Research Article

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University Distance Learning in Correctional Centres: the case of the Hellenic Open University

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Abstract

The paper attempts to discuss how Distance Learning can support the right to education by delivering higher education courses in Correctional Centres. In this context, the role of such courses, the motivation of detained students, the benefits for both detainees and detention facilities, the barriers and challenges faced by detainees as well as the support they receive are explored. The literature review served as a basis for the research and the discussion. The case of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) and the undergraduate courses that offered to detainees are under study through empirical qualitative research, and a semi-structured interview as research tool. Three key-persons involved in the education in detention facilities, with experience in the courses offered by the HOU were interviewed. The findings highlight the importance of the empowerment of detainees through the motivation for learning within correctional facilities as well as the potential for distance higher education to play a transformative role in shaping the identity of detainees and their smooth social reintegration. Both benefits and challenges as well as motivation and opportunities concerning detainees in Greece and the Hellenic Open University courses agree with the literature review and the prospective benefits and actual challenges worldwide.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental right for all people, whether they are free citizens or belong to vulnerable social groups, such as detainees in detention facilities. The participation of detainees in an educational process can broaden their horizons, show them a different path, introduce them to values they had not discovered, open their minds, and strengthen their will to live, with the goal of their smooth reintegration into society. Efforts to implement an educational process in detention facilities face many obstacles, which are related to the difficulties inmates encounter in accessing educational materials, choosing courses, the difficult conditions that they face in prison, as well as administrative barriers that affect the delivery of education, particularly higher education and Distance Learning, which requires the use of technology. Due to its accessibility and flexibility, Distance Learning can play an important role in the education of detainees. This paper aims to discuss about the Distance Learning programs in detention facilities and explore the case of detainees studying in correctional facilities in Greece in the undergraduate programs of the Hellenic Open University (HOU).

2. The state of the Art

2.1. Open and Distance Learning and the Right to Education

According to Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights, the Incheon Declaration [1,2] and the ODL (Open and Distance Learning) manifesto [3], education in all its forms should aim at the full development of the human personality. Since the 19th century, even before the right to education was officially recognized, Open and Distance Learning ensured the provision of educational opportunities to those who were deprived of them, continuously promoting democracy and equality in education [3, 4]. Open and Distance Learning was a pillar of the educational process in times of hardship and crisis, ensuring justice and democracy in education and providing educational opportunities to all, regardless of circumstances. The Incheon Declaration [1,2,5] promotes the idea of "Education for All" a global education movement that began in 1990, advocating universal access to basic education and lifelong learning. The Incheon Declaration refers to Quality Education, the fourth of a series of seventeen goals set by the United Nations [1,2,5] to promote sustainability and development. The key pillars of Quality Education include accessibility, inclusion, equality, quality, lifelong learning, the elimination of racial discrimination, and the promotion of all cultural skills [1,2,5]. In the 21st century, accessibility also means free access to information, technology, appropriate infrastructure, and necessary facilities for all.

Open and Distance Learning provides an educational environment and applies a methodology that activates the conditions of UNESCO's [1] goal for Quality Education and confirms the nature of education as a Human Right. By combining its policy of openness with the methodology of Distance Learning is linked to the values of Article 26, promoting freedom of choice and defending human rights in education in all its forms [3,6].

2.2. Detainees and the Right to education

Today, approximately 11 million people are in detention worldwide, and this number is constantly increasing. Detainees should not be deprived of the fundamental human right to education, which includes the right to lifelong learning (LLL).

In the correctional context, this right includes ensuring continuous access to quality education throughout their incarceration and beyond.

Education for incarcerated people is important, not only as a basic human right but also because, according to the principle of social justice, there should be no justifiable reason to deny these rights to incarcerated citizens [7]. In a democratic society, the concept of educational inclusion and the right to education promotes belief in social justice [8], and equality of access to education is a fundamental human right [9]. The Nelson Mandela Rules inspire various national legislations and serve as a practical guide for countries on how to organize their prison policy and treat inmates. For example, Rule 4 stipulates the obligation of every prison administration to provide, among other things, education to detainees. Rule 92 points out that education must be individualized and adapted to the characteristics and particularities of each detainee. Rule 104 provides further education for detainees who can benefit from it, while education is compulsory for young detainees or illiterate detainees.

At the European level, the right of detainees to education is guaranteed by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (2021) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. In European countries, educational institutions within prisons cover all levels of education, up to university level. According to European Prison Rules, the education of detainees should be integrated as much as possible into the national education and vocational training system so that prisoners can continue their education and vocational training without difficulty and should be implemented with funding from external educational institutions. In Europe, the prison education system is usually administered by the Ministry of Education. However, in addition to formal education programs, many informal education programs are implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), student associations, volunteers, etc. [10].

2.3 Open and Distance Learning at the service of detainees in correctional institutions

The Council of Europe had a similar approach to adult education in the community, which it applied to its policy on education in custodial settings, namely that "*education in custody should aim at the development of the whole person, taking into account his or her social, economic, and cultural background*" [11, p.8]. A United Nations report [12] echoes the position of the Council of Europe, emphasizing that education in detention facilities should aim at the full development of the whole person. This includes providing detainees with access to various forms of education: formal and informal education, basic education, literacy programs, vocational training, creative, religious, and cultural activities, physical education and sports, social education, higher education, and libraries.

According to UNESCO [2], as cited by Ofoegbu [13], Distance Learning is the only option for people who are excluded from traditional education, such as prisoners. It promotes lifelong learning and involves all groups of citizens. It also provides a second chance for disenfranchised individuals, such as women in developing countries or prisoners, with the aim of reintegrating them into society and the workforce [14]. Open and Distance Learning guarantees equal access to opportunities based on individuals' preferences, expectations, and abilities, regardless of exclusion or discrimination [13].

Distance Learning provides the opportunity to study without having to leave the premises of the prison, thus solving the basic problem of prisoners' access to higher education [15]. This approach also minimises security risks due to the lack of physical contact with academics. In addition, the digital medium allows students to continue their studies even if they are transferred to other facilities or released, which is linked to the flexibility of blended online learning. This suggests that open access and flexibility, which are at the core of Open and Distance Learning, allow prisoners to continue their higher education studies regardless of their circumstances [16].

The realization of this vision, according to Farley, Pike, Demiray, and Tangland [17], has led to a significant global effort by prison organizations to offer higher education within correctional facilities. International research consistently highlights Distance Learning as the most effective and reliable approach to providing higher education in detention facilities [16].

There are significant differences between countries in the education provided in detention facilities, particularly regarding whether detainees are entitled to enroll in Distance Learning courses. The United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Portugal have initiated access to Distance Learning. In Spain, a cooperation agreement was signed with the Universidad Nacional de Education a Distancia (UNED) as part of the development of criminal (correctional) legislation. Detainees, under the agreement, can study under the same conditions as other citizens, at least regarding university services, i.e. those over 25 years of age can directly obtain a bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree. Students are provided with appropriate Distance Learning support, guidance, and relevant teaching materials.

In the United Kingdom, the prisons can provide detainees with the opportunity to take Distance Learning courses, for example, in cooperation with the Open University (OU), but higher education in detention centers is not funded. Detained people can apply for loans, and funding may be provided by external bodies and institutions. In France, inmates can take Distance Learning courses through organizations administered by the National Ministry of Education. However, inmates must bear the cost of educational programs, which can be quite expensive. In Portugal, inmates can apply to universities that offer Distance Learning programs. In other countries, Distance Learning is neither offered nor promoted [10].

2.4 Distance Learning and correctional institutions in Greece

Article 16 of the Greek Constitution guarantees the right to free education for all Greek citizens at all levels of education. Specifically for detainees in prisons, the protection of the right to free education is primarily provided by the Greek Penal Code (GPC), Article 35 of which clarifies that the education of prisoners aims at acquiring or completing education at all levels, as well as at their vocational training.

There are 35 Greek prisons, and existing legislation provides for the operation of primary and secondary education schools in them, i.e., elementary schools, Gymnasiums or Second Chance Schools, Lyceums, Vocational Lyceums, Public Vocational Training Institutes, and Greek language learning courses, while when detainees complete their secondary education, they have the opportunity to participate in Panhellenic examinations and then

study at a Higher Education Institution or at the Hellenic Open University (Joint Ministerial Decision 29809/2015).

The image of the correctional system in Greece, in relation to the inmates' access to education, has begun to change significantly since 2015. Access to higher education has been enhanced through the support of Distance Learning for detainees. Distance Learning can be the primary option for detainees to access higher education, due to its philosophy of providing opportunities for lifelong learning and meeting the learning needs of individuals belonging to different age groups and with different educational and professional levels, regardless of circumstances and situations. In addition, for Distance Learning detainees, the prison council must ensure the use of computers, controlled access to the internet, audiovisual or printed material for educational purposes, as well as special study areas. It should be noted here that, following a public lottery, 30 computers were made available to prisoners who enrolled in the Hellenic Open University in 2018-2019 and remained in prison after completing their studies for use by other detained students. Worth mentioning is the signing of a cooperation agreement between the General Secretariat for Anti-Crime Policy and the Hellenic Open University, which provides for the award of 20 scholarships per year for detainees to study in undergraduate programs. The same agreement provides for the support of Distance Learning for detainees who are students in any university department in Greece or abroad, with electronic monitoring for attending courses and workshops and participating in exams. In December 2019, there were 71 detainees enrolled in higher education, of whom 35 were studying at the Hellenic Open University, while in 2020, the number of detainees enrolled in higher education exceeded 100, with 61 being students at the Hellenic Open University.

3. Aim and research Questions
The aim of the study is to discuss the role, challenges, and prospects of Distance Learning programs in detention facilities and explore the case of detainees studying in the undergraduate programs of the Hellenic Open University.

The research questions the study attempts to answer are:
- *What is the prospective role of Distance Learning programs in detention centers?*
- *What are the motives and benefits of detainees in Distance Learning programs in detention facilities?*
- *What are the challenges in Distance Learning programs in detention facilities?*
- *How the situation in Greek detention facilities is shaped by the HOU scholarship program for detainees?*

4. Method
The research methods considered most appropriate for investigating the research questions are literature review and empirical qualitative research.

Initially, a review of Greek and international literature was conducted. The databases used were *ResearchGate, Scopus, Google Scholar, Springer International Publishing, the National Documentation Centre, the journal for Open and Distance Learning and Educational Technology.* The search filters were mainly limited to the last decade, from 2014 to 2024. Keywords such as *prisoners/detainees' education, Distance Learning in detention facilities,* and combination of them in English and Greek were used.

The empirical qualitative approach was the second part of the research process. Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool for data collection. The interview questions were formulated to correspond to the research purpose and research questions.

4.1 The Research Tool
The interview guide consisted of seventeen (17) open-ended questions:
- 1st question concerned the interviewee's relationship with education in general and education at tertiary level in detention facilities and their role in this engagement.
- 2nd to 7th questions concerned data on the participation of detainees in HOU programs (*When did the scholarship program for detainees to study in HOU programs begin, is there interest on the part of detainees to participate in this program, how many applications are made each year, approximately how many prisoners have enrolled and started studying in HOU undergraduate programs to date, which schools/departments prisoners choose to enroll and study in, how many have successfully completed their studies to date, what is the dropout/abandonment rate*).
- 8th to 14th questions concern detainees' motivation to engage in such educational processes, the benefits for detainees and the detention facility, the obstacles faced by detainee students, and the support they may receive.
- 15th question concerns participants' suggestions for improving the Hellenic Open University's scholarship program for detainees.
- 16th question relates to potential student detainees (*undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral*) outside the HOU's action.
- 17th question asks participants to state anything else they wish to add.

The interviews were conducted via online discussion on the Zoom platform and were recorded.

4.2 Validity, Reliability and data analysis
The interview guide was compiled by the researchers. Subsequently, an expert in Distance Learning with experience in Hellenic Open University programs and extensive experience in education in detention facilities reviewed the questions to ensure their suitability for covering the topic under study in breadth and depth (content validity) and to ensure that the wording of the questions was clear and easily understandable (face validity).

After being transcribed, the three interviews were sent to the respective participant so that they could check the accuracy of the transcription and the recording of their answers (verification of the accuracy of responses).

The method used to analyze the data is content analysis, with the unit of analysis being the theme (Thematic analysis). The purpose of thematic analysis is to create an analytical and systematic record of the codes and themes that emerge from the participants' interviews. A code reproducibility procedure was followed with the participation of three coders [18] to ensure the reliability of the content analysis. A pilot content analysis of a part of one interview was conducted by all three coders and then the percentage of agreement among the coders was used to measure reliability that was calculated equal to 0.95, a value that considered satisfactory.

4.3 The Interviewees

The selection of participants in the study was purposeful and convenient, as they were individuals involved in the education of detainees and had experience with HOU Distance Learning programs offered to detainees and agreed to participate.

The participants in the study were three individuals with the following characteristics:

RG: Female, sociologist, permanent employee at a detention facility, responsible for detainee education, involved in Distance Learning as part of her role and the duties/responsibilities of her position. Her role is to provide support for access to computers, sending books, and communicating with the Hellenic Open University.

BK: Female, philologist, educator-researcher in Greek language programs at detention centers.

AE: Female, sociologist, she is conducting postdoctoral research at the Hellenic Open University on the education of detainees. She works in detention facilities as an educator and researcher.

5.   Findings and discussion

According to the literature review, overcoming the challenges of engaging in higher Distance Learning in a correctional setting requires a multidimensional support system, including *institutional support* [19,20], *access to technology and educational resources* [21], *academic support* [22,23], *psychosocial support* [24,25], *administrative support* [26,27], *family and community involvement* ([22,28], *personal development programs* ([29,30], and *legal and political support* [31]. Another important factor is good coordination between the various services involved in providing education, such as the correctional facility administration, the correctional education service, universities that provide Distance Learning, and the service that assists in the reintegration of detainees in society. When this coordination is lacking, the results are discouraging for detainees, who are already in a particularly disadvantaged position compared to other distance learners due to their imprisonment [22,27]. The above literature review findings are strongly consistent with the results of the qualitative empirical research by means of the three interviews.

5.1 The prospective role of Distance Learning programs in detention centers

Higher education in correctional facilities is considered, in literature, to be compensatory for various social issues related to incarceration. It is promoted as a means of *reducing recidivism* [32], *reducing prison costs* [33], enhancing security and safety within prisons [17], *facilitating social integration and support during the post-release* period [34], addressing high post-release unemployment rates [35,36]. The findings of the interviews agree with the above-mentioned conclusions but differ in relation to reducing recidivism and facilitating the reintegration of prisoners,

emphasizing that for all this to be meaningful, governments and society in general must strive to improve their conditions and, in addition, it would be important to offer jobs to detainees after their release.

Researchers [22,37,38] argue that this type of education, which requires students to study independently, using Distance Learning materials, is potentially transformative, making a positive difference to students' lives and identities during incarceration and after release. The prospective positive outcomes of this personal change *include increased determination, self-awareness, critical thinking skills, resilience, skills that will remain helpful in reintegration, as well as the development of a positive student identity, with increased hopes for a different future after release* [22]. Overall, distance higher education in prisons creates a space of hope in an environment that often seems hopeless [16].

At this point, the findings of the interviews research diverge. It appears that changing and empowering detainees is not such a simple matter, given that detainees live in conditions of oppression, material deprivation, and limited opportunities. It also raises the question of whether it is ethical "*to say that their lives must change, while at the same time not fighting to change the objective conditions*" that would make them better. Furthermore, there is the question of the moral responsibility of asking detainees to change in a direction that we consider good, without knowing whether this change will help them survive in prison, given that they are at risk where they live every day and, in fact, some of the threats they face are related to the fact that we are asking them to go against the hierarchies that are established within the prison.

5.2. Motivation of detainees and Benefits

The motivations of detainees to participate in Distance Learning programs are multifaceted [39], with the most important being the relief of their anxiety and boredom, forgetting their restricted freedom and their particularly difficult, dangerous, and impoverished living conditions. In other words, participating in education helps them survive their sentence mentally [22] and is particularly important for those serving long sentences or suffering from mental illness [16]. Many inmates pursue study with the aim of acquiring the necessary qualifications and skills that will help them secure suitable employment after release and create different prospects for their lives and futures [22]. Also, some inmates get involved in learning to test their abilities or even to make it easier to navigate the correctional system (sentence reduction). Others begin their studies with the aim of personal development, which is often linked to their deeper desire to break free from the cycle of recidivism and undergo a personal transformation [22]. The findings of the interviews analysis on detainees' motivations are consistent with the literature.

Fig.1: Motivation and Benefits for detainees.

The empirical research revealed motivations related to the feeling of freedom in an unfree space, mental empowerment, self-improvement, boosting their self-confidence, improving their self-image, participating in a learning community, communicating with people not connected to prison, personal and professional development, broadening their options, beneficial sentencing, smooth reintegration, improving their employability after release, and, more generally, the possibility of a second chance in life.

Benefits for the detention facility are highlighted too:
- enhanced security and safety within the correctional facility
- better management of conflicts between inmates and between inmates and correctional staff, through the development of collaborative and communication skills
- calm and cooperative inmates

5.3 Challenges
Detention is a unique learning environment, and incarcerated students face several additional challenges compared to most distance learners. Detainees involved in distance higher education face a range of academic, administrative, and social challenges that hinder their progress [16]. Part of the problem relates to the fact that, within the correctional setting, security is always prioritized over education [22]. The provision of education to detainees involves many different departments within the institution, with different conflicting priorities, which control their activities [40]. The immediate consequences are reduced access to computers and the internet, which means reduced access to educational material, reduced interaction with teachers and students, difficulty in choosing courses, as well as various administrative restrictions that affect the provision of distance higher education, which uses almost exclusively digital media [16,42,43]. The strictly controlled environment of imprisonment contributes to the detainees' sense of isolation from the educational community at a distance and affects their educational progress, the likelihood of completing their studies, and the development of their social identity, as well as the replacement of their criminal identity with that of a student [22].

Many of the challenges faced by students are related to inmates' living conditions in prison [16]. The emotional and physical abuse of inmates [44], danger and threats, and the "micro-societies" that form within prisons with their own codes of values are all factors that make education more difficult. High rates of mental illness, addiction problems, the dismantling of, withdrawal, institutionalization, the problem of overcrowding, stress, fear and insecurity, dead time in prison, and separation from family and society undermine educational efforts in the prison setting [16].

Problems also arise from the general disregard for education in prison, the fact that security is prioritized over educational opportunities, and the negative and obstructive behavior of correctional staff [16], which stems from their deeply rooted

perception that the education of detainees is an unjustified privilege and not an inalienable right. The research findings are fully consistent with the literature on prison staff behavior, and the study also highlights an additional reason for this attitude, the fact that correctional officers deal with extremely difficult working conditions in their daily lives in prison, with the usual problems of overcrowding, exploitation, disturbances, fights, and addictions. In addition, detainees often face problems related to the payment of their tuition fees [45]. The findings of the study are consistent with and add to the challenges faced by prisoners that emerge from the literature review.

Fig.2: Challenges for detainees.

5.4 The case of the Hellenic Open University

The Hellenic Open University scholarship program for detainees began in 2016. According to the findings of empirical research, after the first year of operation, when interest among detainees was high (5 people in each detention facility), interest began to decline and today there are 3-4 applications per year. The study programs preferred by the detainees are *Business and Organizational Management, Tourism Management, Greek Culture, and European Culture*. A large percentage of inmate students drop out, and only a small percentage have managed to complete their studies and obtain a degree. There is no accurate data on how many prisoners have been involved in HOU programs over the past eight years, nor how many have managed to obtain a degree. The Ministries of Education and Justice, the administrative services of the Hellenic Open University, and detention facilities do not provide or cannot provide accurate statistics. Any information comes from the personal experiences and assessments of the interviewees.

The reasons for dropping out of studies are related to the obstacles and challenges faced by prisoners, as highlighted in both the international literature review and the empirical research are recorded above. In addition, there are detainees who participate in Hellenic Open University programs (undergraduate or graduate) on their own initiative, paying the tuition fees themselves. The number of such individuals is also difficult to determine, but it appears that these individuals may be more strongly motivated to participate in the educational process.

5.5 The role of the 'teachers'

Interviews have also shown that the main supportive factors within prison are *tutors, teachers and volunteer teachers, access* to educational and scientific staff of the prison, the prison social service, other students, family, as well as *individual cases of prison officers*. Emphasis is placed on the important and multifaceted role of tutors, with an

emphasis on their *motivational and guiding role*, which is particularly important for detainees due to their confinement situation. *Communication* among students and 'Teachers' is often their only link to the outside world and can be a condition for continuing their studies. It also highlighted the need for 'Teachers' training so that they can understand the difficulties of an educational project within the prison context, as well as the daily challenges faced by their incarcerated students.

Pike's [27] research showed how important it was for detainees to be treated as regular students, as contact with their tutor and receiving positive feedback boosted their self-esteem and self-confidence. Those detainees who were fortunate enough to meet their tutors in person and have access to information about other students were more encouraged to feel that they were part of the distance learning community, i.e., to gain a sense of belonging. In addition, student-tutor relationships are usually characterized by respect, understanding, care, and positive expectations that reduce antisocial behavior and contribute to the construction of an anti-criminal identity [16].

6. Conclusion

In the imprisonment context, the right to education includes ensuring continuous access to quality education throughout the duration of prisoners' imprisonment and beyond [41]. In fact, detainees should have access to the most comprehensive educational programs possible, covering their needs and aspirations, with the aim of their comprehensive personal development, social reintegration, and professional rehabilitation after their release [10,42]. Due to its accessibility and flexibility, Distance Learning has the ability and the potential to provide educational opportunities to disadvantaged groups, such as prisoners, thus serving their human right to education.

Both literature review and empirical qualitive research by means of interviews from experts in the field highlighted elements of the prospective role of Distance Learning in correctional environments, the motivation and benefits for detainees and the challenges they faced.

The findings highlight the importance of the empowerment of detainees through the motivation for learning within correctional facilities as well as the potential for distance higher education to play a transformative role in shaping the identity of detainees and their smooth social reintegration of detainees. The development of a new social identity for detainees through the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, which will ultimately lead to their successful reintegration into society.

Both benefits and challenges as well as motivation and opportunities concerning detainees in Greece and the Hellenic Open University courses agree with the literature review and the prospective benefits and actual challenges worldwide.

Future research could be to investigate the views of detainees enrolled in distance learning programs on how they experience the educational process of Distance Learning within detention facilities, and what difficulties they face.

Furthermore, it would be very interesting to investigate the experiences and perceptions of the 'teachers', correctional officers, and volunteers who support student detainees regarding the role they play in providing distance higher education in Greece and worldwide.

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