

TELE-LEARNING: PREPARING PRISONERS FOR A NEW LIFE OUTSIDE

Telfi Whilst the numbers of inmates in Austrian penal institutions have been rising continuously over the past years, the chances of these offenders being successfully re-integrated into work have been deteriorating steadily. Over half of the 9000 detainees have had no education or training beyond compulsory schooling. Many of them are affected by an accumulation of other serious problems such as drug addiction, debt, linguistic and cultural difficulties or psychological handicaps. Only one fifth had been in regular employment in the course of the year before their conviction and they are rarely involved in any active labour market measures after their release.

The European Employment Guidelines place a strong emphasis on reinforcing social inclusion and preventing exclusion from the world of work. In its Recommendation ([2004/741/EC](#)) on the implementation of Member States' employment policies the Council stresses, in one of its specific recommendations to Austria, the need "...to increase participation in training, especially for the low skilled and for immigrants". The [Tele-Learning for Imprisoned People](#) Development Partnership (DP), *Telfi* for short, is a particularly striking example of good practice that addresses this need.

"The introduction of e-learning in prisons is a quantum leap in the development of training for people in custody" says Walter Hammerschick of the *Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology* in Vienna, who coordinates the work of *Telfi*. And he also explains that: *"For a long time, the idea of allowing access to the internet from jail was perceived as incompatible with the nature of penal institutions. We had to tackle problems that related to the particular conditions of imprisonment, such as security issues, specific legal requirements and also conventional attitudes towards offenders."*

Telfi's approach was not driven primarily by the desire to make more effective use of available technology. Its main objective was and is to integrate these new opportunities into a comprehensive process of individualised support and empowerment that continues after the prisoner's release. The DP was built on close cooperation between six of the 28 prisons in Austria and several partners with quite different but complementary roles and fields of expertise, including organisations specialising in course development and delivery, software developers and IT experts, and NGOs working with marginalised groups.

NEW FORMS OF LEARNING AND SUPPORT TO PROMOTE THE EMPLOYABILITY OF EX-OFFENDERS



Telfi reflects a wide concern in society about the increase in the number of custodial sentences. Research in several countries has confirmed that there is a strong correlation between the probability of re-offending and unemployment. Practical experience, in Sweden, has also demonstrated the important contribution that training in prisons can make to the re-integration of ex-offenders and to preventing recidivism.

In Austria, only about 3 % of the inmates participate in any type of training. Most of the existing training opportunities focus on

traditional craft sectors and often lack the flexibility that is required to adapt to rapid changes in the world of work. In general, there are very few low-threshold offers and no certification is provided for the short training periods. *“As yet, there is no overall coherent approach to tackling these problems, as yet, in our penal system”* explains Walter Hammerschick.

Against this background, the innovatory nature of *Telfi* is obvious. It combines the introduction of flexible, modern training methods, including the design of contents and qualifications that are relevant to current needs on the labour market, with a range of accompanying measures that are aimed at preparing prisoners for their new lives, once they walk through the prison gates.

TRAINING AND INDIVIDUALISED SUPPORT PLANS

Telfi has provided new practical tools and an infrastructure for e-learning in prisons. A central “prison education server” and a server platform have been established that comply with the security requirements of the individual institutions. Readily available learning software has been tested and then adapted to make it suitable for use in prisons.

“These technical facilities complement our existing training opportunities. They create a basis for new forms of learning and stimulate a strong motivation amongst our clients” says the coordinator of the training programmes in Wien-Josefstadt, the largest penal institution in Austria. Though participation in the courses is voluntary, the number of people who are interested generally exceeds the number of available places. The course programme, which structures the training and experiences of work during the period of imprisonment to the realities of working and social life outside the institution, is the backbone of the individualised support process piloted by *Telfi*.

The first step in this process is in a careful personal analysis of the needs and capacities of potential course participants. This involves individual guided interviews to find out more about each candidate’s interests and motivation, vocational experience and competences, and capacity to work as part of a team. One important aspect of the *Telfi* approach is the early involvement of organisations that are experienced in working with ex-offenders after their release and two DP partners, which are NGOs, play key roles. One provides an external team of psychologists to design and carry out the individual interviews and the other ensures that special “transplacement actors” are involved in the selection process.



The course programme includes low threshold and also more demanding offers and enables participants to progress at a pace that matches their own capabilities. It started with training in literacy and numeracy, language courses and IT basics and was gradually broadened to cover professional fields, such as stock management, metal-working, wood-working and other vocational competences. Courses can last up to 12 weeks and comprise about 20 - 25 hours of course work per week. The training takes place in small groups of six participants and involves periods of self-study allied to cooperative learning. Each group is supported by a tutor recruited from the prison’s staff and by a trainer, who is on site at least half a day per week to provide individual assistance and group coaching. Psychological support is offered in the weekly group meetings, when attempts are made to develop greater group cohesion and also to identify and address any personal problems such as falling levels of motivation, social competence and self-reliance.

WHAT FACTORS MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

The careful selection process is seen by *Telfi* as being one of the factors that have an impact on both the low drop out rate which is only 8% and the high pass rate of almost 83%. But equally important are the accompanying measures during the course and the follow up that is provided. These have helped many prisoners to tackle the accumulation of problems that have a bearing on their present and their future lives.

The determining factor, however, is the DP's uncompromising focus on the early preparation of prisoners for the period after their release. "Transplacement" is the central idea that underpins the concept of the individualised support plan in the *Telfi* model. "*Real punishment begins after the prison term – this is how many prisoners assess their almost hopeless task of getting back into society*" says one of the experts from Neustart (NewStart). "*Therefore we become involved at an early stage in the selection of course participants and accompany them during the course, so that we can design a better individual programme to support them after their release including providing guidance and liaising with employment services in order to help them find a job*".

AFTER THREE YEARS OF OPERATION, THE RESULTS ARE ENCOURAGING

Telfi has implemented some 40 tele-learning courses that are integrated with individual support plans. These courses were initially aimed at prisoners who were coming close to their release and those who were seen to comply with the rules and requirements of open prison methods. Now they also involve inmates who face longer periods of custody and who, after having successfully completed a course, might take on tutorial functions in future courses.

"For me, the course has paid off. After my term I will start work in a travel agency. Without evidence of my computing skills I would not have got the job. Also, the computer course is much more demanding than work in the prison's tailoring workshop". Like this prisoner, almost half the detainees, who stayed in contact with Neustart after their release, have found a job on the open labour market or enrolled in a special placement or training programme.



But all this work will not only benefit the 250 participants in the *Telfi* courses. From its outset, the DP was designed to make a lasting impact on the provision of new training opportunities for all prisoners. A lot of care was devoted to choosing the prisons to be included in the project so that they would reflect the specific situation and role of the different types of penal institutions in Austria. "*This has helped to demonstrate the relevance of our work to other prisons and to facilitate the transfer of the approaches that we have developed. Since we started, five further prisons have joined the project or indicated a strong interest in cooperating*

with us" says Walter Hammerschick. *Telfi*'s new learning platform, "*Illias*", now enables all Austrian prisons to use the software available on the prison education server to organise and deliver e-learning courses. In order to facilitate the transfer of its approach to other prisons, a *Telfi* working group has established a profile for its course tutors and has developed a model for the training of these tutors. This training is now part of the regular programme of the Centre for Further and Continuing Education and Training of Staff in the Penal System which ran its third tutor course in spring 2005.

In addition to the operational partners who carry out the activities of the DP, *Telfi* has also a number of strategic partners that have been closely associated with its work. These include the Ministry of Justice, the national Employment Service, the federal Chamber of Employers and the Austrian Trade Union Confederation. With policy support from these partners the initial project partnership has developed as a sustainable network which has the capacity to promote the wider implementation of the DP's approach throughout the penal system, in Austria.

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION HAS PROMOTED INNOVATION AND RAISED AWARENESS OF REAL EUROPEAN CONCERNS IN THE RE-INTEGRATION OF PRISONERS

Telfi was closely involved in the [PRILEARESNET](#) Transnational Partnership (TP), together with [e-LIS](#) (e-Learning im Strafvollzug) in Germany and the [Reïntegratieproject NL's na buitenlandse detentie](#) in the Netherlands. All three partners pursued almost identical objectives and approaches. However, it rapidly became evident that there were many other EQUAL DPs sharing a common concern about the reintegration of ex-offenders, facing very similar challenges and developing new methods, including the use of Distance Learning in penal institutions. Some of these projects cooperated in the [MIKIRI](#) TP which also involved the German Partner of *Telfi*.

During the first round of EQUAL contact and exchange have evolved steadily between these two TPs, especially through mutual involvement in their respective transnational meetings. They are gradually moving towards the formation of a European network that links the experience of seven Member States in this thematic field. Exchange within this growing network has raised awareness of the need, and also the scope that exists, to progress towards a common vision for transnational action that would make a significant impact on training and integration policies for the prison population throughout the EU. One aspect of this vision is seen in strengthening joint production in the creation of a European "knowledge base" on state of the art practices and the development of a common "jail safe" platform for e-learning. Some Member States, including Austria, have selected projects for the second round of EQUAL that will capitalise on the achievements to date and other Member States have indicated their interest in these developments.

The PRILEARESNET Transnational Partnership has also taken its first steps towards the development of a European server infrastructure which could benefit greatly a substantial proportion of the *Telfi* target group. Approximately 4000 inmates in Austrian prisons do not have Austrian nationality but many of these are citizen of other EU countries. The use of a common IT platform could provide access to learning opportunities that are recognised in their country of origin. The Dutch partner in this TP has particular experience of working with prisoners who are serving sentences abroad.

For *Telfi* the intensive exchange with its transnational partners has had a direct practical effect as it provided a basis for the development of the prison education server and the *Illias* learning platform and it helped in the identification and adaptation of suitable software for tele-learning in prisons. But transnational cooperation has also had significant intangible effects. The positive lessons learned from innovative experience in other Member States "confirmed" the validity of *Telfi's* ambitious, holistic approach. *"This feed back from other European experience was important because it strengthened the credibility of the project. Changing prison practices involves very sensitive issues and effective transplacement strategies require new forms of cooperation between prison management, employment services, training organisations, social services and agencies in the civil society. Credibility is vital for raising the awareness of these actors"* explained a representative of the Ministry of Justice in the context of preparations for the new Development Partnership, entitled "[Step by Step](#)", that has been launched to further the experience of *Telfi*.

Contact

Telelernen für HaftinsassInnen – Telfi
Institut für Rechts- und Kriminalsoziologie
Walter Hammerschick

Museumstraße 5
A 1016 Wien

Tel: + 43 (0) 1 5261516

Fax: + 43 (0) 1 5261510

E-mail: walter.hammerschick@irks.at

Website: <http://www.telfi.at>

Link to [EQUAL database description](#)

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)