departments.

The government departments responsible for prisons, the Home Office in England and Wales and the Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices, fund the

### Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

provision of courses through prison education departments which, since 1993, have been 'privatised' and managed by local colleges and other providers. The Scheme imposes a number of conditions. Students' programmes are limited to no more than 400 study hours per year. Tutorial contact time conforms to a (Home Office funded) pattern of ten hours for a foundation (Level One) course of 400 study hours; and for higher level work, six hours of contact time is assigned to 400 study hours, and four hours to 200 study hours courses. Certain courses which may be considered to pose a security risk are excluded from the Scheme; those, for example, whose components include chemical materials or require access to a modem.

The Open University Prison Scheme clearly represents an application of an equal access policy that has characterised the OU ethos since its inception. The programme seems especially appropriate for students in prison. It enables those for whom other opportunities to participate in higher education are closed. Of particular importance is the programme's ability to facilitate the studies of those who may be transferred and relocated several times during their sentence, since it uses the same learning materials and follows much the same pattern of teaching as that provided for OU students in the outside world. The principal, formal difference lies in the reduced hours of tutorial contact compared with those available to other students (although it has to be noted that not all outside students wish or are able to take advantage of face-to-face tutorial provision, and that the prison tutorial 'class' may sometimes be a single student!).

At the level of personal goals, OU studies can fulfil purposes, some of which the inmate may share with those outside; for example, for vocational advancement, as an interesting and challenging pastime, or for personal development. An OU programme may additionally meet the particular goals of people in custody: a means of reasserting some control over an otherwise closely monitored and controlled way of life and, because courses require full immersion in their subject matter, a way of distancing oneself and mentally escaping from the prison regime (Laycock and Griffiths, 1980; Davis, 1991).

*In such a destructive and depressing environment as prison, education is one of the few constructive outlets open to prisoners, giving them a chance to play a productive role in society and enabling them to see life with a different perspective from the one imposed by the culture of the institution. (OU student)*

## Difficulties of studying in prison

If we want to use the opportunities and means of supporting students' learning in prison to the full, we need to understand something of the kinds of difficulties

and challenges they may face. Some of these may be similar to those encountered outside, but in prison they are often experienced more *intensely*. If we assume that learning is a social as much as an individual activity, then the inmate-student can experience a heightened sense of isolation, where no other students in the same course may be accessible or where there are no other OU students in the wing or prison at all. Associated with this condition may be a feeling of remoteness from the tutor or counsellor, who perhaps cannot be contacted easily or quickly, especially during evenings and weekends when students, both inside and out, can find that most help is needed. Students sometimes become aware of an anti-intellectual culture that treats academic study with suspicion (McVicar, 1978) and may generate hostility on the part both of other inmates, for some of whom education belongs to the social world of 'them', and of some officers to whom the educated inmate may seem a status-threat.

As well as these kinds of interpersonal problems, the student faces other difficulties relating very specifically to the prison environment and management (Fitzgerald and Sim, 1982). For example, the image of the prisoner with 'all the time in the world' is quite misplaced: time constraints—most inmates are expected to work—affect those inside as much as their outside counterparts. Appeal processes can make heavy demands on both time and emotional resources. Students are likely to experience great difficulty in finding a quiet area in which to study: prisons can be very noisy most of the time. And students are especially vulnerable to the life-crises that their continuing links with the outside world bring, like family disruption and break-up, or financial problems, over which they have little control but which often demand heavy emotional investment. In a situation of stress, in which academic studies may lose their meaning and their rationale, dropping out can sometimes offer one way of relieving what otherwise seem unbearable pressures. The kind of academic support that most students benefit from may, therefore, have a special value for students who are also prison inmates.

*Studying in prison has its hazards as can well be appreciated. The conditions under which we work are really not that conducive to the type of serious studying that is required of us. We need to go through the daily routine with some relaxation, some unwinding. But also, we are worrying about the predicament we are in and the problems that have arisen meantime at home, and with our individual family members. All this means we are totally unmotivated for some considerable number of days. (OU student)*

## Supporting the student: a model

The student career can be located at the meeting point of a number of personal and institutional factors which are common to all OU students, in varying

### Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

degrees of significance and meaning, and whose exploration here may be particularly helpful in understanding the situation of those pursuing their studies in a prison setting. A simple, conceptual model constructed around these factors may help us to identify where support can be made available or enhanced, directly or indirectly, which will help students study effectively and enjoyably and facilitate their progress towards achieving their academic goals (see Fig. 12.1).

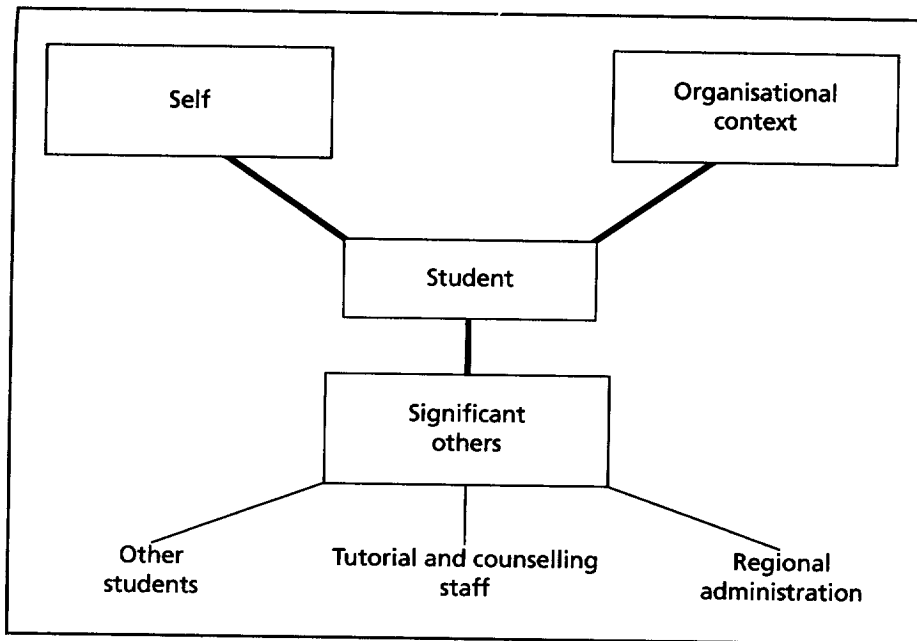


Figure 12.1 Model of student learning career

### Self

This category includes all those elements that constitute the person who presents her/himself as an aspiring student to the prison education department and whom an OU staff member will meet at some point. The identity of that person is constructed from a range of social and psychological characteristics: gender, class, ethnicity, family background, and the intellectual and emotional strengths and weaknesses that have emerged during development, including the experience of the criminal justice system.

An important component of identity is the earlier educational career of the applicant and its outcomes in terms of self-esteem and motivation. Like his/her outside counterparts, the beginner has realistically to match these with

the 'openness' that the OU proclaims and try to understand how he/she can achieve his/her own goals within the kinds of programmes that the University offers. Although printed information geared to the needs of newcomers is readily available, most applicants may still have little idea of what degree studies entail. At an early meeting, one of the first supportive tasks for an OU staff member is to try to depict the basic features and requirements of (Open) university study in a way that is clear, realistic and encouraging.

Motivation has to be developed in somewhat different circumstances and a probably different timeframe to those outside prison. First, students have to be serving medium- to long-term sentences since the application/enrolment period takes some time and, to attract Home Office funding, a course has to be undertaken and completed inside the prison. This probably entails a period of a year or more during which time the inmate has to 'discover' the OU, develop motivation and construct an incipient student identity (Worth, 1994, p. 38). That process may be similar to the development of motivation for outside students, although the inmate is additionally involved, at the same time as developing motivation, in presenting a self which is evaluated by persons who make decisions about 'appropriateness' for OU studies. Developing an authentic student identity involves, then, processes quite different from other existential features of inmate life in that the OU student has to take responsibility for his/her studies in a climate in which almost all decisions are made for the inmate by someone else, by an authority.

*What you are going in for is specifically related to people's choosing for themselves, learning to make decisions, coming to conclusions, and thinking about things, and yet all this is taking place in an environment where these are the one thing they cannot do. (OU tutor)*

The support that can be given in this area of the 'Self' is of two broad kinds:

1. Inmates are frequently studied, observed, analysed and assessed. As a consequence, they are probably more sensitive to and perhaps more defensive about their first encounter with OU staff than are students outside. Since the first meeting may significantly shape subsequent relations and temper the quality of later support, it should hinge on the OU staff member's showing respect for the student and the student's aspirations by being perceived to take these seriously and 'normalising' them. This can be furthered by helping the student to see him/herself as one of a larger body of similar-minded adults. The adult-student role is, to some extent, a 'deviant' one in society at large and may perhaps, in the anti-intellectual culture previously referred to, be a target for ridicule. The staff member's approach can do much to establish a solid base on which a strong, authentic student identity can be built: an approach that suggests respect, a non-judgemental friendliness, combined with conveying a

### Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

sense of the seriousness of the work the student is taking on. It may help to know, when the student has family members, whether they support the student's endeavours so that he/she is aware of the tutor's interest in the personal background of the 'whole' person.

2. The other type of support more specifically involves preparation for study, perhaps built around, should resources allow, a short series of tutorials but, at the least, a meeting directed towards helping and encouraging students to take a *systematic* approach to the task of preparation. It has to be kept in mind that potential inmate-students may not have as much access as new students outside to OU tutorial and counselling staff who can help them in a personal way to prepare for studies. Nevertheless, clear guidance concerning the kinds of activities that can be undertaken should be presented to students. Such an agenda of activities may follow three main strands:

- **The subject matter of the course in question:** First-level Open University courses include a pre-course preparatory pack around which activities can be based. Other available reading can be recommended.
- **Study skills:** This is probably the most important aspect of preparation and may involve, for example, practice in reading for meaning and in note-making in Arts and Social Sciences and maths work for the Mathematics (and Science and Technology, in so far as inmates are permitted to study these) courses. One of the central principles to be explained, as the context for justifying and stressing these kinds of skills, is that OU learning and teaching are based primarily on the written rather than the spoken word. *The good study guide* (Northedge, 1990) can very helpfully be recommended both as a starting point and as a continuing, reflective commentary on preparatory activities undertaken.
- **Contextual features:** Some attention needs to be given to the possibly constraining effects of the culture of the prison and official, managerial routines, but above all to *time* and the need to structure study time in an effective, realistic way that acknowledges all these constraints on inmates' lives. Trying to construct an initial study timetable may both indicate how much time is required and enable the issue of the learning quality of that time to be explored.

It is assumed that supportive guidance of this kind is framed, as far as possible, by an atmosphere of enthusiastic anticipation. Preparation centres on the notion of the independent, but not isolated, learner, with its implications developed further in an introductory tutorial where this is possible.

## Organisational context

There are two elements in the institutional context of the prison that affect the inmate as student and the learning support that can be expected: the prison regime—its management personnel and style—on the one side, and the education department on the other. The prison regime may take an apparently favourable approach to education as part of an assumed rehabilitative programme (and as part of the control apparatus). One report, for example, (Home Office, 1977) comments on OU studies which:

*have been of value in taxing the wits [of inmates] and must have contributed to stability in their establishments.*

Education, as a routine inmate activity, is mediated by the officers who represent the prison culture on a day-to-day basis and administer physical access and movements in liaison with the education department. Prison staff can contribute very positively or otherwise to students' commitment and progress, but not normally in a way that may be apparent to OU staff. An increasing number of prison officers are OU graduates or students and their often unpublicised support for inmate students can be a very valuable resource, although not, of course, one that can be officially acknowledged or integrated into the work of OU staff or the education department.

The work of the education department in supporting student learning is obviously crucial in a number of ways. Inmates can obtain information, advice and encouragement in their first approaches towards OU studenthood, along with a realistic appraisal of their prospects, based on the often extensive experience that staff can call upon. Staff can advise interested inmates about how they should proceed; for example, whether the applicant should try to develop language or mathematical skills before attempting an OU course. Education departments are officially assigned the task of 'sifting' student applications, although final approval has to take account of available resources as well as readiness to study at degree level. The department tries to create a learning climate by providing appropriate tutorial space, helping to induct and taking care of visiting tutorial and counselling staff, and enthusing students. Education department staff can fulfil many of the functions of the outside counsellor by acting in a facilitating, enabling and progress-monitoring role. OU staff try to maintain as close, friendly and co-operative relations with the department as possible because members of that department can provide invaluable, supportive backup on an almost day-to-day basis.

## Significant others

As well as administrative and other help that students can receive from their sponsoring education department, the central figures in supporting and helping students meet the challenge of their courses are, of course, OU tutors and counsellors and, where such are present, other OU students; the whole educational undertaking facilitated by regional administrative support.

### *Other students*

Students can play a most important part in supporting the progress of their fellows and in helping to overcome academic isolation. We are all aware that a good deal of learning in a conventional university setting takes place informally, outside the lecture or tutorial room. In a similar way, inmate students may be able to help one another, even if studying different courses, by sharing the problems (and perhaps joys) that OU work may entail. This kind of informal self-help may take place during association or even other times and can be encouraged to the extent perhaps of giving students on the same course a shared task to try to work on, a question that remains unresolved or undiscussed from a tutorial: some way of breaking down the barriers separating education from 'real life'.

Where there is more than one student taking a particular course then the tutorials associated with that course probably become much more effective learning occasions than the one-to-one tutorial that can, although not invariably nor necessarily, prove stressful for the student and very demanding for the tutor until a tutorial routine becomes established. This possible difficulty may suggest that when students are advised about choosing the course to begin their studies, or which to take when they continue in the following year, the benefits of group study could well be pointed out. It has also to be borne in mind, however, that an apparently coherent group centred on the same course may quite quickly break up because of transfers and similar reasons. Nevertheless, students should be encouraged to be aware of and take account of any fellow students who may prove important resources in their learning progress. Some tutors have tried to bring in members of their outside tutorial group to give inmates experience of other students and of other perspectives. Where this has been possible, it has worked well, but arrangements, including security clearance, can involve considerable additional work.

*Sometimes I feel very positive and then there's times I really stop and question myself. Can I really do this? Will I be able to understand what the material is putting across? But then I hear of ones who have done it, who had the same doubts yet managed it. (OU student)*



***Open University tutorial and counselling staff***

The OU tutorial and counselling staff are clearly those primarily involved in supporting students' learning, within the broad administrative framework provided by the education department. They are normally experienced in the sense of having successfully tutored outside prison for at least the previous year, and currently tutor the same course outside and in prison. They can thus bring an understanding of problems that their outside students encounter in studying the course, additional learning materials that they may have developed and general news of the course and the faculty. Some staff are appointed as (academic) counsellors, either in that role only or combined with their tutorial role. Their work is to help students with study skills and learning difficulties as well as degree-programme planning, including choice of courses for the following year.

Briefing new prison OU staff is usually more effectively undertaken in a group setting where experienced and new staff can meet, where the formal aspects of working in prisons can be reviewed in the context of the experiential knowledge and expertise that continuing tutors and counsellors can deploy. Such occasions may be difficult to organise, however, because the fluid nature of inmate student numbers may mean that staff members may be appointed after the briefing meeting, and because the funds to pay for staff to attend briefing meetings may be limited. Briefing may, therefore, be done on a one-to-one basis out of necessity and, in any case, staff require specific briefing relating to the prison to which they have been assigned.

An OU publication, *Tutoring and counselling students in prison* (Ashley, 1994), meets many of the briefing needs of new staff by introducing them to the historical and organisational aspects of the OU Prison Scheme, to thoughts and suggestions about teaching and counselling, and about security in prison. The central, larger part of the booklet addresses many of the issues and activities that tutors and counsellors are likely to be concerned with, which they can read as part of their preparation for prison work but which also enables them reflectively to evaluate their continuing work with students, whether class-tutoring, counselling or marking their assignments.

When tutors take on prison work, they have to assume a somewhat different supportive role as class tutor. They have to change from their 'normal' mode of teaching which centres on the group, where learning can be managed and supported through the medium of various group-based activities, to a probably less familiar and more directly personal, intimate and intensive style in prison, with long time gaps between meetings during which indirect and often delayed communication only is possible. As outsiders, tutors may become aware of a diminished status and of their dependence on the good will

### Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

of custodial staff. Their patience may be frequently tested by the delays that security measures entail.

It is not easy, therefore, to slide into a role whose strength in effectively supporting students' learning may seem to depend on the absence of the stresses and strains associated with unfamiliarity and unpredictability. (One small way of reducing unpredictability for both the tutor and students is to construct a tutorial visit timetable early in the year, with any subsequent changes notified to or by the education department.) The tutor role makes many demands, especially in the one-to-one relationship where the tutor has to try to develop the student's interpersonal skills so that he/she is aware of a responsibility in the relationship without, at the same time, feeling excessively burdened. This kind of relationship has to be cultivated on the basis of the respect shown the student, as previously discussed, on responding to the perceived needs of the student and helping the student to articulate these, and in trying to achieve a subtle balance between taking a leading role in course-based discussion and helping the student to set and develop the agenda. The tutor may be tempted to feel that prison teaching, in the absence of student peers and set in spatial constraints and time limitations, is somehow 'deficient'. The moods and responses of the student may seem less predictable than those of outside counterparts, partly because behavioural norms and assumptions differ between the two. Prison tutors have to employ, then, a much greater degree of sensitive flexibility in their class-teaching work.

*It became apparent that the one-to-one tutorial can be intensive and mentally draining. This needed care. It was important to avoid overstressing the student through direct questioning and to make sometimes lengthy comments to direct his responses and challenge his viewpoints. This he recognised when he stated that the tutorial was something of a 'culture shock', given his daily routine and the limited opportunities he had for academic debate. (OU tutor)*

Correspondence teaching, which is at the heart of OU teaching and learning, is normally handled similarly for both inmates and outside students. Critical comments on the work of inmate-students may have to be framed with particular care, however, since students' self-esteem, probably diminished by their status in any case, may be especially vulnerable to written criticism which can be mulled over and reinterpreted into a perhaps cumulatively negative message. It is in the area of assignments that the supportive relationship may be challenged and stretched almost to breaking point, since inmate-students cannot easily contact their tutor. If a student has an urgent need to communicate with the tutor, a message at second hand can be sent via the education office or by means of a letter, both entailing some inevitable delay, by which time the issue or problem may have 'cooled out'. It may be that

assignments should include a section where students can state briefly any (exceptional) problems they encountered in completing the work. Part of the students' supportive training in this respect should be devoted to trying to get them to note specific problems clearly so that they may be addressed at the next tutorial. Perhaps making students aware that some of their counterparts outside face a similar situation in accessing their tutor may help to reduce any negative feelings.

When tutors were asked about how their work in prison differs from their teaching outside (Worth, 1994), in terms of the support they could provide for their students, they stressed particularly the lack of direct contact with students in between tutorial sessions and the probably negative effect this had on learning progress, especially of the student who was already beginning to slide. However, they were also able to speak of the very important role that the counsellor could play in mediating the relationship positively (Purcell, 1988), for example, in trying to make an agreement, on behalf of the tutor, concerning the completion of late assignments, and generally helping to restore confidence and a sense of progress in spite of stumbles along the way. More than one counsellor stressed the importance of helping students to assess and appreciate their progress *from* the beginning of their course, as well as their progress towards its successful outcome, and to take some consolation from that, if such consolation were needed.

Outsiders sometimes ask whether the student's criminal background affects the pedagogic relationship. Tutors do not attach much importance to this background and do not seek information about it because it seems to bear no relationship to the kind of teaching or counselling support they can give to their students. OU studies may, in any case, represent a way of preparing for life beyond prison, so that part of the supporting function of the OU staff member can be to help the student 'to dissociate study from the circumstances of imprisonment' (Ashley, 1994, p. 15).

*I do not initially approach people outside with questions of what dark secrets are in their lives. I try to find a basis for the relationship that relates to the here and now. (OU tutor)*

### **Staff development**

The Open University has always seen the professional development of its tutorial and counselling staff as of primary importance in ensuring and enhancing the quality of the learning programme it offers. This development is furthered through printed materials but especially through the work of regional academic staff, who monitor correspondence tuition, visit study centre tutorials, and arrange meetings and workshops devoted to particular issues. OU tutorial and counselling staff working in prisons are closed off from some

### Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

of the continuing aspects of staff development in that, although their correspondence work may be monitored, no particular attention is paid or needs to be paid to the location of the student whose marked assignment is reviewed. Similarly, class tutorials or counselling sessions in prison do not lend themselves to visits by senior regional staff who might, in other circumstances, be able to provide a different and perhaps helpful perspective on tutorial relationships, students' learning and counselling strategies as they are observed. One or more sessions during the year may, therefore, be arranged for developmental purposes, in addition to the more casual, occasional conversations between prison tutors and regional staff about specific administrative matters or the progress of particular students.

The primary purpose of such a session is to provide the opportunity for staff to exchange views on their prison work and to compare practice, thereby overcoming to some extent the professional isolation that parallels students' separation from their academic peers. Staff may represent different faculties so that the programme has to concern itself with matters of a general nature: pedagogy, or relations with the education department, for example. The following brief summary of an evening meeting that took place typifies the kind of session that can be arranged.

**6.30–7.15 p.m.** Refreshments. To facilitate informal staff interaction, perhaps between those tutoring the courses of the same faculty.

**7.15–9.00 p.m.** Discussion initiated by some extracts from the *Tutoring and counselling students in prison* booklet, chosen as trigger topics as much as for their own intrinsic interest. Staff had been asked to read through the extracts before the meeting. Among the ideas aired and discussed during the evening meeting were:

- What allowance should one make for late submission of assignments?
- How much time should be allowed for social 'chat' as against academic 'discussion'? In what ways can these two kinds of interaction be constructively linked?
- How do we interpret and handle students' complaints about prison staff?
- What is a good prison tutorial? How do we know?

These kinds of topics illustrate how invaluable a meeting of this kind can be: it may address topics that range widely across teaching and counselling, that may be specific to prisons, or whose general relevance to supporting students crosses inside-outside boundaries. But whatever tutors wish to discuss is relevant to them and almost certainly to others present. The meeting may be

the only occasion during the year when these kinds of issues can be raised and discussed, when ideas and real instances can be shared and later used to inform good tutorial and counselling practice.

#### ***Regional administrative support***

As well as its central headquarters at Milton Keynes, the Open University in Britain is organised into thirteen regions, each of which centres on a regional office whose personnel include academic as well as administrative and secretarial staff. Regional office administrative services constitute an essential part of the supportive framework within which students' careers can progress. Regional staff in the areas of admissions, student services and tutor services try to maintain an up-to-date information flow and to respond to need, so that senior counsellors with oversight of the Prison Scheme can be kept fully informed and can take appropriate action, whether planning admissions advice, for example, or arranging counsellor and tutor appointments. Regional staff can contribute significantly to student support in the sense of minimising learning 'gaps' when students are transferred in or out, by ensuring that new information about movements is acted upon as soon as possible, and by taking steps to inform the new, host region. It probably goes without saying that a good deal of the effectiveness of regional support depends on good working relations between academic and regional office staff, with the latter kept fully informed about policy and administrative changes.

## **Conclusion**

By constructing a conceptual model of how we might understand the background and motivation of the inmate-learner, and the environment of learning and the work of OU staff, this chapter has tried to set out some of the principles and practices that inform the provision of distance education by the Open University for its students in prison. Many of the ideas discussed can be applied to programmes other than the specific degree-level work of the Open University. It has to be noted that attrition rates for inmate-students probably exceed those of outside students for the kinds of reasons associated with the difficulties of studying, both personal and institutional, previously discussed. And there are other kinds of costs. For those staff who are directly involved, whether making a counselling visit or giving a tutorial, occasions almost certainly occur when other aspects of their OU work may seem more attractive: prison work can entail considerable self-sacrifice, especially the time taken in travel and the frequent need to wait until entry or exit arrangements are completed. Yet, in supporting the educational careers of inmates through

### Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

distance education, there are many compensations, not least in seeing progress and intellectual, as well as emotional, development among those who, from other viewpoints, may have seemed least likely to succeed.

*Tutors who have been worried about coming in have remarked to me that they found the enthusiasm and interest of the student makes it all very worthwhile. (OU tutor-counsellor)*

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