POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

UPSKILLING INMATES Skill HUBS

Authors: Dr Lesley Crane, the Learning and Work Institute and Gary Hill, CEGA Services
Final Editing: Joyce Black, the Learning and Work Institute
Contributors: The SkillHUBS consortium
Graphics and layout: http://spazioada.blogspot.com/

©SkillHUBS - April 2020
Project number: 590140-EPP-1-2017-1-SI-EPPK-A3-PI-FORWARD

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

This project has been funded with the support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Contents

Introduction and context 5

SkillHUBS Erasmus + Transnational project 7

Policy Recommendations 7
1. SkillHUBS adoption and dissemination 7
2. Research and Evidence 10
3. Prison Educator Support and Information Infrastructure 12
4. Post-release Employment and Enterprise 13
5. Prison Security 14
6. Digital Skills vs. Prison Security 15

Recommendations for introduction of the »skillHUBS« model in national prison education systems in other EU countries

Introduction and context

This report makes eight policy recommendations intended for policy makers and policy influencers in organisations which operate or have an interest in prison administration, legislation and prison education across the EU.

As of September 2016, around 860,000 individuals were being held in custody across Europe (excluding Russia), a rise of 2.2% on the previous year[1], with evidence showing that the population comprises a significant percentage of low-skilled individuals[2]. One of the primary legislative frameworks for prison education applicable to Europe is the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation No R (89) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Education in Prison[3].

It is also well documented that basic skills such as literacy and numeracy tend to be disproportionately low amongst prison populations compared with the general population (Hales, 2015[4]). The influencing factors associated with this, according to Hales, include negative experiences of - or exclusion from - education, disruptive childhood experiences, low self-esteem and (perhaps unrecognised) special education needs. Given this profile, it is therefore not surprising that traditional classroom methods of teaching and learning, and curricula originally designed for school environments, are often less than successful in attracting, retaining and successfully educating individuals in custody.

[1] https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/council-europe-releases-new-prison-statistics [Online]. Accessed 11.11.19
[2] GHK Consulting (2013). Prison Education and Training in Europe: current state-of-play and challenges. Brussels: European Commission
[3] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/41781569/42171329/CMRec+%2889%29+12+on+education+in+prison.pdf/9939f80e-77ee-491d-82f7-83e62566c872
[4] Hales, L. (2015). The Language Barrier to Rehabilitation. Hibiscus Initiatives and the Bell Foundation. [Online]. https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/research-report/language-barrier-rehabilitation/. Accessed 01.03.19
[5] Baranger, J., Rousseau, D., Mastrorilli, M and Matesanz, J. (2018). Doing Time Wisely: the social and personal benefits of higher education in prisons. The Prison Journal, 1: 24

The provision of education in prisons is increasingly acknowledged by governments in Europe and across the world as a factor in reducing post-release re-offending and improving personal well-being and social capital[5]. The annual cost of re-offending in the UK alone in 2019 is estimated as €20.5 billion[6].

The rationale is that ex-prisoners who are able to gain suitable and meaningful employment are less likely to re-offend, with positive consequences for communities, society and government budgets. Logically, the ability to gain meaningful employment rests to a large extent on individual skills, competencies and qualifications. Somewhat counter-intuitively though, the research evidence suggests that formal educational qualifications are not significantly correlated with reductions in re-offending rates or securing meaningful employment. Instead, it is the individual's engagement in education - any education – which matters[7].

The evidence is clear and compelling from a global perspective that education – particularly post-secondary education - is an important factor in reducing re-offending rates. In her wide-ranging international investigation of prison education policies and practices to determine the impact of education on re-offending rates, Sanders (2016) notes that post-release support as well as changes in attitudes and behaviours around personal responsibility are also key impacting factors.

[6] Economic and social costs of re-offending, (2019). Ministry of Justice. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814650/economic-social-costs-reoffending.pdf [Online] Accessed 6 April 2020
[7] E.g., Evaluation of prisoner learning: initial impacts and delivery, (2018). London: HM Prison & Probation Service. Exchange rate applies £1 = €1.14

SkillHUBS Erasmus+Transnational project

The following policy recommendations draw on the research and outcomes of the SKillHUBS project. SkillHUBS is an Erasmus+ funded transnational project which has the aim of transforming adult prison education through the introduction of a distinctive teaching and learning methodology known as 'the Engine'. This methodology has been designed specific to prison populations, and focuses on short-term, informal vocationally embedded basic and transversal skills teaching and learning. The methodology is grounded in Theory of Change and Co-Creative Learning. The Engine went into pilot at 3 prison institutions in 3 different countries – Slovenia, Malta and Romania – beginning in the summer of 2019, completing and reporting at the end of January 2020. The outcomes from all three pilot sites are positive, supportive and encouraging.

Policy Recommendations

1. SKILLHUBS ADOPTION AND DISSEMINATION

1.a. *The issue:* As of 2016, there are more than 800,000 individuals in prison or with custodial sentences in Europe. More than 50% of the prison population are reported to have low levels of basic skills on entry to prison. The present emphasis on basic skills education using traditional classroom-based teaching methods is shown to fail in providing prisoners with the relevant skills and experience they need to comply with employers' skills demands. It also places ex-prisoners post-release in a position of inequality in competing for jobs. Low or lack of employment is known to be a factor in re-offending. The outcome is that ex-prisoners post-release are poorly equipped with relevant skills, attitudes and knowledge suitable for employment. Re-offending rates are high with direct cost implications to society and the economy.

Solution: Governments, policy makers and policy influencers of European nations should be informed of the SkillHUBS project and its positive outcomes in a clear and evidence-based way that presents the case for strategic adoption. One way of achieving this is to make a case to the Council of Europe's special interest group for prison education (reportedly already reviewing the 1989 Recommendations on Prison Education) to include adoption of the SkillHUBS model within the Prison Education Recommendations.

EPALE can be used as a centralised repository for SkillsHUBS documentation, evidence and reports, and training resources for prison educators. Secondly, relevant trans-European organisations and media channels can be recruited to promote the SkillsHUB project and its outcomes to all sector relevant stakeholders and relevant professional groups, organisations and networks, including the general public. The core message is: the application of the SkillHUBS approach can positively transform the life chances for ex-prisoners post-release, with equally positive effects on the economy, society, community and families. (See also 3.).

Recommendation: The SkillHUBS model, as demonstrated in its pilot projects, is an adaptive and innovative teaching and learning method which embeds basic skills training in vocational training and contexts, and which is shaped by local employers' skills needs. The nett gain is higher rates of prison learner retention and course completion, with prisoners equipped with skills sets relevant to local employers' needs. Ex-prisoners with the skills, attitudes and knowledge that employers want are more likely to find employment post-release, less likely to re-offend, with less cost to society and the economy. It is recommended that all EU member states adopt the SkillHUBS model as core policy as an embedded element within existing prison education provision. This should be articulated within legislative frameworks where relevant and aligned with post-release care and support provision. The adoption of the SkillHUBS model could subsequently be promoted across all European nations.

Impact: Prisoners would be able to access basic skills education embedded into vocational training and activities which is relevant to their needs, and the identified needs of local employers. Consequently, post-release ex-prisoners will be able to engage positively and productively in job-seeking and employment. This in turn will lead to a measurable reduction in re-offending rates over time, with an associated reduction in the financial and social costs related to re-offending.

1.b. ***Issue:*** **Employers may not be aware of the importance of prison education as a key factor in reducing re-offending rates. Without the support and understanding of employers demonstrated through the action of actively offering employment opportunities to suitably skilled and qualified ex-prisoners, this benefit may not be realised. It is essential that employers understand the key role that they have in mitigating re-offending rates through providing employment and suitable job roles for ex-prisoners.**

Solution: Within each European nation there are public and private sector organisations with a stake in prison conditions, legislation and prison education. These can be recruited to promote and disseminate public and employer-focused information, including positive case studies, as part of their ongoing public facing communications campaigns. These organisations can also work collaboratively to create the employer network and channels for employer support and guidance.

Recommendation: A centrally co-ordinated but locally implemented trans-European sustained information and awareness campaign aimed at employers should be actioned. This will require to be supported with structures for the development of a network of employers prepared to employ ex-prisoners, and direct access to all relevant information, guidance and support services to facilitate such employment.

Impact: A sustained information and awareness campaign, along with all required support structures, aimed at employers will generate higher levels of support and understanding for the values of prison education and increase the probability that ex-prisoners will be able to secure meaningful employment – or to transition to full-time education - post-release. This campaign is also likely to positively increase the general public's knowledge, understanding and support for prison education. The public and state will benefit from the predicted reduction in rates of re-offending. (See also 2.b.).

2. RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE

2.a. *Issue*: The available research evidence on the subject of prison education and its relationship with reducing re-offending rates and wider benefits is fragmented and heterogeneous. This creates a challenge in making reliable evidence-based statements, and in the application of research findings meaningfully and comparatively. The core issue is that individual jurisdictions apply different methods, measures and terminologies for reporting data on prison operations and outcomes. The heterogeneity of data is also a barrier to the application of big data/artificial intelligence technologies on a scale large enough to be meaningful.

Solution: To develop a taxonomy or standard that could be applied across all prison systems in all member states, in the first instance, would require three entities to work seamlessly in collaboration: a co-ordinating body, a higher education institution or specialised commercial data management organisation, and at least one prison institution which can represent the views and experiences of prisons across Europe.

Recommendation: In order to generate meaningful trans-European research, analysis and comparison of data on prison education a common set of standards for data collection should be developed and adopted across the EU. This should include methods for measurement and reporting adopted across all EU member states' prison institutions, as a first step. These standards could subsequently be promoted across all European nations, and potentially on a global scale.

Impact: If all member states and their prison systems/institutions adopted a common taxonomy for measuring and reporting prison data and statistics, it will be possible to (1) evaluate and measure the value of prison education programmes transnationally; (2) undertake between institution and prison population comparisons; and (3) pave the way for the introduction of sophisticated analytics and predictive tools (Artificial Intelligence) creating the opportunity to generate historical accounting and future predictions on, for instance, probabilities of post-release employability. These accrued benefits can then be promoted to all European nations, and globally, to establish a single common set of standards and a multiplication of the benefits gained.

2.b. ***Issue:*** **There is currently no centralised facility for commissioning and/or collating empirical research data on prison education and its outcomes and impact for prisoners post-release. This means that policy decisions, legislation and education strategy relevant to prison education, post-release parole and support programmes are unable to be made on the basis of robust and reliable evidence.**

Solution: A long-term programme of work could be commissioned via the Erasmus+ funding programme, designed to attract multinational teams who are leaders in relevant fields.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the European Prison Education Association lead on establishing a multi-organisation dedicated project team representing leading European research organisations to co-ordinate, commission, manage and curate an empirical longitudinal research programme with the objective of gathering data on different types, formats and structures of prison education, and post-release support, and how these correlate with ex-prisoner employment/recidivism rates post-release.

Impact: Over time, a valuable body of research and evidence will be developed as the evidence basis on which future policy and decision-making in respect of prison education services, employer relations and societal engagement can be made. This body of research will also represent an invaluable European contribution to the wider global literature on prison education, recidivism and basic skills training in general. Data gathered through empirical research programmes can be re-packaged to provide accessible information for employers and the general public. The aim is to create positive awareness of the benefits of prison education and the beneficial impact this has on prisoners while incarcerated and post-release. The objective is to use raised awareness to (a) generate positive support for national prison education initiatives and (b) to positively influence employers of the values of employing ex-offenders with the appropriate educational credentials and skills. (See also 1.b.).

3. PRISON EDUCATOR SUPPORT AND INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Issue: **There is currently no mechanism for a maintained central repository for all current and future SkillHUBS and related resources and information as a free information resource for prison educators, prison management, parole and post-release support professionals, and legislators. Consequently, much of the data associated with SkillHUBS, and any future SkillHUBS model implementations, may be difficult for stakeholders to access. This could lead to duplication of effort and wasted resources. As an extension of this latter point, there is no mechanism that currently enables the sharing of best practice and experience between prison educators across borders and jurisdictions.**

Solution: EPALE could be used as the authorised and maintained SkillHUBS repository, giving open access to all existing and future SkillHUBS programmes, case studies, guidance, training materials for educators, implementation guidelines, research, teaching and learning materials. This could be maintained by one of the existing SkillHUBS partners, for instance the European Prison Education Association, on a long-term contractual basis.

Recommendation: A professionally maintained and centralised, accessible repository of SkillHUBS specific information, data, resources, training and support materials should be established as a free service for all stakeholders involved in prison education, parole and post-release care.

Impact: The existence of a free prison education resources and information service for prison educators and other stakeholders would positively contribute to and promote knowledge sharing between different prison institutions, and support improvements in practice as well as mitigating against duplication of effort. (See also 1.a.).

4. POST-RELEASE EMPLOYMENT AND ENTERPRISE

Issue: **In some European jurisdictions there are rules, policies or regulations which prohibit the employment of ex-prisoners, following release, in certain professions. This means that any education and skills training gained by prisoners whilst in custody may prove to be redundant and inapplicable post-release. It may also mean that prisoners are prevented from engaging in the types of education and training that are most suitable to their experience, skills, interests and talents. Other restrictions currently applied in some European nations prohibits ex-prisoners, post-release, from establishing their own business or enterprise. Restrictions of this type limit the scope of ex-prisoners' skills potential and employment chances post-release.**

Solution: The Council of Europe could make special provision within the Prison Education recommendations (R(89(12) to give a clarification that the recommendations (e.g., recommendation no 2) apply to all forms, types and subjects of vocational training and education within the prison institution. This clarification should also specifically require European nations to review and make suitable provision for amendments to any rules, policies or regulations which place limitations on what ex-prisoners are able to do in terms of legal employment and business enterprise following their release in accordance with a revised interpretation of recommendation no 3 and 9.

Recommendation: EU member states should be encouraged to review and make changes where feasible and possible to any existing policies, rules or legislation which has the effect of placing limits on the future employment of legal enterprise activities of ex-prisoners post-release.

Impact: Reducing the limits on employment and legal enterprise activities post-release will justify the provision of a broad curriculum of skills training – based on local employers' skills needs – and allow prisoners to engage in those skills topics most relevant to them. It would also enable ex-prisoners on their release to have the ability to gainfully and legally pursue productive and positive employment or business enterprises without hinderance. In this way, ex-offenders will be in a stronger position to make a positive contribution to the economy, their community and society.

5. PRISON SECURITY

Issue: **Prison regimes across all EU member states are predominantly driven by security requirements and concerns. Stringent security arrangements can have a detrimental and restrictive effect on prison education in general, and the adoption of the SkillHUBS model in particular. In few cases are prison security personnel directly involved with prison education other than through exercising their required duties. This establishes a potential conflict between the priorities, processes and procedures of the security personnel with those of prison educators. Simultaneously, the competing demands and priorities of security and prison education also prohibits the change in prison culture that is a central aim of the SkillHUBS methodology.**

Solution: Any changes to prison security operations will require either national legislation or local prison administration to activate and promote. This is a matter for individual EU member states to determine owing to the complexity of specificity of prison security. One action that member states can take, and which will have minimal impact on prison security is to promote and enable prison security staff to take an active role in prison education. Existing training programmes and agencies responsible for prison security staff education should take responsibility for co-ordinating distance or locally delivered training for prison security personnel in the principles of the SkillHUBS method and mentoring skills as part of the security training programme.

Recommendation: EU member states should be lobbied and encouraged to review and make changes where feasible and possible to any existing regulations, rules or legislation relating to prison security where it impacts detrimentally on prison education activities. Further, states and prison administrations should be encouraged to amend the roles and duties of prison security personnel to enable them to take an active role in the delivery of prison education.

Impact: Prisoners and prison educators will benefit from a measure of greater freedom in designing, delivering and engaging in prison education programmes

in general, and the SkillHUBS programme in particular. The active involvement of prison security personnel directly within these programmes will result increased understanding, empathy, and trust between educators and security personnel, and between security personal and prison learners.

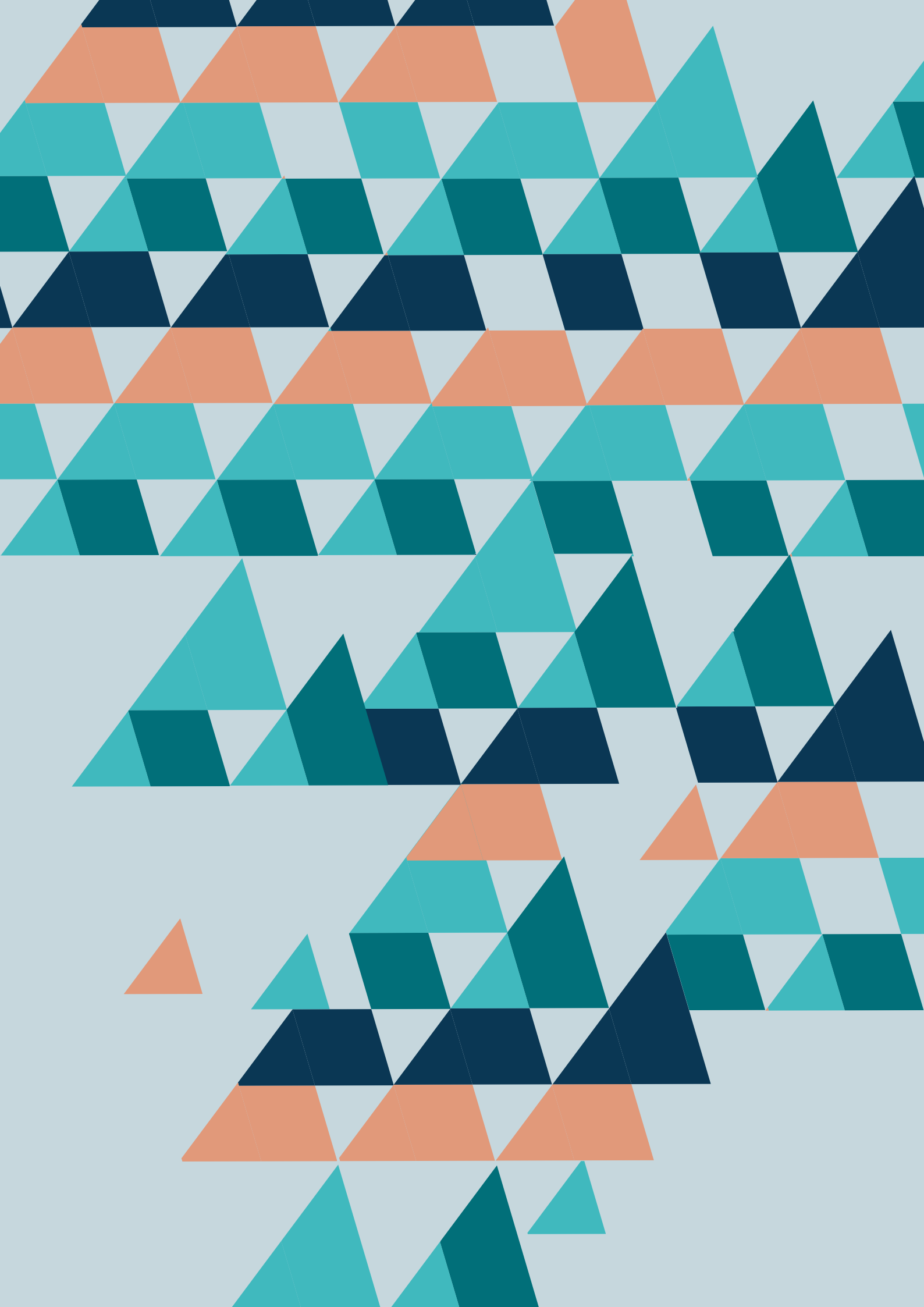
6. DIGITAL SKILLS VS. PRISON SECURITY

Issue: **Most prison administrations and jurisdictions impose limitations on prisoners' access to digital technologies and the internet. These limitations and restrictions are understandable from a security/safety perspective. It is also the case that digital (including online) skills are essential to modern basic everyday living and to almost all forms of employment. Where prisoners serve long periods of time in custody without access to digital technologies, and given the speed of technology development, it is likely that ex-prisoners after their release will be at a considerable disadvantage: in being able to seek and secure employment, engage in everyday life and community, engage in further education. Any digital skills prisoners possess on entry to prison will become degraded rapidly.**

Solution: There is a great deal of free open access learning content on digital skills training: it exists in different media formats including offline, online and hardcopy, and for different levels of ability and skill. These open access resources can be used as the basis for developing a pan-European digital skills curriculum with various entry levels and specific to the needs of prisoners. (This would have equal applicability to low skilled workers and unemployed in general). The core contents can be designed to be accessed, as a minimum, offline or in hardcopy/mock-ups. Mock-up kits for teachers can be part of the package, where mock-ups are easy to assemble, non-digital representations of technologies with minimal actual interactive potential. It is also recommended that a small specialist task force be established to research and develop an acceptable solution to the general ban on internet access within prison administrations, and which would afford prison communities, including prisoners, some form of minimum interaction with a private, secure pan-European network.

Recommendation: Digital skills represent a set of skills which are not only recognised across the EU as essential to everyday life, but which are mostly identical around the world. What varies are the methods and levels of access afforded by prison administrations in different states. What is required is a method of providing variable levels of digital skills training which can be accessible to all prisoners. All prisoners in Europe should be given access to a common digital skills curriculum with various entry levels and which is designed to be accessed online/offline without loss of fidelity. In addition, prisoners should have the right to access digital technologies (on or offline) once per week: referring to the Council of Europe R (89) 12 recommendations for prison education, this provision would support recommendation no 10, 13, and 17 as a minimum.

Impact: Suitably equipped with contemporary digital skills and knowledge, ex-prisoners on release would be in a greatly improved position to be able to seek and secure employment and to engage in everyday living such as dealing with their local social services, parole and ex-prisoner support services, financial management and social engagement.

Note

Note