

**Workshop 17:**  
**Opening one door wider- Expanding opportunities for prisoner  
higher education through Open Learning Australia (OLA)**

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This paper explores the potential role and challenges for OLA in expanding opportunities for Prisoner Higher Education. OLA is Australia's national open access flexible and lifelong learning provider. OLA has no prerequisites or entry requirements for higher education and students can proceed at their own pace. There is a government loans scheme available for the equivalent of full-time study.

For prisoners, OLA addresses many of the problems of conventional higher education studies: the limited number of available HECS based places for distance education; the educational prerequisites; part-time studies; portability on release or transfer; and the lack of flexibility in timing and pace of studies. Learners in correctional institutions across Australia have undertaken individual units and have successfully completed full degrees.

Evidence suggests that funding is one powerful inhibitor to prisoner participation. Revised loan support features will address many of the financial and administrative constraints on its access.

Revisions of entry level materials are making successful completion more attainable.

New approaches are addressing access constraints on the Internet for prisoner learners.

These new developments are widening opportunities and chances of successful studies, while encouraging uptake. Prisoners now have genuinely flexible and effective pathway in higher education.

## **Introduction**

Open Learning Australia (OLA) was established in 1993 as an initiative of the Commonwealth Government. Through Open Learning Australia the Commonwealth sought to make institutions more responsive to the needs of students and industry by encouraging greater flexibility and openness in higher education. OLA is widely viewed as a leading example of universities working collaboratively to achieve this outcome.

OLA operates in the fee-paying sector of the higher education market where it has built a sustainable position with adult and second chance learners because of its open access. It allows anyone able to pay the fees to access higher education. There are no pre-requisites or entry requirements and there are no limits on places. There is a government loans scheme,

Open Learning Deferred Payment Scheme(OLDPS) which allows students to defer part of their fees and make repayments through the taxation system. However, these restrictions on access to OLDPS are currently a barrier to access to OLA programs for many students, a particularly prisoner learners

The programs offered by OLA are valued for the quality of their instructional design, occupational relevance, flexible format and convenience of study. Newer programs are designed to provide a continuous pathway between vocational and university education.

OLA works with over 32 Australian universities and providers of vocational education to give learners access to a range of off-campus studies that can be credited towards formal qualifications in the fields of arts and humanities, business and commerce, information technology and the biological sciences. Within this framework OLA markets courses, enrolls students and collects fees while the academic institutions provide study materials and tuition.

The Company is owned by:

- Curtin University of Technology
- Griffith University
- Macquarie University
- Monash University
- RMIT University
- Swinburne University of Technology
- University of South Australia.

### **The digital revolution**

Within the OLA group of universities collaboration continues to be a key strategy for realising the benefits of the information and communication revolution that is now taking place in the management and delivery of education both on and off-campus. This cooperation centres on the development of interactive courseware applications that enrich teaching and learning while at the same time motivating student engagement. The formats used range from CDROM to online delivery reflecting the rapid progression of presentation and web distribution technologies.

Until recently OLA's interest in online technology for the delivery of open and distance learning was tempered by a:

- preponderance of study materials in paper format
- business model that placed responsibility for distribution and support with providers
- distributed and diverse student body for which conventional mail and print-based learning materials provided the most reliable and effective means of communication and access to content.

The last consideration is of particular significance for prisoner learners.

Advances in web presentation and data compression techniques, greater ownership of personal computers and improved online connectivity in urban and regional areas now make

it possible for OLA to contemplate online delivery to a national body of students. technology from home or work and achieve credible learning outcomes in an online environment.

The tools and standards needed to author, assemble and manage digital materials in a cohesive way are becoming generally available. The emergence of specifications for content description and exchange coupled with the availability of sophisticated content management applications make it feasible for organisations to cooperate on the production and management of a repository for digital course materials that can be distributed on-line and made available in other digital formats such as CD-Rom and DVD. Such materials offer significant advances in the learning experience and acquisition of skills, particularly in entry – level units

Such multimedia interactivities, audio files and video files which are streamed for students with reliable internet access can also be loaded onto CDs and DVDs along with materials formerly only available in print format.

For individual students the approach brings:

- a consistent navigational interface and learning format
- improvements to the management and guidance of learning
- learning materials that are more readily updated to reflect current practices in industry and the professions
- motivating learning experiences that employ a range of multimedia and interactive elements
- the potential for a range of ancillary services such as discussion groups and study groups designed to promote collaboration, enrich learning and add to the sense of belonging to a wider body of students.

For prisoner learners to participate in the last benefit may require significant policy change and OLA recognizes that. This is discussed in more detail later in the paper. However, consideration could be given to the concept of a restricted intranet environment which would enable monitoring of access to the wider internet and access to the richness of the on-line learning environment. OLA's emphasis on reusable digital content and capacity for customized interface (see below) has significance here.

### **The case for reusable content**

OLA has adopted an approach in the development of digital material that emphasizes quality and reusability. Investment has focused on development digital materials that significantly assist learning and understanding and can be re-used in a range of learning situations.

The US Department of Defense, the Department of Labor and the National Guard have established the Advanced Distributed Learning Initiative (ADL) to promote online learning technologies and bring together relevant standards. As part of this project ADL has published the Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) which integrates content exchange and description standards produced by the:

- IMS Global Learning Consortium
- IEEE Learning Standards Committee
- Aircraft Industries Computer Based Training Committee (AICC).

The SCORM approach for on-line learning includes a renewed focus on adapting a common body of material to suit different end uses. This can be achieved by:

1. identifying and changing those elements of a course that relate to a particular market (say the different legislative regimes in international markets); and
2. revising the presentational interface to accommodate the branding of various client organisations.

OLA's approach has been informed by SCORM.

For those students with access to the Internet OLA has developed the OLA Learning Portal essentially the marriage of OLA's business applications (adapted for operating in an open environment) with a suite of knowledge management and collaborative learning applications. The new elements of the system include:

1. Learning Management System (LMS) that provides the interface to structured learning tasks and manages transactions with the content management, student management and other enterprise systems.
2. Content Management System (CMS) which provides the means for managing:
  - learning objects, manifests and descriptive material lodged in a dedicated Learning Content Repository (LCR)
  - the interface to the Learning Portal including customised spaces for students, provider institutions and clients.
3. Collaboration tools that support teamwork, aid the development of student communities and generally encourage the engagement of students studying at a distance.
4. Content authoring and assembly tools that produce learning objects that can be accepted by SCORM conformant LMS applications.

The result of this approach is the development of learning materials which significantly assist learning but unlike earlier on-line developments can be made available on other accessible formats

### **Prisoners and higher education**

Prisoners represent a range of educational, vocational and professional backgrounds. Custodial periods, time in specific prisons and issues on release can affect educational attainment and continuity of education

Key issues that affect the effectiveness of education and training include:

- Literacy levels
- Cultural appropriateness, especially for indigenous prisoners
- Portability of learning materials and credit
- Funding, especially for higher education
- Access to materials
- Access to computer based learning
- Development of learning communities
- Time for studies
- Local tuitional support
- Financial considerations

In particular, prisoners who wish to access higher education experience a number of constraints due to

- Limited number of available HECS based places for distance education.
- Educational prerequisites.
- Lack of portability on release.
- Lack of flexibility in timing of studies, particularly deferral policies.
- Increasing reliance on materials accessed through the Internet. Prisoners in general do not have access to the Internet.
- Lack of local support and learning culture

OLA's open entry and flexible delivery addresses the first four of these constraints with consequent success for dedicated students. Genuine portability, for example, is a key component of equitable flexible learning for prisoners. National portability is a characteristic of higher education as delivered through Open Learning Australia. Prisoners undertaking OLA studies can be assured of the continuing currency and accessibility of OLA programs.

At the same time, prisons themselves have rarely been conducive to educational achievement. Studies have remarked on the difficulties of providing access to resources, particularly high end technology, and how time consuming and energy sapping this is. (Russell Gluck, Kim Daisma and Cecily Boas, *The Art of Prison Literacy*, Draft, July 1997).

However, it is learners' positive expectations for themselves, and an encouraging educational climate which enables them to overcome obstacles to learning, which are the most powerful agents for educational participation and achievement. (Joan Abbott-Chapman, 'The challenge of retention - raising and meeting students' educational expectations', *Youth Studies Australia*, Winter 1994). The need for such support is multiplied for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced little educational success. Such a profile is characteristic of many prisoners.

Course materials, including distance materials, often assume learning can occur through group activity and interaction. OLA recognises that to provide equitable and effective distance education without face-to-face contact or peer group learning communities can be difficult. There is evidence that this can be overcome with well-designed materials and appropriate support. OLA's experience suggests that distance education can address the needs of prisoners who have the appropriate educational standards or levels of experience.

Increasing reliance in higher education on computers in general and the Internet in particular will be a growing issue for addressing prisoners' higher education needs OLA units that have significant on-line components in a way that facilitates alternative methods of delivery for students who are unable to access the Internet. Moreover, increasingly on-line delivery is giving way to a blended form of delivery that uses on-line elements, including interactive multimedia to support teaching and learning as part of a range of approaches.

As well, the prison situation may not allow for the possibility of the learning process to be assisted by the functioning of peer support or group dynamics. OLA is discovering that on-line study groups can provide a way of overcoming the difficulties of studying without a learning community. It is providing on-line study groups based on units and on designated cohorts. Computer based learning and web-based technologies offer educators and learners a degree of interactivity, immediacy and personalisation that was unsustainable in older formats. Multimedia resources can now be developed which can be delivered both over the web and using CD-Rom or DVD.

Supervised access to designated cohort on-line study groups and the use of CD-ROMs might be a suitable approach to delivery of enhanced learning options in an effective and equitable manner. Attention must be paid to careful negotiation with correctional administrations in order to facilitate such flexible delivery with a minimum of disruption to prison security and administrative regimes.

### **Paying for prisoner higher education**

Though the cost of OLA units is highly competitive with the cost of a HECs place and there is a government loan scheme available, the current financial arrangements impose a debt obligation and upfront fee which is working against uptake by prisoners and will continue to do so. Evidence suggests that debt is powerful inhibitor to all student participation.

Nevertheless, in a climate that increasingly emphasizes the contribution of the individual to higher education access to an equitable loans scheme is a fundamental requirement

Australian citizens, including prisoners, are entitled to Open Learning Deferred Payment Scheme (OLDPS) which enables OLA students to defer payment of their OLA undergraduate university unit fees by taking out a loan with the Commonwealth Government. Participants need to be enrolled in at least two units an OLA Study Period and there is a gap fee between the full fee and the amount covered by the Commonwealth loan (currently the total amount payable is \$860 and a gap fee of \$142).

Under the provisions of the Higher Education Support Bill (2003), OLDPS will become part of the FEE-HELP regime and subject to the same provisions as loans for study in private higher education providers and for postgraduate studies.

### *Characteristics of Proposed New Loans Scheme for OLA students (FEE-HELP)*

The Revised Loans Scheme (FEE-HELP) as it would apply to OLA students represents in all but one respect a major advance, particularly for prisoner learners. It will mean:

- The current requirement for an up-front co-payment will be ended.

- Both full and part time students will receive financial support for the full costs of course fees.
- Students will be able to tailor their study progress to their individual needs in a choice of an accelerated, part time or a full time capacity. The current arbitrary timetable will be abolished. This will be of particular benefit in the commencement of studies, ensuring greater potential for successful completion of studies as learners acquire the skills for academic success.
- There will be a financial (maximum of \$50,000) rather than unit limitation to government support, allowing students, including prisoners to complete double degrees and undertake postgraduate studies. Learners are able to continue their lifelong learning through their higher education pathway of choice into the postgraduate area. This is particularly significant as postgraduate education is increasingly required for career progress even for those in early career development.
- Students will be able to combine upfront and deferred payment in any given Study Period. This allows learners to respond to their economic situation
- Financial support will be available for additional fee-paying services (work placements and practicums) or additional services which would contribute to optimum performance (tuitional assistance)
- Learners with low income levels will be able to access programs which may have been unavailable due to financial circumstances.

However, the different interest rate regimes that are proposed for HECS-HELP and FEE-HELP would impose an unnecessary burden on disadvantaged students and will continue to act as a deterrent to the take-up of higher education by prisoners who have particularly significant economic constraints and more limited capacity to attain high incomes on release from prison.

For OLA students this is a retrograde step compared with OLDPS which is subject to the same repayment conditions as HECS. There is indication that the imposition of a real interest rate on FEE-HELP will be addressed by the Senate, making FEE-HELP a significant step forward.

## **Conclusion**

Because of its flexible, open access approach, Open Learning Australia studies offer prisoner learners an opportunity to access appropriate and well-designed materials which can assist prisoners in reaching their educational goals.

New approaches to the development of digital material which can be accessed in range of formats provide much of the advantages of the on-line environment within the constraints of the prison system subject to computer access.

Proposed new government student funding approaches will significantly address funding issues for prisoner learners by enabling them to cover all of the relevant fees for their OLA studies.

## References

- Joan Abbott-Chapman, 'The challenge of retention - raising and meeting students' educational expectations', *Youth Studies Australia*, Winter 1994)
- Russell Gluck, Kim Daisma and Cecily Boas, *The Art of Prison Literacy*, Draft, July 1997