

REORGANISING LEARNING IN PRISONS

More than 50% of prison inmates in Belgium have no vocational qualifications and many of them had no real experience of work before their incarceration. This situation is similar to most other EU Member States, as is the fact that education and training are recognised as being crucially important for the successful reintegration of detainees and for preventing recidivism. However, compared to countries like the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany or Sweden, prisoners in Belgium are offered many fewer opportunities for structured learning that can lead to the acquisition of a formal qualification.



The provision of education and training opportunities for ex-offenders is a relatively new issue in Belgium. Though some related projects started in the early 1990s, most activities in this field still depend on the initiative of the individual penal institutions. The ambitious objective of the EQUAL [REINSERT](#) Development Partnership (DP) is to change this situation by introducing learning opportunities as part of the regular provision in all 17 prisons of the French Speaking Community of Belgium, which also makes provision for the small German Speaking Community.

“It all began in 1991 when a new further education bill enabled the training institutions to offer courses outside their own premises and when I had my first contact with the prison world”, explains Philippe Haine, who was then the Director of a large vocational training centre but now coordinates this EQUAL DP. In 1991, he found that, *“the prisons made very little use of these new opportunities and hardly any training institution was actively engaged in this field.”*



Philippe Haine, coordinator of the REINSERT DP

Over a number of years, Philippe’s training centre piloted different types of basic education courses and training in the fields of computing, construction and horticulture, within the framework of bi-lateral agreements with three prisons. Then, in 2002, EQUAL provided the opportunity to launch a more broadly-based initiative, the [INSERT](#) DP, the results of which are now being developed under the label of REINSERT, in a new Second Round EQUAL DP.

ENGAGING THE KEY ACTORS IN A COHERENT COMMON APPROACH

One of the reasons for the persistent gaps in regular prison education and training is closely related to the complicated division of administrative responsibilities and decision making powers, in Belgium. Interviewed for a television programme in May 2005, Daniel Darimont, Director of the Lantin Prison, did not mince his words. His analysis of the situation was, *“If you talk shop with politicians, they all agree that the provision of training courses for detainees must be the preoccupation for all penal institutions. However, when it comes to concrete action, they all try to off-load the responsibility. The Ministry of Justice supports the idea but it tends to pass the buck to the French Community which, in turn, declares that it does not have the necessary resources. This kind of ping-pong has been going on for years!”*

Against this background, the launch of the INSERT DP during EQUAL Round 1 was a significant step forward as it created a structured partnership that engaged the Further Education Authority (*Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*), the Ministry of Justice, the Public Employment Service (*FOREM*) and several NGOs and voluntary associations. This partnership was extended to prepare for the implementation of REINSERT and now involves all the relevant institutions and actors from both the public and the associative sector.

CREATING A STRUCTURED FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN PRISONS



Learning in Prison

For more than ten years, the few prisons that wanted to make use of the new opportunities provided by the 1991 Further Education Bill were left to organise their education and training programmes on their own, with little guidance and no central coordination. Therefore, the initial thrust of the DP's action was to develop a structured framework for re-organising learning in prisons and for promoting a comprehensive approach that enabled the effective combination of basic education and vocational training leading to recognised qualifications.

Thus, INSERT linked up with all prisons in the French Speaking Community to offer practical support related to the planning, content and delivery of courses, including

contact with external training providers and other relevant agencies, training of staff, evaluation and feed back. These activities are now being taken further through the REINSERT DP.

A lot, though not everything, has changed since 2002. *“There was no lead or focus for coherent and concerted action. Left to their own resources, most prisons had no alternative but to adopt a do-it-yourself approach. We had to start almost from scratch”*, recalls Philippe Haine in describing the point of departure for INSERT. As an example of these patchy arrangements, he quotes the diverse professional backgrounds of those who provided training in prisons: *“We found an incredible variation – here a primary teacher, there a social worker, elsewhere voluntary workers, for instance a retired accountant offering a course in basic arithmetic”*.

NOW A MORE ROBUST “INFRASTRUCTURE” IS IN PLACE.

Within the context of REINSERT, a total number of 28 further education and training centres are actively engaged in prison education and training. Qualified staff develop and deliver courses, assist in interviewing and assessing potential participants, and offer them advice and guidance. All courses involve a final examination and the chance to obtain a recognised certificate or diploma.

Participation in the training programmes is voluntary but admission to these courses requires the agreement of the Prison Director and depends on the results of the interview and assessment procedures that are conducted to find out more about the individual's motivation and suitability. The detainees can select from a range of training options that are operated by different penal institutions. If necessary, successful applicants are transferred to the prison in which his or her choice of training programme is available.



Learning in small groups

Each of eight of the 28 participating further education and training centres have nominated a socio-pedagogical coordinator. These coordinators meet every two months to discuss, and find solutions to, issues that may have arisen from the training courses, such as the need to adapt course material or how to handle psychological problems that are related to course groups or individual participants.

Inside each prison, these new activities are coordinated by a “Local Monitoring Committee” chaired by the Prison Director. The members of this committee include representatives of all of the different interests that are involved such as the prison wardens, the psycho-social service and the external training staff. It also includes the senior staff member of the prison (normally the Deputy Director) who has the responsibility for maintaining close links with relevant agencies and actors outside the prison, like the employment services and social and labour market intermediaries.

AFTER MORE THAN 3 YEARS OF WORK, THE RESULTS ARE ENCOURAGING

Now Philippe Haine can point to a number of successes, namely:

- Around one thousand of the 4500 ex-offenders detained in the 17 prisons have enrolled in different types of courses that last between 50 and 1000 hours, and up to 50% of these participants have obtained a recognised certificate or diploma. INSERT has also provided new opportunities specifically tailored to the training needs and very diverse interests of women prisoners, an offer that did not exist before;
- Qualified trainers and teachers are now better prepared for their work with ex-offenders. A Vade-mecum has been produced, based on the extensive experience of a wide range of actors in the prison environment, to familiarise new members of staff with the particular conditions, issues and practices that are related to the delivery of education and training in prisons;
- An additional financial investment has been made by the Ministry of Justice to increase the quality and scope of the training through the acquisition of new training workshops and equipment, and the recruitment of workshop personnel.



Laying foundation stones for future work

Course participants value the new opportunities and support that are now available to them. One young man who is being trained for work as a mason remembers the guidance that he received before enrolling in the course: *“You don’t walk in just like that. They first test you to find out more about your motivation, and then they make a proposal that all depends on your motivation. I had no idea about masonry and I never worked as a brick layer. I came here and I’ve learned fast. I’m really glad, indeed, very pleased.”* Another participant, serving an eight year sentence, had been involved in distance learning before and is now following a new course that is being offered within the prison for the first time. In comparing these two experiences he feels that *“at the moment, I’m*

satisfied with what I have got. But frankly, if I think of all the energy that I have spent, if I had had the chance to work with a real teacher, I could have gained much more, maybe even access to university level. I was left to myself to find my way around all right, and it’s not Canal+ (a TV Channel) that trains you.”

SECURING SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

Clearly, there is still scope for improving the processes, tools and practices that have emerged from INSERT. Ensuring that this scope will be fully exploited is a major concern in the REINSERT DP. Thus, work during the second Round of EQUAL is focused on two objectives:

- Consolidating and reinforcing the experience and practices, which have been gained from pilot action during the first phase, in all prisons under the authority of the French Speaking Community, in Belgium;
- Paving new, less treacherous pathways that also signpost more clearly the transition from prison to work and civil life. This implies more effective cooperation and coordination between the numerous public authorities and agencies that have an important role to play in this transition, including the 10 Ministries that are currently involved in the whole process leading

from detention to re-integration. More effective pathways also require a stronger involvement of employers and labour market intermediaries.

The INSERT DP created a solid basis from which these objectives can be brought into reach. Firstly, a management structure has been established that involves all the relevant institutional stakeholders. This was set up in the form of a monitoring committee that offers a platform for dialogue, cooperation and coordination that has not yet existed. The committee meets four times a year, but in-between these meetings, there are also frequent bilateral contacts between the DP coordinator and the individual members.

A further element in INSERT's mainstreaming strategy was the launching of broadly based consultations about the possible conclusions for policy and practice that could be drawn on the basis of the DP's outcomes. A series of round table meetings was organised, involving about 100 representatives of all relevant decision makers, including the Ministry of Justice, the French Speaking Community, Regional Authorities and the Public Employment Service, as well as key actors in the prison system and associations working with ex-offenders. The outcome of these consultations was an agreement on a set of detailed recommendations to redress those gaps in provision and practice that had been identified, through the DP's activities.

Published in summer 2005, these recommendations came out at a very timely moment, as they were able to offer practical guidance in support of two new policy initiatives of the French Community:

- The first of these relates to the implementation of new legislation, the "Dupont" Bill, which re-states that promoting the exercise of the detainees' civil rights must be a central preoccupation of the penal system and establishes the provision of training opportunities in prisons, as an obligatory and integral element of this endeavour;
- The second concerns a Strategic Action Plan for the rehabilitation of ex-offenders which places a particular emphasis on the development of comprehensive integration pathways.

The REINSERT DP will be able to offer fresh insights on the reintegration of offenders, as it is now implementing the recommendations stemming from INSERT, within the context of this current, and much more favourable, policy context.

Contact

REINSERT

Philippe Haine
Project Coordinator

Rue de Huy, 123
B – 4300 Waremme

Tel: + 32 (0) 19 33 86 08

E-mail: phaine@prov-liege.be

Website: www.caravelproject.org

Link to [EQUAL database description](#)