

Studying with limited access - 4th July 2023

ROB MOORE: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Student Hub Live with me, Rob Moore, coming to you from the study shack in Leicestershire. And we've got a lovely show for you today, and we've got some friends of mine that are coming in to talk about studying with limited access.

And the concept that we're talking about today is the prison tuition that we do, how we work with students in prison, who, obviously, have very limited access to our materials. So that's going to be the focus of our discussion.

We've got Hannah and Jonathan in the chat, and they'll be taking your questions and answering you there. So you'll notice when messages come from Hannah and Jonathan. They will have SHL in front of their names.

And today I've got Angela with me, who's looking after your messages. So good morning, Angela. And who have we got joining us today?

ANGELA: So of course our chat room is not as busy as it would usually be because this is a very special programme for students who have restricted access. So they may be studying whilst posted overseas with the armed forces, while studying from prison, while studying from hospital, or maybe backpacking. So if you are backpacking on the other side of the world and you have managed to find some internet access, then jump into the chat and watch the show live.

We have Melissa, in fact, joining us from her holidays in Skegness, and she's managed to find some internet access on her holiday. Alex is in the chat. Kat and Zoe are in there. But of course, for anyone joining us, watching this recorded, you might be wondering how you can get your questions answered. And so please feel free to email them after the show on SISE-general@open.ac.uk. So you can still ask questions, but we'll be taking them live from the chat room and by email for you guys who have restricted access.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And thank you for that, Angela. And yes, the SISE stands for Students in Secure Environment. So a specific team that look after our students who, for whatever reason, are studying from a secure environment.

Well, my guest today I've worked with for many years, and we've been involved in a number of prison activities and supporting students in prison. So I'd like to welcome Shaun, Robert, and Stephen. It's great to have you with me today. And I'm looking forward to having our chat.

We're going to start off, and I've got a question for you, Shaun. What are the main challenges that students face when they can't get regular internet access, or if they just don't have any internet at all? So what challenges do they face?

SHAUN MCMANN: Yeah, there's a couple really. I think the first of them is institutionally. There's a bit of a conflict of the OU between what is sometimes called widening participation. And this is the idea of trying to be as inclusive as possible and to offer Open University study to anybody who is interested in studying with us.

The problem with that is that there's also a continual drive for modules to go online for a variety of different reasons, and sometimes we can have students who just don't have internet access. So that institutional decision making can have a massive impact on someone's overall experience.

The other thing is that the OU offers hundreds of modules, dozens and dozens of degree pathways, and a significant number of these are not available offline. So I suppose those two things are-- they're kind part of the same process really, and I suppose it's feeling that the syllabus is quite limited. So that's institutionally.

The other thing, which I think is probably more important, is individually. The students can just feel they're being left out really, I suppose. So if you are aware of the fact there's lots of online content, you've paid the same fees as other students, but some of that content isn't available to you, I can imagine that you'd feel like you're not actually getting full value for money.

To be honest with you, in my experience it's probably not true. I can completely understand why students feel like that, but they get a gilt-edged experience. It's gold standard. And we can talk later about how we get around those issues of accessibility.

But the other thing I suppose is just having access to your tutor. Most students can send an email to their tutor or give them a call, hopefully get a response within a couple of days. But the practicalities, particularly in prisons of those kinds of levels of communication and that instant access, it's just not realistic. So it's something we have to continually be working on.

ROB MOORE: So what sort of things do we do as module teams and when we're designing modules, what do we do to overcome some of these challenges? Because of course, the internet's great and it's lovely to have that continual contact, but module teams must make some changes and accept the fact that not everybody can join all the time. So what sort of things do we do?

SHAUN MCMANN: Yeah. I mean, as an OU tutor, at the risk of speaking out of turn, I think there is too much online content on some modules. So what module teams do is they work out what you absolutely have to have access to in order to succeed and get an excellent grade and your final module feedback. So the first thing is to work out what's extra and what's essential.

And then a couple of other things is that I've noticed particularly over the last five or six years there's an increased emphasis in assessment on students collaborating with each other. And sometimes you can't actually pass a TMA without having had contact with other students. And if you're in, particularly in a prison, that is clearly just not possible. So as a result, module teams are responsible for working out what are sometimes called workarounds, which is an alternative assignment. And sometimes it can be that an entire different TMA is made available to students who are working offline.

ROB MOORE: Yeah. I remember looking back, I worked on a module on change a few years ago, and that had one of those activities where you had to have a discussion. And the accommodation we made for that particular team was we collected a year's worth of actual messages from students, anonymized them, and published them in a booklet, which is 100 pages long, which the students could then choose which ones to react to. So they were reacting to genuine messages, but they just weren't messages that were produced that week. They were produced and they could choose them. So it's things like that that we want to see with module teams and how they work.

SHAUN MCMANN: Yeah. It's not just module teams, I think, as well in just leading on from what you were saying. Tutors can play a massive role in this. I've noticed recently, particularly in my field, which is criminology, the module teams want students to write blogs, for example. And they do this as part of a group. And there's a reflection exercise at the end where you look at the other blogs that have been written by students in your allocated group and you comment on them. And then the person who's written that blog will amend what they've written in light of what's been said to them by the other students. So what happens in gaols particularly is we encourage students to work with people who they know and trust, but not necessarily OU students. And what I think is fantastic about this is that quite often encourages the non-OU student to start studying. So if you like, it's a really kind of important kind of reflection exercise, and we can also get other people really fired up to get involved too. So on the surface it sounds like a bad thing being left out, but it actually can end up with more inclusivity, oddly enough.

ROB MOORE: Yeah, I know I've worked with you a few times. We actually have some prisons where they actually have a prison job, which is an OU support person. So how does that work? And again, that's supporting this community idea.

SHAUN MCMANN: Yeah. I mean, every prison is different. There's usually an OU coordinator as a member of staff, and they will act as a liaison between the students and the university. But like you just said, sometimes in really well set up prisons that place more emphasis on education, a specific allocated student or two might be the person who acts as an intermediary between students, regardless of what subjects they're studying, and the OU coordinator.

So I think Stephen, who you're going to be talking to later, is better positioned to talk about this because he actually works for the SISE team, but I've definitely seen it in action. And once again, just to repeat what I've said before, it really helps to develop a kind of sense of inclusivity and collaboration and teamwork.

And it's a massive boost. You know, prisons are hostile, horrible places. And if you've got this sense of working as a team together and having ownership of something, and feeling like you're really moving forward together, then I think that can only be a good thing.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And Angela, I think we've got a couple of points, a couple of comments coming in on the chat?

ANGELA: We have indeed. We have Michelle in the chat, who is an inquisitive criminology student, and she's really interested in how prisoners can access material while they are studying from a prison environment.

We also have Zoe, who is joining us from Hertfordshire today, but she's a student who loves to travel and often goes to remote places. So in that case, she would be able to plan ahead, and she's interested in how to carry on studying when you don't always have brilliant internet access.

ROB MOORE: And really good question there. And I think I'm going to bring Robert in at this point. So Robert, when it comes to the materials, how do we get an online internet-based module to people who haven't got internet access? So those in prison or-- well, those who haven't got internet, what do their materials look like?

ROBERT MORRALL: Paper-based. So the materials which you see online would actually be printed out by the OU and sent sometimes by the box load to the student in prison. So that's one of the ways. Thinking, though, of the other question, which I was smiling at earlier, takes me back to COVID times and students who got stuck around the world with limited access to the internet. I had one student who got stuck for several days, I think he was coming in for a week, at Dubai airport, but using various means of accessing the internet at the airport, was able to continue with his studies, and actually continued with group work as well.

ROB MOORE: And these materials, I'm not sure if all students are aware of this, but the materials we send out to our prison students are available to all students. They're available in the Download section of your module website. And you can actually print off the internet resources in Word or PDF format as well. And those resources are produced for those students who can't access the internet. If you're going away and if you're going backpacking or you're travelling, as long as you can download the resources to a mobile device or a computer, you can take them with you. And yes, you can't have the messaging function, but all of the content is there and available for you to use. What about the assignments then? So sure, how do the assignments work for preparers? Because they don't have access to student home, they don't have access to the ETMA system. So how do they get around those aspects?

SHAUN MCMANN: So the questions that most students, particularly second and third years will download from the module website, they're provided on paper, and then the student writes their answers. Sometimes they're able to use IT, and it's usually Microsoft, so they can produce essays on Word or maybe PowerPoint presentations. But that's not always possible. So there is the option to handwrite assignments and actually post them in, kind of as it used to be when I first started working for the OU when dinosaurs roamed the Earth. And so I'll give you an example of this. I once had a really high flying student who was in a maximum security prison, got caught up in this thing that I'm convinced wasn't his responsibility or he wasn't responsible for, and found himself in the segregation unit. And he was in there for almost the entire duration of the final assignment and the EMA, and he handwrote it, gave it to the OU coordinator, who posted it to me, and the work was of such a high standard that I have nothing but respect for people who work under those conditions.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And as we all experienced during COVID, I would guess that most people are not aware of this, but when we had the COVID issues, and a lot of prison officers were actually off ill or were isolated, a lot of prisoners were actually locked in their cells for more than 23 hours a day and couldn't get access to anything. And nearly all of them had to handwrite their assignments.

So imagine that, having to handwrite your assignments. So how do they handle the deadlines then? So if you're studying in prison, then how does the deadline, the cutoff point for your assignments work? Because obviously, they can't actually post them themselves or send them in.

SHAUN MCMANN: Yeah. I mean, it's a continual problem, to be honest with you. But I think we can get seduced into the idea that students in prison are very different somehow from mainstream students, but loads of the same issues apply. Health issues arise and the student needs perhaps a two-week extension. And so those kind of ongoing things that mainstream students deal with also apply in prisons. But I think the best thing, really, is for a tutor to be really open to the fact that student may well have submitted the work to the OU coordinator well on time, and it arrives late because maybe that person's a part-time member of staff, it got lost in the prison postal system. So I suppose it's just a case of a bit of tender loving care from the tutor to make sure that the student is just seen as another human being who has needs and will potentially send stuff in late.

The only real problem is if exams or EMAs are delayed, and then we turn that over to the students in secure environments team to work out with the prison what the best way forward is. But by and large, the issues are really similar to those experienced by mainstream students.

ROB MOORE: Yeah, absolutely. And we're very reliant on the prison staff and the OU coordinators. And that relationship between the tutors and the prison staff is absolutely crucial to make sure things run smoothly. And of course, we are very aware that there is an extra party. And I suppose that's some of our advice, isn't it, to the students? Remember that there's an extra step you have to go through when submitting, particularly if it's part-time members of staff that you're reliant on.

So Stephen, I know we're going to be coming onto your personal experiences, but in your role now, what would you say is the question you get asked the most from students? What is it that students contact you about when they're completing or, completing their studies or submitting assignments?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: Thanks, Rob. Their range of issues tend to be generic, repetitive, but these issues tend to relate to material, issues around contact with the tutor. Of course, the Students in Secure Environment work through third parties, so they can't just pick up the phone or send an email. We've got issues around contact with tutors. We've got issues around materials, as I mentioned. But also, we've got sometimes issues around just the conditions under which they're being-- one of issue, their studying. We just talked or referred to one of those issues where you're working an environment without internet access. So those are the sorts of issues students will get in touch with the team about.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And when we work with students in prison, we work very closely with the education officers and the OU coordinators, and we support them in using the OU systems because even though they are not studying, they still need to be able to send information in, gather information, collect research on behalf of prisoners. So there's a really close relationship that's needed.

Robert, I know that you've got some stats about our prison tuition, and I wondered if you'd like to share some of the facts and figures with us.

ROBERT MORRALL: Yeah, I think it's quite interesting to set the scene regarding the world of prisons. As of February this year, there was 83,676 prisoners in prison, people in prison in the UK.

Per 100,000 population in England and Wales, 190-- 159 people are actually prisoners. And it's slightly higher in Scotland. Those figures, in terms of the population size, are expected to rise within two years to 94,000, and within five years over 106,000. So it's an increasing population.

As of September last year, reports highlighted that 52% of prisons in England and Wales were overcrowded, and this really impacts on accessing education and the challenges that OU students in prison have.

One particular example, Leeds Prison, in January of this year was holding 1,095 prisoners when its capacity was actually 641. So you can imagine, Rob, the pressures which are actually put on people in prison, students in prison. Four hundred prisoners are actually held in prison cells because there's not enough space in the estate.

And most people tend to think that prisons are all state-run. They're not. There's 141 prisons in the UK, but in England and Wales there's 14 prisons, which are private prisons run by companies like Sodexo, Serco, and G4S. And there's actually 2 in Scotland. So it's not all state-run.

And what Shaun was saying earlier about the differences between what goes on in prisons and the regimes that the prisons have and the resources that prisons have can vary tremendously, there was an inspection in 2020 looking at 32 prisons. And out of that 32 prisons, none were rated as outstanding from an education point of view. Nine were rated as good, and 19 were rated as requiring improvement, and 4 were considered as inadequate.

And thinking about this, the other statistic I'd like to throw into the pot is that it actually costs around 42,000, over 42,000, about 42,600 as an average-- sometimes it's lower, sometimes it's more expensive-- to keep one person in prison for a year. And we need to think about the impact of education and the impact of doing a degree on the likelihood of re-offending. There are statistics which show that if you do an OU degree, you are less likely to actually re-offend. But the cost to the country of re-offending is 18 pounds billion a year, and that's in England and Wales, not including Scotland.

ROB MOORE: And I think it brought us nicely into where we're coming up to next.

ROBERT MORRALL: I was just—

[INTERPOSING VOICES].

ROB MOORE: Go on, sorry.

ROBERT MORRALL: Very quickly, there was a UK parliamentary report published '22, '23 called "Not Just Another Brick In the Wall," and there's a quote from the OU in there, which says, "Education brought a sense of purpose and hope as well as a realistic pathway towards living a different life."

ROB MOORE: You see, this is it. You've led me into session two, which is perfect. So we're going to take a short video break. We're just going to show you a video, and it's a story about one of our guests, Stephen. So watch the video, and then we're going to talk to Stephen about his experiences when you come back. So we'll see you all in a few minutes just after this short video.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- Prisoner. PhD. Drug dealer. Father. Each of these words conjures up a different picture. None of them tells you exactly who someone is.

My name is Stephen Akpabio-Klementowski. I'm a PhD candidate, and I'm a lecturer of criminology for the Open University.

I work with students in prisons. I love what I do. It feels deeply personal to me because I used to be a prisoner, too. All of these labels have been mine.

So growing up, life was tough. My father died in a car crash when I was a teenager, and that hit me really hard. I didn't see the world as a meritocracy. I had to grab what I could. But being sent to prison for dealing drugs was a shock. I was sentenced to 16 years.

For the first three months inside, I didn't speak to anyone. Eventually, I started working in the kitchens. As people got to know me, I was eventually assessed for my educational potential, and encouraged after that assessment to enrol at the Open University.

But the most difficult barrier was actually inside of me. I left school with no qualifications. Nothing. I was scared of my future, and I decided to try.

My day job working in the kitchens and the servery meant that I had to study at night. So I had to study on the toilet while my cell mate snored.

So when I finished my first module, it gave me hope, and it gave me something I could focus on. There was no going back now.

All the prisoners and guards kept asking me why I was wasting my time. Studying wouldn't matter with my criminal record. I thought, I was changing. I discovered I loved learning, and that was enough to keep me going.

I served eight years of my 16-year sentence. By the time I left prison, I had completed my first degree, and I had also completed two further degrees at master's level. So after I was released, I got a job working with students in prisons, not in spite of who I was, but because of it. It's hard to describe how I felt the first time I went back to prison as a lecturer, and the governor had come down and shook my hand. What I want people to know is that I'm not different or special. Anybody could do this. Almost half of all prisoners have left school without achieving any formal qualification. I know how it feels, and it had a massive impact in my confidence.

But that does not mean that you're not able to learn. Everyone has the potential and the power to change. I've seen it and I've lived it.

It was Winston Churchill who said, "There is treasure if you can only find it in the heart of every man."

What do we want from our prisons? Is the primary goal of prisons punish or to help find a different path?

The policy is incoherent, you see? Research shows that education does reduce re-offending. It allows former prisoners to make different choices. So when I sit with prisoners, I say to them, I was in your shoes, but I am now released and outside, got a good job, got a good life with my family.

Had I met somebody like me when I was younger, things might have been very different. No one believed in me. I didn't believe in myself either. It's taken two decades to get here, and this is only the beginning.

The word prisoner is just a label. I found freedom within my own mind. You need to remember that you have the capacity to learn, you have the capacity to change your life. There is treasure within each and every one of us.

[END PLAYBACK]

ROB MOORE: We hope you enjoyed that video that was telling Stephen's story. But now we want you to hear the story from Stephen himself.

So Stephen, can you tell us your experiences and what it was like for you studying without that level of access that most students enjoy?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: Thanks, Rob. Yeah, so I guess the one word I would use to describe that experience would be challenging. It's challenging on two levels. The first is literally not having access because, obviously, that's a queue. [INAUDIBLE]

And then on top of that is being in an environment that is really un conducive for this level of learning. And so the situation is compounded by that. And so it's really challenging. And our students will need to find a way of navigating these challenges if they were to succeed.

ROB MOORE: So what did you study? And what difference did it make to you, both while you were studying and also what's happened since?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: Right. Well, I think a bit of context is required here. So I arrived in prison in 2002 having been convicted on some drug-related offences. I had left school at 14 without achieving any formal qualifications.

So when I arrived in HMP High Down, I think it was in 2002, so till the age of 36, I had no idea that being able to study at university level would be something that would be available to me. It never crossed my mind.

And it was quite through good fortune, really, that I met a member of staff-- I had to do an assessment. When prisoners arrive-- when people arrive in prison, there's a mandatory requirement to do a literacy and numeracy assessment. I suspect the idea behind that is you want to establish where people are in terms of their skills and qualifications.

So everyone has to do this assessment. And I reluctantly went to do mine. As I said, I had such a poor educational experience at school, and it wasn't on the horizon for me. So I went off and done my assessments, and did very well at them.

And I was fortunate to have this lady who administered the assessment to me, and we got talking about it because I had done quite well on them, and she felt I could take the opportunity to get my sort of GCSEs, sort of level two literacy and numeracy, equivalent to that. And that's where it started.

So being an OU student in prison, it's not like our students and general population students, or students in communities, you might want to describe them. When in prison, you need the government's permission for everything that you may want to do, including the OU. And so you have to meet the minimum threshold, minimum requirement, which is the level two literacy and numeracy, which I didn't have when I turned up in gaol. You have to have achieved them, achieved that, and then become eligible to apply to study with the OU with the government's permission.

And so that's what happened to me. I took the advice of a member of staff and did complete my sort of this level two, which is equivalent to GCSEs basically, and consequently, I became eligible for OU study, which I took up. And that was back in 2003.

So in 2008, I achieved an undergraduate degree, a bachelor of arts honours in the social sciences. Indeed, one of my-- my first tutor on that qualification, I think the first module was DD102, Introduction to Social Sciences, and my tutor on that module while I was in custody is a member of our panel today. And so that set me on my way. And I gained that degree in 2008. And then I went on and gained two further degrees at postgraduate level and master's level within the two years prior to my release in 2010. And so when I got out at the halfway point, my sentence was [INAUDIBLE]. So I'd served eight years to 2010, [INAUDIBLE] eight years in community. When I emerged from custody with these three university-level qualifications, they provided a basic foundation for who I am and what I do today.

ROB MOORE: And what is your role today?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: That's a good question. So I've got a number of hats that I have on. Primarily, my full-time job is as a regional manager for this dedicated team we refer to as Students in Secure Environments team. We are responsible for managing the relationship between the university and prison establishments and our student well-being to help provide as best quality of study experience as one could possibly in what are really difficult circumstances. So that's what the team does.

ROB MOORE: And I think it's fantastic you've taken your unique-- well, I say unique. There are quite a few students. I actually have to say a similar experience through prison. But you've taken your experience and you've turned it into something that is so valuable in supporting others that want to achieve the same thing. And of course, I think it's great that Shaun was training his replacement quite early on. I think Angela's got some-- oh, sorry, carry on.

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: No, no. I was just going-- well, just very quickly. So it is, indeed, there is a sort of intersection, a kind of a range of experiences that I have that are now playing out and impacting on the work that I do.

So for example, yes, I'm a regional manager with this team, as I just said. But I'm also an associate lecturer. I'm a criminologist. I'm training to be one. So I'm in the final stages of my PhD. I have my board next May. But I'm mostly a lecturer, and I teach on DD105 and 212.

And these experiences means that I've had that experience of studying without access, internet access, but it really has not prevented me from going on and making that progress in my academic career. And I think that really is the important point to draw attention to, the fact that not having that access is not itself prohibitive, if you see what I mean. The support [INAUDIBLE] goes to compensate for that lack of access.

ROB MOORE: And I think your story is the perfect illustration of the Open element of the Open University, the fact that we really can welcome people, whatever the background, whatever their circumstances. There are ways to support and succeed.

So Angela, we've got some questions from comments in the chat. Would you like to let us know what people are talking about?

ANGELA: Indeed. Meglena found Stephen's story incredibly strong. Sara commented on how powerful and inspirational she found it.

Earlier on, Natalie had asked in the chat about the video and audio aspects of course, and how students in a secure environment access those. Hannah replied in the chat to say that they are sent CDs where they can access them, but sometimes they're just transcripts. But it'd be really interesting to hear Stephen's experiences of studying in a secure environment and how he got access to the materials that he needed.

ROB MOORE: So Stephen, how did you manage to access the videos and audios? Were they sent on disc, or were there other options that you had?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: Well, it's difficult. Just let's have it right. It's difficult. Sometimes, yes, they do come sent in on a disc. The issue with that is that you obviously need something only to play the disc if it's something that isn't, say, the sort of CD-ROM that's in the education department and then you need access to the department. That's not dependent on you. That's dependent on some movements, availability of staff to take you up there also, all sorts of secondary issues in relation to that. Some students may have a sort of DVD player, and some of these discs may have that format so you could play it to yourself, to a DVD, which is what I have, which I do. But increasingly, it's a new technology. The things have been put on different formats, CD-ROMs and so on. It does require a computer to play or a laptop to play. [INAUDIBLE]. You get access to that through the education department. And so that could be a little bit difficult in terms of trying to access it.

But what you will have is a transcript. And one of the-- well, I find one of the key features of OU study without sort of internet access, it's just the quality of materials that you receive. I think that the materials are phenomenal. They're engaging. And especially for students who may be isolated. I think, yeah, they're isolated.

You're looking forward to these materials arriving to engage with them. And you get them, and the quality-- their quality is fantastic. I think that's another point to take away.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And Robert mentioned earlier that different prisons have got different rules and different levels of access. But in some prisons, we have something called virtual campus, which is a closed version of the OU website with selective materials on. And when the materials are there, then students, if they can get access to it, can actually watch them on the computer. But the access isn't always universal.

So I want to go back to Robert and Shaun now because I know, being a tutor who works with students in prison, some of my most moving stories come from working with those students. So I'll come to you first, Shaun. What's your-- I want to say favourite [INAUDIBLE]. What's your most memorable story from working with students in prison?

SHAUN MCMANN: Well, there's a couple, but the one that's really at the forefront of my mind now is Stephen. I first-- I mean, I started working in prison in 1999. And like a lot of people, I had really strong attitudes and opinions about prison. And then I realised within about half an hour that they were all wrong. So as a result, since then I've become a real advocate for education in prisons.

And I suppose the question, even though we're talking about the OU, the question really here is what is prison for. And it strikes me that, if one of the outcomes, as Robert was saying, of OU study is that people just stop committing crimes, then that's got to be a good thing. And me and Stephen in 2004, and having the good fortune have been his first tutor, was amazing.

So I'm confronted by this articulate, intelligent young man, made some mistakes, and he's paying for those mistakes but is trying to turn his life around. And then I think it was about 10 years later, we just happened to meet at this little conference in the OU, got chatting. I mentioned a job was coming up in the team I was working for.

He applied for it. And I have to admit that, when he got the job, I was one of the interviewers. I openly wept in front of an entire panel of interviewers. In fact, I've got a lump in my throat. Now just thinking about it. I think Stephen is a massive inspiration. So he's-- if you like, he's my favourite anecdote, but he's also my mate.

So I could tell you something else later, but I think for the time being I think it's great that Stephen has done what he's done to achieve where he is now. He's come from that situation to being a PhD student, almost completing. And he's actually-- I'd say in terms of something you said before about the openness of the OU, it's the OU, I think, at its absolute best.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And you got me tearing up now because of some of my memories.

SHAUN MCMANN: Apologies.

ROB MOORE: No, no, that's absolutely fine. Robert, we'll go to you before I start getting teary-eyed on screen.

ROBERT MORRALL: Thanks, Rob. Loads and loads and loads of experiences and stories. Like Shaun, either with the OU or outside of the OU, I've actually worked and delivered training in prison since 2003, so many, many years. And one particular story for me sticks out.

He was an OU student. He actually wasn't my student. He was doing environmental sciences programme. He had gone down for 14 years. And when I met him, he was on his 10th year of his sentence. And through a programme that I was running, we actually did day release.

He was able to come out on licence one day a week and actually work with me. And we built a relationship and mentoring. And eventually, this person left prison. And because of his degree, and because of the learning journey he'd been on, and how he built his self-esteem and his self-confidence, when he was released, he was able to turn his family around.

The family had always been supportive, but the children have been quite upset about dad being imprisoned for a large chunk of their time. And he inspired his children to actually go on to start at University. And he has been, I think, a real inspiration.

Although his family were UK nationals, he was a foreign national. He was twice put on a bus to be deported, and one day turned up at the border agency where he had to sign on each week, and was just told there and then, you're leaving the country this weekend.

He wasn't allowed to go home. He wasn't allowed to say goodbye to his family. He was put on a plane.

But that resilience that he had developed, I think through doing his degree, has actually managed for him

to continue with his life and continue with his family. And he's a guy who, 13 years down the road, is still in contact with me and somebody who I still, outside of OU, mentor.

ROB MOORE: Fantastic. I'd say we've got so many stories that we can tell. Personally, I'm a bit of a graduation junkie. I love going to graduations. I like being part of the procession, and sitting there, and watching all the graduates coming on. But we also have graduations in prison.

And I think the time I cried the most was a graduation in Nottingham, where we had five students who were graduating. And the students, actually, we get the gowns. They get to wear the gowns, and we get to put our gowns on as well when we go and join in.

And this guy was at the front, and we had five students who'd got their degrees, and we got to hear their stories. And I just remember this guy was there. His family had been invited in. And he just said, at last, I've got something my son could be proud of.

And he was just so passionate about the fact that he could set this example to his family. His family was there. And yeah, there were just floods of tears in the whole room. But just seeing the achievement, the sense of achievement, and people can do what they've always been told they couldn't do.

So we're going to I think now about the role of the tutor. So obviously, we've talked about what the OU does, how we adjust things, how we change things around, and what the experiences are like, but in a moment we're going to ask Robert to tell us about what it's like to be a tutor and actually support somebody that's studying with-- in these challenging circumstances.

But before I do that, I'm just going to ask Angela if we've got any more comments, any questions. What are people saying in the chat?

ANGELA: Well, the whole chat room has been tearing up, obviously. Meglena says that Stephen is an absolute hero. And the other stories we've been hearing are so inspirational as well. As you're moving onto your next section, I would like to give Aurora a mention.

Aurora has been living in hospital and studying for many years. She wants to give a shout out to the PLA, the personal learning advice service. She says they've been absolutely fantastic while doing her studies in a secure environment.

And if she struggles getting in touch with her tutor, they've been offering to help her do that as well. So a shout out to the PLA, the personal learning advice service, and also to tutors everywhere with students who are challenged in their circumstances.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And I think that's going to come onto some hints and tips later, but knowing who to contact and who to talk to, if you're struggling, whatever the reason is that you are struggling to complete your studies, talking to somebody early on, that's absolutely key. We have some fantastic members of staff that are there to support you, whatever your problems are.

So Robert, you've been a prison tutor for many years. So from your point of view, what's different or what's the same? What are the challenges? What are the rewards? And what are the things you have to modify when you're working with students in prison?

ROBERT MORRALL: Firstly, Rob, I would say it's a labour of love. It's a passion. And I am a firm, firm believer in-- we hear a lot of statistics about people in prison, but to me, it's about the individual, and it's about the one person, and it's about helping the individual.

It's very different supporting somebody in prison as to supporting somebody in the community. The access to the person is a challenge to start with. I love to do face-to-face tutorials when it's possible, to be able to do that, but that can take a lot of arranging. It can take weeks of arranging with the prison, with the contacts in the prison, going along with the right forms of identification to be able to get into the prison. Working as I have in the past in the east of England, some of my journey times to visit somebody in prison could be over three hours each way. So it's not just five minutes down the road, it's sat in the car for literally hours to be able to get to the prison.

Prisons are unique environments, as Shaun and Stephen well know. And you never know from moment to moment what is actually going on. And even though you've got your arranged visit, you may arrive at the prison, you might not be able to get in.

A little story of a prison. I've driven for over three hours to get there to be told by the gate that I'd have to wait at least another half an hour, maybe an hour at the gate because they couldn't get the door open into the prison. Arriving at a prison, starting a tutorial with a student, to then be told after 10 minutes that we have to finish because the prison was going into lockdown.

So all sorts of challenges like that. Yes, sometimes you have a very nice room to be able to do your tutorial with your students in, but I've tutored in the kitchen in the prison. I've tutored in a storeroom in a prison. So any corner which is available is really, really a valuable space to be able to spend time with the student.

If face to face isn't possible, then phone tutorials. Again, these take a while to organise. Sometimes you need a special code to be able to ring in. It's always a monitored call that you have. Very often, the student is sat on somebody else's desk, listening to the conversation.

Very often the phone calls, and as you well know, Rob, I like to talk. I can talk for forever. But it might be that you've only got a 15-minute call, you've got a 20-minute call. And if you're trying to talk about a whole block of learning, talking about the feedback on the TMAs, it can be very, very challenging to be able to do that.

From my point of view as a tutor, it is incredibly rewarding to be able to help somebody to be able to overcome those barriers and those challenges. And the feedback that I've always had, and I'm sure Stephen would agree with me on this, but for the student, it's that access to the outside world. It's that contact with somebody from outside. And it's feeling valued.

And when somebody knows that you've driven for hours to go and see them, that adds to that. Actually, somebody is really taking time to come and be with me, to support me. I've had people turn around, students in prison, saying, yes, I feel really valued, but actually our time together is about me being a person and not being a number.

And I feel that, in this session, in this training session, in this tutorial, my language that I'm using is different I'm suddenly using academic language. Suddenly, my views and my ideas are being valued. And I'm very aware that, once I leave this room, whether it's the kitchen, the store room, or the classroom, I become a number again.

And some people have actually said to me, I feel that my body language changes, that I change my language and I change my body language to fit in with the regime of the prison, to fit in with life in the prison. But in these tutorials, in these training sessions, I am myself, I can be myself.

And that helps so much with wellbeing and mental health. And but it's not easy. As a tutor, you have to have the passion to want to do it. And it's not about numbers. It's about helping that one person.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And I'm sure you've been in the same situation as me, where you've gone to talk to a student, where you've confirmed the appointment the day before, and you find that they're no longer in the prison. They have been moved at a moment's notice, and they've been moved without their materials. So how do you cope with that? What do you do in those circumstances?

ROBERT MORRALL: I've not had the problem with a student being moved. I have had the problem with not being able to access a student when I've reached the prison. But I've had, on many occasions, Rob, the challenge where a student has moved, or a student has been referred onto me as a tutor, having moved from one person to another.

And their learning materials are lost, their books. Their work is lost. Their TMAs are lost. They have submitted a TMA in one prison, but actually it's never gone anywhere because they've left the system. So yeah, it's a challenge.

And this having to be flexible, having to look at ways to get around the challenges, to get around the problems-- and it's not just the case of turning up at a prison. Unless you are drawing keys at that prison, then you have to wait for somebody to take you from the gate to wherever you're meeting the person.

You don't have that ability just to move around the prison and find somebody. You know? So you are restricted yourself and your movement, and what you can do, and of course, the materials that you can take in. Everything has to go through security, and everything that you take in has to be checked.

And this, of course, Stephen was talking about some of the challenges to doing learning in prison. I was in a prison doing some work. I won't say which prison. But the OU coordinator came up to me in great frustration, saying, Robert, I have a student who's doing a literature degree, and their book has been banned by the prison security.

And I said, what on Earth is it that they're reading that's being banned? And it was Madame Bovary which was actually printed in 1856. You know, this wasn't a racy, modern-day novel. It was something from 1856.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And you have to think about these things. I remember my very first prison student. And unusually, this particular student had some limited internet access and could do some research. And the module was a case study about Manchester Airport and all the different arrangements there.

And this particular student suddenly had all of his privileges restricted, and all of his items were confiscated. And when we dug into it, because he was researching Manchester Airport and the security arrangements, they thought he was planning a prison break, and he was just doing his TMA.

And it was-- we just hadn't considered it. And yeah, so we have to be very careful what we actually have or what we get sent through. I got one of my anecdotes about access as well. I once got locked up in maximum security.

I'd gone to visit a student. And as you say, we could end up anywhere with the tutorial. And in this case, we were actually on the wing, actually in one of the small offices along from the bedrooms. And the prison officer had taken me in and left me there.

And because my watch was a smartwatch, I wasn't allowed to take it in. So I didn't have anything to tell the time. And it got to a point where I thought I'd been there a long time. And it turns out I've been there for four hours.

And I walked up to a prison guard and said, oh, excuse me, I don't think I'm supposed to be here any longer than this. And basically, what had happened is the prison officer who had taken me in had managed to catch a hand in one of the very heavy metal doors and was taken to hospital with a suspected broken hand but didn't tell anybody I was there.

And I was just left abandoned in maximum security. They did let me out eventually. But again, it was quite a disconcerting experience.

ROBERT MORRALL: I have a similar experience to you. I have not been locked up, but I was doing some work in a prison, which again, will remain nameless. And when I came to leave and the Head of Education was taking me out, she said, Robert, I really hate to ask this, but the head of security would really be interested in having a little chat with you.

So I went, and I had this chat with the head of security, and we spoke generally about this, and that, and what I did. And when I got outside the gates, the Head of Education turned to me and said, I'm really so sorry, Robert, because you've done work in other prisons, there seem to be a crossed wire, and they actually thought that you were a prisoner. And they had to try and verify that you weren't trying to escape from the prison.

ROB MOORE: Oh, but it's great. So Angela, have we got any more comment, any questions before we carry on with the chat and get some more stories?

ANGELA: Because you've just been sharing some humorous stories, Rafa said, poor Rob for getting locked in. But I said that I suspected Rob, had you been in there for any particular period of time, you'd have got at least five new students signed up.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely.

ANGELA: We've had lots of questions about the value of studying to the individual and to the people around them and overcoming the challenges of doing that in a secure environment. I've had a question to say, is there a step by step, in terms of who to contact first in case you are currently studying with the OU, and you find out you're about to have limited or no access to the internet?

So what should you do to put things in place if you know that you're going to be without the internet for a while or that it might be flaky access?

ROB MOORE: OK, well, I'll talk generally from the Open University point of view, and then I'll pass on to Stephen for specific advice. If you've suddenly found out you're going to be studying from prison. So the top tip I would give people is talk to your tutor early. As soon as you know, talk to your tutor.

So the example I would give is a young lady who went on a honeymoon. She'll was on a module with me this year. She was on a honeymoon for three weeks. And that happened to coincide directly with a collaborative activity that was an essential part of the module.

So her old assignment was based on this piece of work where she needed to collaborate with others. And fortunately, we had an alternative activity, which can be studied if you haven't got access, and we were able to give her that option so she could complete it before she went on honeymoon and didn't miss out on those marks.

Now, I just want to be very clear, these are not-- you can't just opt to do the alternative version. It's not you choose one or choose the other. You have to demonstrate and justify why you need that, or-- I was able to talk to the module team. We looked at the situation very sympathetically, and we were able to allow her to do the alternative activity.

And she completed the module very well. And I think that's the same. If you ever find yourself in a situation where you're going to lose access for an extended period of time, your tutor is the first person to talk to. They can then advise you on the options and then put you either in touch with the module team or with the student support team.

And it's rare that we don't find a solution. Sometimes the solution is actually to say, you know what, let's pause at this point, and let's defer the module and pick it up again later. Sometimes that's the advice that we give. But quite often, there are other solutions that we can come up with. Yes, Angela.

ANGELA: So that covers the learning materials and the access to the learning materials, and actually we've had some great advice about that today earlier on in the show, particularly from Stephen as well, who has actually done it himself. But if you are planning this limited access because you're travelling or you're being posted somewhere, how do you plan for the lack of interaction that you've been used to? So things like your forums, and your face-to-face-- and not your face-to-face tutorials, but your online tutorials, and the support you've been used to getting online whenever you've needed it. Is there anything you can put in place to be a safety net for yourself?

ROB MOORE: Yeah, it's a difficult one to answer generally because every situation is different. So I actually had a student who was on a yacht race, around the world yacht race. And what we did in her case was, we planned-- and again, these things-- in her case, it wasn't a sudden occurrence. She planned it for a long time.

And we frontloaded a lot of the work. We did a lot of the work upfront. And we also agreed how she would then catch up and take part in things when she actually got back on dry land. And she actually managed to complete the collaborative activity, even though she wasn't part of it for 3/4 of the time.

We just worked with the team before she went, and she agreed what her role in the team was going to be, and she did it at the end. And I think that's the thing, it's that conversation. What can we do upfront? What can we do afterwards? How will we manage it? How will we bring extensions in that are needed? And Yeah every, one is slightly different. I suppose one of my very early stories, just to tell you how far it goes back, this was during the Iraq war. I had a phone call from a student. We wanted a conversation, and the student's called David. And he said, Rob, can you tell me about-- just doing my TMA. Can you tell me about this?

And he was whispering. And I said, but, yeah, of course, David. And we had a chat. I said, can you speak up a little bit, though? Because I can't quite hear what you're saying. Can you speak a bit louder? And he says, not really. I'm in a foxhole on the front line, so I don't want them to hear me.

So he's was actually calling me from the front line. And again, the armed forces have some real challenges with contact because they can lose contact back home at a moment's notice.

ANGELA: But one of the things that comes through so strongly is the amount of resilience and strength and motivation that students have when they are studying in challenged situations. We've heard some incredible stories today. The chat room really has been tearing up.

ROB MOORE: And I think Robert talked about the labour of love. And it's whether your students are in prison, whether they are in the armed forces, whether they're overseas and losing. We don't have favourite students, but you have a certain respect for students that study when things are against them, when it's a challenge. And you really do go the extra mile in those circumstances.

So Stephen, just to come back to you quickly on that one, if somebody is studying with the OU and unfortunately finds out that they may be sent to prison, what would you advise them to do? Who would you advise them to contact and talk to?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: So if they've been-- if unfortunately they're looking to be incarcerated or go into a prison, then it would be the students in secure environments team I would recommend they have a conversation with. I think we did share the email contact for my team. So I think getting in touch with them as early on as possible, letting us know that this is likely to happen. Unfortunately, there isn't much that the team can actually do. I mean, we can give advice, of course, but there isn't much we can actually do until the student actually finds themselves behind the prison walls. And again, it would further depend on their circumstances. So students-- so prisoners who are on remand, awaiting their trials, for example, have not been convicted of any offence as of yet, well, they can't access OU stuff at that point.

It's a prison rule, and it's a rule that the University has had to accept. It's come from the Ministry of Justice, so we've got to go along with it. But prisoners on remand are unable to start their OU studies. You need to be a convicted prisoner with at least six months before you can sort of read a module. So it would then depend if you were sure-- if you found yourself that this was something that might happen, it would depend on the context in which it does happen. And if you arrive in prison, under remand in prison, then you'll need to wait for the outcome of your trial and all of that.

But if you arrive as someone who-- for example, someone who might have been convicted of an offence, released on licence in the community, and been hauled back into custody, then it's more likely that you can simply pick up the studies from where you left off [INAUDIBLE].

ROB MOORE: Your team would be the right team to tell you what your options are, what to consider.

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: Right.

ROB MOORE: So I'm going to move on to the story. I love the story. So I'm going to come back to you, Shaun. I'm going to ask you for another of your favourite stories. But also, while you're going through your story, if you can give some tips, what tips would you give to a student who is studying, and they haven't got the access, or somebody who's studying in prison? What would be your top one or two tips that you would give them?

SHAUN MCMANN: Yeah, I suppose it would come out of the anecdotes, to be honest with you. That degree ceremony you mentioned before, where there were five students getting their certificates, included one chap who just finished his masters. I met him a few years before in a completely different set of circumstances, for him to be given his undergraduate degree.

And the ceremony took place in what I can only describe as a broom cupboard. It was May, one member of staff, one prison officer and the student. And then suddenly, there we were, three or four years later with him being in this different environment, massive hall, again, over a hundred guests.

Prison Governor turned up, and it was this joyous occasion you mentioned before. I started talking to him afterwards, and he introduced me to his dad. It turns out this chap was who had been serving the sentence and got these two degrees. He was the first person in his family to study anything after the age of 14. And here he was, getting his masters.

And he'd been a massive inspiration because both of his sisters had subsequently enrolled with the OU. And this is like, you can imagine, a massive, life-changing event for all of them. And what I thought was absolutely fantastic, it was his daughter who at the time was 18, going on 19, had just enrolled at a campus-based University.

So she was the very first member of the family who went off to do higher education, but in person, at a brick university. And I just thought, what an inspirational story this is. And this chap, he manifested what I think is the most important thing.

So the tip I'd give to anybody in difficult circumstances is, on active service, travelling abroad, for example, in hospital, or in this case, in a prison, it's just stick with it, and be resilient, and be your own advocate. And be aware of the fact that, even though you are studying in isolation, as lots and lots of students are, whether they're inside prisons or they're in the community, you are actually studying for something that is really, really important, that can, ultimately, to be honest with you, have an inspirational kind of impact on loads of people around you.

So I suppose that's just a long ramble, really. I'd say stick with it, and don't be put off. Be your own advocate.

ROB MOORE: Yeah, and I think you're right. I think we can't fail to be impressed by the tenacity of some of the students and the way that they overcome challenges that we would really struggle to do. So absolutely agree. So Robert, your anecdote and your top tips for students, what would that be? One of the many, I'm sure.

ROBERT MORRALL: I think, Rob, that the students which I have had, the OU students I have had in prison, are some of the most dedicated students, actually, that I have had. I have a COVID story about a lad who actually had done a level one qualification. I had been his tutor.

And then a couple of years later, he reappeared on my student list again, and I was thrilled when that happened. And I'm always thrilled when I see a repeat student. But he was having to handwrite his work. And he was in a prison which had been hit quite heavily by COVID.

So there was a lack of staff. And because he was handwriting his work, actually the staff had been advised not to pick up his work. So his TMAs were done, done on time, but actually couldn't be submitted until a lot later, when the staff had decided it was going to be OK to actually pick up his work and submit it.

One of the things we've not touched on is actually when somebody comes out of prison. So somebody might be doing an OU degree, and they get released from prison. They might be going into temporary accommodation. They might be going into a hostel. Their materials, as we've spoken about before, may still be sat in the prison and haven't come out and caught up with them yet.

So there's another side to the story as well. And although they may have been working extremely well, suddenly having been in prison for many years, coming out into the community, having to deal with life in the community. And I remember a prisoner saying to me when he was released into the community, Robert, it is so loud out here. The world is so loud. I'm not used to so much noise.

And somebody else saying to me, when I first came out in the first few days, I couldn't understand people walking round in the streets talking to themselves because, actually, they've not come across, or officially come across, mobile phones and AirPods.

So these things are all challenges which people have. I had a student who's been in prison for many years who became very aware when they came out of prison how it had impacted on their eyesight, and how they were used to looking at things fairly close up. But walking down the street and being able to see the distance suddenly was a challenge for them.

People coming out of prison, then having the challenges of signing on with the job centre, of finding accommodation, if they've got a family, rebuilding those relationships. I had an education manager who said to me-- we released a guy recently, and I've had his wife on the phone, asking why he sits on the bottom of the bed to eat his dinner because that's what he's been used to doing for years, and years, and years.

So there are challenges for people when they come out, and those challenges will impact on their learning and their access and will act as distractions. And we need to bear that in mind as well.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely, and just getting used to the OU systems because I had a student in prison who was released recently. He'd done the first five years of his degree in prison. He was out for his last module, just for his last assignment, actually. And he sat in front of the computer and didn't know how to use the system, where-- simply because everything, when I say I was done for him, it was all presented to him.

And then he gave the information to the prison officers, and they submitted everything. And we spent hours just talking through how to submit an assignment, the things that you don't expect to do at level three. So yes, that part of getting used to the systems, getting used to it.

And also, there are so many things to do when they're first released. I think that's the most challenging time. So Angela, have we got any more questions? This will be the last set of questions from the chat at the moment.

ANGELA: We haven't got any more questions, but we have had lots of people commenting on the OU's provision. Aurora said that it's-- not only have the OU been really helpful, but students have also helped to remind her that she's a student before a service user, which is a really lovely comment. And just massive respect for all those who are studying in challenging circumstances.

And just to leave you with something completely different, I'm also aware that we've got quite a few criminology students in the chat who are interested in how people study in secure environments. And if everybody's modules have come to an end, if anyone's modules have come to an end, and you have just a few hours that you could spend on OpenLearn, Rosalind Crone did an amazing OpenLearn book a couple of years ago on the history of learning in a prison environment.

It's a very moving book with lots of video shot from inside an old prison, including a prison library that only has one novel that you can borrow. So that's a really interesting BOC to do. But we are aware—

ROB MOORE: You've got to explain what a BOC is because I know what it is.

ANGELA: A badged open course for those students who are studying criminology. I thought they might find that interesting. That's on OpenLearn. But, of course, we are aware that a lot of people can't be in the chat room today. And so if they have any questions-- if they're watching this on catch-up, and they do have any questions, feel free to email SISE-general@open.ac.uk. Because it's great if you're able to get your questions in after this show, based on what you've heard from our fantastic guests today.

ROB MOORE: And of course, if anybody is watching this on virtual campus from within prison, your education officer can also always send those requests on your behalf, or talk to your tutor. So I just wanted to give Stephen the opportunity to end the session.

So Stephen, in a couple of minutes, what would be your top tips for people who find themselves in prison, thinking about studying with OU, or what they are studying? What would be your two or three top tips you would give them?

STEPHEN AKPABIO-KLEMENTOWSKI: Well, the first would be the need to be resilient in very difficult circumstances, where you stripped away of any sense of autonomy. But interestingly, within that environment, one area where there is autonomy relates to your OU studies, in terms of what you can choose, what you would like to study.

So you should get that back there. But you need to be resilient, and you need to be organised, or you need to be as organised as possible because, I think it's already been alluded to by the panel, just the sheer unpredictability of the environment.

So if you have a sort of IT session scheduled for a specific time, you need to prepare for it to make sure that you take advantage of it because if it gets cancelled, then you've lost out. So forward planning is also important. But above all would be a good relationship with your tutor, and if you're in a prison environment, the OU coordinator in that establishment because those are two key people who you really need to be alongside you if you're looking to be successful and complete your studies.

ROB MOORE: Yeah, I totally agree. I think that's exactly the advice I will give. So thank you for that, Stephen. And I'd just like to say thank you to my guest today. So Shaun, Robert, Stephen, Thank you so

much for joining me. It's the first time I've actually cried in a Student Hub Live session. So well done on that.

But no, I've really enjoyed this chat. And it's obviously a subject that very close to my heart. And I do appreciate you spending the time with us today. Just for those of you who are watching, can I remind you to complete the feedback form?

We want to know what you thought of this session? Do you want more sessions like this? What was it that you really enjoyed about the session? So please remember to fill out the feedback form. It makes a massive difference when it comes to our planning and arrangements.

And just a couple of adverts. If you're interested, I'm running a session tomorrow night, one of our study sessions, on how to confidently use other people's ideas. And then we've got other live sessions coming up, looking at learning from feedback, note taking, academic communication.

And the one on the 19th of July is what to do when you move up to the next level of your study. So if you're about to go from level one to level two, or level two to level three, I'm going to be joined by [? John Quill ?] and Karen. Karen of Student Hub Live fame is joining us for the session. And we're going to be having a chat about how to make those adjustments as you move up to the next level.

So thanks again to my guests, and thank you everyone who has joined us today. I've had a lovely time with you this morning, and I look forward to seeing you all again soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]