

Background Research Report

ICT & Multimedia in European Prisons

Summary of results of research undertaken by the *PriMedia* Network

Involving information provided by partners in Bulgaria, Catalonia, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Turkey, and the UK

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“E-learning gives inmates the chance to not only learn subjects for their general or vocational education but also provides them with the opportunity to acquire digital literacy. In today’s society, where digital competence is becoming necessary at the workplace as well as in daily life, the chance for ex-offenders to be reintegrated can be greatly improved by offering qualifications in the field of new media and computer use. People lacking digital competence are at risk of exclusion.”

‘E-Learning in Prison Education in Europe’

The degree to which ICT has developed in a prison context is a product of the overall national environment that applies in different countries: the philosophical attitude to the desirability of giving IT access and/or education to prisoners; and the resource that the government gives to funding teaching staff, hardware and software as part of the national educational process. There is significant variation, in performance, attitude and resource. As in other research undertaken into European prisons, the situation regarding the provision of ICT & multimedia is often contradictory not only in each country, but often from regions to region. In general, the Northern European countries tend to be further advanced in allowing access, although other countries have also made encouraging progress.

Problems

Despite progress in a number of countries, security continues to be a significant issue in terms of the development of ICT education in prisons. There have however been developments to address this stumbling block, for example in Denmark and Norway. Even if security issues have been overcome, access - particularly the use of ICT for educational or training purposes - is in many cases extremely limited, although for others it is becoming easier. Even when the problems of security and access have been resolved, there are a number of other obstacles to be overcome, including the impact of economic cutbacks, technical unreliability, lack of assessment and portfolio of achievements, lack of competent trainers and poor basic ICT skills of users.

Benefits of ICT

Nevertheless, despite this rather gloomy perspective, where such problems can be overcome the benefits not only for the prisoners but also for the prisons are enormous:

- ICT can make prisons safer because it reduces tension in the prisoners, restores calm, not just the passive way like television, but also in a more active way.
- ICT can assist in the prevention of repeat offences and for better rehabilitation of detainees.
- ICT is a tool which can help detainees to take responsibility for themselves on release.
- A large majority of the students are foreigners and so educational approaches are targeted at their specific needs, in particular communication difficulties in their host language.
- Specific initiatives such as the 'Skype for prisoners' project in an Italian prison allow prisoners to talk with people on the outside, including their family.
- In the UK the benefits of a newly introduced internet programme for prisoners are identified as boosting ICT confidence, helping to build personal CVs and assisting in productive job-searches.
- E-learning can also be used for the further qualification of prison staff. helping them to become aware of the advantages of using ICT in education.

Multimedia

In earlier European projects concerned with prison education, a range of multimedia examples were identified, chiefly though videos and DVDs, many of which have been circulated online via U-Tube, etc. In fact multimedia provides a vast range of opportunities, but is mostly identified as part of ICT in general, rarely as a specific discipline in its own right, not only in offender learning but in education generally. Yet multimedia can be utilised for a wide range of purposes, including: for e-learning (education), entertainment, promotional and advertising aims, e-publications, modelling and simulation, and public information. Many examples can be found in the *PriMedia* database.

Conclusion

Whilst the overall picture regarding ICT & multimedia activities in European prisons – at least with regard to the countries covered by this survey – is mixed, concerns about access and application are to some extent offset by some encouraging initiatives, both at national and regional and at local level. It is to be hoped that, despite the difficult economic and social environment in which prisons are operating today, the real benefits to be gained by allowing prisoners their basic right to become digitally literate and access the same communication facilities as those on the outside will be reaped. Certainly the *PriMedia* Network will support all actions that enable this to happen and to this end has already created the framework for an internationally accredited training programme for ICT and multimedia practitioners and teachers, and is supporting a further initiative in the development of a European-wide Intranet service.
