

BUILDING ON DIVERSITY - TELE-LEARNING IN PRISONS - IMPROVING ACCESS TO WORK FOR (EX) OFFENDERS

While the numbers of inmates in Austrian penal institutions have been rising continuously over the past years, their chances of being successfully reintegrated into work after their release have been deteriorating steadily. Even before their imprisonment the vast majority were even more marginalised on the labour market in Austria than many other disadvantaged groups and only some 19 % of detainees had been involved in regular employment in the year before their conviction. Unfortunately, in the year after their release most (ex) offenders face the same bleak situation and also they rarely have, or take advantage of, opportunities to take part in any active labour market measures. Over half of the prisoners have not completed any education or training beyond compulsory schooling and so they are not equipped to meet ever more demanding job requirements. Many of them are also affected by an accumulation of other serious problems such as drug addiction, debt, linguistic and cultural difficulties or psychological handicaps. Research and experience has consistently confirmed that a strong correlation exists between mastering these problems and preventing recidivism

Using the new opportunities that information and communication technology (ICT) can provide, the Austrian "Tele-Learning for Imprisoned People" Development Partnership (DP) has designed, and is now testing, a new model that supports prisoners in developing the capacities, skills and competences that they need after their release, if they are to be successfully re-integrated into working and social life.

AIMS AND BACKGROUND OF THE DP

Telfi

The [Tele-Learning for Imprisoned People](#) DP, or Telfi for short, is piloting a new approach to learning and qualification in the Austrian penal system. Most of the existing training opportunities in prisons focus on traditional craft sectors and often lack the flexibility that is required to adapt to rapid changes in the labour market. Estimates suggest that only about 3 % of the 8000 prisoners in Austria participate in any type of training measure. In general, there are very few low-threshold offers and no certification is provided for the short training periods. There are different reasons for this lack of provision such as:

- The training programmes that are available locally do not comply with the security requirements placed on prisoners;
- Many inmates, especially women and young people, serve a sentence that is shorter than the duration of conventional training courses and a similar situation applies to prisoners in remand centres;
- Lack of personal resources, prison staff lack experience and skills in managing education and training programmes within the institution



Innovation

One of the novel aspects of the Telfi model is the use of tele-learning in prisons, including the design of contents and qualifications that are relevant to current needs on the labour market. These ICT-based methods of learning can closely reflect the particular circumstances

and needs of inmates. However, they pose a number of specific problems, which relate to the rules of imprisonment and the very nature of penal institutions, such as security concerns, legal requirements and also conventional attitudes towards offenders.

The introduction of e-Learning is seen by Telfi as a new flexible approach to complementing training opportunities and not as an alternative or substitute for existing courses. The general advantages that the use of PCs and learning/training software can offer appear to be particularly appropriate for prison inmates, who are of different ages and have different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. Most of the prisoners have failed in the traditional education and training systems and so one of the most important advantages is the possibility for participants to determine their own pace of learning. First positive experiences of e-Learning in connection with training for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) has reinforced the DP's views about its suitability.

All partners in the DP are aware that training measures alone are unlikely to make a substantial improvement to the chances of (ex) offenders finding employment. Thus, the most ambitious innovation that Telfi seeks to introduce is the integration of these new opportunities into a comprehensive process of active individualised support and empowerment that continues after the prisoner's release. This process relates learning, training and experiences of work during the period of imprisonment to the realities of working and social life outside the institution. Here the challenge to the project lies in developing cooperation between prison management, employment services, training organisations, social services and many other agencies and actors in the civic society and gradually bringing about a change in their levels of consciousness and awareness.

Partners

The broad range of partners working together in the Telfi DP is an important asset in promoting such change. They include:

- Six of the 28 prisons in Austria, which together reflect the specific situation and role of different types of penal institutions. They comprise a prison for young people serving sentences of above one year, a remand prison for young people and young adults, a women's prison, a semi-open penal establishment, one prison for the enforcement of long-term sentences and one for short-term sentences (i.e. more or less than 18 months);
- Seven operational partners, each of whom brings specific expertise and experience to the team and assumes a particular responsibility for aspects of the DP's activities, such as:
 - The development of training courses and the e-Learning platform;
 - Motivation, selection and (psychological) tutoring of course participants;
 - Guidance and advice in the preparation for, and continued practical support after, the release of participants;
 - Evaluation;
 - Overall coordination and management

These partners include the Vienna University of Technology, organisations specialising in the fields of course development/delivery and social research, national level NGOs engaged in the reintegration of prisoners and (ex) offenders, and the DP Managing Organisation;

- Five strategic partners who provide policy support and/or advice on the development of the DP. These include the Ministry of Justice, the national Employment Service, the federal Chamber of Employers, the Austrian Trade Union Confederation and the Centre for Further and Continuing Education and Training of Staff in the Penal System

Detailed information on all partners, their specific role in the Telfi DP and their wider activities can be accessed through the [DP's website](#)

ACTIVITIES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The activities of the Telfi DP are organised in three closely interconnected fields of action

Assessing the needs and capacities of inmates, and working with them to develop individualised support plans that include new forms of learning and training

Through the individualised support plans, new opportunities are created for prisoners to engage in an intra-muros programme of e-learning courses. These courses combine the acquisition of vocational skills and qualifications that are relevant on the labour market with IT-media competence and a particular emphasis on personal capacities, such as communication skills and the ability to cooperate. Individualised support includes tutorials and personal assistance during the courses and programmes to prepare prisoners for their transition to working and social life and further support measures are also provided after their release.

Information on the courses offered by Telfi is posted on the notice boards in the individual institutions. Participation in the programme is voluntary and the number of people interested in taking part most times exceeds the number of available places



Assessment

Course participants are selected on the basis of a personal assessment, which is designed and carried out by a specialised external team of psychologists working in cooperation with staff from the penal establishment. This process involves individual guided interviews and tests to find out more about each candidate's:

- Interests and motivation;
- Vocational experience and competences;
- Capacity for teamwork;
- Ability to work under pressure.

Other selection criteria are determined in relation to the contents of the respective courses. This assessment is an important first step in developing the candidates' individual support plans to prepare them for their transition to working and social life after release. The selection team includes the external assessors, psychologists and social workers from the penal institution in which the course is offered, and "transplacement actors" from Neustart (see below).

Up to the end of 2003, assessment interviews had been conducted with 165 individuals, 94 of whom were admitted to a course. The careful and comprehensive assessment and selection process is seen by Telfi as one of the main factors determining both the high pass rate of almost 90% in the final course examinations and the low level of drop out. Most of the drop outs (8) were due to unexpected transfers to other establishments or to unexpected release. Only two people have been removed from the courses for disciplinary reasons.

Target

groups

The primary target group for the e-learning courses and other support activities are those prisoners who are coming close to their release. Included are also inmates who seem to have the potential to comply with the rules and requirements of open prison methods that, in turn, will enable them to take up regular employment outside the penal institution. However, Telfi also involves inmates who face longer periods of custody but who might, after having successfully completed a course, take on tutor functions in future courses or apply their newly gained skills and qualifications within prison workshops or other fields of work. It is expected that this latter group could also help to develop new services inside the institution that would provide experience relevant for work in the regular labour market.

Course programme and organisation

The programme is designed to include low threshold but also some more demanding offers and to enable participants to progress at a pace that matches their individual capabilities. Subject to technical requirements and/or the institution's security concerns, the learning programmes are

either installed on PCs in the prisons or can be accessed on the central project server. Depending on the content, courses can last from 2 to 15 weeks and involve about 20 hours of course work per week. The training takes place in small groups of six participants and involves both periods of self-study and cooperative learning. Each group is supported by a trainer, who is present on site half a day per week to provide individual assistance and group coaching, and by a tutor recruited from the prison's staff. In addition, psychological assistance is offered through weekly group meetings, to help identify and address personal problems such as lack of motivation, social competence and self-reliance and also to develop group cohesion. These intensive accompanying measures have a vital part to play in implementing the individualised support plans that Telfi is piloting.

In 2003, the programme included training in basic IT-skills (seven courses, each lasting six weeks) and language courses (German as a foreign language, eight courses, each lasting ten weeks). In 2004/2005, courses will be offered in the fields of stock management (including the acquisition of a driving licence for a fork lift), wood-working, metal-working, language learning (English) and basic skills in mathematics, reading and writing. Particular attention is being paid to developing training opportunities that are especially useful to women. Wherever possible, e-learning will be combined with practical work and will also be used in the prison's training workshop

Current plans suggest that by September 2005 a total number of 40 courses will have been implemented involving around 240 participants.

Providing the tools and developing an appropriate infrastructure for e-learning in prisons



This field of action involves three main tasks:

- Searching for, identifying and adapting appropriate learning software. This includes a continuous process of exploring how learning contents that are relevant to the labour market can be effectively conveyed through tele-learning and of testing the suitability of such e-learning programmes for use in prisons;
- Developing, advising on, and implementing the technical infrastructure for e-learning in prisons including the installation of hardware and software and technical support;
- Installation and development of a "prison education server" and a server platform that complies with the prison's security requirements, for example in terms of access to the Internet. The platform will be further developed to enable all Austrian prisons to use the software available on the server for the organisation and delivery of e-learning courses in the future

In addition, a web-based communication and information platform has been established to ensure that all developments within the project are transparent to all the partners involved in the DP.

Organising the transition from imprisonment to the post-custodial stage

"Transplacement", or the effective preparation of prisoners during their term of detention for their post-custodial life, is the central idea that underpins the concept of the individualised support plan in the Telfi model. Neustart (NewStart), a national level NGO providing post-custodial support for ex-offenders and one of the operational partners in the DP, plays a pivotal role in this transfer process. "Transplacement actors" from Neustart are involved in the selection of applicants for training courses. They then maintain contact with participants during the course and support them after their release by helping with any problems of housing, providing guidance and liaising with employment services in order to find job placement opportunities.

Telfi also cooperates with other Austrian Development Partnerships, like the Schulden-Shredder (Debt Shredder, [AT-1A-04/65](#)), that offers specialised advice to people from particularly disadvantaged groups, including ex-offenders, who have debt problems.

One of the DP partners undertakes accompanying research and evaluation in all of the three fields of action described above and provides a continuous feedback on observations and outcomes.

Issues for future development

In 2003, the first operational year of the DP, the range of courses that Telfi could offer was relatively narrow. It will be broadened considerably in 2004 and this will place new demands on the project team:

- Telfi seeks to buy in and adapt existing, rather than develop new, software for these courses. However, in practice it has proved difficult to find appropriate programmes on the market, which can cause delays in the progress of the DP and may require more investment in software development than initially planned;
- The number of prison staff acting as tutors will need to be increased, which implies the provision of training for the new tutors. In 2003, Telfi used e-learning to train two members of prison staff of each participating prison as tele-tutors who then took on tasks in the organisation of courses and offered advice and support during the participants' self-study periods. Furthermore Telfi initiated the development and the provision of training for prison staff of all Austrian prisons to prepare for future tasks as tele-tutors;

The Telfi team is confident that the DP will make a lasting impact on the provision of new training opportunities for prisoners, not only in the prisons involved in the project but also in other penal institutions. Already during the DP's first operational year, seven further prisons indicated a strong interest in cooperating with or joining the project. The combination of the specific roles of strategic and operational partners in the DP, and the close cooperation between them, has transformed the initial project partnership into a potential nucleus of a sustainable network. This network has the capacity to maintain and develop the new approaches piloted by Telfi beyond the period of EQUAL funding and to promote their wider implementation throughout the country's penal system.

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Within the [PRILEARESNET](#) Transnational Partnership, Telfi cooperates closely with two DPs, in Germany ([E-Learning im Strafvollzug - e-LIS](#), DE-EA-91661) and in the Netherlands ([Reïntegratieproject NL's na buitenlandse detentie](#), NL-2001/EQA/0086), that pursue objectives and approaches which are very similar to its own. All three partners have identified the common concern of improving and diversifying learning and training provision for female prisoners.

A second important aspect of the transnational cooperation is the exchange and adaptation of education and training materials. The use of a common IT platform and jointly developed learning programmes in prisons in different Member States could open up new opportunities for non-national inmates to access learning and training resources in their own language and could also contribute to the establishment of a European network for tele-learning in the penal systems.

DP information

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)