



THE EUROPEAN FORINER PROJECT: BUILDING A MODEL TO PROVIDE DISTANCE EDUCATION TO FOREIGN NATIONAL PRISONERS

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Abstract

Correctional institutions are facing numerous challenges in providing education to their foreign national prison population. Although foreign national prisoners have the right to education, their educational needs are rarely met due to organisational and structural barriers. The ongoing European FORINER project (2016-2017) has designed and tested different solutions to respond to this problem. 15 pilot projects have been developed and implemented throughout Europe to test how educational courses for foreign national prisoners could be organised. These courses are provided by their home country and received in the country in which they are detained. These innovative educational practices are also scientifically investigated using quantitative and qualitative research methods, and will ultimately lead to the development of an evidence-based FORINER-model. As the scientific investigation is still ongoing, this article provides insight into the literature about the educational opportunities for foreign national prisoners, and the different steps the FORINER consortium has already undertaken in searching for a method/frame to provide this population with an educational offering. An extensive research report will be made available in November 2017.

Introduction

The population of foreign national prisoners cannot be considered one homogeneous group as they have different backgrounds, nationalities and ethnicities. As criminological literature defines foreign national prisoners as “prisoners who do not carry the passport of the country in which they are imprisoned” (Atabay, 2009, p79), the term ‘foreign national prisoners’ is used as a large composite level, including: (1) people travelling from one country to another with the aim of committing a crime (e.g., drugs smuggling, human trafficking); (2) people who have resided for a long period of time in the country in which they are imprisoned, but have not been granted citizenship for various reasons; and (3) people who are legal residents of the country for a short period of time (e.g., migrant workers). Besides, in countries where illegal immigration is an offence, illegal immigrants can also be detained in the same institutions as prisoners who have committed internationally recognised criminal offences (Atabay, 2009).

At the 1st of September 2015, on average 23% of the European prison populations consisted of foreign national prisoners, but there are big differences between countries. For instance, Hungary had no foreign national prisoners, while San Marino only had foreign people among their prison population (Aebi, Tiago, & Burkhardt, 2016). Despite the high proportion of foreign people in prisons all over the world, many countries do not have specific strategies or policies to deal with this group (Atabay, 2009). A growing body of literature nevertheless illuminates that apart from the traditional ‘pains of imprisonment’, foreign national prisoners experience additional problems in terms of language, problems in maintaining contact with family members, and are confronted with immigration issues (Barnoux & Wood, 2013; Bhui, 2009; Lloyd et al., 2006).

Why a European project?

The European FORINER project is produced against the background of the legal and human rights (foreign) national prisoners have to education, even though they have been punished and imprisoned. For instance, the standard United Nations (1955) minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners indicate that ‘all’ prisoners should have the right to take part in education. In 2009, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations demonstrated that not all their member states meet the equal rights of foreign national prisoners to education and recommended that providing educational programmes for foreign national prisoners should deserve special attention (Muñoz, 2009). Besides, the European Prison Rules also state that the prison regime for ‘all’ prisoners should focus on reintegration. This can be accomplished by education, labour and training brought by providers from outside prison, on an equal quality standard (Council of Europe, 2006).

Research has shown that participating in education during imprisonment entails several positive outcomes, as creating a regime of dynamic security (Costelloe & Langelid, 2011), decreasing recidivism (Kim & Clark, 2013), and retaining a sense of agency in the controlled prison environment as prisoners still can make some choices on how to spend their time (Behan, 2014). Despite the recognition of these positive outcomes, foreign national prisoners have less participation opportunities compared to national prisoners (Brosens & De Donder, 2016; Westrheim & Manger, 2014). If education is provided to foreign national prisoners, they are mostly language courses to learn the language of the country in which they are detained (Brosens & De Donder, 2016; Ugelvik, 2015). These courses are organised so that foreign national prisoners are able to deal with language problems and become able to communicate with prison staff and fellow prisoners (Ugelvik, 2015). However, research conducted by

the FORINER consortium has demonstrated that many European countries struggle with providing an educational offering to their foreign national prison population. The main barriers are a lack of resources, as there are only limited or totally no educational materials available for foreign national prisoners, and that the financial resources to provide an educational offer are insufficient. Another important barrier is that it is difficult to provide education to foreign national prisoners due to the fact that they do not sufficiently speak the language of the country in which they are detained (Brosens & De Donder, 2016).

Although education is a right - also for foreign national prisoners - in practice this right is far from being met as it poses several challenges. Based on this conclusion, the FORINER consortium is convinced that a European-wide network and knowledge is necessary to fight this problem and assure that foreign national prisoners can effectively obtain their right to education.

Building a European network and the realization of pilot projects

Since the start of the project in January 2016, FORINER has taken several steps to set up a European-wide network and pilot projects throughout Europe to test different manners to provide foreign national prisoners with education received from their home country (both digital and non- digital). First, a desk research to map and analyse the existing educational initiatives for European citizens detained in another European country was carried out. The desk report is entitled "Educational participation of European citizens detained in a foreign European country". This report contains a literature review concerning foreign national prisoners. The second part of the report presents the results of an online survey (N=108 prisons in 22 different European countries). This online survey has been distributed to gain an overview of the educational practices that exist for European citizens detained in another European country, as well as the barriers professionals experience to organise such an educational opportunity. In addition, questions are posed about the available ICT facilities and devices within the European prisons. Based on the online survey, four learning practices throughout Europe were selected for further investigation. Fifteen interviews were conducted with educational coordinators, volunteer teachers, prisoners and ICT staff members (Brosens & De Donder, 2016).

As a second step, a FORINER conference was organised in October 2016. The aim of this conference was to bring together organisations from across Europe that were interested in setting up one or more pilot projects with another European country to provide educational courses to foreign national prisoners from their home country, in their own language. There was a lot of interest, and twelve different countries participated in this meeting. The conference was organised as a hackathon¹ and the goal was to exchange information, ideas and to start-up joint pilot projects.

Later on, between January and June 2017, 15 pilot projects were developed and realised throughout Europe to test how an educational offering for foreign national prisoners provided by their home country could be organised. Nine European countries have been involved in these pilot projects. Six European countries have sent education to their nationals detained abroad: Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Three countries received educational courses for foreign people detained within their correctional institutions: Belgium, Malta, and Norway.

¹ A hackathon is 'an event where people come together to collaboratively build and launch a new application or finished good aimed at solving a particular problem built on top of new or existing technology enabler' (Rosell, Kumar, & Shepherd, 2014).

36 prisoners have followed an educational course of their home country. The courses were diverse, for instance English, history, management courses, mathematics, and personal social development. 25 of the students are involved until the end of the pilot project. The other 11 students dropped out during the course of the pilot project due to release from prison, transfer to another prison, or stopped with their study. 31 of the students were male (86.1%), 5 female (13.9%). Their mean age was 32,3 years. The youngest student was 20 years old and the oldest one 68 years.

The processes that participating prisoners undergo are monitored by pre- and post-surveys. When a foreign national prisoner starts an educational course, they are invited to fill in a starting questionnaire, with another questionnaire when the course has been completed. These questionnaires focus, for instance, on discovering the motives for selecting that particular course, as well as how they would assess their own current skill level (on subjects such as reading, writing, ICT, self-regulation and mathematics). The ending questionnaire also includes, for instance, questions about what following the course of their home country has contributed to their perspective on reintegration. SPSS 24.0 will be used to perform the analyses, but we already have some first previews. The first results indicate that in particular the reading and writing skills of participating prisoners increase by following an educational course of their home country, that their main motivation is to learn about an interesting or relevant subject, and that they want to satisfy their desire to learn. Furthermore, they expect to have a better life after release from prison and to be able to find a better job. Besides, five pilot projects have been selected to be investigated more in-depth to gain insight into the experiences of those involved. Professionals and prisoners are interviewed qualitatively at the end of the pilot projects (N=16). Being selected for this in-depth evaluation does not mean that these were 'the best' pilot projects. The following selection criteria were used: digital/non-digital, different models to provide distance education, coaching of the student, accused or convicted prisoners, and European region (i.e., North, East, South and West). All interviews will be transcribed verbatim and analysed using MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis programme. Similar to the quantitative evaluation part, we are still working on the analyses, but we can already reveal that students were very grateful for the opportunity to follow a course of their home country. For instance:

"Thank you for offering me this programme. It will help me to spend my time in prison useful. It will help me to refresh long forgotten knowledge. It will help me to forget the hard reality. I'm very grateful for this opportunity". (Lithuanian student, Belgium)²

The ultimate aim of the FORINER project is to develop an evidence-based, European model about how distance education from the home country can be organised for foreign national prisoners while they are in prison in another European country. This model will be partly based on the scientific evaluation of the 15 pilot projects. Insights from the first qualitative interviews show that providing support to the studying prisoners can be a task for the sending partner (from the home country), as well as the receiving partner (from the country where the prisoner is detained). For instance, the sending partner sends the course materials and homework tasks, corrects them and provides feedback. While doing so, some of the sending partners try to motivate prisoners to keep on studying. In other words, they provide both educational as well as motivational support. The receiving partners, from their side, try to have frequent face-to-face contact with the students and motivate them to keep studying.

² The evaluation report including the results of the scientific research (both the quantitative as quantitative research) will be available by the end 2017 on www.foriner.com.

They are not directly involved in providing educational support (although some of them print the educational materials they receive from the sending partner for the prisoners), only in motivational support. Furthermore, permission and support from prison authorities is important. Also finding the appropriate level of schooling is of utmost importance. All need a good liaison between the educational provider(s) or social worker(s) in the home country and the prison in which the foreigner is detained.

The evidence-based FORINER-model will be finalised in November 2017. Preliminary results at this time point towards some important elements that should be integrated in the model: 1) The necessity to have a European overview of all sending partners and their educational offer. 2) The need to have 'national coordinators'. For example, the idea is explored to have a national sending coordinator who has an overview of the educational offerings of the diverse national educational providers (e.g., basic skills education, secondary schools, higher education institutions, universities). This coordinating sender can be contacted when another European country has a foreign national prisoner with an educational need in one of their correctional institutions. The receiving partner will get in contact with the coordinator of the sending country to communicate about the possibilities for collaboration. 3) The ongoing evaluation of the pilot projects also reveals that the ideal situation would be that the sending and receiving countries can work together on a digital base (i.e. e-learning, web-based learning). This latter aspect is confirmed by Hawley, Murphy, & Souto-Otero (2013) who state that in particular, a combination of ICT and distance education can create educational opportunities for foreign national prisoners, as it facilitates the cooperation between a prison in the foreign country and the educational provider in the home country. As stated by a professional in one of the receiving countries:

"The best will be some kind of platform on the computer, on the Internet [...] where you can login and get the materials. Because of the security, maybe this will be the task of the teacher or the counsellor but together with the student. We also operate this way with university students for example, so it is possible. [...] The best solution will be that every country has its own area on this platform, where some countries can put many courses and other countries maybe not so many. [...] This platform cannot only be used for educational materials, but also as a way to communicate with partners in the other countries."

Challenges for future advancement

The FORINER consortium is convinced that the steps they took (and are still taking) are important, but the pilot projects are still in the experimentation phase and need sustaining, and scaling up. There is a lot of potential to support the ongoing development of such projects on a wider scale and to transfer it to more European countries. More than 86.000 prisoners were detained in European prisons at the 1st of September 2015, among which 23% had another nationality than that of the country in which they are imprisoned (Aebi et al., 2016), implying that there are many potential students. However, different (potential) pilot partners have tried to find their citizens in prisons abroad in which they may be detained and did not succeed. Various ministries and embassies were contacted, but due to privacy reasons or organisational barriers they were not able to provide an overview of the prisoners detained in their country. Creating possibilities for detecting, localizing and engaging citizens detained abroad remains a challenge for the future.

Despite the great interest and enthusiasm in the field to work together with other European countries to exchange education across borders, the development of the pilot projects – and especially of the digital ones – is not easy. It requires a lot of trial and error, and new local and intra-national networks need to be built. One of the 15 pilot projects was a digital one, the 14 other pilots were paper-based, implying that all course materials and homework assignments usually needed to be sent by post. Sometimes, the materials are sent by e-mail by the sending partner to the receiving partner. In this case, the receiving partner needs to print all the materials they receive. Implementing ICT in distance education for foreign national prisoners is an important challenge for the future, but it can facilitate the cooperation between a prison in the foreign country and the educational provider in the home country (Hawley et al., 2013).

Besides, the partners involved in the pilot projects are very enthusiastic staff members/volunteers trying to make a difference for some foreign national prisoners, but many of them are operating alone and without structural support from their organisation. A new European project proposal – FORINER II – has been submitted which aims to upscale the evidence-based FORINER model (which is already partly developed, but will be adapted based on the results of the scientific evaluation of the pilot projects). 13 different European countries are involved in this project proposal: Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and two European-wide organisations (the European Prison Education Association [EPEA] and EuroPris) support the project. If the project will be approved, three 'upscaling levels' will be targeted throughout the project: local, national, and European level (January 2018 – December 2019).

Next steps of the current FORINER project

As already mentioned, 15 pilot projects throughout Europe have been organised to see how education offered to foreign national prisoners provided by their home country can be organised. The different local approaches taken in the pilot projects are currently scientifically evaluated and will provide insight into the different models that can be used to organise education for prisoners detained abroad. The next step of the project is to design an evidence-based FORINER-model (November 2017).

The FORINER consortium will also design policy advice. To improve mainstreaming and influencing policy development, the FORINER project has an advisory board consisting of experts in European and national policy on prison education and ICT. The advisory board has been following up on the project and its results closely. They mainly give strategic advice on the project goals and how best to achieve them. They will also help in spreading the project results among European stakeholders and policy makers after the project has formally ended. One of the biggest challenges for the FORINER consortium during the upcoming months will be to write well-founded policy, taking into account the advice of the board in order to have a policy impact on a European level (before the end of 2017).

Becoming involved in the Foriner project

If you would like to become involved in the Foriner project, you can contact our project coordinator (bianca.durkovics@vocvo.be or foriner@vocvo.be).

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Dorien Brosens is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Educational Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). She obtained a PhD in 2015 with a thesis titled: 'Participation in prison programmes. Profile of (non-)participants, encouraging and discouraging factors.' In addition, she has been involved in a research project concerning participation and involvement of prisoners in prison life (e.g. prisoner council, voluntary work), a research project focussing on the needs, motives and barriers of foreign national prisoners to participate in prison activities (FIP2 – Foreigners Involvement and

Participation in Prison), and the European FORINER project about providing foreign national prisoners in European prisons with access to learning opportunities provided by home institutions.

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Liesbeth De Donder is Professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel where she teaches the courses 'Civil Society and Community Development', 'Social Gerontology' and 'Research Methodology'. She manages and supervises different research projects on social inclusion and social participation, elder abuse and quality of care, and participatory research methodologies. She is also the chairwoman of the research group PaLD (Participation and Learning in Detention).

Inge Van Acker has worked as a teacher for several years before she entered the prison education working field. In 2008 she left the teaching job to become the first prison education coordinator of the prison of Mechelen. After two years she moved to VOCVO to coordinate prison education for all prisons in Flanders and Brussels. She has been working in this job for VOCVO up to now. During the past years at VOCVO Inge managed to build a large network within the Flemish field of prison education and also abroad. This led to the foundation of Klasbak vzw, the Flemish branch of the EPEA, in 2014, in close cooperation with other education providers or other professionals related to the field. Inge is Secretary of Klasbak. As the contact person for all issues regarding prison education in Flanders, Inge has regular meetings with partners such as the Belgian Prison service, the Department of Education and the Department of Welfare to discuss problems, look for solutions and constantly try to improve the cooperation and educational offer in prison. In 2016 Vocvo started the Erasmus+-project FORINER, of which it is the coordinator. Inge is the project leader. FORINER is a two-year European project on providing distance education to prisoners detained abroad, in their own language.

Bianca Durkovic graduated at the Babes Bolyai University in Romania and is a member of the Romanian College of Psychologists. She is also a trainer with almost 3 years of experience in planning and ongoing training programmes addressing adult education using formal and informal approaches. In the last 4 years, she gained professional experience in project coordination and supervision of programmes and services in the non-governmental sector in Romania. She is involved in non-formal education since 2012, participating in numerous international trainings and exchanges in Europe through the Erasmus+ programme. The learning mobilities were aimed at developing competences in the field of social inclusion, discrimination and equal opportunities for people coming from vulnerable groups. Bianca also acquired competences in writing projects applications through European funds by coordinating Mobility projects in the field of education and social inclusion within the Erasmus+ program. She is coordinating the FORINER project from May 2017.

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