

Written evidence submitted by Dr Rod Earle (Senior lecturer at The Open University)

Education in prison – call for evidence UK Parliament

From Rod Earle, The Open University

I write to offer testimony on the effect of studying with The Open University in prison. In 2019 I co-edited, on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Open University, *Degrees of Freedom – Prison Education at the Open University*. Nine of the 14 chapters are written by students about their OU studies in prison, and its effects on their life. These are supplemented by nine shorter vignettes that add to the variety of the testimony. My OU colleagues in Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) have already responded to this call-for-evidence with a comprehensive account of the value of the OU's delivery of higher education in prison. I will not repeat or rehearse those arguments. I urge the committee to invest in a copy of *Degrees of Freedom* and listen to the stories of transformation therein.

The force of argument and evidence has always favoured education in prison. It has been at the philanthropic core of every prison from HMP Brixton in the 19th century to HMP Berwyn in the 21st. In the second half of the 20th century the OU was launched as a 'University of the Air' inspired by the 'white heat' of the technological revolutions that followed the victory over fascism in World War 2. Prisoners were slowly included as it was discovered that OU study materials designed to deliver a complete and comprehensive study package to the doorstep could also be delivered to the cell door. The university of the second chance, found its own second chance. As a result thousands of prisoners have emerged from their sentences not only older, but wiser and better equipped to thrive in their freedom. The issue today is that another technological revolution is sweeping the globe, potentially compromising much of what has been achieved in prisons over the last 50 years. Digital online learning is transforming Higher Education and OU systems of delivery. If prisons do not enable digital and online learning, they will become even more barren warehouses reducing the human potential of all within them.

The argument and the evidence is strong. It always has been. The political will to make education in prison decent, widely available and appropriate to the needs and aspiration of students in prison is less strong. It takes courage, determination and integrity to resist the urge to make cheap political capital out of people whose actions make them easy to hate. The Prime Minister is a self-declared fan of Winston Churchill and is no doubt aware of his well-known remark about prison, borrowed from the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky's 'House of the Dead': "*The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country*". Churchill's brief incarceration during the Boer War in South Africa may have sensitized him to the position of the prisoner as a human made abject by others. It is not evidence parliament needs. It needs to channel some of Churchill's better tendencies: be daring, have a heart and show some political willpower.

In *Degrees of Freedom* Alan Jermy writes "My Open University journey began after being found guilty of murder, aged 41..." He finds he can choose between packing tea into boxes or studying for a degree. Some years later at a graduation ceremony in HMP Coldingley organised by the Open University Alan was conferred with a 2:1 and is now proceeding to Master's study, with the ambition

of “completing a doctorate when I get to D category”. Alan’s passed his tests. Parliament can show it will do the same by keeping those options open.

March 2021