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Living in Prison, Studying on Campus: Digital Challenges for Students in a UK Open Prison

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Abstract

This article examines the information behaviour of a group of students housed in an "open" prison in southern England and enabled to attend university during weekdays. This group faces unique challenges, unexplored in existing studies on incarcerated distance learners, as they experience intermittent online access alongside specific restrictions. The study aims to explore their information behaviours, including how digital literacies develop over time, and evaluate the support provided by university staff to generate recommendations for similar prison–university partnerships. Data from weekly reflective progress logs and follow-up interviews with incarcerated students (n = 8) are supplemented with interviews with relevant university staff (n = 5). Theories of digital exclusion, transitional information behaviour, and digital identities inform the analysis. Preliminary findings suggest challenges emerge from the contrast between the restrictive prison information landscape and the digitally intensive university environment, combined with time pressure related to intermittent digital access. Students must continually adapt to new technologies while already immersed in a transition. Prohibitions on smartphones and online networking can lead to social stigma and hinder full participation in the student community. Nonetheless, participants showed strong determination to succeed, which could be supported through targeted support from institutional stakeholders.

Keywords

digital exclusion; England; higher education; information behaviour; prison education; transitions; United Kingdom; university

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1. Introduction

In England and Wales, Category D or "open" prisons are designed to transition individuals towards resettlement in society, usually following a period of incarceration in higher security establishments. These institutions offer opportunities to work or study off-site, alongside regular home visits.

This article arises from a doctoral thesis focusing on a group of men incarcerated in a Category D prison, who are released on temporary licence (ROTL) to attend a local university campus and complete credit-bearing modules. This partnership is primarily funded by the university and coordinated by a steering group involving representatives from both institutions. While permitted greater freedom than those in higher security establishments, the students face strict regulations, including curfews and digital disconnection during prison hours. Relatively minor rule breaches can lead to significant penalties, potentially disrupting their studies.

Rich qualitative data was gathered to explore the experiences of this distinctive group of students, and particularly how incarceration affected their information behaviour. Following Given et al. (2023), "information behaviour" is defined broadly, encompassing academic information-seeking but also informal information-sharing and avoidance behaviours. Further objectives were to understand any changes in students' information-related skills and confidence over a semester, and to evaluate the university's support systems.

Pastore (2018, p. 1274) observed that "in the collective imagination, prison and university appear as worlds apart, distinct universes: common sense has it that criminals belong to the former and respectable persons to the latter." There is a wide gulf in norms between these institutions, sometimes portrayed as a dichotomy between (penal) restriction and (academic) freedom. Scott (2018, p. 13) contrasted the humanising aims of education with penal "campuses of dehumanization." Whilst all students are also impacted by *university* regulations, there is some truth in the contrast.

A key facet of this contrast is digital. Despite ongoing policy emphasis on digital transformation, UK prisons remain reliant on paper-based systems. Administrative processes are only gradually shifting to digital formats, while digital infrastructure is geographically inconsistent and fragmented (Prison Reform Trust, 2025). The slow pace of change is as much cultural as technical. Security concerns predominate, prompting significant risk aversion around new technologies. Prison authorities are also highly conscious of UK public opinion, often held to value punishment over rehabilitation; innovations may be withheld until they can be expected to pass the "Daily Mail test" (referencing a British tabloid newspaper that frequently expresses punitive viewpoints; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). Farley and Hopkins (2017) noted that incarcerated learners can feel disconnected from online sources of support. While initiatives like Virtual Campus (a restricted virtual learning environment for incarcerated distance learners) have expanded possibilities for learning in prison, these heavily censored and monitored environments are inadequate preparation for a digital world.

Transitioning from full-time incarceration to ROTL can be an abrupt and unsettling experience, even while representing a positive moment in an individual's journey towards full societal reintegration. The contrast between the restrictive, largely paper-based, and risk-averse prison estate and the open, technology-enabled, and collaborative experience of a modern university campus is stark. Stepping outside

the "small world" (Chatman, 1999) of the prison, the students must rapidly accustom themselves to new norms. Most are expected to submit their first assignment within weeks of campus arrival, having gained sufficient familiarity not only with course content but also new procedures, ways of learning, and educational technologies. As Lloyd et al. (2013) observed, while analysing the information behaviour of another marginalised group in transition (refugees), those who do not adapt their practices to a new landscape can face exclusion and isolation.

The following literature review covers theories of digital exclusion and their application to prison and higher education contexts; information behaviour in transition; and risks for (formerly) incarcerated people in the digital sphere.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Exclusion: Theory and Applications to Resettlement

The concept of a "digital divide" based on access to internet-enabled devices has gained nuance as digital technologies have become increasingly embedded into the everyday lives of much of the world's population. Prisons are, theoretically at least, among the last remaining environments in high-income countries where inhabitants lack this basic access; even accounting for illicit possession of smartphones (HM Prison & Probation Service, 2018), the ubiquity of devices in the wider world is not reflected inside.

Additional layers of digital exclusion also disproportionately affect those impacted by incarceration. Hargittai's (2002) "second-level digital divide" revolved around the skills necessary to successfully navigate online information environments and avoid frustration, confusion, and task abandonment. Frequent and long-term internet users were notably more efficient and successful searchers, suggesting barriers for those lacking experience with technologies or whose access is withdrawn for significant periods. Increasing digital interactivity prompted distinctions between medium-related operational competencies and content-related skills for finding, using, sharing and creating information (van Deursen et al., 2011). As the binary "digital divide" conceptually shifted towards a continuum of usage and capabilities, incarcerated people were increasingly left behind.

The foundations of Helsper's (2012) "corresponding fields" model of social and digital exclusion are a person's online and offline economic, cultural, social and personal resources, underscoring the relationship between digital inclusion and social structures. The applicability of this model to those incarcerated in closed conditions can be questioned, since they lack the power to significantly alter their material circumstances. However, partnership students are emerging into a digital world, reintroducing some agency. Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) synthesised Helsper's (2012) model with rehabilitation theory, inserting a set of resources related to re-entry and identifying specific factors of particular relevance to partnership students, such as sentence length and digital self-presentation. Highly structured and resource-based approaches to digital exclusion have attracted critiques from scholars who view these as too rigid. Advantage and disadvantage are precarious states (Asmar et al., 2022), and this precarity may particularly affect information practices, which are contextual, embodied and influenced by power relations (Hicks, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2013). Helsper's (2012) and Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) models are perhaps best seen as tools to illuminate multiple barriers to digital integration faced by those disadvantaged by incarceration.

Echoing a remark by Pike and Adams's (2012, p. 372) participant that non-networked virtual learning environments (VLEs) are limited, while "the internet really means unlimited," Hopkins (2022) advocated shifting prison-based digital education in Australia towards "network literacy" skills necessary for participation in digital communities, for example evaluating online information and influencing discourse as information creators. Incarcerated distance learners now perceive that exclusion from social media-based learning communities reinforces their disconnection (Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024). Those nearing release are concerned about re-entering a changed world, confused about terminology, and anxious about asking family for technological assistance (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). Allowing basic phones in low-security categories was seen as "too little, too late" by participants in Jewkes and Reisdorf's (2016) study who were keen to acclimatise to technologies they would encounter on release. With digital education within prisons often limited by out-of-date tools and viewed as a privilege rather than an essential element of preparation for resettlement (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016), formerly incarcerated people are likely to struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing information environment once released.

The development of digital literacy skills for higher learning can represent a steep learning curve for incarcerated students. The literature suggests that these students may require more time and support to familiarise themselves with educational software, and could perceive that other students have greater digital fluency to learn, connect, and interact in ways that are not accessible to them.

2.2. Information Behaviour in Transition

This research is a study of information behaviour in transition, indebted to empirical work illuminating the challenges faced by individuals adapting to new information landscapes, including migrants (Bronstein, 2018; Kennan et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013), students participating in transfer/exchange programmes between universities (Hicks, 2022; Ivins et al., 2016), and those navigating health transitions (Meleis et al., 2000). The research has also benefited from overarching theoretical efforts to model transitional commonalities (e.g., Ruthven, 2022).

Ivins et al. (2016, p. 245) defined a transition as "a period in-between moments of stability, initiated by the move between two socio-cultural systems." Using the concept of information landscapes, which represent the collectively established and recognised information practices and norms shared by actors in an information space, Kennan et al. (2011) and Lloyd et al. (2013) considered how recent arrivals acclimatise to a new country through a cyclical and iterative process of transitioning, settling in, and becoming settled. Settlers became more proactive in seeking out information as they adjusted, diversifying sources and building networks through information-sharing, information-mapping, and observation. Transitions could require information-seeking, use of role models, and modifying existing activities and practices (Meleis et al., 2000). However, while many frameworks recognise that transition is not a linear process, fewer examine the implications of undergoing a transition between states of identity whilst repeatedly crossing boundaries between divergent information landscapes, such as prisons and universities. Existing models may fail to fully account for this back-and-forth due to lack of available data.

Experiencing a significant transition can fundamentally impact a person's self-identity, since transitions are "psychologically and emotionally disruptive to the way we experience life" (Ruthven, 2022, p. 580). Meleis et al. (2000) highlighted perceptions of difference; for transitioners, this could involve a divergence between

expectations and reality or seeing the world or themselves differently. Some previously perceived differences may be blurred, but not necessarily erased, as Bronstein's (2018) work also highlighted. Even when migrants had acclimatised to a new homeland, they could still perceive themselves as existing in a liminal state where they did not fully belong to either place. Transitions can be planned or unplanned, voluntary or involuntary, anticipated or unexpected (Ivins et al., 2016). Incarcerated people may have very little time to prepare themselves for moving into higher education, including any impact on their self-identity. Self-perception and the perceptions of others can significantly affect the success of a transition, particularly where stigma is a factor (Bronstein, 2018) and where marginalisation and ingrained cultural attitudes could inhibit access to community support (Meleis et al., 2000).

Entering new information landscapes requires learning multiple new norms and practices, often rapidly and simultaneously. Transitions are often associated with information overload (Ruthven, 2022) and culture shock (Ivins et al., 2016), which can impact an individual's performance within, and adjustment to, a new environment. Ivins et al. (2016) argued that culture shock could be mitigated if those experiencing it understand that it's a time-limited phenomenon, while all students can benefit from learning to adapt to change.

The research covered above has focused on specific contexts and is vulnerable to Ruthven's (2022, p. 579) critique that these studies "rarely reach the level of theory." He also argued that the portrayal of transitions as moments between stable states (as in Meleis et al., 2000) misses an opportunity to understand transition as a process. Ruthven (2022) proposed a model that synthesised transition-focused literature across disciplines, with an individual moving from "life before" to "life after" through a series of stages (understanding, negotiating, resolving) and processes (engaging, enacting, establishing) that are always subject to re-evaluation. Ruthven's (2022) stages are notably consistent with the three stages of desistance recognised by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2020): cessation of offending; adoption of a non-offending identity; and recognition of this change by others, alongside a sense of belonging.

2.3. Adverse Digital Incorporation and the Punitive Mesh

"Carceral citizens" with experience of criminal justice systems face relationships with authorities characterised by negative biases, limited access to "stabilizing institutions," and subjection to (post)carceral supervision and discipline (Miller & Stuart, 2017). Gurusami (2019) presented these citizens as caught in a digitally enabled "carceral web," where "stickiness" prevents them from escaping their online histories and "entanglements" tie them to a hostile justice system, while Corda emphasised the scope of a "punitive mesh" which extends far beyond formally sanctioned punishments due to the incentives driving state and corporate actors to gather and distribute personal data.

As noted above, identity reformulation is considered a crucial component of successful transitions. This reflects that successful post-incarceration resettlement requires nurturing a new identity that is also recognised by others (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020) and the development of new "life projects" (López-Armijos & Ponce de León Romero, 2025). However, the necessary privacy to adopt a new identity can be hard to find. Incarcerated people are subject to a form of "adverse digital incorporation" (Heeks, 2022) in which they are included in digital systems without their consent. Stigma is amplified by the internet because it permeates geographical boundaries, meaning that an individual incarcerated in one locality cannot expect a "clean slate" even if they subsequently relocate (Lageson & Maruna, 2018). Information

sources on an individual's past are enmeshed in a self-sustaining series of "nodes and links, of endless connection" (Corda, 2026, p. 4).

The ease of finding information about a person's prior convictions online can undermine a carefully constructed new identity, and living with an awareness of this risk is a negative drag on confidence. However, studies have also revealed the potential for formerly incarcerated people's visible participation in digital realms to create solidarity, challenge stigma and motivate others (Gurusami, 2019), suggesting that the confidence and skills required to build alternative networks may help to mitigate the effects of the punitive mesh.

3. Methods, Participants, and Timelines

3.1. Research Objectives

Research objectives for this study were to:

1. critically explore partnership students' experiences in terms of their information behaviours;
2. understand the development of individuals' information and digital literacy skills as they progress through a semester;
3. evaluate the support provided by university staff working directly with this group and provide practical recommendations.

The study was designed to gather rich, qualitative data to inform the development of themes connecting diverse individual experiences, which could be translated into recommendations for universities conducting or considering prison partnerships. The designation "partnership students" aims to avoid stigmatising language around imprisonment.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

Participants were first asked to complete weekly semi-structured "progress logs," an adaptation of the solicited diary method (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Across a 12-week semester (10 logs with two break weeks), participants received three to five questions on a defined topic (e.g., interactions with other students or future career plans) designed to illuminate instances of information seeking, use, evaluation and sharing. Semi-structured follow-up interviews lasting 60–150 minutes provided insight into why participants had highlighted specific issues. The combination of progress logs and interviews was an iterative process (see Section 3.4) and significantly deepened the analysis by enabling detailed exploration of whole experiences alongside providing more structured records of progression. Tonal differences between data sources were noted, with participants more formal in writing and more confidential in person.

3.3. Sample

The sample was small, comprising a total of eight male students (Table 1) and five staff (Table 2). Four students participated in 2024–2025 and four in early 2026. Due to volatility within the prison system (e.g., participants being released or recalled to closed conditions), not all participants completed every stage

of the study; however, a further phase of interviews was conducted with three previous participants post-release to see how this had impacted their studies. Significant changes occurred between cohorts, notably more widespread adoption of generative AI and a relaxation of the prohibition on smartphones.

All participants would be classed as mature students in the UK, and many were significantly older than the average undergraduate. Participants came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, in line with the broader student population at the university. Specific demographic information is not included here to protect identities within this small sample. Pseudonyms are used throughout. The two institutions are identified simply as the university and the prison.

Table 1. Student participants ($n = 8$).

Cohort	Pseudonym	Progress logs completed	Interview 1	Interview 2
1	Terry	10 weeks	May 2024	May 2025
1	Dylan	9 weeks	May 2024	May 2025
1	Malik	N/A (recruited at interview stage)	May 2024	April 2025
1	Leon	4 weeks	Withdrew	n/a
2	Alan	9 weeks	May 2026	n/a
2	Rohan	10 weeks	May 2026	n/a
2	Viktor	3 weeks	Withdrew	n/a
2	Connor	2 weeks	Withdrew	n/a

University staff participants comprised three student support staff, one lecturer, and one study skills tutor, all experienced educational professionals selected for their close engagement with partnership students over timeframes ranging from just under two years to over a decade. Although analysis of their relatively recent contributions is at a preliminary stage, some quotations are included to offer a broader range of perspectives.

Table 2. Staff participants.

Pseudonym	Interviews
Sophia	Single interviews February—March 2026
Richard	
Elena	
Kieran	
Jemma	

3.4. Data Analysis

Progress logs were coded first, in consecutive sets by cohort. Since the questions were pre-determined, coding was used to shape the student follow-up interviews rather than to suggest themes. Initially, many codes had queries attached. For example, in response to the prompt "Have you encountered any difficulties due to lack of access to particular technologies or devices either on or off campus?", Terry commented:

> There is help on the campus for everything the difficult[y] is not having enough time with the studies and preparation.

This was initially coded as "lack of time" but appended with "(To seek support? Related to intermittent access to devices?)." Combined with further mentions of limited time across Terry's log, this suggested that the issue of time would be worth exploring in the interview, where it emerged that Terry had missed some early digital workshops because he didn't have a functioning laptop, but also that intermittent access to devices made him feel pressured to use every on-campus hour productively.

The interviews were individually subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), where further codes were applied and themes were constructed, informed by my deepening understanding of the literature and the context. Audio recordings were transcribed and imported into Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis tool which supports clustering codes into visual thematic bubbles.

3.5. Ethics

This study gained ethics approval from Robert Gordon University and the HMPPS National Research Committee (NRC), which must approve all research with incarcerated individuals in England and Wales. Written consent from participants was gained following distribution of the Participant Information Sheet, which provided details of their rights, confidentiality, and anticipated risks and benefits of voluntary participation.

Building rapport and trust was crucial. For Patenaude (2004, p. 79), gaining participants' trust "requires assurances that what they reveal is important, that it will be reported in an accurate albeit anonymous manner, and that it will not harm them or their respective positions in any manner." It was particularly crucial to reassure student participants that their decision on whether to participate in the study and any contributions they chose to make would not affect their university progression or their status within the prison. While audio-recorded with participants' consent, interviews were deliberately designed to resemble an informal conversation as opposed to an interrogation that may remind participants of negative experiences within the justice system.

Participants were assured that their privacy would be protected as far as possible with the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details from published extracts, but also alerted that the small size of the cohort could pose the risk of "jigsaw identification" by those familiar with the programme and so complete anonymity could not be guaranteed. All participants agreed to these terms. Participants had an opportunity to review transcripts and note anything they would like to change or omit from published extracts. Only one participant, a staff member, requested the removal of an anecdote that they felt could identify a non-participant student and this request was honoured.

4. Data and Analysis

The following analysis addresses technology-related challenges faced by partnership students as they transition into higher education. The four indicative themes span the research project, encompassing more than the digital aspects highlighted in the present article but selected for their relevance to that topic. Some quotations are lightly edited for clarity.

Despite the challenges outlined, students enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to experience higher education. Rohan had always aspired to attend university but missed out due to a volatile home life, followed

by incarceration, and was excited "to fulfil the ambition to go to university which I am fully embracing." Terry reflected that "these two past semesters have not only taught me that I have the ability to learn, they have also given me a chance to integrate back into society gently. If I had not have come to [this prison,] I would have never got to university….I would have not reintegrate[d] back into society so positively."

The motivation and commitment displayed by university staff should also be acknowledged. As Jemma (staff) noted, every time she visits the prison for "open days" to recruit prospective students, she feels a sense of "brokenness" in the room, prompted by incarceration, and then "I'm even more motivated to be involved, which is why I keep going. I want to come and do a teaching session. Let me come and show them that they can be in a university-level educational space and perform." As the analysis demonstrates, staff are creative and adaptive in their approaches to guiding these students through transition.

However, digital integration presents significant challenges from the moment that students arrive on campus. The following analysis will cover their initial experiences upon arrival; the challenge of completing assignments on time with intermittent access to digital devices; ongoing technological change occurring in parallel to their transition; and the effect of digital technologies on students' formation of new identities.

4.1. Arrivals and Information Overload

Terry illustrates a significant challenge of emerging into wider society following long custodial sentences:

> Before I came away, I never used a cash point, I hadn't used click and collect, bike lanes and scooter lanes are extremely dangerous for me as I continuously forget as I walk down the path.

The scale of the challenge is dependent on incarceration length, echoing Gurusami's (2019) findings and illustrated by Malik, who served a shorter sentence:

> There was only like what, a year and a half, when I wasn't using any technology and stuff at that time. Nothing had changed drastically over that time, so I was quite lucky in that sense.

While Malik had some prior experience of university before his sentence, Dylan was encountering educational technologies for the first time:

> I've always been able to use computers…but I haven't used a computer academically in so long.

Staff delivering inductions had to adopt creative approaches to enable digital enrolment:

> Our first hurdle, and this is where we lose loads of time, is that students don't know what is the personal e-mail…the prison registered for them….We discovered this year that sometimes we have to ignore what the prison has done. We started to create Outlook accounts there and then, and they created their password. (Elena, staff)

Induction staff took digital photos of the students for enrolment, but students struggled with the subsequent procedures:

> Even downloading a photo from an e-mail, saving it and uploading it to the enrolment form, for some people that was quite a challenge to do at the very first point because they're not used to handling digital images. And it's all the things that they're not allowed to do in prison. (Sophia, staff)

Kennan et al. (2011) found that those who have already adjusted to a new information landscape have a "complex internal map" which they can communicate to others. Chatman's (1999) work suggested that inhabitants of a "small world" like a prison are more likely to trust information originating from fellow inhabitants. One progress log asked whether participants had sought guidance from other partnership students. Some exchanged tips on educational technologies like email, chat, and the VLE, while one student reported that the cohort agreed to avoid disclosing their circumstances to avoid unwanted attention towards the group.

Partnership students had few unstructured opportunities to imagine and explore their "possible futures" (Hicks, 2022) in the university environment or prepare for the transition. Pre-enrolment information is limited to an "open day" at the prison (university staff visits to introduce the programme to prospective students), a printed prospectus, and interviews with admissions staff. Students must undertake an accelerated process of constructing knowledge and new identities when they arrive on campus.

Information overload during transition could mean that participants miss key details. Relevant knowledge may be gained later, through experience and observation, following cues provided by staff and other students (Kennan et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013). Terry explained:

> It actually took me about the fourth week before I found out about the reading materials….And [the lecturer] said: "Read this one." Week 4! I wish I'd known that!

He missed specific learning opportunities, including digital skills training, because he felt overwhelmed and his laptop was malfunctioning.

Meanwhile, Dylan learned by observing other students that viewing presentation slides side-by-side with notes during lectures helped him to follow the content: "It's just such a simple fix…and I just overlooked it."

As the partnership between the university and the prison has developed, staff have evolved their approaches to introducing the students to new technologies:

> One of the hidden curriculum skills issues is *definitely* IT. When you haven't got access to IT at other times, you know, where maybe you haven't used IT much at all in years…the starting point for that is just *way* back, you know? And trying to teach, I realized I needed to break that down much more and have it filtered all the way through…it needs lots of training, but the training has to be drip-fed, not thrown in all at once, otherwise it becomes overwhelming. (Richard, staff)

A strong support network of engaged and motivated staff and more established partnership students helps to mitigate the challenges but does not entirely eradicate them. This reinforces the idea of transition as an ongoing process, with students persistently re-evaluating their activities as they work through understanding, negotiating and resolving their new identities (Ruthven, 2022).

4.2. "Doing Time"

Almost all participants mentioned the lack of access to devices, software, and the internet during evenings and weekends as a significant barrier to effective learning, yet students had varying opinions on whether internet access should be enabled in the prison. Malik was in favour:

> If I'm sat in jail all weekend, I should be able to go to the library in the prison and crack on with some uni work. I should be able to have access to [the VLE] from the prison.

Dylan feared that if prison authorities permitted devices in prison there would be a corresponding reduction in the time that students were licenced to be on campus. This chimes with Hofinger and Pflegerl's (2024) argument that digitalisation of prisons under institutional constraints could negatively impact incarcerated people's rights.

For Alan, lacking evening and weekend access to his laptop and the internet "means that I have to plan work well, rather than leave deadlines until the last weekend." Other participants acknowledged that they initially struggled to manage their time. At one point, Malik felt he might not be able to continue with his studies, but recognised that:

> It was just me not knowing how to manage my work…when you come in and you have a laid back approach, all the work builds up…you're gonna be overwhelmed.

Malik felt that he had gained time management skills as he progressed with his studies through re-evaluating his approach. However, this was challenged by new distractions when he was released:

> Even something small like a mobile phone, where I wasn't used to having one for years, and now all I wanna do is just look at it, go on Instagram looking at reels for an hour.

Dylan was granted an extension for one assignment, but that impacted his schedule for completing other modules:

> That knock-on effect is *massive*. Because we only get the time that we have. And it had a domino effect on the rest of my assignments after that point, which meant that I was really *rushing*…the pressure was on.

As Terry noted, while another student might be able to:

> Pick his computer up at night or on a Saturday, when he's got an assignment, we can't do that. We're back with our prison faces, hard as nails…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.

As the participants moved between the university and the prison, as well as home leave and eventual release for some, they traversed multiple information landscapes. In contrast to individuals making permanent

moves (Bronstein, 2018; Kennan et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013), these students must reconcile the different expectations placed on them at different times, placing them under significant pressure to adapt, achieve, and conform.

4.3. New Technologies, New Challenges

Participants in the first cohort were strictly prohibited from using smartphones, and some had strong views on this:

> These are things that we should be allowed to have because you want us to integrate, reintegrate into society. And that's on a smartphone these days. (Terry)

This chimes with Hopkins's (2022) comments on the necessity of developing network literacy, and Jewkes and Reisdorf's (2016) finding that basic phones in open prisons could be "too little, too late."

The second cohort were the first to be permitted smartphones, but they had to purchase these personally. This created a new inequality *within* the cohort, illustrated by Alan and Victor's very different experiences of navigating the university environment:

> I have an iPhone and laptop now, which have eradicated the initial challenges. Without the smartphone I couldn't register for lectures or open links in a lecture. Now, even on the bus or train, I can check my emails and [the VLE]. (Alan)

> I do not have access to a smartphone and this also causes me issues on a daily basis, such as registering my attendance and getting information from relevant apps for my course. (Viktor)

The overall perception from both staff and students was that smartphones were necessary for effective resettlement in a digital society, particularly due to the ubiquity of QR codes as a primary route to access information. Sophia (staff) welcomed the prison's policy change, noting that it may enable students to participate in more extracurricular activities:

> I think the smartphones will kind of empower them to feel a little bit more confident in those interactions, that it's one less barrier to them being able to fit in and blend in as a student.

Even as both institutions evolve their practices and students develop coping mechanisms, the information landscape is being constantly reshaped by technological advances:

> The pace that technology and things like AI and everything is developing…smartphones, laptops, all the different devices, Chromebooks, all the learning tools and the methods that we use for learning now…and digital submission of assignments. It's not just a case of writing an assignment now, it's like, is it in the right digital format? (Sophia, staff)

The widespread adoption of AI was a significant development during the study. Jemma (staff) was uncertain about the partnership students' ability to adapt to authorised use of AI in assignments:

> We're starting to integrate AI into our coursework….I would imagine that those skills would be lacking in the students as they turn up.

Some students saw potential in the new tools, but there was notable apprehension. Viktor and Terry embraced opportunities to learn to use AI effectively for their studies, even as Terry described this experience as "akin to learning to fly a Boeing 747 with a manual in Russian which is upside down." After some initial experimentation, Malik decided to avoid AI tools where possible because he felt that they could negatively impact his learning:

> I've tried to stay away from [AI]. Because when I originally first started I was hanging around with [another partnership student] and I was…I wouldn't say I was relying on AI, but I was using it at certain times and I was like, "why aren't you using it?" He said, "I'd rather spend the time doing it properly, I learn more from it," and I thought, "you know, that's actually the best way to do it." So even if I struggle with it and it doesn't come out in the most academic way, at least I can just try and improve on it from there.

A further significant change preceding this study was the transformation of staff working patterns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. With the students' academic advisors primarily based off-campus, video conferencing interactions required another new skillset:

> Being able to use headsets to log on to calls for people, to do Zoom meetings…going and seeing someone doesn't necessarily mean walking to a room and knocking on a door, it's finding a quiet computer, knowing how to log on, knowing how to connect digitally with people. (Sophia, staff)

Terry found groupwork challenging, but he did report a positive experience of using cloud-hosted software to work on a group presentation: "We're all in different locations, I was on home leave. And this is the first time that I've really seen technology work." Group members were able to edit and comment on the draft in "real time" and overcame distance barriers to deliver a successful presentation.

New technologies presented both opportunities and challenges for all partnership stakeholders. A notable finding is that students are experiencing change *within* change, as they transition to university and encounter digital technologies which are simultaneously evolving very rapidly. To Meleis et al.'s (2000, p. 19) notion that "transitions are both the result *of change* and result *in change*" could be added the idea that transitions can also occur *in the context* of change.

4.4. Stigma and (Digital) Identities

All students in this study expressed the desire to "blend in" as much as possible with the university population. Partnership students can choose whether to disclose their status to other students, but none of the participants had, due to concern about negative reactions:

> 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)

Malik was sensitive to the fact that other students might have been victims of crime and formed opinions on that basis, while also feeling that:

> It leaves you vulnerable as well, because if [a] person doesn't like you for any reason, then they know a way that they can get rid of you, essentially.

This feeling of precarity was widely shared. As they remained entangled in the "carceral web" (Gurusami, 2019), students feared having university privileges withdrawn if a rule was breached or relations with prison authorities soured:

> You are always living on the edge being from prison, you can never truly relax, as ultimately you do not really have control of your life. We are extremely privileged to have this opportunity. However, if you make the wrong move or upset someone in the prison, you could have all of this taken away. (Terry)

Digital restrictions placed on partnership students by the prison presented significant obstacles to blending in. The first cohort were prohibited from owning smartphones and instead issued with basic phones. Elena (staff) recognised that this could force students to disclose their status or seek special treatment, for example when registering attendance in lectures or accessing the Sports Centre (both activities usually require QR codes and workarounds involved explanations to staff).

Partnership students are subject to unannounced prison "spot checks" when they are expected to respond to a phone call and briefly meet with an officer to confirm their presence on campus. These calls had the potential to draw unwanted attention, exemplified by an incident when partnership students were studying together in the library:

> One of my classmates…she came and sat with me because she wanted me to help her out with some work. And a couple of the lads [partnership students] are sitting nearby, and my phone goes off, his phone goes off, then *his* phone goes off, and she's thinking "well what are you up to? You're up to no good." I'm not gonna tell her that I'm a prisoner. (Malik)

These basic phones could also be mistaken for "burner" phones, commonly used by drug dealers because they are less traceable and easily discarded, as Terry observed:

> So let's say I'm one of the students, yeah? I see a guy with a phone like that [indicates phone]. That's a burner phone. They search [my name], it comes up. Then they go and tell their parents, "that guy working there, he was in, he done all this." And the next thing, it could be blown out of proportion. All because of these phones, yeah? All because of them.

Terry's comment alludes to a form of "adverse incorporation" (Heeks, 2022), since records of the students' convictions are often available online, and partnership students are sensitive to the risk that other students could find them. As Terry noted, "all they got to do is Google you." He reported avoiding forming friendships so that other students would not attempt to connect with him online:

> 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?"

Digital self-presentation was an element of Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) adaptation of Helsper's (2012) model for successful rehabilitation, but without access to social media, these students have little control over their online profiles.

Participants invented reasons to explain why they didn't have a smartphone. Terry used his mature student status, telling other students that he didn't have one because "I'm an old man! I don't know how to use these smartphones." Malik varied his excuses, saying that his smartphone was broken or that he was a "conspiracy theorist," adding that fellow students didn't always believe him: "They think I'm talking rubbish!"

University staff, however, were frequently perceived to be supportive. When Malik was struggling with an assignment, he spoke to the lecturer and felt comfortable enough to explain the challenges he faced:

> He went through it all and said, "look, you can't be doing this, you need to be doing that. I want you to do well because you come to every class." So I told him my situation and he said, "if there's anything you need, just let me know," and he was quite supportive.

However, Richard (staff) recognised that not all partnership students would feel comfortable asking for help:

> I think there are massive barriers…which are about holding back part of yourself, not necessarily wanting to belong entirely, having a deficit sense of yourself, which actually might make you *not* want to engage with skills development activities because it's embarrassing.

Terry had confidence in his ability to succeed in his studies, provided that suitable support was in place:

> If I'm given the right help, the right assistance, the right guidance, I always believe that then I can achieve anything, and I *know* I can achieve anything…you need to have that belief, but you need to have the assistance as well.

Meleis et al. (2000) observed that personal, community and societal conditions can facilitate or hinder transitions, while stigma is a clear factor in preventing people from accessing resources that might help. The findings from my study support these conclusions, as well as highlighting some of the ways in which specific restrictions such as social media bans can impact those undergoing resettlement. Fears of being "outed" as incarcerated individuals cast a significant shadow over the students' experience, and these findings suggest that this is one of the most significant barriers to integration in the university environment.

5. Conclusion

Based on a study exploring the experiences of students released on licence to attend university, this article addressed digital aspects of their transition. Drawing on extant literature on digital inclusion and exclusion of incarcerated people, information behaviour during transitions, and risks for incarcerated people when participating in digital realms, this article makes a particular contribution to understanding experiences of those reintegrating into society while still housed in a carceral institution. Particularly notable findings concern experiences of "transition within transition," prompted by rapid technological change occurring in parallel to an ongoing change in an individual's circumstances and students' experiences of daily movement

between information landscapes. This adds a new dimension to models of information behaviour in transition such as Ruthven's (2022) framework.

5.1. Key Contributions

The findings show that students who are unfamiliar with digital educational technologies face a steep learning curve as they transition to a digitally-enabled environment, particularly if they have endured long incarceration. The university represents a new information landscape (Lloyd et al., 2013), yet these students are perpetually moving backwards and forwards *between* landscapes with differing expectations and adapting their practices accordingly. Since students have limited opportunities to prepare (practically and psychologically) for this transition, staff should introduce new information gradually. This is particularly evident in the realm of digital skills.

Intermittent access to devices places time constraints on students. While some developed effective coping strategies to address this, others initially struggled to manage their workload in the time available. Students' re-evaluation of their strategies over time reinforces that transition is a process, rather than a moment (Ruthven, 2022). Meanwhile, the rapid evolution of new technologies forces students to navigate further change while already undergoing a process of transition. Students must rapidly develop information literacy and communications skills to make effective use of emerging technologies such as generative AI and video conferencing. This notion of "transition within transition" is posited as a key contribution of the current research to existing literature.

The findings also revealed the affective labour involved in managing identity across institutional boundaries, especially since students lacked control over how they were represented online. Partnership students are attempting to build new, pro-social identities with the ever-present fear that disclosing their circumstances would stigmatise them and impact their relationships with other students or the progression of their university studies. This extends existing literature (e.g., Gurusami, 2019) to currently incarcerated individuals.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

This is a small, highly context-specific study. While the sample size and data collection methods enabled deep exploration of these students' experiences, the findings are not generalisable to other situations. Incarcerated students undertaking distance learning within closed conditions, for example, face significantly different challenges. The restrictions and opportunities experienced by these students are unique to this local context.

The findings may, however, help to inform the development of similar partnerships between universities and "open" prisons, across England and Wales and similar regimes. More quantitative research examining, for example, student achievement and retention rates or impact on re-offending could strengthen the case for investment in partnerships.

5.3. Recommendations

There is a good case for university staff engagement with prospective students within the prison, at earlier stages and more regular intervals. Jemma's proposal to run lecture-style sessions inside could allow incarcerated individuals to imagine "possible futures" (Hicks, 2022) involving university, enabling a realistic assessment of the potential benefits and challenges while mitigating the risk of information overload during induction for those who choose this path.

The recent revision of the prohibition on smartphones presents opportunities for students with financial means to navigate the university environment more smoothly, but also introduces a new economic inequality. Recognising both the benefits and challenges of this new situation, the partnership steering group could seek more sustainable and equitable arrangements to fund the provision of these devices to promote broader digital inclusion. The prison could also consider whether arrangements already in place for distance learners to access study materials off-campus could be expanded to these students, and whether training could be offered to introduce inhabitants to emerging technologies in a secure way.

Finally, students may benefit from more guidance on how to address their apparent differences in interactions with other students while maintaining their privacy, and how to respond if the new identities they are building for themselves are ever compromised by digitally available information about their past.

5.4. Final Remarks

Despite substantial challenges, the findings strongly support that university study represents a positive opportunity which builds confidence and can assist with the reconstruction of identities. A final comment from Terry is indicative of the positive benefits of this partnership arrangement:

> What university gave me was giving me that little bit longer to adapt. Had I stayed in the prison environment and come straight out….I wouldn't have had time to adapt, and university gave me that. It gave me an insight into the better side of life.

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Data Availability

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