

# Investigating the Digital Divide for the OU Offender Learner

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The Open University

## 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

## 5. 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

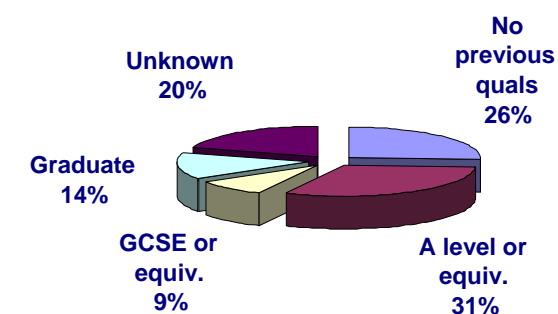
- Access to computers varied from 1 hour/week to a full Open Learning suite with open access most days or in-cell laptops

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

## 3. Educational Qualifications before entering prison



## 6. 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]

"Prison is not the environment to study... 1 open and 4 closed doors. Now it's almost impossible to find the one open door" [3,17]

