



Overloaded and isolated? Preliminary findings on overcoming information challenges for incarcerated university students

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper outlines two tentative themes identified in the initial findings of a project focusing on the information behaviour of a particular group of incarcerated university students. These students are released on licence to attend lectures and study on campus, but are still affected by prison restrictions.

Theoretical background. Theories of information landscapes, small worlds and information behaviour in transition have informed this work.

Methods. This paper presents analysis of the first round of data collection, using a combination of progress logs and interviews.

Findings. The two key themes outlined here relate to issues of inclusion and exclusion in academic spaces. The first theme reveals issues around information overload, particularly during the induction period, while the second relates to how relationships and restrictions on and off campus affect informal information sharing.

Conclusions The identification of these issues can inform support arrangements for these students, with a focus on academic library support. While these issues are unique to a particular group, they have broader implications for other categories of *non-traditional* higher education (HE) students.

Introduction

This paper is an output from a doctoral project on the information behaviour of higher education (HE) students in prison, which aims to explore the experiences of a group of incarcerated students released on temporary licence to attend a UK university. These students occupy a unique position within the HE landscape, navigating challenges that set them apart from their peers. While able to participate in on-campus activities, such as attending lectures and accessing library resources, they must contend with prison restrictions on access to communication technologies and a perceived need to limit the personal information they share with fellow students. The research highlights stark contrasts between prison and university environments, affecting how students interact with information and their inclusion in the academic community. The study aims to:

1. Critically explore the experiences of this group around information access and use
2. Understand the development of individuals' information skills as they progress through a semester
3. Evaluate the support provided by academic libraries to this group.

This paper will outline some tentative themes that have been developed from the first round of data collection, which has revealed some ways in which the intersection of institutional restrictions and academic expectations influences these students' lives and contributes to broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion in HE. The research question for this paper is:

- How do incarcerated students' unique circumstances contribute to their sense of inclusion/exclusion in academic library spaces?

Theoretical background

Existing research on information behaviour in related contexts provides a strong foundation for this study. Lloyd et al. (2013) examined the information behaviour of refugees adapting to the practices of their new homeland, introducing the concept of '*information landscapes*', where groups share similar '*established methods of information production, reproduction, circulation and modes of access*' (Lloyd et al., 2013, p. 122). This concept applies to the divergent landscapes of prisons and universities. Student-prisoners must attempt to bridge the gap between the restrictive, risk-averse and largely paper-based information world of the prison and the open, collaborative, digitally-enabled university, while often missing out on opportunities to be socialised into it. The risk of failing to adapt, as Lloyd et al. (2013) explained, is exclusion and isolation. Lloyd et al. cite Vinson's (2009) definition of exclusion as having '*limited support networks, inability to access the labour market, alienation from society and poorer educational outcomes*'. These challenges already impact former prisoners, and feelings of being excluded from academic information spaces could exacerbate rather than alleviate these issues.

Chatman's (1999) concept of *small worlds* was developed in a prison setting and draws clear distinctions between *insiders* and *outsiders*. In this study, the small world of the prison collides with the larger worlds of the university and academia more broadly. University enrolment requires members of the prison community to reorientate their view to encompass the perspectives of outsiders, gaining a working knowledge of unfamiliar *codes* (Chatman, 1999) necessary to operate within the world of academia rather than the methods of finding and interpreting information that they may be used to (Britz, 2004). Chatman's earlier (1996) model of information poverty has been critiqued for focusing too much on exclusion at an individual level, rather than analysing the systemic patterns that reinforce the positioning of certain groups at the margins of *acceptable* information practice (Gibson and Martin, 2019). In this context, the task of developing new ways of learning can be guided and enabled (or obstructed and prohibited) by the other actors in the system: universities and prisons.

This research also draws on studies examining the information behaviour of groups undergoing significant transitions (e.g., Kennan et al., 2011; Ivins et al., 2016; Bronstein, 2018; Ruthven, 2022). Transition is acknowledged to be ‘a complex and socially situated process’ (Hicks, 2022, p. 210) that impacts feelings of belonging in academic spaces.

Methods

This study is designed to highlight differences and similarities between individual experiences, generating rich qualitative data. Participants completed weekly semi-structured *progress logs*, an adaptation of the solicited diary method (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015) designed to capture individual-level qualitative data over the course of a semester, using prompts to address research questions while allowing opportunities for participant reflection and providing a narrative of progress (Virgo, 2024). Follow-up interviews were conducted to explore issues raised in the logs.

The first round of data collection occurred between January and June 2024. Two participants completed the progress logs and interviews, while a third discontinued their studies in week 5 (his contributions are not featured here). A fourth participant was interviewed but did not complete the logs. A second round is planned for the same period in 2025, recruiting from new students joining this small cohort.

This is a small sample, but the data generated is very rich. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022) has been used for the initial round of coding and crafting of themes from the interviews, while a more classificatory approach was taken with the progress logs.

Findings: two key themes

Here I present some tentative preliminary findings from this work in progress. I will focus particularly on two themes relating to sources of feelings of inclusion and exclusion in academic spaces that are evident across multiple participants’ contributions.

Theme 1: information overload during transition: ‘I wish I’d known that!’

Participants were often challenged by the rapid transition from full incarceration to spending weekdays on campus. For those incarcerated for longer periods, this was particularly pronounced:

I was completely overwhelmed when I first started coming from prison where you have no interaction with the public for years on years and confined to a cell for 23 hours a day. It is absolutely mind blowing, trying to remember how to use a cash point, cross the road safely, there is no way I could take it all in during the first week. [Terry, progress log]

During the interviews, which explored information gaps mentioned in the progress logs, participants often reported that it took time to understand aspects of academic practice or course-related information. The data analysis code I used for this was ‘I wish I’d known that!’, from Terry’s comment below:

It actually took me about the fourth week before I found out about the reading materials... And [lecturer] said ‘read this one’. Week 4! I wish I’d known that! [Terry, interview]

The reading resources are good but using them to my advantage is like ... it’s a skill in itself. It’s a study skill isn’t it? And I’m getting better, and I know that the resources do help. [Dylan, interview]

Other instances included not knowing where to find their grades or of the existence of digital tools that would have helped them with a module.

Being permitted to continue studying on campus over the summer was identified as important by multiple participants, to reinforce skills development:

My plan is to study here over the summer, come here every day ... there's so many points that I need to improve on, so I'll just go through them one by one. [Malik, interview]

The initial data analysis has suggested valuable recommendations for improvements to the bespoke library inductions delivered for these students to focus on *learning by doing*.

I think you can sit and explain something for ten hours, but until you start messing around with it, you ain't gonna get it anyway. [Dylan, interview]

But I believe in, you know, getting the guys to do something, you know, have a little test... 'right, I'm going to get you to find this document' ... I bet you 75% of them won't come up with the answers. Shows they really don't know what to do. But then once they've learned where to look, they'll then remember and they'll go 'ah, I remember! There's somewhere I can find this'. [Terry, interview]

Theme 2: multi-faceted isolation: 'nobody to ask'

The participants perceived risks in interacting with outside students and staff; particularly, the risk that they would be judged for being imprisoned:

I have not revealed any information about serving a prison sentence. I feel it would be received as such a shock that it may overcast their perception of me. I just want to be seen as just another student which is already slightly difficult given that I am also a mature student. [Dylan, progress log]

Prohibitions on owning smartphones and using social media also distinguished these students. The identical non-smart phones mandated by the prison are a rare sight on campus and draw attention – often, ironically, reminding other students of burner phones used in criminal activity and thus raising suspicions.

Avoiding questions was an uphill battle which can lead to isolation:

So you've got to keep that distance so you're not even that kind of friendly, you know, so they wouldn't ask for your, you know, 'what's your socials?' I don't have socials. [Terry, interview]

Other students were perceived to be using informal communication networks, particularly social media, from which these students are excluded. This prompted a feeling that they had 'nobody to ask' when they were unsure about academic processes or coursework. While the prison cohort are a tight-knit group, they are all studying different subjects:

Because we're prisoners, we've got nobody to really ask, you know? We're not like a group of classmates, you know, you sit at night and [discuss] 'how did you do that?' 'how would you do that?' 'oh, I've done it this way', and you get ideas. [Terry, interview]

However, some did find information shared by students from the same prison who had been studying for longer to be helpful:

It is a safe and easily accessible place to get quick answers to questions from the same perspective as you. And can help with some of the nerves at the beginning. [Dylan, progress log]

Participants commonly believed that some separation from other students was necessary, but still wanted to be able to take advantage of all of the opportunities offered by their course (e.g. field trips), which might mean disclosing their status to staff. All participants did, however, report positive responses from staff when they needed to confide in them.

Participants reported juggling multiple identities, amplifying feelings of exclusion. Reacting to questioning from prison officers about why they needed full days on campus for studying, Terry highlighted that other students could work evenings and weekends:

We can't do that. We're back with our prison faces, hard as nails, you know, having to be this prisoner, put this façade on. And then at the weekends, now we're starting to get to see our families, we have to adapt to being this loving, caring husband, who actually can't remember if he's a 'bad' prisoner, or if he's a student. [Terry, interview]

All interviewed participants reported having supportive family relationships, and some called on family to help them with their studies:

When they start off they tell you what's a good source and what's a bad source. And also I've got my sister as well. So if there's any doubt, like if I use a reference from a source like Tutor2U or something like that she'd say 'nah, you can't use that, that's really bad'. So I'd then learn from that what I can use and can't. [Malik, interview]

Discussion

The first theme identified here (*'I wish I'd known that!'*) relates to the absorption of new information during transition. Information overload during transition to university has not been thoroughly examined in the literature, but transitions are associated with information overload (Briggs et al., 2012; Ruthven, 2022). The idea that the stresses of transition can prompt the development of information literacy practices suitable to the new environment is supported by Hicks (2022).

The second theme (*'nobody to ask'*) highlights identity, belonging and informal information sharing. With a perceived need to maintain distance from coursemates and restrictions on use of communication technologies, these students have fewer informal sources of information and support. Du Toit et al. (2022) found that first-in-family students relied heavily on their existing social networks when they transitioned to university. All participants here reported family support, with some family members taking an active role in offering advice on topics such as referencing and the credibility of information sources. This actually puts them in a better situation than many first-generation students and protects them from some of the consequences of information exclusion identified by Lloyd (2013).

Together, these two themes reveal some barriers and forms of exclusion that are unique to these students' situation, but also issues that they may share with other students, especially those from disadvantaged and non-traditional student groups, such as information overload at induction and lacking confidence with digital technologies.

Conclusions

These students' experiences of the justice system shape their behaviours in far-reaching ways, and these preliminary findings reveal two ways in which their information behaviours are affected. The themes are related to belonging and identity in academic spaces, and demonstrate a finding that has been prominent in initial analysis: interpersonal information sharing is just as important for these students as finding more formal sources of information directly related to their studies.

The next round of data collection will introduce more perspectives. Every student is unique, and these students' range of life experiences influence their study habits, social connections and use of information. It will be interesting to see whether the themes above remain prominent in the final analysis.

This research has already prompted some local changes. I now act as a library representative on the steering group overseeing the university-prison collaboration. I deliver bespoke inductions for incoming incarcerated students. Based on the findings from theme 1 (*'I wish I'd known that!'*), I

ensure that these are paced and structured to mitigate the sense of being overwhelmed, with takeaway materials and opportunities to practise using the library discovery system. I am also creating a specific library web page for these students, part of a Google site designed to provide them with relevant information about university services.

Considering theme 2 ('nobody to ask'), it seems appropriate for the library to provide a named contact who already knows about these students' circumstances, removing the need for them to explain or hide details. This person can be consulted about issues that are specifically related to imprisonment and access to information resources. Through the establishment of these lasting protocols, I am committed to facilitating consistent, tailored support for this unique group of students.

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