

Developing Occupational Standards Case Study: Prison Educator

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Abstract

In the contemporary context of modern penitentiary systems, the social rehabilitation of inmates has become a priority for both penal and social policies in Romania, as already happened in far more developed countries. Nowadays, traditional detention measures are outdated and the importance of targeted educational, psychosocial and social interventions become the obvious solution for reducing recidivism and facilitating successful re-entry into society to former inmates. One of the key actors in this process of rehabilitation in Romania is the prison educator – an occupation that needs to upgrade to the statute of profession in order to reach its full potential and contribute to better results in the social rehabilitation of inmates and reducing recidivism. This research drives the analysis of the occupational standards and professional practices of prison educators in Romania, and also presents perspectives and solutions for career and statute development, through a comparative analysis that includes European and international standards, good practices and professional examples. The research proposes recommendations for developing the present occupational standards and engaging the professionalization of the prison educator, including the development of an independent professional statute and code of ethics.

Keywords: penitentiary system, rehabilitation, occupational standard, professionalization.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary context of modern penitentiary systems and targeted rehabilitation solutions, traditional detention solutions failed to achieve substantial results in sustaining effective social rehabilitation of inmates and reducing recidivism.

In the past fifteen years we can observe a slightly improvement in the recidivism rate in Romania (from 44,93% in 2010 to 36,93% in 2022² and still decreasing) due to an improved public policy for social rehabilitation, that include a coordinated intervention in the educational, psychosocial and social interventions,

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² Romania, Ministry of Justice. 2023. „Integrated study regarding the causes of recidivism”, page 65. Available at: <https://anp.gov.ro/norwaygrants/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2024/01/20240103-Studiu-integrat-recidiva.pdf>, accessed on 10 July 2025.

during the execution of prison sentences.

Considering the importance of targeted educational interventions for reducing recidivism and facilitating successful re-entry into society to former inmates, we can acknowledge that one of the key actors in the process of rehabilitation in Romania is the prison educator. The development of this essential occupation can conduct to an improved intervention, better rehabilitation results and a reduced rate of recidivism.

This research drives the analysis of the **occupational standards** and **professional practices** for prison educators in Romania, using a qualitative and comparative approach of European and international standards, legislation and recommendations, and also international practices and professional examples.

The proposed solutions and recommendations are for **developing the present occupational standards** and **engaging professionalization** of the prison educator, including the development of an independent **professional statute** and **code of ethics** for the new profession.

2. The Professional Profile of the Prison Educator in Romania

In Romania, prison educators are part of prison police staff and contribute to the implementation of educational policies established by the National Administration of Penitentiaries, which operates under the authority of the Ministry of Justice.

Prison educator is part of a multidisciplinary team, together with the psychologist and the social worker, in the social rehabilitation sector, under the direct coordination of the head of the education service. Prison educator frequently collaborates within the multidisciplinary team and with other departments (security and prison regime, medical etc.), as well as with external partners — schools, universities, NGOs, cultural institutions and employment agencies.

According to Romanian national legislative framework, one of the prison sentence's role is to generate a correct attitude towards the legal order and to the rules of social coexistence, aiming for efficient social rehabilitation of inmates. The national legislative framework also establishes the obligation for the state to ensure access to education for all inmates³ without discrimination and designates the prison educator as one of the specialists that delivers specific interventions for inmates in the educational field of social rehabilitation⁴.

The first evidence of the prison educator in the Romanian Classification of Occupations (COR) is the listing of *prison educator specialist*⁵ COR code 242904 in

³ Law No. 254/2013 on the execution of sentences and custodial measures ordered by judicial bodies during criminal proceedings, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 514 of August 14, 2013, with subsequent amendments, art. 3, art. 79 and art. 90

⁴ Order of the Ministry of Justice No. 1322/2017 for the approval of the Regulation on the organization and implementation of educational, psychological and social assistance activities and programs in places of detention under the jurisdiction of the National Penitentiary Administration, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 432 of June 12, 2017, with subsequent amendments, art. 34.

⁵ Order of the Minister of Labor, Family, Social Protection and the Elderly no. 123/2015 on the modification and completion of the Classification of Occupations in Romania - occupation level (six characters), approved by Order of the Minister of Labor, Family and Social Protection and of the President of the

2015, as a specialist in administrative domain with higher education and specific role in the Romanian penitentiary system.

The specific legislation in the Romanian penitentiary system⁶ states that, in order to occupy the prison educator position, the penitentiary policeman must graduate higher education with a bachelor's degree, a psycho-pedagogical training program or trainer course and must have advanced computer operating skills.

The purpose of the prison educator's activity is established by internal regulation⁷ and it is settled to provide qualified support in order to improve the educational level of inmates and assist them in solving the problems they face during imprisonment. The same regulations establish for the prison educator professional competencies directly related to work with inmates, such as: knowing and assessing the educational needs and resources, identifying ways to improve the educational and vocational level, training, developing and practicing prosocial behaviors, managing crisis situations and educational counseling. The minimum standards regarding prison educator's professional activities are two educational programs per week, three hours of assessment activities, four hours of individual information conversations per week and 3 hours of educational counseling per week. The planning of the activity has to ensure a minimum of 4 hours of direct activities with inmates.

3. Prison Education - European and International Standards, Legislation and Recommendations

The European rules on prison education⁸ mention the principle according to which *education in prison helps to humanize prisons* and that *education in prison is an important way of facilitating the return of the prisoner to the community*, and the Committee of Ministers made series of recommendations including that *all prisoners shall have access to education* and that *education for prisoners should be like the education provided for similar age-groups in the outside world*.

More recent European standards⁹ on prison education include the principle according to which *ensuring quality education for all is a public responsibility* and that *access to education in prison reduces recidivism*, mentioning recommendations regarding to the quality of education in prisons to be a public responsibility and that

National Institute of Statistics no. 1.832/856/2011, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 161 of March 9, 2015, with subsequent amendments.

⁶ Law No. 145/2019 on the status of prison police officers, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 631 of July 30, 2019, with subsequent amendments.

⁷ Decision No. 500201/2017 on the approval of the National Norms in the field of education, psychological assistance and social assistance of persons deprived of liberty, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 914 of November 22, 2017, with subsequent amendments, art. 63 and art. 76

⁸ Recommendation No. R (89) 12 of the Committee of Ministers. Available at: <https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/council-europe-recommendation-89-12-education-prison>, accessed on 10 July 2025.

⁹ Draft of The Committee of Ministers Recommendation (XX)XX on Education in Prison. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/draft-recommendation-on-education-in-prison-7-january-2025/1680b355a2>, accessed on 10 July 2025.

public authorities are responsible to ensure quality education in prison, and also that *education in prison should be delivered by **qualified professionals***.

United Nations rules¹⁰ for the treatment of prisoners complete the European principles and establish the obligation for all prison staff to possess an *adequate standard of education* and to carry out their duties in a **professional manner**, and also for the education of prisoners *to be integrated with the educational system of the country*, in order for the former inmate to have the possibility to continue their education without difficulty after release.

All these principles and recommendations listed above conduct to clear and comprehensive conclusions for the prison educator. We have to underline the role of the prison educator to help humanizing prisons, facilitate a good return of the prisoner to the community and to reduce recidivism. We also have to acknowledge the responsibility of prison educator to deliver professional services similar to those in the community and the base condition to deliver professional services is the high qualification of personnel.

4. International Practices and Professional Examples

A recent study¹¹ identifies the **risk of professional deformation for prison staff**. The study identifies personal and functional causes that determines gradual psychological and behavioral changes and lead to reduced adherence to legal or ethical norms. According to the study results, low legal culture, stressful conditions and poor regulation conduct to subjectivity in applying legal and moral norms by penitentiary staff. Two of the proposed preventive measures against professional deformation are **improving training** and **professional development** among penitentiary staff.

Also, the recent case study¹² of **police “re-professionalization”** in England and Wales, due to the criticism of institutional failures in policing (e.g., the Stephen Lawrence case, Hillsborough disaster) triggered reforms intended to modernize the police. The new measures redefined professionalism as compliance with managerial standards, leading to organizational paralysis, loss of discretion and reduced service quality. The study warns of the detrimental consequences when **professionalization is imposed “from above”** rather than developed **“from within”**. In this case, new measures paradoxically weakened **professional autonomy** and **competence** instead of strengthening policing as a profession.

On the other hand, another study¹³ published in 2009 on **job satisfaction** and

¹⁰ Revision of Nelson Mandela Rules, rule 75 and rule 104. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175>, accessed on 10 July 2025.

¹¹ Yan Streluk, Dmytro, Kolodchyn, Oleksandr Mykhalik, Kostiantyn Podliehaiev, Andrii Bohatyrov. 2023. “Criminological Principles of Preventing Professional Deformation among Penitentiary Personnel,” *Cuestiones Políticas* 41, no. 76: 367-377, pp. 374, 375. <https://doi.org/10.46398/cuestpol.4176.21>.

¹² Clifford Bacon, Bill Heberton and Leo McCann. 2023, “The limits of ‘professionalisation from above’: On the ‘re-professionalisation’ of street-level policing in England”. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 25/4: 1071-1096, pp. 1090, 1091, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958231170153>.

¹³ Brett E. Garland, William P. McCarty and Ruohui Zhao. 2008., “Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment in Prisons: An Examination of Psychological Staff, Teachers, and Unit Management Staff”,

organizational commitment among three groups of prison staff (teachers, psychological staff and unit management personnel) revealed that **supervision quality and perceived efficacy with inmates** were the strongest and most consistent predictors of job satisfaction and organizational commitment across all groups. Additionally, teachers in minimum-security prisons reported stronger institutional commitment and job satisfaction depending on institutional tenure (time spent in a prison). The study reveals that **teachers**, among other two staff groups, are **vital for both security and rehabilitation in prisons**, and that improving supervisory practices and enhancing positive inmate–staff interactions can significantly strengthen both job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

A report¹⁴ from 2013, managed by the European Commission, that provides an overview of education and training in European prisons, states that **prison education** in Europe plays a crucial role in rehabilitation, employability, and social reintegration of inmates. Skilled educators are vital, requiring **specialized pedagogical and in-service training**. The report mentions that **cooperation** among teachers, prison officers, governors, and external organizations **improves outcomes in rehabilitation and social reintegration** and recognizes that **investment, innovation** (especially ICT-based), and **stronger cooperation between prison systems and communities** are the best solutions to make prison education a central element of rehabilitation strategies.

An interesting example for analyzing adult education and its characteristics can be the article¹⁵ published in the *International Review of Education* in 2016, which critically examines how **professionalization** in adult education differs across Germany, UK and India, distinguishing it from **professionalism**. The authors highlight that professionalization is often conflated with systemic control, not necessarily tied to autonomy or ethical practice. In Germany, they identified a heavily bureaucratic control through a state-regulated teacher education system, in UK they discovered a mix between market-driven provision and bureaucratic oversight, with professional agencies and NGOs playing influential roles, and in India, professionalization is largely shaped by bureaucratic and aid-system imperatives, with less autonomous professional structures.

Another interesting article¹⁶ regarding professionalization presents perspectives from different international regions on professionalization of counseling. The conceptual framework used in the research uses terms as **professionalization** explained

Criminal Justice and Behavior, 36/2: 163–183, p. 172, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854808327343>.

¹⁴ Jo Hawley, Ilona Murphy and Manuel Souto-Otero. 2013. “Prison education and training in Europe: current state-of-play and challenges”, European Commission, Brussels, p. 47.

¹⁵ Lesley Doyle, Regina Egetenmeyer, Chetan Singai and Uma Devi. 2016. “Professionalisation as development and as regulation: Adult education in Germany, the United Kingdom and India”, *International Review of Education/Internationale Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft/Revue Internationale de l’Education/International Review of Education*. 62 no. 3: 317–341, p. 335, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24756386>.

¹⁶ Meredith L.T. Montgomery, Blythe Shepard, Hildah Mokgolodi, Mingyi Qian, Mei Tang. 2018. “Professionalization of counseling: Perspectives from different international regions”, *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 40/4: 343–364, p. 360, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-018-9330-6>.

to be a process for development of a **professional identity, licensing systems, educational standards and ethical codes**. In addition, **standardization** is seen as part of professionalization, but sometimes strained by the need for flexibility and creativity in practice. The article presents the example of Canada and its poor regulated counseling. Additionally in Canada, the multiple professional titles seems to create public confusion. In Botswana, counseling is not accepted to be part of mental health professions, and in China, there is very high demand for counseling services, but there are competence problems due to certifications with low standards. We can easily deduct a lack of a unified professional identity. The authors identified as main challenges the competition with other mental health professions (psychology, psychiatry and social work), the absence of **training standards** and license portability, and the imbalance between standardization and creative freedom of counselors.

In terms of professionalization, we can present the particular case of **professionalization of sport educators** in European prisons¹⁷. The study focuses on the role of specialized training and instructional design of 341 prison sport educators from Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Romania, and Spain. The results of the study indicates that only 61.3% of sport educators had specialized training in sports. Specialized training turned to be more common among less experienced staff (<1 year) and those with university/postgraduate education. In Denmark, access to sport educator jobs comes mainly from internal promotion, while in Spain only through external recruitment with sports qualifications. Sport educators with higher education and less experience showed a higher degree of professionalization (more formal planning, broader activity offer, more systematic evaluation) and **experience alone did not consistently improve professionalization indicators**. The conclusion of the study is that **specialized training and higher education are associated with stronger professional practices**.

The need for a professional code is mentioned in the article¹⁸ published by Bergenhenegouwen, which examines the absence of explicit **ethical codes** for industrial trainers and explores how **norms, values and standards** can be formalized to strengthen their professionalization. The study also underlines that **a professional code** provides standards for correct conduct, legitimizes activities and ensures trust with beneficiaries and organizations. The study concludes that training professionals require not only **technical expertise**, but also **ethical competence** and that **a professional code** is essential to anticipate and manage dilemmas, enhance trust, and legitimize the field of industrial training as a profession.

In addition, **mutual recognition of professional qualifications** turned to be a brilliant policy mechanism within the European Union as the research¹⁹ published by

¹⁷ Jose Devis-Devis, Daniel Martos-García, Alexandra Valencia-Peris and Carmen Peiró-Velert. 2017. "La profesionalización de los educadores deportivos en prisiones europeas / Professionalization of Sport Educators in European Prisons.", *Revista Internacional de Medicina y Ciencias de la Actividad Física y el Deporte*, vol. 17 no. 66: 205-223, p. 211, <https://doi.org/10.15366/rimcafd2017.66.001>.

¹⁸ G.J. Bergenhenegouwen. 1996. "Professional code and ethics for training professionals", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 20/4: 23-29, pp. 28, 29, <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090599610117054>.

¹⁹ Frances Plimmer and Stuart Gronow. 1990. "Mutual recognition of professional qualifications: some

Plimmer and Gronow concluded. The **regulation of professions** turned to have the effect to create opportunities for professional mobility but it remains constrained by national regulation, professional resistance, and cultural barriers. The regulation of professions success depends on building trust in professional standards across borders and balancing economic integration with professional integrity.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In Romania, although the institutional framework is defined and the occupation is slightly regulated, the lack of detailed occupational standards, mechanisms for continuous professional development and tools for professional recognition are missing.

A critical analysis of the professional profile, international standards and recommendations, and also of the international practices and professional examples, underscores that the occupation of prison educator in Romania is in a low stage of professionalization. International models, standards and recommendations can provide concrete examples of best practices that can be adapted and integrated into a coherent institutional **reform project**.

Although the occupation is officially recognized, there is no detailed occupational standard that can reflect the actual complexity of the role. **Developing a new occupational** standard in consultation with practitioners and universities, reflecting the current demands of the occupation, can be the first step to make for professionalization.

Initial training for prison educators is brief and continuing education is sporadic, with no institutionalized mechanisms for professional development. Introducing a nationally accredited **initial and continuing training plan**, including modules on prison pedagogy, counseling, professional ethics and supervised practice, can conduct to career predictability, job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

For prison educator, educational activities are sometimes reduced to administrative or mediation tasks, diminishing professional autonomy. The public image of prison educator is vague, and the occupation lacks a strong identity both within and outside the penitentiary system. The solutions to counter these disadvantages are building sustainable collaborations with educational institutions, NGOs, universities and the social actors to diversify educational offerings, and also creating a professional association for education specialists within the Romanian penitentiary system, to advocate for professional interests, develop a **code of ethics** and support professional self-regulation.

In this context, the profession of prison educator can become a strategic pillar in one contemporary penitentiary system, through its educational, preventive and morally formative mission. Strengthening and professionalization of the prison educator occupation is not only a matter of organizational efficiency but also one of social justice and public responsibility.

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