

Proceeding Paper

The PROMOTE Project in Portugal: Rethinking Reintegration Through the National Adaptation Workshop [†]

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation of competency-based professional development for correctional staff through the DACUM (Developing A Curriculum) methodology. A National Adaptation Workshop in Portugal engaged professionals from multiple sectors—psychologists, social workers, educators, prison officers, re-education and reintegration technicians—to validate occupational profiles and training needs. Thematic analysis revealed gaps between required and available training, especially in conflict management, mental health, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Key findings show strong support for participatory, practice-informed training, provided it is contextually adapted and accessible. The results underscore the practical need for flexible, modular training frameworks in correctional settings, offering implications for policy and staff retention strategies.

Keywords: PROMOTE; training; correctional services; professional profiles



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1. Introduction

The prison environment is marked by institutional rigidity, social vulnerability, and psychosocial tension. Professionals operating within such settings, including psychologists, educators, reintegration officers, and correctional staff, face multifaceted challenges that extend far beyond custodial duties. Their roles increasingly involve psychosocial intervention, educational support, and the facilitation of inmates' reintegration into society [1,2]. However, despite the complexity of their mandates, these professionals often lack access to continuous, specialised training tailored to the specificities of penal institutions [3].

Contemporary correctional systems across Europe emphasise rehabilitation and social reintegration as key objectives of incarceration. This transformation implies a shift from punitive to human service roles, in which correctional staff are required not only to maintain institutional order but also to foster behavioural change and promote personal development among inmates [4–6]. In a study by Miklóski [1], it became apparent that the Hungarian experience illustrates this shift, with structured training models aiming to

enhance competencies such as communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and intercultural sensitivity.

Empirical findings indicate a significant gap between the competencies required in prison work and the training professionals receive. For example, a study involving staff working with juvenile offenders revealed widespread self-reported inadequacy in dealing with aggression, addictions, and sexual offences—critical areas in prison dynamics [3]. Similar concerns emerge in the Hungarian penitentiary context, where short initial training periods and high staff turnover threaten the quality of institutional functioning [1].

In response, the literature advocates competency-based and experiential learning models that emphasise practical knowledge, psychological resilience, and reflective practice. Progressive training methods—such as role play, case study analysis, group work, and supervision—are highlighted as more effective than traditional lecture-based approaches in fostering autonomous, adaptable, and ethically grounded professionals [7,8]. Furthermore, mentoring systems and career development strategies are essential for staff retention and professional identity consolidation [9].

The PROMOTE Project (Promoting Integrated Professional Development for Prison Practitioners), co-funded by the European Union (PROMOTE—101144006—ERASMUS-EDU-2023-PEX-COVE), aligns with these recommendations by proposing the implementation of collaborative training groups for professionals working with incarcerated populations. These groups aim to provide a structured environment for skill development, knowledge exchange, and psychosocial support, thereby enhancing the quality and ethical grounding of professional interventions. Ultimately, this initiative seeks to contribute to a correctional culture that balances institutional security with human dignity and rehabilitation. It focuses on identifying professional profiles, required competencies, and training needs.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodological Framework: DACUM Approach

This study adopted a participatory, competence-based methodology (DACUM—Developing A Curriculum) to identify key tasks, skills, and training needs of professionals working with incarcerated individuals [10]. The research was conducted within the scope of the PROMOTE project through a National Adaptation Workshop led by the Egas Moniz School of Health and Science (Work Package 2—WP2).

2.2. Workshop Structure and Participant Profile

The workshop brought together 11 professionals from diverse correctional roles—prison officers, psychologists, re-education technicians, and reintegration officers. Through structured group exercises, participants validated occupational profiles using DACUM checklists informed by prior surveys, interviews, and policy analyses.

Workshop activities included a briefing on the DACUM methodology, small group discussions around occupational roles, and a consensus-building process to assess the relevance of proposed competencies and training needs.

2.3. Qualitative Analysis Procedures

All workshop contributions—written notes, verbal exchanges, and group summaries—were documented and subjected to thematic analysis. An initial coding phase was conducted by a single researcher, who identified recurring patterns and divergent viewpoints. To improve the rigour and credibility of the analysis, the emerging themes were then reviewed by the project team through a collaborative validation session. This helped ensure interpretive consensus and alignment with the local institutional context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Validation of Professional Profiles

The results of the National Adaptation Workshop reinforce the relevance of a competency-based, practitioner-informed approach to professional development in correctional settings. Participants from diverse occupational backgrounds confirmed the general validity of the PROMOTE profiles, while also highlighting critical nuances requiring contextual adjustment, as demonstrated in Table 1. All occupational groups provided structured feedback across several key dimensions: Duties and Tasks, Competencies, Attitudes, Knowledge, and Training Needs.

Table 1. Validation of professional profiles.

Professional Profile	Section	Validation Level	Non-Validated Items
Prison Guard	DT	Partial	1: (a); 3: (b), (e), (g), (i); 4: (a), (c); 5: all items (except Head of Corps: (b), (h), (i))
	C	High, with notes	13, 21, 24 (contextual limits and responsibilities)
	A	Full	None
	K	High	None (note: not formally required)
	TN	Full, with caveats	None (note: training not available)
Psychologist	DT	High	2. (g), 2. (h); 7. (a), (b), (c)
	C	Full	None
	A	Full	None (note: limits to confidentiality in item 10)
	K	Full	None (suggested: basic life support)
	TN	High	1, 16
Re-education Technician	DT	High	2. (o)
	C	Full	None
	A	High	10
	K	Full	None
	TN	Full	None
Reintegration Technician	DT	Moderate	1. (f), (g); 2. (f); 3. (e), (f), (g); 4. (a), (b), (c); 5. (b), (c), (i); 9. (f), (h), (i), (m), (p), (q)
	C	Full	None
	A	Full	None (repetition in 1 and 8 and 3 and 12)
	K	High	4, 19
	TN	High	22, 23

Note: Full—fully validated; High—largely validated with minor reservations; Moderate—partially validated; Partial—some aspects validated; Not Validated—rejected.

3.1.1. Duties and Tasks (DT)

Participants from all professional groups shared reflections to refine and contextualise role expectations. Clarifying responsibilities was a recurring theme. Re-education technicians noted overlaps with psychologists in therapeutic tasks, stressing these belong to licensed mental health professionals. Reflections across professional groups revealed the need to clarify role expectations [e.g., “It is necessary to restructure the legislation (...) our professional actions are limited (...).”]. These observations echo prior studies on the importance of role clarity in complex institutional environments [1,3].

3.1.2. Competencies (C)

Feedback from prison guards and psychologists centred on functional boundaries and the necessity of role-specific differentiation. Guards underlined their limited authority in disciplinary decisions, which are formally reserved for institutional boards. One participant remarked: “Prison guards are only responsible for the application of disciplinary (...)” Psychologists advocated for an expanded role in mental health policy and inter-institutional coordination, reinforcing the imperative for adaptive competency on future frameworks [1].

3.1.3. Attitudes (A)

The dimension of professional attitudes was widely endorsed, with guards and technicians emphasising the ethical handling of security-related information. A guard made the following observation: “Our duty obligates us to communicate situations that may present a risk to the order and safety of the prison.” Balancing firmness with rehabilitation was seen as requiring judgement, reflecting the emotional and ethical demands of correctional work [2].

3.1.4. Knowledge (K)

Comments in this area indicated a disparity between formally required knowledge and actual practice, particularly among prison guards and reintegration professionals. A participant made the following remark: “The majority of these items are not a requirement for the function and this knowledge is only acquired through the initiative of each individual prison guard.” Psychologists proposed basic life support as a relevant knowledge area. These insights support earlier arguments that training frameworks must move beyond prescriptive curricula and incorporate experiential, practice-informed learning [7].

3.1.5. Training Needs (TN)

Although the training needs were largely endorsed, participants reported significant gaps in training availability and access. Also, the work overload and understaffing make it difficult to attend training. Prison guards noted that most recommended training is not offered. Additionally, professionals across groups suggested integrating emerging topics, such as restorative justice and applied statistics for psychologists, or interpersonal skills and conflict management for prison guards [e.g., “The training proposed is relevant, but not accessible. We need training that supports our actual challenges (...)”].

3.2. Applicability of Best Practices

Participants broadly acknowledged the relevance of international training models but emphasised the need for contextual adaptation, especially concerning legal frameworks and institutional infrastructure. Table 2 outlines the perceived applicability of proposed practices by professional group. While most practices were deemed relevant, their feasibility was often contingent on structural and legal conditions.

Table 2. Applicability of proposed practices by professional group.

Professional Group	Practice 1	Practice 2	Practice 3	Practice 4	Practice 5
Prison Guards	App	APP	APP	RA-SC	APP
Psychologists	APP-FL	APP-FL	NA	APP-T	APP-FL
Re-education Technicians	APP-CP	NA	NA	NA	APP
Reintegration Technicians	NA	NA	NA	APP	APP-IP

Note: APP = applicable; RA-SC = requires adaptation (shared cell occupancy); APP-FL = applicable with funding/licensing; APP-T = applicable for training only; APP-CP = applicable with comprehensive planning; APP-IP = applicable (in progress); NA = not applicable.

4. Conclusions

The Portuguese National Adaptation Workshop confirmed the value of participatory, competency-based approaches to professional development in correctional environments. The use of the DACUM methodology allowed for practitioner voices to shape and validate occupational profiles, enhancing contextual relevance.

Key outcomes included the need for clearer role differentiation, the misalignment between formal training provisions and institutional demands, and a call for accessible, interdisciplinary, and practice-oriented training models.

To advance these findings, future phases of the PROMOTE project should integrate flexible training modules, mentorship systems, and collaborative learning strategies. Such measures not only respond to national needs but also align with broader European efforts to humanise correctional systems through professional capacity building.

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