

# Telelearning: preparing prisoners for a new life outside



Whilst the number of inmates in Austrian penal institutions has been rising continuously over the past few years, the chances of these offenders being successfully re-integrated into work have been deteriorating steadily. Over half of the 9 000 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 a recommendation to Austria on the implementation of employment policies, the EU Council of Ministers stresses 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.

## E-learning is a quantum leap for prisons

*"The introduction of e-learning in prisons is a quantum leap in the development of training for people in custody"* says Walter Hammerschick, who coordinates Telfi's work.

*"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 to integrate these new opportunities into a process of individualised support and empowerment that continues after the prisoner's release. It combines the introduction of flexible, modern training methods, including qualifications relevant to current labour market needs, with a range of accompanying measures to prepare prisoners for their new lives after they walk through the prison gates.

The DP 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.

## Preparing for a new life outside

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 programme includes a range of courses, enabling 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, metalwork, woodwork and other vocational competences.

Telfi has implemented some 40 telelearning 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.*

## From project partnership to sustainable network

But all this work will not only benefit the 250 participants in the Telfi courses. Since it started, five further prisons have joined the project or indicated a strong interest in cooperating with it. Telfi’s new learning platform enables all Austrian prisons to use the software available on the prison education server to organise and deliver e-learning courses. In order to transfer its approach to other prisons, Telfi established a model training course for its tutors which is now part of the regular programme of the Centre for Further and Continuing Education and Training of Staff in the Penal System.

With policy support from strategic partners like the Ministry of Justice, national employment service and social partners, the initial project partnership has developed into a sustainable network with the capacity to promote the DP’s approach throughout the Austrian penal system.

Telfi has also been closely involved in Transnational Partnerships with other EQUAL DPs facing similar challenges. They are gradually moving towards a European network to link the experience of seven Member States in the field. Some, including Austria, have selected projects for the second round of EQUAL that will capitalise on the achievements to date.

## Transnational solutions for cross-border cases

The PRILEARESNET Transnational Partnership has started developing a European server infrastructure which could benefit a substantial proportion of the Telfi target group. Approximately 4 000 of Austria’s inmates do not have Austrian nationality but many are citizens 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 exchange with its transnational partners has had a direct practical effect – as a basis for developing the prison education server and the Illias learning platform. But transnational cooperation has also had significant intangible benefits. The positive lessons learned from innovative experience in other Member States confirmed the validity of Telfi’s ambitious, holistic approach. A new Development Partnership called “Step-by-Step” has now been launched to further the experience of Telfi.

*A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/activities/search\\_en.cfm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm)*

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