

Workshop 4
IT-supported distance education for flexible learning
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ABSTRACT:

In order to increase the opportunities for inmates to participate in adult education, the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration has introduced a pilot project for development (started in August 2003). A joint venture with the Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning (CFL) was established for the connection to the national education system, i.e. for a quality guarantee concerning Education Act, ordinances and syllabuses. The responsibility of CFL is to contribute to the project with pedagogical management.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Administration engaged teachers, mostly for full time, in the project. Today there are about 30 subject teachers spread out mainly in one region of the country, which includes 17 prisons/Remand Prisons. The more different subject competences that are represented by the teachers, the wider choices the inmates will have according to their own needs and wishes. There are a few teachers stationed (one, two or three) at each local prison/Remand Prison. Each place forms a Learning Centre, a meeting place, where the students can find support and resources for their studies. All Learning Centres are also connected in a network with pedagogical management from CFL.

The development towards an organisation for flexible learning includes the introduction of IT-supported distance education. This form of education makes it possible for the inmates to continue their studies no matter where they are moved or when they are released. Their studies become independent of time, place and pace. Hence the teaching can get extremely individual, adapted to special needs. A Learning Management System (LMS) is now built considering the security demands of the Prison and Probation Administration. This

IT-support will make it easier to register the students, to administrate their studies and to support their communication with the teachers who are not necessarily located at the same prison. It will also be a way of providing the students with digital educational materials.

The pilot project aims to improve the quality of education for inmates, to get equivalence to the national educational system and to increase continuity of the inmates' studies. We strongly believe in the potential of this model for flexible learning. The experiences of the development so far are very good.

IT-supported distance education for flexible learning
- Education for everyone!

Prison education has been a reality in Sweden for more than a century. A centralised, national education system supported for a long time even the prisons with teachers. However, a changing society demands new ways of learning and the education system have changed over the years. In the beginning of the nineties the responsibility for all education was transferred to the municipalities (about 260 in Sweden), a fact that worried the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration. Who would in this situation give priority to education for offenders in prison? To be sure that the prison education should not fall apart, the Prison and Probation Administration made a proposal that this would be their own mission. An agreement was made with the education ministry who thereafter did not have any education

responsibility for inmates. The justice ministry got the financial resources transferred in order to purchase the education from the municipalities. In the middle of the nineties the Public Procurement Act was introduced which requires a quotation process, to ensure a fair competition within the market. Hence, each prison started to contract teachers from different education organizers.

The number of education organizers has increased and the quality varies as much as the cost per hour does. Furthermore most of them do not have examination rights. In the end the situation was alarming for the prison education. Since each local authority purchased their own education, it ended up in a diversity across the nation that did not promote the learning situation of the inmates. Few of them had the opportunity to obtain grades at the end of the courses. Another problem was that the offer of adult education was so different at each prison that the inmates in most cases had to cancel their studies when they were transferred between two different prisons.

In order to improve the quality of education for inmates, to get equivalence to the national educational system in prison and to increase continuity of the inmates' studies, the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration introduced a pilot project for development of prison education in August 2003. A joint venture with the Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning (CFL) was established. The latter is a national authority under the Swedish Ministry of Education and Culture with the purpose to strengthen and stimulate the development of flexible learning in the fields of adult education. The ultimate aim is to make education available to all adults. In this case the partnership was a way of establishing a connection to the national education system, i.e. for a quality guarantee concerning the Education Act, ordinances and syllabuses. The responsibility of CFL is also to contribute with pedagogical management.

The new way of organizing the education system is named The Model of Learning Centres and requires the following to function well: a Learning Centre organization, engagement of special subject teachers for several levels, computers for ICT (Information and Communication Techniques), inclusion of distance education, collaboration between prisons and - the most important of all - focus on the individual; education in consideration to the learner's needs, preferences and circumstances.

A Learning Centre is a meeting place where adult students can find support and resources for their studies. This means, in addition to functional and inspiring rooms, guidance and support from teachers, use of computers, literature, education materials and library services. At the Learning Centre the inmates can also meet other students and have an experience and knowledge exchange. This is the current development in the whole of the Swedish society today. There are Learning Centres in almost every municipality. A similar development within the prison education is therefore valuable. An environment like this can defuse the education situation, as this situation often is connected to negative experiences for the inmates. Since the environment is different from a traditional school, it can even stimulate the inmates to enter. Furthermore, when they leave prison they will be familiar with the idea of Learning Centres, which may encourage them to continue their studies in freedom.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Administration have started to engage teachers according to this new model. The teachers are employees with a 40-hour duty per

week and with five weeks vacations. This is since the education is something that is needed all year round. Today there are about 30 subject teachers spread out over 15 prisons/remand prisons, mainly in the western region of the country, who form a network together. The more different subject competences the teachers represent, the wider a choice the inmates will have, according to their own needs and wishes. For that reason it is of great importance to keep a national view regarding competences when recruiting new teachers. Today there are several subjects represented in the network, e.g. Swedish, English, German, Swedish as a foreign language, Spanish, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography, Civics and Religion.

There are teachers stationed, usually between one and four, (Swedish prisons are built for a maximum of 250 – 300 inmates) at each local prison/remand prison and each place forms a Learning Centre. All teachers are assembled in a network with pedagogical management from CFL. The network is important to the teachers since it is the base for contacts and collaboration with colleagues who are spread out across an area of about 500 kilometres from north to south.

The role of the teachers consists of teaching courses in their special subjects and coaching students studying other subject fields. The latter are supported by special subject teachers by distance education. That means that the teachers support the inmates during their learning processes, both in the physical room and in distance education situations. There are groups of students (when the inmates are allowed to see each other) but the teachers also teach and support individuals, depending on the local situation. Even in the groups the learners do not necessarily study the same courses or not even the same subjects. This depends on the needs and wishes of the individual. The teacher has to give prime consideration to the individual's preconditions and education plan.

The development towards an organization for flexible learning includes the introduction of IT-supported distance education. This form of education makes it possible for the inmates to start their studies no matter at what time they enter the prison, and to continue them wherever they are moved or when they are released. Their studies become independent of time, place and pace. The organization of the Learning Centres is very important in this context. There has to be a link between all Learning Centres within the Prison and Probation Administration, in order to guarantee the supply of education for all inmates.

The Learning Centres are equipped with computers to be used by the learners. Access to the Internet is not yet allowed but a Learning Management System (LMS) is under construction, considering the security demands of the Prison and Probation Administration. This IT-support will make it easier to register the students, to administrate their studies and to support their communication with the teachers who are not stationed at the same prison as the student. It will also be a way of providing the students with digital educational materials. There are databases accessible through Internet where the teachers can find learning objects to pass on to the students.

A decision has now been made at the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration, stating that the model will be implemented in the whole country within the year of 2007. It will take until this before the educational model can be at its most effective. When every local prison is involved, it does not matter where the prisoner is stationed – he or she will always have the opportunity to study and, which is very

important, to continue and finish studies once started! Another advantage with the whole country involved, is the large number of subjects that will be represented by the different special subject teachers.

The following picture will show a general image of the idea with Learning Centres. The main object with this model is to strengthen the educational system for the inmates so that adult education will be available for everyone even in prison.

