Online Teaching and Learning in Correctional Facilities: Opportunities and Tensions

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Abstract

In a prison environment, inmates participating in online learning face numerous challenges. Access to education and digital materials must compete with security protocols that usually stifle innovative approaches to online learning. Education in prison environments is well-established, and studies attest to this notion. This article explores online learning in a correctional environment where inmates enrol with two distance education institutions, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) and the University of South Africa (UNISA). The study showcases the conditions, opportunities and tensions in online education in prison contexts in the nexus of providing access while ensuring security. The article further concedes that various countries are embarking on viable partnerships between correctional services, institutions of higher learning, non-governmental agencies, and other stakeholders. The two institutions, OUUK and UNISA, through well-guided Memoranda of Agreements (as argued in this article), have provided best practices and models that could be emulated to advance the agenda for the fourth industrial revolution in online learning. The qualitative documentary research that directed this article used a case study of the two open distance learning institutions, and it entailed a directed, inductive document analysis of national and institutional policies and Memoranda of Agreement (MoA). The research findings point to the continued impact of the tensions between access and security and strategies in ameliorating these tensions. Thus, with specific practices and multiple factors in each country, conditions and opportunities for online learning exist and are utilised to the best of each country's abilities in offenders' educational pursuits.

Keywords: access and security; distance education (DE); online learning; correctional facilities; Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK); University of South Africa (UNISA)

UNISA

Introduction

In a prison environment, inmates'[1] participation in online learning requires access to educational and digital materials without interfering with prison security protocols. The situation poses several challenges to students, educators, institutions, and prison authorities. The challenges require these various stakeholders to make crucial decisions regarding innovative approaches and strategies to navigate the challenges posed by the restrictive prison environment. Providing access to education in prison facilities[2] is well-established, and various studies attest to this notion (Johnson 2015; Linden and Perry 1983). However, these studies show that the potential and challenges of online teaching and learning in correctional environments have not been adequately addressed within distance education, and perhaps in adult education literature. This study aims to contribute to the literature mapping of the conditions, opportunities, and tensions in offering online learning in prison contexts. The study that directed this article focused on two distance education universities—the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) and the University of South Africa (UNISA), offering online learning to inmates.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2014), aim at achieving a prosperous life for all. SDG 4 ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong opportunities for all. However, as observed, "limited consideration has been paid and little data collected so far on the impact of criminal justice policies on education. Criminal justice and prison reform must play a part in achieving the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda" (Penal Reform International 2017, 1). Core to realising the SDGs in education—whether formal through post-school, non-formal or informal—the two institutions in this case study function and operate in two different contexts. Notably, these contexts present broad areas that could apply in other education systems with a broader scope.

The national legislative environments and documents of the two countries relevant to the issues in this article were identified and discussed. The study identified critical issues in the respective Memoranda of Agreement/Understanding that guide the two institutions, OUUK and UNISA, regarding their responsibilities and commitments to education and collaboration with prison facilities in their respective countries.

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1   In this article, different concepts are used interchangeably to refer to prisoners, offenders, inmates, incarcerated people. The reason for this is that each country adopts its own terminologies. For instance, the UK still uses prisoners, while South Africa has adopted two concepts—inmates or offenders.

2   The notion of the "prison environment" is used interchangeably with correctional facilities or centres to mean the same.

Research Questions

Against the above backdrop, the purpose of this study is to explore the tensions and opportunities in providing online teaching and learning in two different contexts.

The research questions flowing from the above-stated introduction are stated as follows:

- How do the legal and regulatory factors impact online education in prison facilities?
- What are the different opportunities, tensions, and challenges in the nexus of providing access amid security concerns?
- As pronounced in their Memoranda of Agreement, what are the responsibilities and commitments in providing online education in two specific cases (i.e., OUUK and UNISA)?

Review of Related Literature

The right to education is generally regarded as a universal human right and a legal requisite for all citizens, including serving offenders. Although this human right to education is universal, certain factors inhibit the freedom of some offenders who want to study and the full implementation of educational programmes to a varying degree, depending on individual countries' circumstances. In line with the research questions, the literature review attempts to establish what is already known regarding the nexus of access to education and security concerns and the resulting tensions, opportunities, and challenges of providing online learning to incarcerated populations. This section briefly highlights the literature review regarding two countries with developed economies (the USA and Australia) and two countries with developing African economies, namely West Africa (Nigeria) and Central Africa (Kenya), including Uganda. The discussion explores access to online learning programmes and experiences in security issues, focusing on conditions, opportunities and challenges. The literature further explores some partnerships with universities between correctional facilities and institutions and organisations in each country where they exist.

Selected Developed Countries

The United States of America

Tolbert et al.'s (2015) report on technology in penal institutions in the USA points to opportunities and challenges brought about by using technology for educational purposes nationally. The report further notes that advanced technologies in USA correctional facilities have been used successfully for security and communications monitoring, case management, data collection, analysis, and sharing. Therefore, the same model could be applied to online learning (Tolbert et al. 2015). Weise (2021) asserts that online learning in the USA is steadily gaining traction, with many online service providers showing interest in providing online teaching and learning services to inmates. Projects such as the Prison-to-College-Pipeline (P2CP), Prisoner Re-entry Institute, the Prison University Project (PUP) at the Saint Quentin State Prison in

California, and Bard Prison Initiative, have been cited as best models, among other initiatives (Harpaz 2019; Weise 2021).

Australia

Cloud Technology is perceived as allowing learners to download content from the Internet and store it for later use. While there are other important uses and functions of cloud technology and computing, the cloud works as a service in providing information technology (IT) infrastructure, and as a service platform in providing customers with hardware-software for developing, running and managing applications without the cost, complexity, and inflexibility of building and maintaining that platform on-premises. Organisations use cloud technology to tailor-make their data infrastructure, hardware, software, and file storage, and to access and retrieve them from any web-enabled interface (IBM Cloud Team 2022). Some facilities introduced cloud technology as a compromise to afford inmates the downloading of content related to their studies, which circumvents full use of the Internet. However, McFarlane and Pike (2019) observe that most correctional facilities do not provide these literacies and skills to inmates due to limited resources and the security risks they pose for correctional centres' management. Garner (2017) also notes that cloud technology is still unavailable to some centres where such services do not exist. Furthermore, some higher learning institutions have initiated projects to provide and support offenders studying in correctional facilities to mitigate such risks. Mullich (2011) states the 16 ways cloud technology may change people's lives. His views are more inclined to business and economic issues, but can similarly apply to the educational sector, as it concerns the importance of data in cloud computing. Similarly, cloud technology can be beneficial in correctional centres and other organisations for the inmates conducting their studies through accessing information by using various technological devices, if they do not compromise the security protocols.

The *Making the Connection* Project by the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in 2014 conceptualised and implemented a successful partnership that benefited many inmates. The project introduced a server with a version of the learning management system (a Moodle-based system called the *USQ Offline StudyDesk*) and internet-independent notebook computers. The USQ undertook the prison project in four states, with discussions underway for widespread roll-out across Australia (Farley, Pike, and Hopkins 2015).

Selected Developing Countries

Nigeria

In recent years, there have been noticeable new developments demonstrating the political will regarding access to education for prisoners, including efforts in Nigerian prisons (UNESCO 2021). In line with the research objectives of this study, conditions and opportunities to provide educational opportunities are extended to previously disadvantaged prisoners. Ndunagu and Tanglang (2019) comment that information technology (IT) is a prisoner's self-employment, alluding that if prisoners gain IT skills,

sometimes they can secure employment in related areas, thus giving them a new lease of life. An article published in the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN 2020) about the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) reveals an undertaking by the institution to provide free education for prisoners. The role played by the NOUN—in providing formal schooling and informal training targeting IT for prisoners to curb recidivism and give them access to educational opportunities during their incarceration—is applauded in many quarters around Nigeria. Although not specifically directed at online learning in prison, basic computer knowledge and skills such as Microsoft software applications are being provided by NOUN, in partnership with the Centre for Human Resources and in collaboration with Kaduna State Ministry of Justice, for use in further education, business, and other facets of life post-incarceration (Ndunagu and Tanglang 2019). The knowledge and skills in computer use are a step in the right direction, as online learning starts from using a computer that some inmates do not possess. The collaboration is envisaged as extending to other states and correctional facilities. This educational project aims to provide computer training to inmates at a basic level, while advanced levels follow. In recognising the role played by NOUN, Ogidan and Sanusi (2012) recommend that ODL institutions, such as NOUN, should use a multidisciplinary approach in addressing problems of access and provision, ranging from sound policy formulation to the education delivery details in classrooms, while the initiative extends to other parts of the country in general and correctional centres particularly.

Kenya/Uganda

The African Prison Project (APP) was founded in 2018 in Kenya and Uganda to provide educational opportunities for inmates and prison staff by providing resources and study materials and identifying areas of interest and careers (APP 2018). Strides were made in training paralegals and exploring various learning methods, including digitising learning in prisons (APP 2018). Krolak (2019) and Bowden (2018) view digital technologies offered for inmates in Kenya and Uganda as a model adapted for prison libraries in providing online learning in various aspects of learning across Africa. Their study concedes that the APP, funded by non-government agencies in the UK, supports prison educational programmes in the two East African countries. "Longer term, we want to expand geographically, where there is a broader need. So, we will take this model—which is working so effectively in Kenya and Uganda—and implement it more widely across Africa" (APP 2018, 24). Another observation in a study by Makokha and Mutisya (2016) reveals that the adoption of e-learning for inmates at the university level was still in its infancy stage in public universities in Kenya, such as the seven public universities where the study was conducted. Additionally, the focus of the study by Makokha and Mutisya (2016) did not consider issues of security when inmates were offered an opportunity to study online.

This study adds its voice to what was recommended by Coates (2016) regarding the review of prison education that stand-alone laptops should be made available to students for use in education centres and free Open Learning short courses in an offline format. That is done in some countries, including South Africa, where inmates are fighting for

their rights to education through courts of law to use laptops, maybe through offline format.

Methodology

A Qualitative Case Study Design

A case study starts with the researcher asking questions on the phenomenon being studied, as outlined by the three questions guiding this study. Thus, a qualitative case study design was used in exploring online learning in the prison context as an intervention by the two distance education (DE) institutions. The two units of analysis are the two institutions being studied, namely the OOUK and UNISA, to determine how the findings link with their interpretation and discussions (Yin 2013). The case study design could yield valid responses to the research questions (without generalising the findings), as each institution is unique in its practices and operations. A case study regarding online provision in correctional facilities with two units of analysis prompted the researcher to explore the two institutions' unclearly defined phenomena and contexts (Leedy and Ormrod 2005).

Document Research Approach and Data Collection

This study used a qualitative document research approach to collect and analyse data. Documents are considered a valuable source for collecting data for research. De Vos et al. (2011) affirm that document study comprises various documents, classified as primary and secondary sources for multiple purposes. As an approach, it refers to using documents for research for those individuals and groups who will use it (Monageng 2006; Savin-Baden and Major 2013). The use of selected documents for this study (and their availability through open access) was enough to respond to the research questions; thus, there was no need to use other data collection methods that warranted being or meeting data sources.

One source of electronic documents is the Internet, referred to as virtual documents, as observed by Bryman and Bell (2011). Using email communication, the researcher approached the staff at the two DE universities responsible for handling programmes offering education to offenders. They were requested to provide documents for the study, particularly the memoranda documents that inform the third research question of this study. That included information on the internal procedures and processes on partnership agreements used.

The use of documents for data collection has both advantages and shortcomings. As a rich source of information, documents are one of the best data collection methods suggested by some scholars (Bryman and Bell 2011; De Vos et al. 2011; Savin-Baden and Major 2013). However, documentary research can pose challenges for researchers, such as the incompleteness of documents, some documents written with the authors' biases, and a lack of standard format. It is not easy to compare data with other information (De Vos et al. 2011). Other views on the shortcomings of documents are

that they may be "unrepresentative, they may be selective, lack objectivity, be of unknown validity and may be deliberately deceptive" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 182). Studying the two institutions sometimes presented a challenge wherein, comparing similar scenarios, the available information was not very compatible, with one institution having more information than the other in some respects and vice versa.

Table 1: Documents that were used for the study, the rationale for the choice and for their analysis

Types of documents used for data collection and data analysis	OUUK	UNISA
Legal documents Policy documents	• House of Commons Justice Committee. 2019. HC191. Prison Governance: First report of session 2019–2020 • The Government of the UK, through Ministry of Justice, launched a White Paper on Prison Safety and Reform, 2016. • MoJ-HMPPS 2017. Policy framework, PET, Legal framework by the UK Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.	• Department of Correctional Services. 2005. White Paper on Corrections in South Africa. • South African National Planning Commission: Vision 2030. 2011. • CHE 2014 on Post-school Level Approach on Technological and Digital Use for Educational Purposes. • DHET 2014. On Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-school System.
Published research findings in the context of the OUUK and UNISA	• McFarlane, R. and Pike, A. 2019. *Degrees of Freedom: Prison Education and the Open University—from Prisoner to Student.*	• Wolela, M. 2016. "Correctional Services Introduce UNISA ICT Hubs for Offender Online Studies." • Johnson, L. R. 2017 "Enhancing Distance Learning via Computer-based Hubs in Correctional Education Environment: The UNISA Experience"
Memoranda of agreement Institutional reports/annual	• MoJ-HMPPS 2017. The Memorandum of Agreement and partnership between the HMPPS and the OUUK. • OUUK. 2017. Annual Report, 2017–2018.	• UNISA 2017. Department of Correctional Services Memorandum of Understanding. • UNISA 2015. 2030 Strategic Plan: An Agenda for Transformation. • UNISA 2018. Policy on ODeL.

Data Analysis

Each institution's specific experiences and practices were noted and analysed to provide a pattern relevant to the research issues. Upon identifying the patterns in the documents, the researcher created a generalised understanding of online learning provision amidst

access and security challenges. Yin (2013) provides guidelines regarding how a case study can be structured and its protocols developed. The author further suggests five case study analysis techniques: "pattern-matching; explanatory; time-series; logic models; and cross-case synthesis" (Yin 2013, 156). Using a pattern-matching logic in this study, implies that the independent variables derived from the critical issues of the research questions could be predicted to follow an outcome. The three research questions of the study provided several independent variables, such as legal and regulatory factors, responsibilities and commitments as found in Memoranda of Agreement, and opportunities, tensions, and challenges in providing access amid security concerns. Pattern-matching was also used to formulate sub-headings, structure the flow of the findings discussions, and the study's results based on the key issues. The second analysis technique of cross-case synthesis enabled the study to identify similarities—converging issues and differences—and divergent matters in each case scenario of the OUUK and UNISA. The advantage of using the cross-case synthesis and content analysis was also to note the strengths/conditions and challenges prevailing in each country and institution, based on the identified patterns.

The Scale: Trustworthiness

Bryman and Bell (2011, 545) note, "the kinds of sources upon which content analysis is often carried out in social sciences are documents." They suggest criteria or scales for the use of documents as sources of data:

- Authenticity/accuracy: Reflecting the reality of the situation; must be legitimate and accurate. This study ensured that the identified and used documents were cross-referenced with other publications on the issues discussed.
- Credibility/reliability: Reliable and trustworthy documents. Memoranda of Agreement (MoA)/Memoranda of Understanding (MoU)[3] are the institutions' official and mandatory documents. Thus, they carry credibility and reliability by being institutional, statutory and binding. Due to their credibility and reliability, these documents are regarded as official documents that describe the roles and responsibilities of various institutions and stakeholders, representing the real situations regarding the interactions and work relationships with correctional services in the various jurisdictions. While such relationships keep evolving, the study's recent publications helped to update information on how relationships have evolved and new developments emerged.
- Meaning/value addition: Documents with value, significance, and valuable to the issues—documents that aim to highlight opportunities and challenges where they exist, avoid biases, and ensure fair and honest reporting where it matters.

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3   In the UK, the concept used is the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA). For South Africa, the terminology refers to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). While they may refer to a similar discourse, they will be referred to and used according to their jurisdictions in this study.

Ethical Considerations

In the Berlin Declaration, the German Research Organisations (2003) give two main conditions regarding open access (OA). OA are publications that can be accessed through written, digital and spoken means and are readily available and open for public and personal use. The researcher ensured that the ethical principle applied where documents with open-access status were used, and authors' and copyright holders' rights were acknowledged. The second Berlin principle relates to the institutional rights to "a published and online repository supported and maintained by an academic institution, scholarly society, government agency or any other organisation that seeks to enable OA, unrestricted distribution and inter-operationality and long-term archiving" (German Research Organisations 2003, 2). The researcher observed these two main principles while accessing open-access data from the published and online records of the two institutions. The notion is also echoed by UNESCO's OA ethical principle on publications under the Creative Commons rules and regulations. Individuals' intellectual property rights are protected and vested with owners, institutions, and organisations within these principles.

However, the two memoranda of agreement/understanding and other internal operations of the two organisations about inmates are exempted from the OA. That means the two and other related documents were available only to the researcher, whose sole intention was to use them for research purposes. The researcher approached the two institutions for these documents and was granted permission to share and analyse them for research purposes for the study.

- The Memorandum of Agreement and Partnership between the Ministry of Justice-HMPPS and the OUUK (Ministry of Justice: MoJ-HMPPS 2017)
- UNISA Department of Correctional Services MoU (2017)

To ensure that the integrity and scientific soundness of the research was not compromised, as stated in UNISA's Policy on Ethics (2012), an application for approval of this study was submitted and approved by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Committee

Results and Discussion

Based on their response and character of being *open* higher educational institutions, the two institutions ensure that their enrolled inmates participate in educational activities using various distance learning strategies (OUUK 2018; UNISA 2018). The enrolled inmates in the two institutions are primarily provided with the tutorial matter in printed study guides. They also study using various technologies, multimedia, and online approaches and methods. Although technology and online platforms are provided in various forms, the inmates learn under strict supervision. As stipulated by correctional services security protocols in each prison jurisdiction, the institutions operate with extra caution.

The framework and factors impacting conditions, opportunities, and tensions in both institutional contexts are understood to be varied and may differ. The following section discusses some factors that impact the two institutions' work to provide inmates with educational opportunities. The provision of educational opportunities through DE in correctional facilities is regulated through a stipulated MoA between the two institutions and correctional departments or ministries, broadly supported and funded by the national governments (MoJ-HMPPS 2017; UNISA 2017). The partnerships and operational factors of each institution are also discussed.

Legal and Regulatory Factors that Impact Online Learning

The legal and regulatory framework in the UK provides a fertile and conducive environment for the OUUK institution and other stakeholders to operate within clear guidelines. The governance structures go beyond just legal and policy formulation; they further support some of the teaching and learning policy implementations done through the virtual campus model and dynamics in funding logistics (OUUK 2018). Clear lines of operation for stakeholders ensure that attention is given to the last detail. However, considering the high cost of education in developed countries, some inmates still fall between the cracks as they struggle to access education due to the funding models used. Hammerschick (2010) pinpoints no uniformity in the management and administration of tuition for inmates in some areas. Online education in the UK's prison facilities is influenced by political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors. The House of Commons Justice Committee (2019) acknowledges that the leading partner, the Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), offers a substantive contribution to ensure that prisoners who are willing to study are assisted in various ways by supporting the studies of prisoners enrolled with the OUUK. Parliament provides an oversight function (House of Commons Justice Committee 2019; MoJ-HMPPS 2017). The findings reveal that the UK government fully supports the virtual campus model, which offers learners the chance to access tools that assist them on their journey in integrating easily into society and better prepare them for the labour market post-incarceration. Hammerschick (2010) adds that due to their popularity on virtual campuses (VCs), there were plans by the UK government to make more funding available to expand the programme to prisoners all over the UK. Accordingly, a virtual campus prepares prisoners to explore avenues (under supervision) for reintegration during their parole period and beyond. This model contributes to curbing recidivism, making inmates gradually integrate with the outside world and explore job opportunities before and after release.

Similarly, in South Africa, online education in prison facilities is influenced by political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors. In addressing some of the factors, the following documents were analysed to provide the necessary data. From 2010–2011, the South African government projected its political, economic, and social developmental agenda with a futuristic approach. The process gave rise to the South African National Plan: Vision 2030 (National Planning Commission 2011). One of the critical pointers noted by the NDP is the desire to improve education, training,

and innovations as significant in distance education and information communication technology to advance and expand knowledge and lifelong learning purposes. Given the high rate of crime in the country, the vision must extend to correctional services in mitigating offending behaviour and recidivism.

As the oldest correspondence-teaching distance institution, UNISA offers a correspondence-teaching mode of delivery for offenders in continuing its legacy. That further extends to the online education provided to inmates, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus (Covid-19) era, where UNISA ensures that all learners conduct and manage learning activities online. Prior to Covid-19, UNISA launched a computer-hub system to curate the inadequacies in the old model by expanding access to online learning. Despite the efforts by UNISA in providing and making online learning accessible to inmates, due to security protocols, and among other reasons, the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) still faces challenges of placing the majority of studying offenders in computer-hub centres. A newspaper article by Postman (2019) confirms some of the frustrations that an inmate at Johannesburg Medium C Correctional facility faced with using his laptop for his studies. Johnson (2015) also writes about another similar incident where an inmate in Durban Westville took the DCS authorities to court for refusing him permission to use his laptop. On both counts, the main reason for refusing inmates permission to use their laptops was the security risk it potentially posed (Johnson 2015; Postman 2019). As quoted in Postman (2019), in a court judgement by Judge Kollapen in 2018, the judge ruled in favour of the three Boeremag members who took the DCS to court because prison officials were depriving them of using their laptops; their laptops were similarly confiscated, and their use disallowed, citing security compromise and risks to prisons. Judge Kollapen stated many inconsistencies, as some centres allowed laptops in cells, while others were against it. Recently, the full bench of judges in the Gauteng High Court ruled in favour of the three Boeremag members to use their laptops in pursuing their postgraduate studies in prison. Unfortunately, the trio was still barred from using their laptops, and security reasons for the DCS remain the stumbling block (Pijoos 2022).

Although the social dimension in South Africa is well established, online learning for inmates to provide better and quality education is still marred with many inadequacies (Steyn 2015). Since time immemorial, UNISA and other higher education institutions have provided distance education and learning for inmates. Technological factors such as access to computers, restrictive internet opportunities, digital literacy amongst inmates and the costs associated with online learning, are some of the reasons that still constrain the realisation of online learning in a prison environment. The National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allows inmates to apply for funding. However, they must compete with other higher education students and follow similar criteria, rendering access to education for inmates impracticable, according to the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA 2011). Therefore, this article notes that the various studies, funding, and related educational services are not as readily and

systematically available in South African correctional centres as in the UK and with OUUK.

Nexus between Access and Security: Conditions, Opportunities, and Tensions

The second research question for this study is how online learning is accessed by and offered to inmates by the two institutions amidst the security protocols that govern the correctional service structures in both countries. Different countries have reached out to educate prisoners in varying ways. While there are notable progress and success narratives in some countries, in other countries, education access competes against the security practices within correctional facilities. This section discusses how the two universities strive to provide educational opportunities to inmates through online learning in a highly controlled prison environment.

Prison education in the UK has evolved over a long period (Ellis 2019). In 2019, for instance, the OUUK celebrated its 50th anniversary. Some of the highlights in its evolution were that the OUUK has staff across England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (covering both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic). They look after students in secure environments (prisoners and patients in hospitals) and support the education staff (House of Commons Justice Committee 2019; Pike 2014). Secure networked systems and virtual campuses are concepts commonly used in the UK to support the two disadvantaged groups in accessing DE, regardless of their marginalisation and limited internet use for educational purposes (Pike and Adams 2012; Pike 2014). The OUUK scenario provides various opportunities and platforms to accommodate prisoners' needs—the virtual campus, the "walled garden" network of the learning management platform, and the prison education framework with the Students in Secure Environment (SiSE) curriculum (McFarlane and Pike 2019, 5). This range of platforms facilitates access to online learning for inmates. Where such options do not exist due to old prison infrastructure and security restrictions, efforts are made to circumvent the problem by providing laptops and Open Learn short courses in offline modes.

Consequently, from the documents analysed, it is evident that the OUUK and other stakeholders acknowledge prison security procedures. Hence, they continue to look for ways of ensuring that the inmates' online learning is not affected. Online learning, mediated by digital platforms, should be given to inmates to advance their educational pursuits. Using digital platforms should not be seen as an impediment to security but rather as an acquisition of knowledge to reinforce learning, particularly at higher education institutions (Dias-Trindade and Moreira 2020).

Notwithstanding the viable structures for achieving inmates' social and other online learning objectives, the country is cognisant of the challenges and tensions that still hinder online education delivery. There is no complacency as the country continuously evaluates and assesses its progress to minimise implementation bottlenecks that may interfere with prison security in one form or another.

Despite the sound legal and policy frameworks that provide for digital learning in South Africa, the availability and use of laptops in South African correctional facilities remain a challenge with the DCS. From the narratives, it is noted that UNISA, as an institution, has contributed computers for online use. However, how they are to be used is at the discretion of the DCS. Computer hubs are highly regulated and have time constraints to service inmates' online learning needs. The officials seem to be concerned about inmates having laptops over extended periods on their own for fear of accessing unofficial websites that may compromise security. What is encouraging is the inmates' ability and perseverance to challenge and fight for their educational rights. Perhaps, one day, the two parties will reach an amicable solution.

Responsibilities and Commitments through Formal Agreements

This section emanates from research question 3 and discusses the partnership agreements that mandate and guide the two higher education institutions as cases for this article. As with other study findings, the two documents, namely the MoA and MoU, were analysed together with some institutional policy documents as data sources.

An official MoA exists between the OUUK and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ-HMPPS 2017), which stipulates the British government's commitment to and partnership with the OUUK regarding prisoners' educational access and provision. The MoA is regulated by the MoJ-HMPPS (2017) Directorate: Rehabilitation and Assurance (the Authority), acting as the custodian of the mandates and operations. According to the agreement, the MoA's overall purpose is to enable prisoners to undertake distance learning by reimbursing OUUK's costs in administering course applications and providing additional tuition activities for those prisoners engaged in OUUK courses (OUUK 2017). The UK government partially subsidises funding for initial OUUK access courses. Most adult prisoners fund higher education through part-time study loans, or they apply for financing through charitable organisations such as the Prisoners Education Trust (PET), which has formalised and established relations with the OUUK (Prison Reform Trust [PRT] 2018).

The Memorandum of Agreement aims to provide access and education to inmates by ensuring direct support, which they get through the educational pact between MoJ, OUUK, PET and PRT. Each stakeholder has a specific role in supporting the virtual campus by HMPPS. In the literature section of this study, it was established that the UK government is convinced and fully supportive of the virtual campus model and thus through its Parliament, is fully supportive of the OUUK's contribution towards its establishment. The findings reveal detailed information on the MoA systems and operational requirements to ensure that the partnership works according to agreed plans. Any deviation from such plans might result in dire financial sanctions from the MoJ by all stakeholders. That, therefore, demonstrates the precise evaluation and monitoring systems in place to ensure compliance with the mandates and contents of the MoA. Responding to the issues in this article, the conditions set by the MoA allow better opportunities for inmates to advance their careers during and post-incarceration.

The OUUK agreement affirms a virtual campus (VC) and its critical role as a sound learning environment accessed through computers in prisons (OUUK 2017). As a digital medium, the specific task, as enshrined in the agreement, is for the OUUK to reduce overall administration costs in the medium term and adapt the learning materials. The VC incurs a cost to the university covered or subsidised by the UK government through HMPPS funding (OUUK 2017). Failure in compliance by the OUUK or any deviation from the agreement's contents means the institution would suffer severe consequences, affecting future support by the UK government. With funding applications, the institution submits its funded activities and how it will conduct its services. The agreement includes a detailed scope of educational activities, inmates who can benefit from the programme, agreed outputs/long-term outcomes, key performance indicators, milestones, and institutional requirements, among other criteria (OUUK 2017). In 2017, the OUUK's work and services towards prisoners' educational programmes won an award, demonstrating best practice and its commitment to the prison education discourse. The findings further reveal that all teaching, learning and support activities rendered for inmates are spelt out in the agreement, with full details of how the grant should be administered, managed, evaluated and reported to the MoJ, which remains the sole custodian of the prison education provision in the UK (OUUK 2017).

The OUUK has direct contact and administrative support to handle prisoners' educational and study needs and queries through the Memorandum of Agreement. This structured prison system and work are advantageous for prisoners in the UK by encouraging them to keep their minds busy as students. According to Pike (2014), prisoners who are kept busy can maintain relationship support with their families and friends, including their employers and the university (significant others). The relationship encourages students to interact and benefit from collaborative learning as they engage online with their institutional support (Pike 2014).

According to the MoA, the OUUK works closely with other not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) such as the Prisoner Education Trust and the Prison Reform Trust, as service providers solely contracted through the MoA-related services to prisoners and prison staff (MoJ-HMPPS 2017). The NPOs work closely with prison staff to ensure that studying prisoners are not disadvantaged but get all the necessary support regarding their studies. Their sub-contractual agreements and services mark the importance of partnerships between the UK government and OUUK to advance the prisoners' needs. The PET ensures that prison staff are informed, updated and trained in all related programmes and activities to cascade such information to prisoners. As stated by the MoA, the pact provides information regarding post-release reintegration programmes and job opportunities. It links them to halfway houses and other counselling and social work support services. The MoA also states that if educational interests are provided for incarcerated inmates, that should lead to a systematic and structured tracking of ex-prisoners to ensure that their studies are not interrupted during post-incarceration. In support of the MoA, Pike (2014) observes that a lack of information about post-release

transition and post-release continuation of studies manifests as anxiety, disrupting teaching if not well tracked and managed.

Memorandum of Understanding: Open Distance E-learning with UNISA

The MoU between the DCS and UNISA is guided and regulated by the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997. The purpose of Act 101, among others, is to control and regulate higher education and provide for the establishment, governance, and funding of public higher education institutions in pursuing support for citizens, including serving inmates engaged in educational activities (UNISA 2017). According to the MoU, UNISA and the DCS leadership launched the first "DCS-UNISA Hub" in a correctional centre in 2014 (Johnson 2017; UNISA 2017; Wolela 2016). The ICT computer hub is explained as "an area within an identified correctional centre where students registered at UNISA could utilise the services offered by UNISA, and the hub is linked to a UNISA Regional Services Centre" (UNISA 2017, 3). As the MoU states, UNISA offered to fulfil its mandate as an Open Distance e-Learning (Ode-L) institution by committing to provide such services in the DCS facilities, using their information, communication and technology resources and technical expertise to provide online learning for inmates. UNISA further acknowledges the benefits it would accrue in the pact as part of community engagement, research and capacity building as a higher education institution (UNISA 2017). Another advantage is in research areas where the institution would use correctional/prison facilities for practical and experiential learning through its College of Education. The pact implies that the institution brings resources to plan, conduct, manage, and evaluate inmates' educational plans. According to the MoU (UNISA 2017), the scope of activities highlights UNISA's intentions and provides guidelines for conducting its online educational activities through an ICT computer hub.

The DCS acts as the recipient of technical resources and support for inmates, while it also provides logistical arrangements to ensure that inmates participate. Students at higher education institutions are funded via the National Students Financial Assistance Scheme (NSFAS), the public funding agency in the country, and other funding charities on an ad hoc basis in the South African context. However, according to the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA 2011), funding opportunities are not documented or easily accessible for offenders, except for the NSFAS.

Through the DCS-UNISA partnership, offenders also benefit from asynchronous, facilitated and self-paced learning (Steyn 2015). Synchronous online learning is not provided for correctional settings for various reasons, such as incompatible time schedules and DCS priorities over education provision. However, education is considered a priority for the DCS in South Africa. The offenders conduct their studies at controlled times that may not be compatible with video or telephone-conferencing, chat sessions, or web-based audio. Over and above what the MoU stipulates, and the official curriculum offered for all students, there are other micro-operations, projects and activities at UNISA's college and departmental levels between individual correctional centres and UNISA.

Although UNISA's internal collaborations may not be directly linked to online learning, they are mentioned as related to teaching and learning issues with offenders. UNISA offers a structured certificate, diploma, undergraduate and honours degrees at national qualifications framework levels 5–8 in Correctional Management. The courses/modules aim at equipping correctional services practitioners, not necessarily offenders (UNISA 2022b).

Other UNISA colleges offer different modules that do not necessarily focus on correctional services directly but can be mainstreamed to accommodate areas of interest. For instance, within the College of Human Sciences, Department of Psychology, there are modules and community engagement projects, such as Inside-Out, that continue to provide needed services and collaborations at various correctional centres (UNISA 2022a). Different departments offer different modules to enhance teaching and learning pedagogies and epistemologies for adult correctional educators and researchers in the College of Education. This way of working indicates different pockets of interventions by UNISA with no explicit coordination and collaboration within UNISA regarding work with correctional services with offenders. However, none of the courses/modules in these various departments and colleges is offered online.

As stated in this article, UNISA has provided educational opportunities for political prisoners such as the iconic former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela and many others. The institution has amassed extensive experience in providing education opportunities for inmates using different delivery modes, as noted by many authors (Biao 2012; Johnson 2015; Masondo 2014; Pauw 2014; Quan-Baffour and Zawada 2012). Several partnerships have been created and operationalised at various levels. However, the current MoU focuses on technology-induced computer hubs and online learning for inmates, and is not as detailed as the one for the OUUK in terms of funding for inmates' studies and the involvement of other stakeholders. UNISA and the DCS's roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood in South Africa.

Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, the conclusion was made that both institutions have demonstrated their unique, similar, and different conditions, opportunities, and strengths. There is room for improvement and lessons to learn from each other. Despite the written mandates and rules governing the relationships between governments and universities, the precarious nature of prison as a space of learning in general and online learning specifically, tension exists regarding the prison environment's risk factors as risks take precedence and must always be prioritised. According to the literature and findings of the study, society's security remains a priority for prisons. Any security risk and intolerance cannot be compromised in prison centres. Reports from the countries in this study and the findings show that online learning is associated with using the Internet, which is prone to abuse and misuse by inmates. Thus, correctional facilities' security protocols take precedence over educational opportunities.

The two countries and the public institutions are guided in their correctional education programmes through mandatory guidelines. The documented rules are meant to identify the scope and areas identified and agreed upon between the two statutory bodies (government ministries or departments and the universities). As established from the literature and the findings, formal agreements provide the requisite conditions and opportunities to enable and facilitate smooth operations and relationships between partners. The partnership practice and business model, as outlined in this study, can be utilised in other countries where communities of practice can be emulated.

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