

Education behind foreign prison bars (Eabt) successful for 15 years and still unique, but there are some threats too

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The Education behind Foreign Prison Bars Foundation (*Educatie achter buitenlandse tralies*, Eabt) is a volunteer organisation that was founded in 2004. Eabt organises remote education for Dutch prisoners abroad. The findings of an evaluation study show that the foundation is unique but that there are some threats too.

In the countries of the European Union, 11.6% of all prisoners are from another country than the country of detention ('foreign prisoners'). There are 1950 Dutch prisoners abroad. Figures for 2016¹ suggest that 60% of all prisoners have been in prison for more than three years. It is clear from various studies that taking education in prison has a positive effect on the prisoner's mental vitality, that (partly as a result of this) it reduces the chances of recidivism after the prisoner's re-entry into free society, but that it increases the chances of finding and retaining a job as well, something that is important for both the respective prisoner and society.

According to the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2010), the right to education should not be denied to or withheld from anyone. This also applies to prisoners. In the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States Concerning Foreign Prisoners (Council of Europe, 2012), it says: 'To ensure that educational training is as effective as possible for foreign prisoners, prison authorities shall take account of their individual needs and aspirations, which may include working towards qualifications that are recognised and can be continued in the country in which they are likely to reside after release.'

In most EU countries, more or less active education is offered to the prisoners. In most cases, however, foreign prisoners can hardly read or write the language of the country of detention, if at all. Since education is provided in the language of the country of detention, foreign prisoners are virtually never able to take the education provided in the penitentiary. It is almost always impossible to offer foreign prisoners' education that is in line with their background, capabilities and perspective, because education is hardly ever available in the language of their country of origin. Yet, taking (suitable) education during detention is also very important for them. As suitable education (in the prisoner's own language) cannot be provided by the country of detention, it was decided 15 years ago that remote written education should be made available with support from the Netherlands to Dutch prisoners abroad who are interested. Some 25% pertains to language education (the native Dutch language as well as other languages), and 75% to vocationally oriented education. Every year, Eabt assigns courses to approximately 200 Dutch prisoners abroad, 50 of whom complete the course with a sufficient result and obtain a certificate or diploma.

Eabt receives the application for a course through the mediation of the consular section of the local Dutch Embassy and the Dutch Probation Service. Next, Eabt sends the respective prisoner information about the course in addition to a level test for testing the prisoner's command of the Dutch language. The prisoner returns the completed test in a prestamped envelope. If the command of the language gives sufficient reason to expect that the course will be completed successfully, the education material will be sent to the prisoner. The homework that is part of both the course and the guidance is also sent by the prisoner to Eabt in a prestamped envelope. Expert teachers check and correct the homework and return it to the prisoner with motivation-enhancing feedback. When the prisoner is transferred to another prison (in the country of detention or in the Netherlands) or after his release, the

¹ Council of Europe, Annual Penal Statistics, Space I-Prison Population, Survey 2016, Final report 2019

prisoner can take the course material along to continue and complete the study. Taking a course by remote education is free of charge for the prisoner and the prison.

Now, at Eabt's fifteenth anniversary, the board wondered how participating prisoners and the parties supporting them (consular employees, teachers, Probation Service supervisors, visiting volunteers) assess the activities of Eabt. Researchers from the Free University of Brussels (VUB) have conducted an evaluation study since the autumn of 2018, the first results of which have recently been announced. The study consists of two parts: a quantitative study focused on student prisoners, and a qualitative study into the experiences of professionals and volunteers who support the Eabt activities.

The study comprises surveys among 60 students and 17 interviews with supervisors.

The students expect that by taking the course:

- to make the most of their time in prison;
- they will gain knowledge and skills;
- they will be able to prepare for a life after prison by having better chances of a job as well as preparing for follow-up education.

From the evaluation, it becomes apparent that these expectations motivate them to dedicate themselves to taking the course and completing it, despite detention circumstances that are sometimes very difficult indeed. Especially the fact that the course material and guidance come from the prisoners' own country, from the Netherlands, is important and stimulating to them.

From the interviews with the volunteers and professionals involved, we learn that they appreciate the professional commitment of Eabt to accomplish the mission:

- Contributing to making the time spent in prison useful;
- Reducing the harmful effects of detention;
- Improving the chances of a job;
- Enhancing the possibilities of taking follow-up education.

The positive experiences these volunteers and professionals have with Eabt include:

- The professional way in which information on study possibilities is provided, the study process, and the guidance provided;
- The professional manner of testing whether the student has a reasonable chance of taking the course successfully;
- The use of prestamped envelopes and the possibility of taking remote education from the Netherlands;
- The motivating feedback provided by the Eabt teachers correcting homework.

The fact that providing guidance and offering remote education in Dutch for Dutch prisoners abroad is done by volunteers rather than by paid workers is considered the major strength of Eabt by both the prisoners and the volunteers and professionals; mentioned as a strength several times, especially since there volunteers have a strong passion for the cause. This is impressive and makes the students realise there are people who wish them well and who want to help them get ahead in those difficult circumstances in prison.

It is noticed that the Eabt volunteers' strong commitment leads to creative solutions in a 'market' where the rules and (im)possibilities of studying and getting education material into the prison et cetera change from country to country and within one country even from prison to prison.

However, the picture is not altogether positive. The evaluation study has brought two points of special attention and challenges or even threats to light for the near future:

- The first of these concerns the continuity of Eabt as a volunteer organisation. The average age of Eabt volunteers is high, for they started at Eabt 15 years ago, when they retired. They devote several days per week to Eabt tasks. Finding successors is not easy, but potential successors will need to be found all the same, preferably young expert volunteers.

- The second threat is the unstoppable digitisation of society in general and of education and course material in particular. The material – which is also used in regular schools and education – includes growing numbers of references to websites for further information or examples. In the educational process and guidance, the importance of the computer and the Internet is increasing too. The same applies (maybe to an even higher extent) to remote education.

At present, the homework can still be done on paper and sent by surface mail, corrected by the teachers and then returned by surface mail. A growing number of students who are not prisoners and who take remote education expect this will be via 'student plaza', via the Internet and by e-mail.

The respondents especially experience difficulties concerning receiving teaching packages in certain prisons or countries and concerning the long waiting involved in correspondence by surface mail. Additionally, the imbalance between the increasing digitisation of society and the lack of digitisation possibilities in the prisons is mentioned several times.

In almost all prisons and countries, prisoners in general and foreign prisoners in particular are not allowed to use computers, and the use of the Internet and e-mail is out of the question. This is a major issue.

It is not unlikely that remote education by surface mail will no longer be possible in the not too distant future.

It is therefore essential that policymakers in the European Union, at the Ministries of Justice and the prisons in the various countries give this problem some serious consideration.

In consultation with the educational institutes, safe possibilities should be found to offer prisoners shielded education sites for their study. With the available knowledge on artificial intelligence there has to be a way to find or develop a solution.

Despite these difficulties, Eabt is really considered a powerful, strong organisation that other organisations could learn from considerably. The use of digitisation and continuing the activities are the major challenges for the future.

Do not hesitate to contact us, if you are interested in the working method and experiences of Eabt. We will be very pleased to support initiatives to set up an organisation and working method similar to those of Eabt in other countries as well.

Frans Lemmers worked for 18 years as a manager in Dutch penitentiaries, for eight years as a director/national project manager in addiction treatment and for ten years as a manager in the Dutch Probation Service, charged specifically with the care for Dutch nationals in foreign detention. He is the founding father of the highly successful as well as unique project 'distance education for Dutch prisoners abroad'. You can contact him via lemmers.frans@gmail.com or via PO Box 9005, 6070 AA Swalmen, the Netherlands.