



## **“All Prisoners Shall Have Access to Education”: Transnational Knowledge Sharing on e-Learning in Europe’s Prisons**

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### **Abstract**

E-learning is said to offer prisons the flexibility to bring vocational and educational day structure to their heterogeneous clientele within a secure setting, answering their clients’ divergent needs. Education, training and qualifications make a substantial – if not the most effective – contribution to successful resettlement into the community, therefore lowering the high - and rising - recidivism rate in Europe. Over more than a decade, the European Union mandate has been to improve the quality of prison education through European cooperation.

26 Grundtvig & Leonardo projects have now taken place knowledge-sharing on e-learning in prison, including the DG EAC European Conference on Prison Education ‘Pathways to Inclusion: Strengthening European Cooperation in Prison Education and Training’ (Budapest, 2010). DG EMPL has supported learning as part of its drive to rehabilitate and increase offender employability: ESF Programmes EQUAL (2002-2009), and the Learning Network on (Ex)Offender Community of Practice (ExOCOP, 2009-2012) focused on e-learning as one of the key influencing factors in offender education, training and employment. These networks were forums for diverse stakeholders to share policy, practice, progress and potential collaboration. They brought together European Education, Labour and Justice Directorate Generals, NGO’s, academics and vital professional organisations.

A great deal of inter-disciplinary transnational learning has already taken place, and one aspect of our future work is to sustain the needs of this network, using something like the good practice wiki developed during ExOCOP: [eu.exocop.org](http://eu.exocop.org). This way, future European collaboration can be oriented by what has already been achieved in digital learning in prisons: German has legislated penal e-learning across 11 of 16 federal states, Norway and Denmark have pioneered internet access in prisons, Sweden’s pedagogical approach to imprisonment has broadened the role of the e-teacher to mentoring and coaching. Belgium is committed to digitalizing prisons and the UK has launched the *Virtual Campus* (in collaboration with the Open University), designed as a full resettlement tool.

But national and regional attitudes remain extremely divided in policy and practice: some European countries already successfully integrating collaborative and social PLE’s into their penal educational systems, even working on through-the-gate education and training platforms to aid rehabilitation. Others struggle to even have internet access viewed by governors, politicians and the public as anything but an undeserved perk. Despite pockets of excellent practice, very different administrative and public attitudes persist towards prison as a learning environment. As a result, ICT resources and e-learning budgets for prisons can also be extremely variable, becoming ever more so.

To secure a sustainable rehabilitation programme and support e-learning budgets we propose fostering a profitable European Prison Industry Network, where better dialogue with the local labour market would allow prison administrations to affordably and effectively tailor e-learning to the right qualifications and skills for in-demand employment, perhaps even linking to e-apprenticeships. This would move prisoners away from menial work, which neither builds employability nor aids long-term resettlement in the working community.