Results of the research carried out within the STEP project:
despite some virtuous examples, distance learning in european prison is still a small-scale phenomenon that needs to be implemented

The STEP (Supporting distance Training and Education in Prison) project aims to support and enhance the use of digital tools and distance learning in prisons. To achieve this goal, the project is structured in two phases. The first one involves the observation of existing distance learning experiences in prison, while the second one envisages the creation of tools to improve and increase the development of future initiatives in the field.

As the final result of the first phase, a research was drafted by Association Antigone, one of the project partners. The goal of such research was to describe and analyse the implementation of distance learning in the prisons of the five project partner countries: France, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Specifically, for each country, the research provides a national overview of ongoing e-learning initiatives in prison and an in-depth analysis devoted to a specific experience that the partners have directly observed[1].

From the overviews conducted at the national level, it appears that, although there are some interesting experiences, in general distance learning in prison is still a quite uncommon phenomenon. All five countries have examples of e-learning in prison, however, in most cases these are isolated initiatives, often linked only to certain categories of training or delivered only in certain places of detention.

Besides some initiatives that have been going on for many years, most e-learning projects have been implemented in the last few years. In all five countries, in fact, there has recently been an increased propensity to initiate distance learning projects, which is likely to increase further in the coming years. In addition to the natural progression of time, it can be presumed that the great impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the use of technologies in the field of training will bring some effects also in the development of new experiences within penitentiary institutions. The increased global awareness of the importance and especially the feasibility of distance learning will hopefully foster its development, outside such as inside prison.

With regard to the five countries researched, within the macro area of distance learning most initiatives concern higher education. The possibility of taking university courses remotely is indeed widespread, especially thanks to online universities (such as the *Universidade Aberta* in Portugal and the *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* in Spain). However, this possibility is offered to a very small part of the inmate population, as most do not have the level of education to embark on a university career.

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[1] Regarding the specific e-learning initiatives, FARAPEJ (France) observed the project "MoodleBox in detention" implemented in the prison of Caten in collaboration with the University of Caen; LINC (Italy) observed an Italian language course for foreign prisoners recently launched by the University for Foreigners of Siena in the Prison of Porto Azzurro; Changes&Chances (Netherlands) observed a course delivered in the Zaanstad Penitentiary Centre aimed at obtaining a certificate required in many workplaces i.e. "Safety, Health and Environment Certificate - VCA"; Form2You (Portugal) observed the Virtual Campus Educonline@pris project implemented in the Prison of Coimbra by the Open University; finally, AIFED observed an IT training delivered through an e-learning tool called EduTIC developed by the Avopri association in the Social Insertion Centre of Granada.

If there are some examples of distance learning aimed at acquiring transversal working skills or specific certificates useful for work, to date real distance courses for vocational training are still very rare in prison. Apart from some few exceptions[2], no structured examples of official vocational courses (capable of awarding specific certificates) were found within the scope of this research. It can easily be argued that distance learning in prison is significantly more widespread for educational courses than vocational training. This imbalance does not, however, reflect the needs of a large part of the inmate population, which in many cases would need more resources to acquire work-related skills expendable once outside.

With regard to the e-learning initiatives observed by the partners, each one had its own characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. Despite the many differences, there are certain elements that can be detected in each of the experiences observed and that could therefore be defined as frequent aspects of distance learning in prison.

First of all, the total absence of internet connection. In none of the initiatives surveyed at the national level or observed at the local one, access to the internet is foreseen for security reasons. The second very frequent element is the lack of resources, both in terms of human and material resources. In general, few people are deployed to take care of all aspects of the courses and often staff with other duties or volunteers perform these functions. Moreover, almost all courses have shortages of technological resources or have to use poor ones. A third sphere of issues closely related to the second one are organisational problems (eg. the synchronisation of platforms is complex and time-consuming; difficulty in delivering exams; overlap with other activities). Finally, another relevant feature consists in the high dropout rates registered by most e-learning courses. Several factors may contribute to the decision to abandon a class. Some are inherent to detention itself, such as the end of a sentence or the transfer to another prison, but others also depend on the quality of the activity. As reported throughout the research, elements such as organisational issues, scarcity of resources and lack of interactions may strongly discourage students to pursue education, amidst the many difficulties that a period of detention already entails per se.

The critical issues and good practices that emerged through the country studies and the comparative analysis carried out with the research lay the foundations for the development of common guidelines for the enhancement of distance learning in prison and an ad hoc training for prison staff and civilian personnel working in institutions. Both instruments will be aimed at improving and ensuring a greater and effective development of distance learning in prison.

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[2] The main one is the Tuscany Region Web-Learning Platform called TRIO (*Tecnologia, Ricerca, Innovazione e Orientamento*). TRIO is one of the first projects in Europe for distance learning financed with regional resources through the European Social Fund (ESF). TRIO is a platform for e-learning and professional training which offers an extensive catalogue of about 900 training products available online. Following the positive passing of the final exam or intermediate tests, the program issues an official certificate of attendance upon request. It is currently active in four prisons for adults and in one juvenile detention centre in the Tuscany Regione.