



Justice Data Lab analysis: Reoffending behaviour Ministry of Justice after support from The Open University (2nd analysis)

This document outlines a description of the intervention in the provider's own words and a response to the January 2026 evaluation of their intervention.

This wording is from the provider and does not reflect the views of the Justice Data Lab.

The Open University in their own words

“As a distance learning provider of higher education, Open University (OU) is operated in over 150 prisons (covering all security categories). They also work with individuals living in the community who are subject to licenced or legally restricted conditions, to engage with higher education. In England and Wales, the OU is contracted by the Ministry of Justice (via a grant agreement) to offer higher education study within prisons. The OU’s Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) curriculum includes 34 named undergraduate degrees (BA/BSc), four Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE), and four Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE), and 148 individual modules. The disciplines covered include: Arts and Humanities; Business Management and Business Studies; languages; Mathematics; Science; Social Sciences; Sports and Fitness.

Access to OU study in a prison or secure unit is organised through the prison education department, learning centre, or occupational therapist. In partnership with the OU, the prison education department helps individuals with their study plans and choice of qualification and modules, completing the application and registration process, applying for fees and funding, gaining access to their study materials and tuition support (e.g. individual study support sessions which are delivered by telephone), administrative tasks associated with the submission and collection of assessment, and general study support. This is further complemented by the OU SiSE Support Team who provide individuals and the prison education department staff with detailed assistance on all aspects of OU study, including specialist advice and guidance associated with educational queries, study planning, careers and employability advice and individual support with fees and funding.

For individuals who are unsure whether they are ready for higher education study, the OU offers four interdisciplinary access modules (Level 3), which are designed to develop skills, confidence and motivation to study at higher educational level and enable individuals to explore different subject areas, prior to committing to higher education study. The four access modules are called: Arts and Languages; Business and Law; Psychology, Social Science and Wellbeing; and Science, Technology & Maths. SiSE students are also assigned an OU module tutor, who provides personalised and individual academic support via correspondence tuition, individual academic support sessions (generally delivered by telephone), as well as marking and providing constructive learning commentary on assessed work. At present, all prison-based students receive physical copies of their study materials, which have been specifically adapted for study within the prison estate. This may include books, printed materials, the assessment materials, and DVDs. Working with Ministry of Justice, the OU has also developed a “walled garden” – a secure prison Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The VLE currently contains 137 modules and enables SISE students to access their learning within a secure online environment. There are plans to extend this further to include as much OU SiSE relevant curriculum as possible.”

Response from The Open University

“Delivering higher education in secure environments and supporting students in prison to succeed in their study remains a core part of The Open University’s (OU) mission to open up education to all.

This analysis and report demonstrate that, despite the impact of the Covid pandemic, and the ongoing operational and management challenges in the prison estate, accessing OU study continues to deliver positive impact for students across a range of metrics. This leads to better outcomes for prisoners, victims, and wider society.

Clearly more needs to be done to build on this and further improve outcomes. It remains a priority for the OU to deliver on this, underpinned by support from Government to facilitate greater digital provision in the prison estate, and better through-the-gate support.

The positive impact of accessing higher education in prison runs deeper than the analysis presented here. OU study makes a considerable positive difference to day-to-day prison management, helping to role model good behaviours, and improve overall wellbeing. Its impact is lasting too as an important building block to securing future employment.

Most importantly the impact is driven by our students and staff tutors, their commitment and determination to succeed is exceptional, and lies at the heart of this analysis.”

Further information

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Alternatively, you can contact OSR by emailing regulation@statistics.gov.uk or via the OSR website.

Contact

Press enquiries should be directed to the Ministry of Justice press office.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-justice/about/media-enquiries>

Other enquiries about the analysis should be directed to:

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