

Summary “Distance Education for Dutch Citizens Detained Abroad: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of the Foundation ‘Education behind Foreign Bars’” – Article published in Education Sciences  
*Dorien Brosens, Silke Marynissen, Frans Lemmers & Flore Croux*

The PARTICipation and Learning in Detention (PALD) research group of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB - Belgium) has conducted a mixed-methods case study into the unique functioning of the Dutch foundation ‘Educatie achter buitenlandse tralies’ (Education behind foreign bars) by investigating professionals, volunteers and students involved. The international journal ‘Education Sciences’ published an article about it. *You can read the full article on <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/2/41>.*

## Introduction

Access to education is a human right (Council of Europe, 1950; United Nations, 1966), including for prisoners (Council of Europe, 1989; Council of Europe, 2020; United Nations, 2015). In particular, the Council of Europe (2012) formulated a specific recommendation for foreign national prisoners stipulating that their educational needs should be considered. Despite foreign national prisoners’ equal rights, they are confronted with less educational opportunities than national prisoners (Brouwer, 2020; Brosens et al., 2020; Westrheim & Manger, 2014). Mainly the language barrier prevents foreign nationals to participate in prison education. Often a good understanding of the national language of the detaining country is required (Armstrong & Reily, 2019; Atabay, 2009). In addition, foreign national prisoners that want to participate in prison education are hindered by waiting lists, a lack of information about the educational offer in a language they understand, a lack of available places, or getting no answer on their request to participate (Westrheim & Manger, 2014). Recent research into the barriers prison professionals experience in providing education to foreign national prisoners has demonstrated that educational materials for foreign nationals are limited or even not available, and that financial resources to provide an educational offer to this population are lacking (Brosens et al., 2020). Providing prison education to foreign nationals is often not considered as a priority by policy makers (Lemmers, 2015). Consequently, prisons organize a smaller educational offer for foreign national than for national prisoners. If foreign national prisoners have access to prison education, courses to learn the national language of the detaining country are most often provided (Brosens et al., 2020). However, learning the national language is not always relevant for those prisoners who will leave the detaining country (Croux et al., 2019). For this group, **distance education from their home country could be valuable, but nowadays such learning opportunities are limited** (Brosens et al., 2020). To respond to this need, the **Dutch foundation Education behind Foreign Bars (Eabt) provides distance education to Dutch nationals detained abroad**. To the best of our knowledge, Eabt is the only foundation in the world that provides distance education to nationals detained abroad. Given the uniqueness of this case, a mixed-methods case study was set up to gain insight into the perspective of volunteers and professionals who support the courses via Eabt, and the detained students abroad (further abbreviated as students) participating in such courses. The following research questions are addressed:

Qualitative part—professionals and volunteers:

- RQ1: How do volunteers and professionals experience the progress of a course from Eabt, from application to completion?
- RQ2: How do professionals and volunteers perceive the future of Eabt, and what are the success factors and challenges in this regard?

Quantitative part—students:

- RQ3: How are the students motivated to participate in a course from Eabt?
- RQ4: What are the results and effects for the students of participating in a course provided by Eabt?

## Methods

A mixed-methods case study design was set up consisting of: (1) individual interviews with professionals and volunteers involved in the working of Eabt, and (2) pre- and post-surveys among students. First, to get insight into the **perspectives of professionals and volunteers** involved in the working of Eabt, **17 individual interviews** were conducted between December 2018 and March 2019. The aim was to reach a diverse group of participants (e.g. visiting volunteers, teachers, after-care workers, employees of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Consular Affairs). 12 participants were working in the Netherlands and 5 in the detaining countries. 10 interviews were conducted by telephone, 5 face-to-face, and 2 via Skype. Second, the process that **students** underwent while attending a course from Eabt was monitored by means of a

**pre- and post-survey.** All 96 students that applied for a course between July and December 2018 were asked to fill in the pre-survey, which was sent by post. Between June and August 2019 (i.e. 7 to 10 months after sending the pre-surveys), the students who filled in the pre-survey were sent a post-survey. In the end, 60 students completed the pre-survey (response rate of 62.5%) and 31 the post-survey (response rate of 51.7%). There was a drop-out between completing the pre- and post-survey due to, for instance, releases from prison, transfers to other prisons, and loss of contact.

## Findings

### 1. Qualitative findings: perspectives of professionals and volunteers

The interviews demonstrated that the provision of distance courses from Eabt follows three steps: (1) Informing students, (2) applying for a course, and (3) starting the course, doing homework, and being assessed. The **first step** consists of **informing potential students** about the educational offer of Eabt. The interviews demonstrated that written information sources are mostly used. When Dutch nationals are arrested abroad and registered at the Foreign Office for Consular Assistance, they receive an information package with a brochure that provides information about the offer of Eabt. Besides, in some countries, students could get informed about the educational offer of Eabt by means of oral information sources (e.g. visiting volunteers of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service, employees of the local prison, the Dutch embassy or consulate). The **second step** consists of **students applying for a course**. When students are interested in following a course from Eabt, they could inform the study programme counsellor in the local prison or an employee of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service. These actors in turn pass on the information to Eabt. The students are then sent an application form and an introductory package. The purpose of this is providing information about the requested course, to estimate the language level of the potential students, to gauge their motivation, to check whether the requested course is in line with their previous education, to check which materials are allowed in the local prison, and to determine how long students still have to stay in prison. **Finally, students start the course, do homework, and are assessed.** After a successful application, Eabt sends a trial lesson to the students. If the trial lesson is evaluated positive, students receive the full course package. If Eabt feels that the student's language and—sometimes—calculation level is insufficient, a course in Dutch is first recommended or another course is sought. When students have been given permission to start a distance course, a teacher from the Netherlands is assigned and the full course package is sent by post. In some situations, Eabt relies on the help of local partners for the import of the course packages. The respondents mentioned that students study independently, do homework assignments, and send them to the Netherlands. Eabt offers the students the opportunity to study at their own pace, which was valued by the respondents. However, several respondents pointed out that distance education is not feasible for every prisoner. Study facilities were very different in prisons across the world. Several respondents reported that after successful completion of certain courses, students receive a certificate. For most courses, it is sufficient to complete the homework assignment for each part of the course and pass, but for some courses (e.g. from the National Business Academy or Open University), an exam must be taken. According to the respondents, Eabt takes several efforts to organize this exam during detention abroad, which often requires creativity. The respondents indicated that when it is not practically feasible to organize the exam during detention, the students will still be able to take the exam in the Netherlands after their release.

Throughout the interviews, it emerges that **learner support** is offered from the Netherlands and in the detaining country. The support from the Netherlands is structural, which means that all students receive it. The teachers motivate students through their feedback and tips on homework assignments and Eabt by sending postcards at key moments (e.g. course package sent or certificate obtained) and with special events (e.g. public holidays or birthdays). Content-related support is also provided as Eabt sends extra teaching materials (e.g. dictionaries or handbooks) and looks for the right educational provider if a student asks for a course that is not in their standard educational offer. Support in the detaining country is more likely to depend on the local situation. Examples of motivational support include visiting volunteers, fellow prisoners, or teachers encouraging students, while content-related support is more about going over homework assignments or follow-up of the course.

The professionals and volunteers mentioned various **success factors** which Eabt should continue to focus on in the future. Eabt's working with volunteers is considered a success, as the volunteers are strongly committed and have a passion for what they do. The extensive network with partners in the Netherlands and world-wide is regarded as a huge advantage, indispensable for making Eabt work. Furthermore, the wide assortment of courses, free of charge, and homework support are among the success factors mentioned. Next to the success factors, the respondents highlighted several **challenges**. The fact that Eabt works with volunteers was experienced as a strength. However, this could also be seen as a threat to Eabt's continuity because of the average age of Eabt's

board members and volunteers (i.e. most of them are aged 65 and over). Respondents indicated that follow-up is necessary, such as looking for younger volunteers or letting Eabt 'merge' into a governmental organization. A second bottleneck experienced regarding the continuity of Eabt is its dependence on subsidies. A third challenge is the dependency on the post for getting in contact with the students. The respondents mainly experienced difficulties with the import of course packages in certain prisons/countries, the long waiting times associated with correspondence by post or parcels that get lost or end up at the wrong addresses. Finally, the main challenge faced by Eabt is the lack of opportunities for digitalisation in prisons. The respondents believed that Eabt could benefit from using the Internet for (part of) its functioning, but Eabt depends on the local prisons to facilitate this.

## 2. Quantitative findings: students following a distance course from Eabt

The students were mainly **motivated** to acquire knowledge and skills and to prepare for life after detention. The majority wanted to spend time in prison by doing something sensible or useful (96.6%; N = 56), to learn about an interesting or important subject (86.4%; N = 51), or to find work more easily after release (83.1%; N = 49). Besides, the students were more satisfied with the **support** they received from the Netherlands compared to the support they received from the local prison. In terms of the support from Eabt, the students were satisfied with the way homework was sent to their teacher in the Netherlands (87.1%; N = 27), but also with the way homework was sent to prison (77.4%; N = 24). Almost 76% of the students (N = 22) indicated that they had received the course material in full. In terms of the support from the teacher in the Netherlands, 77.4% (N = 24) were satisfied with the feedback they received from their teacher and 66.7% (N = 20) thought that their teacher had knowledge of the subject of the course. Also, students' satisfaction with the support they received in the prison where they were staying was surveyed. Almost 60% (N = 17) felt that their fellow prisoners approved that they followed this course. Thirty percent (N = 9) indicated that prison officers encouraged them to complete the course. The students were less able to ask questions about the course in the local prison. 20% (N = 6) indicated that they could ask questions to fellow prisoners and 9.7% (N = 3) to prison officers.

In terms of **assertiveness, digital skills and language skills**, 50% experienced an increase in their language skills, 46.7% in assertiveness, and 37.9% in digital skills. Finally, in terms of students' **perspective on reintegration**, 66.7% of the students (N = 20) expected to have a better life after release from prison as a result of the course. The chances of easier avoiding committing crimes (39.3%; N = 11) and increasing the chances of release (20%; N = 6) were estimated to be less high. 60% (N = 18) expected to find work more easily and also to find a better or nicer job after release from prison due to the course. The students also felt that the course has contributed to the development of their social skills. 60% (N = 18) indicated that the course allows them to control themselves better, 53.4% (N = 16) that they can better manage their daily living activities, and 50% (N = 15) that the course will improve their relationship with family and friends. In addition, 33.4% (N = 10) stated that the course has taught them to behave better in a group. Finally, more than half of the students (55.1%; N = 16) wanted to return to the Netherlands because of the course, while only a small minority (10%; N = 3) expected that the course gives them more chances to stay in the detaining country.

## Conclusion

Although foreign national prisoners have equal rights on prison education, in practice, their educational needs are rarely met due to organizational barriers. Education behind foreign bars (Eabt) offers a solution to this problem by providing distance education to their nationals detained abroad. This exploratory mixed-methods case study provides insights into the working of Eabt and can inspire countries or organizations that would like to set up distance education for their nationals detained abroad. Among other things, it is important to set up an extensive network of partners all over the world, to further develop the digital learning opportunities in prison, and to provide both motivational and content-related support to the students. As up until now little efforts are taken by prison authorities to provide distance education to foreign national prisoners, further research is needed to find out why no action is taken and what is needed to make distance education for foreign national prisoners a common practice in Europe.

More information about the study: [dorien.brosens@vub.be](mailto:dorien.brosens@vub.be) / [pald@vub.be](mailto:pald@vub.be)

More information about Eabt: [lemmers.frans@gmail.com](mailto:lemmers.frans@gmail.com)

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