



EXTERNAL REPORT ON MAPPING RESEARCH AND WORKSHOP FINDINGS

PARTNERS



RICHTUNGS-
WECHSEL



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Introduction

The PRISGRADS project is a collaborative effort aimed at evaluating and improving the pathways for university graduates to enter and thrive in European prison services. Recognizing the critical role of well-trained professionals in correctional institutions, the project seeks to analyze the current landscape of graduate recruitment, identify gaps in existing policies, and propose innovative strategies to enhance talent acquisition and retention.

Through a structured approach, the PRISGRADS project explores key recruitment mechanisms, competency frameworks, and mentorship programs that influence how graduates transition into prison services. By fostering cross-border collaboration, it aims to develop sustainable employment pathways that benefit both prison administrations and the professionals entering the sector.

This report serves as an official external document, synthesizing both research findings and workshop discussions to provide actionable insights for policymakers, prison administrations, trade unions, academic institutions, and other stakeholders involved in graduate employment strategies within the correctional system. It offers comparative analyses, policy recommendations, and practical solutions that can guide institutional reforms in prison recruitment and training methodologies.

The PRISGRADS project seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by:

- Mapping existing recruitment and training strategies in six EU countries, analyzing their effectiveness and adaptability across different legal and institutional frameworks.
- Identifying key competencies and skills required for successful graduate integration into prison services, ensuring that recruitment efforts align with the demands of correctional environments.
- Assessing mentorship programs and their role in professional development, job satisfaction, and long-term retention of new recruits.

Research Methodology

This research employed a structured data collection approach to analyze graduate recruitment in European prison services. The methodology included an online survey and a series of participatory workshops, ensuring a comprehensive examination of recruitment practices across different national contexts.

The online survey gathered quantitative insights from respondents across more than six EU member states, providing data on recruitment trends, competency expectations, and the role of mentorship programs in integrating graduates into correctional facilities. Meanwhile, the workshops, conducted in English, Romanian, and German, facilitated in-depth discussions among stakeholders, enabling the exchange of experiences and the identification of common challenges and best practices. This multilingual and cross-national approach allowed for a broader perspective on recruitment strategies, capturing both institutional frameworks and on-the-ground realities.



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Respondents and Sampling

The mapping activity engaged 40 professionals working within the prison system, covering a range of roles relevant to recruitment, training, and operational management. Respondents were selected to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives on workforce development in correctional facilities.

Participants included:

- Upper prison management – responsible for strategic workforce planning, recruitment policies, and institutional development.
- Middle prison management – overseeing daily operations, staff supervision, and implementation of training programs.
- Specialized officers – professionals in roles requiring specific expertise, such as rehabilitation, education, or psychological support.
- Prison officers – frontline staff directly involved in mentoring and training new recruits while ensuring the security and daily functioning of correctional institutions.

This broad representation allowed for a comprehensive analysis of recruitment dynamics, training needs, and mentorship practices within the European prison service landscape.

Criteria for Data Selection

To ensure a comprehensive and representative dataset, the research applied a structured selection framework based on the following criteria:

- Geographical Representation – The study included responses from professionals across at least six EU countries, capturing diverse recruitment and training approaches within different correctional systems.
- Role Diversity – Participants held various positions within the prison system, including upper and middle management, specialized officer roles, and frontline prison officers, ensuring insights from multiple levels of the correctional workforce.
- Professional Experience – The research incorporated perspectives from both strategic decision-makers and operational staff, providing a balanced evaluation of recruitment processes, training effectiveness, and mentorship dynamics.
- Language Accessibility – Workshops were conducted in English, Romanian, and German, facilitating broader engagement and enabling cross-national comparisons.

By combining survey data with interactive discussions, this methodology offers a well-rounded perspective on workforce development in European prison services. The following sections will present key findings and propose actionable recommendations for optimizing recruitment, training, and mentorship practices in the correctional sector.



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PRISGRADS English Workshops: A Detailed Overview

On October 8, 2024, Richtungswechsel hosted an online webinar titled “Recruitment and Employment of Higher Education Graduates in the Prison Service” in collaboration with Center for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning (CPIP) & INTERCHANGE (INCH). The purpose of this webinar was to present recruitment innovation strategies and enhance the integration of higher education graduates into the penitentiary systems of partners of the three leading organisations. Through a blend of presentations, group discussions, and case studies, the webinar facilitated the exchange of ideas and identification of strategies for improving recruitment practices, competence evaluation, and mentoring programs.

The event, which took place from 1:00 to 3:00 PM, encouraged active participation from 12 representatives of prison institutions & prison-training organisations across Austria, Czechia, Greece, Romania, and the United Kingdom including prison managers, HR professionals, and project advisors. The session presented the PRISGRADS project, showcase the mapping activity results, present the Unlocked Graduates scheme. Additionally, participants discussed current challenges in prison recruitment, the need for mentorship programs, and ways to improve the integration of university graduates into the prison system.

On January 17th, 2025, Richtungswechsel & INCH hosted another English online webinar with the same purpose to increase the reach of the PRISGRADS project and gather input from more EU member states. The event took place from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM and encouraged the participation from HR professionals and prison training managers from Slovakia and Italy.

PRISGRADS German Workshop: A Detailed Overview

On October 9, 2024, Richtungswechsel & INTERCHANGE (INCH) hosted an online webinar titled “Recruitment and Employment of Higher Education Graduates in the Prison Service”. The purpose of this webinar was to present recruitment innovation strategies and enhance the integration of higher education graduates into prison systems in Austria and Germany. The webinar facilitated the exchange of existing strategies, discussed innovative ideas and identified strategies for improving recruitment practices, competence evaluation, and mentoring programs.

The event, which took place from 1:00 to 3:00 PM, encouraged active participation from 8 representatives of prison institutions, prison-training & HR facilities, and research organisations across Austria and Germany including prison managers, HR professionals, researchers, and training academy staff. The session presented the PRISGRADS project, showcase the mapping activity results, present the Unlocked Graduates scheme. Additionally, participants discussed current challenges in prison recruitment, the need for mentorship programs, and ways to improve the integration of university graduates into the prison system.



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PRISGRADS Romanian Workshop: A Detailed Overview

On October 10, 2024, the Center for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning (CPIP) hosted an online webinar titled “Recruitment and Employment of Higher Education Graduates in the Prison Service”. The purpose of this webinar was to present recruitment innovation strategies and enhance the integration of higher education graduates into the Romanian penitentiary system. Through a blend of presentations, group discussions, and case studies, the webinar facilitated the exchange of ideas and identification of strategies for improving recruitment practices, competence evaluation, and mentoring programs.

The event, which took place from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM, encouraged active participation from 22 representatives of various penitentiary institutions across Romania, including managers, HR professionals, and trainers. The session provided a platform for discussing current challenges in prison recruitment, the need for mentorship programs, and ways to improve the integration of university graduates into the prison system.

Research Findings

Graduate Recruitment in Prison Services: Policies and Current Initiatives

Recruitment policies for prison services across Europe vary widely due to different legal frameworks, workforce demands, and historical hiring models. Some countries, such as Austria, operate structured training academies, combining formal education with practical fieldwork, while others, like Romania, rely on general public sector hiring, where candidates must meet standard civil service requirements rather than sector-specific qualifications.

A notable example of structured graduate recruitment is the Unlocked Graduates Program (UK), which integrates selective hiring, mentorship, and academic training to attract high-potential graduates into the prison service. Participants receive on-the-job training, mentorship from experienced officers, and the opportunity to pursue a master's degree in criminal justice. This model has proven effective in retaining young professionals and fostering leadership skills.

Across the six European countries surveyed, three main recruitment models were identified:

- **Structured Graduate Pathways** – These involve targeted university partnerships, dedicated recruitment programs, and specialized training academies that prepare candidates through a combination of coursework and hands-on experience.
- **General Public Sector Hiring** – Officers are recruited through civil service examinations, with limited sector-specific training, which often results in high turnover and skills mismatches.
- **Internal Promotions and Career Transitions** – Some countries rely on promoting internal personnel from administrative roles, social work, or psychology into prison security and management positions.



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Common challenges across these models include a lack of university outreach, reliance on internal career mobility, and an over-dependence on external job postings. Many correctional services lack active recruitment strategies, such as career fairs or collaboration with higher education institutions, which limits the number of qualified graduates entering the field.

Key Competencies Sought by Prison Administrations

Survey data indicate that prison administrations prioritize a combination of technical expertise and interpersonal skills when recruiting officers. These key competencies include:

- Conflict Resolution and Crisis Management – De-escalation techniques, negotiation skills, and emergency response capabilities.
- Psychological Resilience and Stress Tolerance – Coping mechanisms for trauma, emotional stability, and adaptability to high-pressure environments.
- Legal and Procedural Knowledge – Understanding of penal codes, security protocols, and rehabilitation policies.
- Mentorship and Leadership Capabilities – Training and supervision of recruits, team management, and professional development coaching.

Training programs should be adapted to emphasize these skills, ensuring that recruits can meet both security and rehabilitative objectives within correctional institutions.

Existing Mentorship Programs and Their Impact

Mentorship plays a vital role in graduate retention and career progression, yet programs differ greatly across Europe. The PRISGRADS study identified three mentorship models:

- Formalized Mentorship Programs – These involve structured mentoring, where experienced officers support recruits in their professional development. The Unlocked Graduates Program (UK) assigns new hires mentors for two years, ensuring continuous career guidance.
- Informal Mentorship Initiatives – Some countries have informal mentoring arrangements, but these lack standardized implementation, leading to inconsistent support.
- No Formal Mentorship – Some prison systems provide only basic induction training, leaving recruits without structured career guidance, which contributes to high attrition rates.

Mentorship programs increase retention, improve job satisfaction, and facilitate career advancement by providing recruits with professional guidance and emotional support. The findings emphasize the need for expanding structured mentorship initiatives across European correctional services.



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Summary of Workshops

The PRISGRADS project hosted four national workshops two in English, one in German, and one in Romanian, providing a structured platform for professionals, trade union representatives, and education specialists to discuss graduate recruitment and mentorship in the prison sector. Each workshop focused on existing recruitment strategies, challenges in hiring graduates, and approaches to mentorship, ensuring a diverse exchange of knowledge among at least eight European countries.

The three main workshops lasted approximately two hours and were conducted in the respective national language to ensure accessibility and engagement. Attendees included prison administration officials, HR specialists, training professionals, and union representatives, totalling around 45 participants across the four workshops. The format incorporated expert presentations, case study analyses, and breakout sessions, allowing participants to share experiences and propose solutions.

Best Practices Identified

The discussions highlighted several successful models and initiatives that have contributed to improved graduate recruitment and mentorship in correctional services.

Structured mentorship programs have proven effective in providing long-term professional support for new recruits. In the UK, the Unlocked Graduates program pairs new officers with experienced mentors for two years, offering continuous guidance and leadership development. This initiative integrates training, mentorship, and career progression incentives, helping to retain highly qualified professionals.

Graduate training tailored specifically to prison work has also been beneficial in increasing job readiness. Austria has developed a model that emphasizes partnerships with universities, integrating structured training academies where candidates receive both theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience before taking on their roles. This approach ensures that recruits acquire the necessary competencies while reducing early turnover.

Collaboration between universities and prison administrations has strengthened recruitment pipelines in several European countries. Austria and Germany have launched targeted campaigns at job fairs and career events, leading to an increase in applicants with specialized knowledge and a better understanding of the correctional system.

Additionally, incentive-based recruitment strategies have been implemented in some regions to attract university graduates to the prison workforce. These include financial incentives such as tuition reimbursement, salary bonuses, and career advancement guarantees, all of which help counter negative perceptions of prison work and enhance the appeal of correctional careers.



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Challenges in Graduate Recruitment and Mentorship

Despite the successful practices identified, several persistent challenges continue to hinder the effectiveness of graduate recruitment and mentorship in European prison services.

A significant obstacle is the negative perception of prison work among university graduates, who often view careers in correctional services as undesirable, dangerous, and lacking opportunities for career progression. This perception limits the pool of skilled applicants, as many graduates seek more socially prestigious and financially rewarding roles.

Another major issue is the lack of standardized mentorship programs. While some countries have established structured mentorship models, others rely on informal or ad-hoc mentoring, leaving many recruits without adequate support. The absence of a consistent mentoring framework contributes to high attrition rates and insufficient professional development.

The limited availability of clear career development pathways further discourages highly qualified graduates from considering long-term careers in the prison sector. Many correctional institutions fail to offer transparent progression routes, making it difficult for new recruits to envision a stable and rewarding future in the field.

Hiring criteria also vary significantly across different countries, with some prison administrations relying on generalized public sector recruitment processes that do not adequately assess the leadership and rehabilitative skills required for prison work. This inconsistency results in skills mismatches and higher dropout rates among new employees.

Additionally, there is a lack of public awareness regarding career opportunities in corrections. Unlike other public sector roles, prison service jobs are rarely promoted at career fairs or through university employment programs, reducing their visibility and limiting the chances of attracting top graduates to the field.

Collective Recommendations from Participants

To address these challenges and improve recruitment and mentorship, workshop participants developed several recommendations to guide future policies and institutional reforms:

- Participants emphasized the need for standardized recruitment frameworks across European prison administrations. A common set of hiring criteria and skill assessment models should be introduced to ensure that graduates entering the field meet professional competency standards.



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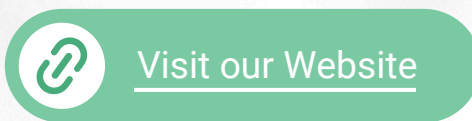


- A structured, EU-wide mentorship program should be implemented, ensuring that all new recruits receive consistent guidance from experienced professionals. This would involve designated mentorship training for senior officers, enabling them to effectively support and train graduates.
- Prison administrations should actively promote correctional careers through university partnerships, social media campaigns, and career fairs. Greater visibility of graduate success stories, professional growth opportunities, and the social impact of prison work can help shift public perception and attract top talent.
- Participants proposed the introduction of structured internship opportunities in correctional institutions, allowing university students to gain practical experience before applying for full-time roles. This initiative would enhance job readiness and increase retention rates.



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