

Summary Education behind Foreign Prison Bars: Evaluation Study

The Participation And Learning in Detention (PALD) research group of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) has conducted a study into the functioning of Education behind Foreign Prison Bars (Eabt). The study was aimed at gaining insight into the perspective of students taking a course via Eabt, and of professionals and volunteers who support this. The mixed-method study consisted of (1) a longitudinal quantitative part, in which the process prisoners were subjected to was monitored by means of an initial questionnaire (N = 60) and a final questionnaire (N = 31), and (2) a qualitative part, in which 17 interviews were conducted with professionals and volunteers.

The quantitative part bears out that information about the possibility of taking a course via Eabt is often provided by the Dutch embassy or the Dutch consulate, and, to a lesser extent, by visiting volunteers. Students are primarily motivated to take a course by their wish to acquire knowledge and skills and to prepare for life after detention. In general, the students are (highly) satisfied about the course and believe the course satisfies their needs. The large majority would like to take yet another course via Eabt. Additionally, the study suggests that students are most satisfied with the way in which homework is sent from the prison to the teacher in the Netherlands (and back) and the feedback they receive from their teacher in the Netherlands. In addition, students appear to have gained more confidence in the possibility of finding a good, nice or better job after their release and, in a general sense, more confidence in the future. During the course period, the quality of life has remained unchanged for the majority of students. One in three students experience a (slight) improvement.

From the qualitative part it becomes apparent that the motivation among professionals and volunteers to commit themselves to Eabt is their desire to contribute to realising the mission and objectives of Eabt. The respondents indicate that following a course from Eabt happens in three steps: (1) the student is informed about a course via Eabt, (2) the student registers for the course, and (3) then starts the course, does his homework, and is evaluated. From the interviews it becomes clear that motivating and specific support is given to students (1) from the Netherlands and (2) in the country of detention. The teacher and Eabt render structural support from the Netherlands. It is given to all students and comprises feedback on and tips for homework assignments by the teacher, sending postcards at key moments (e.g. public holidays, the student's birthday), or providing additional course material by Eabt. Support in the country of detention rather depends on the local situation. Examples include visiting volunteers, fellow prisoners, or local teachers encouraging students or going through the homework assignments. Respondents say a course via Eabt has added value for the students (e.g. time usefully spent, increased ability to fend for themselves), the prison (e.g. more agreeable climate, less miscommunication), and society (facilitating reintegration, more in line with the labour market). The professionals and volunteers mentioned various success factors which Eabt should continue to focus on in the future. Eabt working with volunteers is considered a success, as these volunteers are strongly committed and have a passion for what they do. With respect to the average age of the Eabt board members and volunteers, some respondents pointed out that this could also be a threat for the continuity of Eabt. 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 assistance are among the success factors mentioned. Finally, the main challenge faced by Eabt is digitisation. The respondents believe that Eabt could benefit from using the Internet for (part of) its functioning, but Eabt depends on the local prisons to facilitate this.

For further information, or if you have any questions about Eabt, please contact lemmers.frans@gmail.com. For further information, or if you have any questions about the study, please send an e-mail to pald@vub.be.