ESF Transnational Learning Network

Ex-Offenders Community of Practice (ExOCoP)

ExOCoP Sub Project: Knowledge Management

European Social Fund for Germany
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Executive Summary

Representing nearly 75% of the prison population in the EU27, the ExOCoP ESF Shared Learning Network brings Ministerial and intermediate bodies in direct communication with leading European-based professional organisations. The network brings 40+ partners from ESF authorities, the criminal justice system, NGO’s and European ETE organisations face-to-face to tackle the diverse, complex and strongly interdependent issues an individual offender can face on the path back to successful resettlement into society. The ExOCoP work plan focuses primarily on how interventions in entry into prison, in prison education, training and employment (hereafter ETE) and in aftercare could address re-offending, both in prison and outside.

Partners identified a need for a tool to help manage and mainstream the diverse data to facilitate within ExOCoP and the wider European Community:

- A pan European platform for expert and practical knowledge interchange, peer learning and innovation of tools
- Feedback and peer to peer networking of practitioners across all relevant fields and on the regional, national and transnational level.
- A tool which both made accessible existing national and European digital knowledge bases, but whose very usefulness would encourage new expert and practitioner contributions.
1 Literature review

1.1 About Knowledge Management: Knowledge Management (hereafter KM) is a relatively new discipline in which a range of strategies and practices allow an organization to identify, create, represent, distribute, and facilitate the adoption of peer learning and experience of insights and experience. As institutions have grown organically, this knowledge is either embodied in individuals or embedded in organizations as processes or practices: KM generally a digital attempt to unlock this knowledge, to share and mainstream good practice, so as to work more effectively and not repeat our mistakes.

1.2 Identifying National and Transnational Need for Knowledge Management: Existing literature acknowledges that pockets of successful interventions exist across the range of education, training and employment services offered to offenders and ex-offenders in Europe, but are not well-shared. For example, one of the conclusions of the Pathways to Inclusion 2010 Conference Strengthening European Cooperation in Prison Education and Training (in which some relevant ExOCoP workshops were embedded) was that “teachers new to prison education or those attempting new approaches and programmes are forced frequently ‘to reinvent the wheel’”.

Whilst EU funding has helped to facilitate the sharing and transfer of practices and has helped to “create sustainable partnerships and networks to ensure this process of mutual learning continues in the long-term”\(^1\), further tools and instruments are needed for professionals to effectively identify and recreate good practice in their own organisation. The final report of the KEYS 2009-2011 project on Working and Learning in European Prisons states that “information should be exchanged both among educational and other prison staff about innovative tools and instruments facilitating the access of prisoners to education that have been developed”\(^3\).


1.3 Identifying ExOCoP’s Need for Knowledge Management: Network partners told us that research into European prison and resettlement KM was both timely and desirable for their organisations and stakeholders, and a cost effective alternative to each country developing their own individual platform.

One of the recommendations from ExOCoP’s sister sub-project *Evaluation* stated that those who responded to their questionnaire were actively seeking “more efficient and innovative ways of working are required as demand for services rises above supply and the resources available to deliver services are limited. Currently across Europe, organisations are required to do better for less and therefore efficiency and value for money must be top priority when providing services for offenders.”

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2.0 Project Development, Key Aims and Challenges

2.1 Project Development: During the May 2009 kick-off meeting of the ExOCoP Network, three partners joined a breakout study group covering use of KM in entrance, ETE and aftercare. Examples were presented on existing knowledge bases in two countries, and plans which exist to expand these. This was followed up by a conference call between 5 partners in September 2010, and further sub-discussions during steering group meetings.

It came clear that there were several pockets of experience and expertise sitting in different partner countries, and it was decided that all effort should be made to bring these people and projects together to discuss the best way forward for KM in ExOCoP. This happened during the Ghent Conference in October 2010. Aims, challenges and a collaborative workplan was developed for the Network by those present. Thereafter, the German partners took the lead in developing a platform, incorporating feedback (such as use of a toolbox, and later, social networking of the articles) from steering group meetings.

2.2 The Italian Approach

Italy presented several separate public digital knowledge bases: one for example covers age management (learning opportunities for older people), another gives information about ESF national/regional operational programmes (transnationality.com).

One, less formal but very engaging approach is an Italian prisoner-written initiative which serves both to inform regional and national stakeholders about prison life, but also encourages the prisoners to learn from one another’s experience by working with peers, coaching, setting up communities of practice or publish a local newspaper\(^5\). To support this kind of knowledge sharing, inmates should not only be given more access to knowledge sharing and learning systems, but also given the opportunity to participate and interact with those systems.

\(^5\) Details of the Ristretti Organisation run from Padova Prison in Northern Italy are available in ExOCoP Lessons Learned 1

http://www.exocop.eu/sixcms/media.php/13/ExOCoP_LLPL_2012-06-08_for-USBsticks.pdf
2.3 **The German Approach**

In Germany, within the Equal project BABE (Education, Work and Professional Re-integration) a KM system was developed covering all aspects of the penitentiary system. The KM tool PrisonPortal was a transnational section, which developed out of the BRIK Research Institute, Bremen developed out of this. User generated and edited content was the starting point – anybody who wanted to write something in the field of penalty, imprisonment, reintegration of (ex-) offenders and so on, was invited to participate.

2.4 **Key Aims:** As the Network researched and came into contact with other professional organisations and networks operating in similar fields, clear goals became apparent with regards KM. Literature and findings from Workshops identify some key areas where KM could help resettlement partnerships and programmes be more effective:

**On a transnational level:**

- Understanding **European political differences on penalty and penal institutions** in general and on complex topic of reintegration of (ex-) offenders in particular.
- Being knowledgeable on prominent **European Professional Prison Organisations**, their reach and remit, so as to connect with existing research, exchange and initiatives.
- Being knowledgeable on which **National, European and International funding strands** can be accessed from where, when and by whom, in order to bring a prison ETE project together.
- Being knowlegdgable on **which EU Member States are furthest advanced** in a particular area of offender and ex-offender resettlement (UK and Belgium, for example, has developed a recent tradition of digital prison platforms. The Netherlands and Sweden are possibly furthest ahead with regards successful and efficient transition management into the community).

**On a national level:**

- **Connecting areas of practice** along the path of offender resettlement: sentence planning, educational/vocational training, health and mental health care are currently generally undertaken by separate institutions or organisations.
• **Finding the right contact people** within the correct institution: large institutions operating in another language can sometimes be an insurmountable first hurdle to forming a partnership.

  **On a local or regional level:**

• **Connecting prison infrastructures** so that offenders and prison staff can benefit from local expertise in neighbouring prisons, such as those prisons with training centres, those with developed prison industries.

### 2.5 Outcomes from Workshop discussions

Literature and findings from Workshops also highlighted complex potential challenges:

• **Governance**: “no simple tool or IT system can effectively manage this diverse and growing knowledge-set.... setting up IT systems is one thing but making them useful and successful is only possible if there is real engagement, an active participation and a clear governance structure.”

• **Management and sharing of knowledge within and between local prisons**: Local professionals often have a huge level of expertise and information. Where in smaller institutions the knowledge sharing often is organised on a more informal, less explicit way, the need for better structures and systems is higher in larger facilities.

• **Data sharing** between any institution is fraught data protection difficulties. Any KM tool would have to take national and EU law in this regard into account and to potentially decide between keeping secure content digitally locked, or having less detailed data more accessible to a public audience.

### 2.6 Outcomes from 2010 Ghent Conference

Further partners were sought networked at a conference on e-learning and knowledge management in prisons which was embedded into the International Community of Prison Administrations (ICPA)'s annual meeting in Ghent in October 2010. Experts in the field were gathered from partner countries and brought together the key challenges of operating a KM tool on an international level bringing in diverse players to a complex information pool.

Key outcomes of this conference are summarised in the diagram below. This illustrates the complexity of the interactions, and the different levels at which sharing information and

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6 ExOCoP Lessons Learned 1, page 19 Internet [http://www.exocop.eu/sixcms/media.php/13/ExOCoP LLP_2012-06-08_for-USBsticks.pdf](http://www.exocop.eu/sixcms/media.php/13/ExOCoP LLP_2012-06-08_for-USBsticks.pdf)
experience could take place. At the other hand, it shows very clearly that no simple tool or IT system can effectively manage this diverse and growing knowledge-set.

Figure 1: Diagram illustrates the complexity of an EU Prison and Resettlement KM tool

3.0 Developing an ExOCoP Knowledge Management Tool

3.1 **Network workplan collaboration:** During the Ghent conference the whole Network agreed that there is an urgent need for sharing all kinds of knowledge between different European Countries, and that ExOCoP should start up an initiative.

During this project phase, the German Prison Portal was presented to different European partners, who liked the approach of targeting a large group of possible writers, including teachers, educators, staff from administrative, employment and training agencies and employees from the Ministries of Justice and Labour. From these content-givers came a wide range of different types of texts, standardised only by our format.
Partners also thought the Wikipedia-style platform was applicable to a large subject group which could be hyperlinked quickly and easily allowing connections to be made and researched with equal ease.

So when it came to the development of a European knowledge management tool, Germany’s prior experience with this technology gave the sub-project a head start.

ExOCoP Steering Group members decided one first step to progress this collaborative facilitation would be to invest in a whole new, Europe-wide knowledge management system, basing on increasingly prevalent Wikimedia technology. This was established as a sub-project, feeding from the main work plan, alongside the Evaluation Sub-Project.

3.2 Share knowledge, facilitate communication, interface for collaboration: The first practical step was to create a wiki platform on [http://eu.exocop.org](http://eu.exocop.org), which we did in collaboration with Technologie-Zentrum Informatik (TZI), part of the University of Bremen, who had helped establish PrisonPortal. Once the new wiki system was live, a team of editors began transferring the content of Prison Portal to the new knowledge management system and let former contributors know about the new project, as the German system has not been edited for some years.
3.3 Connect existing knowledge platforms, or add/research your own content. On the main page registered users can find out about a project, start their research or use a forum. This is the entry point for the system for European content in the English language. Platform gateways for four more co-existing systems – one for each participating country (Belgium, England, Germany, Romania, Spain) – are live and ready for users from these countries to input their own data, or to link to an existing national knowledge management system. Dialogue to this effect was underway with partners at the project end.

3.4 Data capacity, security and accessibility: The new system has more data capacity and is based on the most up-to-date security standards, now commonly used in Europe.

ExOCoP users benefit from some new features, added based on our experience with Prison Portal: the old wiki-editor was replaced by a new, more user-friendly interface, similar to conventional Microsoft Word. This allows greater accessibility and breaks down potential barriers to use. Additionally, users can convert all pages of the Wiki to a PDF document and even combine several pages/articles to print as a book.

The Network did decide, however, to keep the login and registration access controlled by a central administrator for now, so as to boost partner’s confidence to input information whilst the project was still in the trial phase.

3.5 Feedback on the Wiki

Network partners were asked during steering group meetings to trial and test the wiki, and if possible to input their own project data. The majority of those who tested the wiki as an audience were very positive about the style and usability of the software – it felt familiar and accessible to them, and delivered useful content in hyperlinks and searches.

Only very few found time to input their own project data, and from these we also had very positive feedback about how easy it was to load and save text and images: it felt to them just like any other wiki tool.
4.0 **Content**

4.1 **Network aims:** The steering group wanted ExOCoP’s wiki to act as a repository for the wealth of work which has already been undertaken around education, training and employment in Europe, to be a point of reference on national prison administrations and funding strategies, and – critically – to integrate itself into prison discussions successfully enough to become an active part of local, national and Europe-wide dissemination practice.

4.2 **Motivational recruitment, marketing and dynamic content:** Important next steps have been – and will continue to be – made to motivate people working in the field or currently running projects to share their knowledge.

Pro-active motivation of contributors has been a central challenge, and one which was not given correct weighting during the project proposal period: with an ‘empty’ system and without prior experience of using a wiki, it’s not easy for contributors to see the potential in this platform. Better supporting infrastructure on a national level has to be encouraged, specifically editors or people interested in taking care of and editing such a platform. They need to receive proper training, were necessary, and there should be one Managing Editor who would as a contact person on their national policy and resources, to maintain both style and an objective standpoint.

4.3 **Sensitivity of data** was initially a concern for some partners, particularly those who are uncomfortable with the idea that the prisoners could enter the system. Partners disagreed about what kind of content should be put on the platform(s) exactly. As a solution the EU platform is simply a visual model, using content already in the public domain. We translated EU relevant articles from the German platform for the EU platform, generated new content and tried to convince partners to put relevant content from their countries on the platform as well.

4.4 **On-going digital marketing:** Since the wiki was populated enough to make it interesting and useful to the target audience, we have been promoting it online. With one-click buttons, it’s easy to share via social networking, to email or print or simply to bookmark pages of interest. We have also begun connecting with national and European organisations using networking tools such as Twitter and LinkedIn. Ultimately, we would like to use these social
media connections to identify trends in European prison thinking, and to find the right person to contribute interesting and timely content, relevant to European discourse on prisons and resettlement.

More and deeper connection with media partners in DGs Just, EAC and EMPL would allow ExOCoP’s wiki to disseminate relevant articles quickly to interested partners, which in turn would make us more useful to audiences and wider read. But all these connections take time to establish.

We have reciprocal links between projects of our partners, as well as many others, and want to connect with digital mail outs from other transnational networks, to encourage people to look at – or even contribute their own knowledge to – this growing, cross-disciplinary resource.
5.0 Discussion

A hugely diverse number of institutions, projects and experts as were identified as stakeholders in ExOCoP during the Ghent Conference, it was certainly ambitious to attempt to find a platform which accommodated – and would be useful to – each of these stakeholders within 18 months. Within the equally large remit of ExOCoP’s workplan, the KM sub-project was to some partners an added strain on resources at a time when serious cutbacks were being suffered: content input into the wiki suffered as a result, as partners were not able to offer dedicated editors to populate the wiki, to persuade local projects of its potential value or to link their own existing platforms to the wiki’s landing page.

Within a start-up wiki such as this, such a dedicated team would be essential in order to populate and make the wiki relevant and ‘moreish’ to the target audience. The process of finding editors/contributors, inputting relevant content and promoting it on a meaningful scale should be a long-term project and undertaken with sustainability in mind. Only then will readers themselves see value in adding their own unique content or in expertly editing others.

It is important to note the short time frame of the ExOCoP KM sub-project, that 18 months was inadequate time to achieve aims such as identifying, training and finding a sustainable source of funding for a team of European editor/contributors.

It is also important to remember the fast pace of digital technologies: during the conception and development period, at least 3 partners began developing their own national or regional KM tool, meaning their resources and efforts were rather directed towards their own project, than to the European ExOCoP wiki platform.

One suggestion has been for the wiki to focus on one particular area of prison life – for example prison industries – to build a wiki around this and make it dynamic, engaging and useful, then to showcase this to other areas and slowly build up the whole picture of ETE and resettlement of (ex)offenders.
6.0 Conclusions

One of Network Partner’s key objectives in ExOCoP’s Berlin Declaration, which was presented and supported at the Berlin Policy Forum in 2012, states that ‘by sharing information about what works and examples of good practice, the measures adopted will be based on those that have proved to be useful and effective in other situations’.

It has become clear that there are very real cost-effective benefits of European knowledge sharing and networking, to mainstream good practice in prison and resettlement – an area which brings together actors who might not normally be used to working together. We see now that it is possible for one central, nodal platform to perform two functions without this being confusing to the target audience: as a wiki ‘article-style’ knowledge repository and as a hub page linking to previously developed platforms.

There is consensus among the Network steering group that the time is right for prison and resettlement stakeholders to make every effort to collaborate efficiently and effectively in finding innovative initiatives and partnerships which work to reduce recidivism by a sustainable offender resettlement pathway.

There is also consensus that a digital platform such as a Wiki is the right digital tool to facilitate the discourse, networking and the researching elements which will make these above goals achievable. The software is familiar, fast and accessible without extensive training and can be used in a manner which is in tune with today’s tight squeeze on resources.

What we have produced during the sub-project Knowledge Management gives us a very clear picture of the challenges of:

- Getting timely, expert content which is relevant to current European prison and resettlement discourse.
- Getting knowledgeable, motivated local editors and content contributors across all work fields and all levels, who can not only sustain their own input, but can help others in their network see the value of distributing the KM tool and contributing to it.
- Agreeing on good governance of a complex data pool and IT structure, between stakeholders with very different data protection ideologies.
• Agreeing on an accurate timeframe and agreeing targets for numbers of users along this frame.

However, the ExOCoP Knowledge Management sub-project has played a vital role in helping all partners, stakeholders and contributors visualise such a tool, helping them too to see how valuable it could be to have such a digitally immediate medium at the fingertips of those who most need the information. There is certainly consensus that this project is a step in the right direction to mainstreaming good practice and thereby helping Member States help themselves to reduce recidivism using new and changing ETE policy and practice. Partners new and old have expressed an interest in taking this tool forward in some form or other.