

1. Academy students come from all walks of life.

An instructor at HMP and YOI Hollesley Bay remembered the day that Max came into the classroom to ask about the CCNA courses. “He couldn’t believe that he could work towards his CCNA certification and advance his ICT education in prison. For me, it’s always an amazing feeling knowing that I’ve helped someone get his life back on track.”

All prisoners who are eligible to apply for PICTA courses are suitably risk assessed and are made aware of the rigors of the coursework.

While all students undergo similar risk and learning ability assessments, anyone walking into a PICTA classroom would be hard pressed to describe a typical PICTA student.

An instructor at HMP Ford said, “One of the biggest challenges is the diversity of backgrounds we encounter. Some students are well educated and even have technology backgrounds. Other students have never even seen the Internet.”

One student has almost completed CCNA 4, and will be released within a few months. He intends to go back to university and earn a cybersecurity degree.

2. Academy instructors also come from all walks of life.

There is no typical PICTA instructor. For example, one had worked in commercial ICT for most of his adult life. He was planning to retire when he saw an advertisement for PICTA instructors. “This seemed like important work—to bring technology education into prisons.”

Another instructor is a long-time adult education teacher who decided to move into technology education. “I wasn’t worried about learning the technology, because the instructor support resources for PICTA instructors are excellent.”

The first step is for instructors to familiarize themselves with working in a prison environment. New instructors spend a minimum of two weeks at a PICTA location. Once they’ve completed this phase, they can begin their instructor certifications (some are through Birmingham City University, the Cisco Academy Support Center for PICTAs).

Birmingham City University (BCU) also provides ongoing support for academy instructors, including help desk support for technical questions, and online instructor professional development. BCU also offers additional support to PICTA students who may wish to continue with their studies upon release from prison.

3. Roll on/roll off: PICTA supports diverse learning styles.

Classroom sizes vary by location: the smallest can accommodate 10 and the largest almost 30 students. Depending on classroom size and category of facility, there could be up to 3 instructors for each. Where possible, PICTA students will attend class on a full-time basis, usually from 8:00 am - 4:45 pm, with a lunch break and regular short breaks as needed. All PICTA classrooms have workstations and a lab area for hands-on practice work.

Self-paced learning takes on a whole new meaning in the PICTA program. Depending on their knowledge level, each student works on different courses at different stages, and most importantly, at their own pace. PICTA instructors and prison managers refer to this as the “roll on/roll off” approach.

There are frequent skills tests to reinforce learning. With the roll on/roll off model, this testing is invaluable for helping instructors check on each student’s progress, and support their learning needs on an individual basis. “Having a feeling of achievement is just as important for these students as the ICT skills they’re acquiring,” says one instructor. “This isn’t about looking for the strongest candidates - we want everyone to be successful. If someone is struggling, it’s up to us to figure out how to give that person the support they need.”

4. Encouraging peer-to-peer mentoring.

Wherever possible, PICTA instructors foster peer-to-peer mentoring among the inmates. “Prison life can be very isolating,” said another instructor. “In the real world, working in any technology job requires teamwork. Mentoring is an important part of building the whole individual. It teaches people how to collaborate, work in a team, and encourage others to do their best. Mentoring builds leadership qualities. And most of all, there’s no better way to learn something than by teaching someone else.”

More about Academy Support Centers

Birmingham City University is the Cisco Academy Support Center (ASC) for PICTA locations. Support services include:

- Video lectures to support delivery of the IT Essentials and CCNA courses
- Instructor enrollment and account creation
- Instructor resource sharing
- Updates to instructor training reports
- The collection, analysis and interpretation of performance statistics for all Cisco courses
- Help Desk support for PICTA instructors
- Management of academy agreement support to PICTA partners

Academy Support Centers exist all over the world, and the types of support they provide can vary. These are just examples.

Instructors can build leadership and mentoring skills by:

- Having students break into groups on a project, which encourages people to voluntarily mentor others on the team
- Asking a student who finishes a course module early to stay and mentor someone else in class
- Designating 'orderlies', who are trusted to assist with classroom support

5. Formalizing a mentoring program with ICT professionals.

Kathryn Baddeley, a Cisco Community Relations Manager, has been a volunteer mentor for PICTA students since 2009. Cisco employees can volunteer to mentor PICTA students who meet specific criteria. Employees are asked to commit a minimum of 6 months to a student (and, of course, the student has to be at least 6 months away from their release date).

One of the first inmates Kathryn mentored is 'Sam'. Kathryn says, "He had no background in technology. But he was determined to create a better life for himself and his family. As his mentor, I was determined to do as much as I could to help him."

Sam has since been released, and now works as a Level 1 Technician for a technology company. Kathryn helped him find a volunteer position there, and eventually he was hired as a permanent employee. According to Sam, "Every day at work I face something I haven't encountered before. It makes my job challenging and exciting. It gives me the space to be creative. I never imagined I'd have this kind of career. It's been absolutely life-changing."

He has since become a mentor himself within his company. "None of this would be possible without the help I've been given. I've learned how important it is to check in with the people on my team and offer my help if they need it. Especially new people, because I know exactly how they feel."

The mentoring program is currently offered at HMP Spring Hill, Wandsworth, Coldingley, Ford, and HMP and YOI Hollesley Bay, with other PICTA prisons to be added.

But the reality is that travel and geography are obstacles to getting more volunteers involved. Which is why Cisco is working with NOMS to develop a virtual mentoring option that will make it easier for Cisco volunteers to connect with students in prisons throughout the UK.

Opening more doors with virtual windows.

Virtual mentoring is part of a larger vision to reach more prisons with virtual training. NOMS runs a virtual learning program called Virtual Campus (VC). VC makes more than 130 courses available to prisoners in most of the prisons across the UK.

Cisco and HMPPS have been working to expand VC offerings, including Cisco Networking Academy courses, so that prisoners in a non-PICTA prison will then have the opportunity to enroll.

According to Nuno Guarda, Cisco CSR Consultant in the UK, "Working with NOMS over many years has been rewarding and exciting. Their PICTA initiative is extremely valuable to improve career prospects and employability. I am really proud that Cisco has built a successful, long-term partnership with such an impactful initiative."

And finally, Max says, "I've got a timetable, my books and tests to take. I'm eager to move forward with a new life. I'm very grateful for all the people who helped me along the way."

More Information

Learn how Cisco Networking Academy's flexible learning program can support your training goals: www.NetAcad.com