

## Article

# Distance Education for Dutch Citizens Detained Abroad: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of the Foundation ‘Education behind Foreign Bars’

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**Abstract:** Foreign national prisoners have less educational opportunities than national prisoners. Therefore, the Dutch foundation ‘Education behind Foreign Bars’ (Eabt) provides distance education to Dutch nationals detained abroad. A mixed-methods case study is carried out to gain insight into the perspective of professionals and volunteers who are involved with Eabt and of the students taking a course from Eabt. This study consists of individual interviews with volunteers and professionals and pre- and post-surveys among students. The qualitative results show that following a course from Eabt happens in three steps: (1) Informing, (2) applying for the course, and (3) starting with the course, doing homework, and being assessed. During the course, students receive motivational and content-related support from the Netherlands and, depending on the local prison context, also from the detaining country. The professionals and volunteers identify various success factors and challenges of Eabt. The quantitative results demonstrate that students are primarily motivated to participate by their wish to acquire knowledge and skills and to prepare for life after detention. The students are satisfied about the support received and they seem to have more confidence in the future due to the course. Overall, Eabt is highly valued by both students, professionals, and volunteers.

**Keywords:** foreign national prisoners; distance education; mixed-methods case study; education behind foreign bars



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## 1. Introduction

As Behan [1] (p. 20) states “education within prisons is as old as the institution itself”. Prison education is a type of adult education and encompasses formal learning, non-formal learning, and informal learning programs [2]. It thus covers a wide range of educational activities such as academic education, literacy education, vocational training, arts, and cultural developments [3], distance learning [4], language courses [5], etc. In their general theory of prison education, Szifris et al. [6] distinguish three types of outcomes for students that follow education during their time of incarceration. First, being engaged in education can serve as a hook for change. Prisoners can be subjected to different ways of thinking and presented alternative choices they can make in their life. Following education during their time of incarceration can transform individuals and lead to the development of new identities. A second outcome is that education can be a means for gaining skills and qualifications prisoners can use after their release from prison, for instance on the labor market [6,7]. Although it can be expected that vocational training programs are more adapted than traditional academic programs to prepare prisoners for the labor market, the meta-analysis of Davis et al. [8] demonstrates that both programs are effective at realizing this. In connection herewith, the rapid evidence assessment of Ellison et al. [9] has shown

that participating in academic education and vocational training programs seems to reduce the likelihood of recidivism and increase the chances of obtaining employment after release from prison. The last outcome of prison education Szifris et al. [6] identified is that the environment in which prison education takes place acts as a safe space. Under the right circumstances and with appropriate staff, it can lead to the development of pro-social identities. These identities focus on growth and developments, rather than on survival.

Access to education is a human right, which is stipulated by both the European Convention on Human Rights [10] and the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights [11]. For the prison population, there are several legal instruments dealing with their right to education, such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners [12], the Recommendations on Education in Prison [13], and the revised European Prison Rules of 2020 [14]. In addition, the Council of Europe also formulated a specific recommendation for foreign national prisoners stipulating that the educational needs of foreign nationals should be considered [15].

Despite their equal rights, foreign nationals are confronted with less educational opportunities than national prisoners [16–18], which goes against the international and European regulations [16]. Mainly the language barrier prevents foreign nationals to participate in prison education. Often a good understanding of the national language of the detaining country is required [19,20], through which they cannot meet the test or selection criteria to participate [21]. In addition, foreign national prisoners that want to participate in prison education are hindered by waiting lists, a lack of information about the educational offer in a language they understand, a lack of available places, or getting no answer on their request to participate [18]. Recent research into the barriers prison professionals experience in providing education to foreign national prisoners has demonstrated that educational materials for foreign nationals are limited or even not available. Besides, this study found that financial resources to provide an educational offer to this population are lacking [17]. Providing prison education to foreign nationals is often not considered as a priority by policy makers [22]. Consequently, prisons organize a smaller educational offer for foreign national than for national prisoners. If foreign national prisoners have access to prison education, courses to learn the national language of the detaining country are most often provided [17]. These courses facilitate the communication [23] and help to understand information provided in prison [24]. However, learning the national language is not always relevant for those prisoners who will leave the detaining country [25]. For this group, distance education from their home country could be valuable, but nowadays such learning opportunities are limited [17].

To respond to this need, the Dutch foundation ‘Educatie achter buitenlandse tralies’ (Education behind Foreign Bars; further abbreviated as Eabt) provides distance education to Dutch nationals detained abroad. They offer courses to citizens with the Dutch nationality and those who have a residence permit for the Netherlands. In 2018, there were approximately 2000 Dutch nationals behind foreign bars worldwide. Most of them were detained in France, Germany, Spain, or the United Kingdom [26]. The educational offer of Eabt can be divided into four categories: (1) Preparatory vocational education, (2) higher education courses, (3) Dutch language courses, and (4) foreign language courses. The language courses are developed by Eabt, while for the preparatory vocational trainings and higher education courses Eabt collaborates with other distance education providers (e.g., National Business Academy or Open University). All courses lead to a certificate. The language courses are rewarded with a certificate that is offered by Eabt, while the preparatory vocational trainings and higher education courses lead to qualifications of the other distance education providers. The duration of the courses varies from person to person, and from detention situation to detention situation. The background of the prisoners and their study skills differ greatly from each other, which affects their speed of studying. Some prisoners have little or no prior education and study experiences, while others do. The study conditions vary from studying in a classroom, alone in a cell, to studying in a cell in the presence of their cellmates. This also influences the study conditions and thus the

speed of studying. In the free society, a study duration of 4 to 12 months is assumed. In detention, this varies from 4 months to 2.5 years.

To the best of our knowledge, Eabt is the only foundation in the world that provides distance education to nationals detained abroad. Given the uniqueness of this case, a mixed-methods case study was set up to gain insight into the perspective of volunteers and professionals who support the courses via Eabt, and the detained students abroad (further abbreviated as students) participating in such courses. The following research questions are addressed:

Qualitative part—professionals and volunteers:

- RQ1: How do volunteers and professionals experience the progress of a course from Eabt, from application to completion?
- RQ2: How do professionals and volunteers perceive the future of Eabt, and what are the success factors and challenges in this regard?

Quantitative part—students:

- RQ3: How are the students motivated to participate in a course from Eabt?
- RQ4: What are the results and effects for the students of participating in a course provided by Eabt?

In the context of this study, formulating hypotheses is seen as unnecessary. The study has an exploratory character and describes a cross-section of reality, including experiences and situations tied to distance education opportunities for foreign national prisoners that are provided by their home country. This specific context does not require formulating any hypotheses.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper utilized a mixed-methods case study design consisting of: (1) Individual interviews with volunteers and professionals involved in the working of Eabt, and (2) pre- and post-surveys among students. Prior to the data collection, ethical permission was obtained from the Ethics Commission in Human Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) (Ref. ECHW\_163).

### 2.1. Part 1: Individual Interviews with Volunteers and Professionals

To get insight into the perspectives of professionals and volunteers involved in the working of Eabt, 17 individual interviews were conducted between December 2018 and March 2019. The aim was to reach a diverse group of participants (e.g., visiting volunteers, teachers, after-care workers, employees of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Consular Affairs). Potential participants received an e-mail with information about the study from the director of Eabt. In this way, the participants were informed that they would be invited for an interview. Subsequently, the researchers contacted the respondents to agree on an exact time and manner of conducting the interview (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, or Skype). Twelve participants were working in the Netherlands and 5 in the detaining countries. Ten interviews were conducted by telephone, 5 face-to-face, and 2 via Skype.

The interview schedule consisted of 5 parts: (1) Background information; (2) their role in relation to Eabt; (3) the process of following distance courses; (4) the results and added value of following distance courses for the students, prisons and society; and (5) the strengths and challenges of Eabt. This paper focuses on parts 3 and 5.

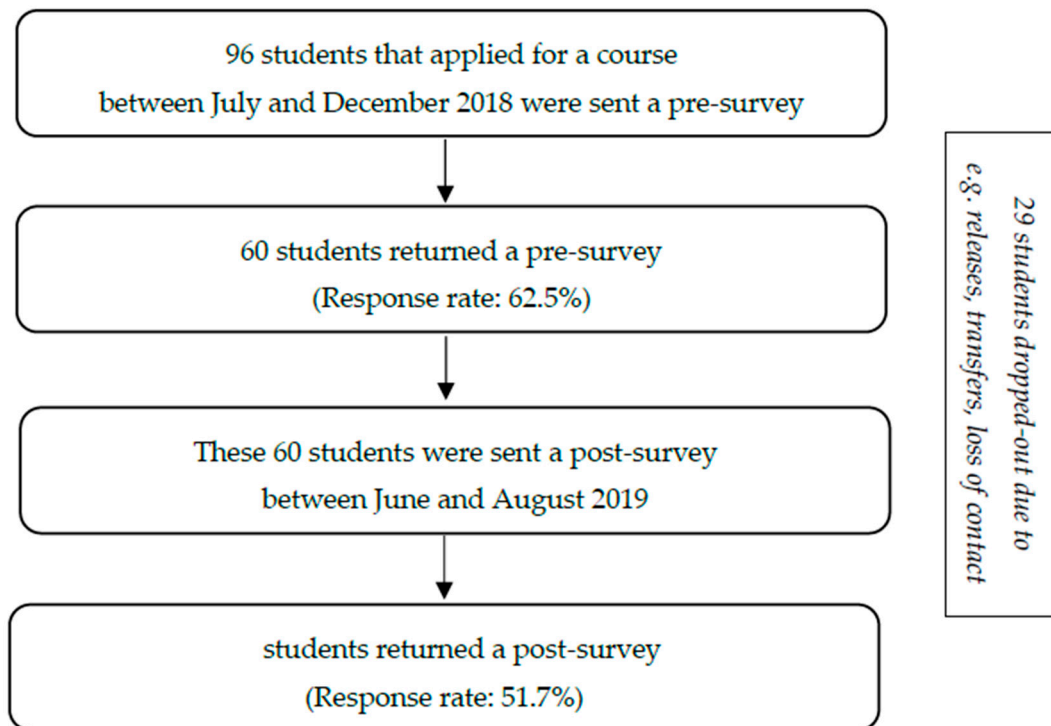
Prior to the individual interviews, the participants were given information about the study and asked to sign the informed consent. The interviews were recorded and lasted between 23 and 95 min. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Inductive (i.e., data-driven) thematic analysis was performed following the six steps described by Braun and Clarke [27]: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6)

writing the final results. The analytical software program MAXQDA has been used. The authors elaborately discussed and agreed upon the codes and steps in the analysis.

## 2.2. Part 2: Pre- and Post-Surveys Among Students

### 2.2.1. Participants and Procedures

The process that students underwent while attending a course from Eabt was monitored by means of a pre- and post-survey. These surveys were available in Dutch. Figure 1 presents an overview of the number of students that were sent the surveys, and how many surveys were returned.



**Figure 1.** Number of respondents and response rate of the pre- and post-surveys.

All 96 students that applied for a course between July and December 2018 were asked to fill in the pre-survey, which was sent by post. A postage-free envelope was added so that the students would not incur any costs in returning the completed surveys. A reminder was sent to the students to fill in the pre-survey 2 to 3 months later. A volunteer of Eabt and the researchers kept an overview of the contacted prisoners in an Excel file. Once the researchers received a completed pre-survey, it was added to the Excel file.

Between June and August 2019, 7 to 10 months after sending the pre-surveys, the students who filled in the pre-survey were sent a post-survey. In addition, the post-survey was sent by post and accompanied by a postage-free envelope. In the end, 60 students completed the pre-survey (response rate of 62.5%) and 31 the post-survey (response rate of 51.7%). There was a drop-out between completing the pre- and post-survey due to, for instance, releases from prison, transfers to other prisons, and loss of contact.

In the pre-survey, 55 students provided information about the course they followed; 73.9% of the students (N = 41) followed a preparatory vocational education. Courses that were commonly followed were for instance sailing license, social hygiene for a job in the catering sector, social psychology, and fitness trainer. Furthermore, 21.7% of the students (N = 12) followed a foreign language course. Spanish was the most popular language, but French, German, and Russian were also followed. The minority of the students followed a Dutch language course (3.6%—N = 2). At the moment of the data collection, none of the students followed higher education.

The average age of the students was 40.3 years (range: 17–66). 95% had a Dutch nationality. The others had a residence permit for the Netherlands. There was a greater diversity in the country of birth. Students were mainly born in the Netherlands (68.3%—N = 41) or Surinam (11.7%—N = 7). If we look at the educational level the students had before they started a course from Eabt, more than 1 in 3 students (34.6%, N = 18) had obtained an educational level, which corresponds with level 4 of the European Qualification Framework [EFQ]. 25% (N = 13) did not have a diploma. Almost 1 out of 5 (19.2%, N = 10) of the students obtained level 1 of the EFQ. Furthermore, only 1 student obtained level 5 (1.9%), and no one had a bachelor (level 6), master (level 7), or PhD degree (level 8). The majority of the students (71.9%, N = 41) will return to the Netherlands voluntarily after their detention. Fourteen percent (N = 8) will be forced to return to the Netherlands and 5.3% (N = 3) will remain in the detaining country. Finally, 8.8% (N = 5) chose the other option and filled in, for example, "if possible, I will go back to the Netherlands", or a certain country. Someone also filled in "the Netherlands", but with this person it was unclear whether this would be voluntary or forced.

### 2.2.2. Variables

In the pre-survey, the students were shown 20 possible motives for following a course. Each respondent was asked to indicate which motives applied to their own situation, using a 4-point Likert Scale (1 = not important at all; 4 = very important). The items were taken from a survey developed for the European FORINER project about distance education for foreign national prisoners [28], which was based on previous research [29,30]. Afterwards, the motives were grouped into five different categories, based on the literature on motives to participation in prison education [28,30]: To acquire knowledge and skills, to prepare for life upon release, reasons unique to the prison context, distance course from the home country, and social motives.

In the post-survey, the students' satisfaction with the support they received was measured. Respondents got 10 statements from which they had to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale to what extent they (dis)agreed (1 = totally disagree; 5 = totally agree). The statements were largely based on the FORINER project [28], supplemented by items based on conversations with members of Eabt.

To measure the students' assertiveness, digital skills, and language skills, we presented the respondents 17 statements from the SIT-instrument (Social Inclusion after Transfer) [31]. These statements were included in both the pre-survey (T0) and post-survey (T1). The students could indicate on a 10-point Likert scale how well the statements suited them (1 = does not fit me at all; 10 = fits me at all). Afterwards, three scales were constructed: (1) Assertiveness (5 items—cronbach's  $\alpha$  T0 = 0.871; cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = 0.903); (2) digital skills (3 items—cronbach's  $\alpha$  T0 = 0.928; cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = 0.948), and (3) language skills (9 items—cronbach's  $\alpha$  T0 = 0.844; cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = 0.811).

Lastly, the post-survey contained 11 statements about how the students look at their chances of reintegration into society, which were mainly based on research conducted in the framework of the European FORINER project [28]. The students were asked to assess the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 5 = totally agree). Afterwards, they were split up into 4 categories: General perspective on reintegration, job opportunities after release from prison, development of social skills, and country after release from prison.

### 2.2.3. Methods of Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. First, descriptive statistical analyses were performed to report the frequency of the students' motives, satisfaction with the support, and perception on reintegration. Second, to measure the changes in students' individual scores on assertiveness, digital skills, and language skills, change variables were constructed. These variables were calculated as the scores of the post-tests minus the scores of the pre-tests.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Qualitative Findings

##### 3.1.1. Progress of the Courses from Eabt: From Application to Completion

The interviews with professionals and volunteers demonstrated that the provision of distance courses from Eabt went through three steps: (1) Informing students, (2) applying for a course, and (3) starting the course, doing homework, and being assessed.

##### Step 1: Informing Students

The first step consisted of informing potential students about the educational offer of Eabt. The stories from the respondents revealed that written information sources were mostly used. When Dutch nationals were arrested abroad and registered at the Foreign Office for Consular Assistance, they received an information package. According to several respondents, this information package included, among other things, a brochure with information about the offer of Eabt. This was experienced as positive by several respondents. For instance, one said:

Prisoners are given a great deal of information at the beginning [of detention]. Once they have been arrested, they do not yet know what awaits them. So, it is a good idea to mention it again in a brochure (R9, The Netherlands).

Some respondents considered the fact that this brochure was only available in Dutch as a drawback. An eligibility requirement for following a course was that students must have the Dutch nationality or a residence permit for the Netherlands, but not all of them do speak Dutch. Due to this language barrier, it might be that potential foreign-speaking students were not informed about the offer of Eabt, although they also offer Dutch language courses. A potential solution formulated by the respondents was translating the brochure in other languages, such as English or French.

Besides, some respondents mentioned that the students could get informed about the educational offer of Eabt by means of oral sources of information, such as visiting volunteers of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service, employees of the local prison, or the Dutch embassy or consulate. This was considered important by several respondents, as face-to-face contact motivates more than an information brochure. Especially for prisoners who do not understand Dutch, as the brochure is only available in Dutch. In the words of a respondent: 'Personal contact is always very powerful' (R7, Netherlands). However, respondents mentioned that providing oral information to potential students was not always possible in the detaining country since Eabt depends on visiting volunteers. Not all countries have visiting volunteers. If there are volunteers, but they drop out, the dissemination of information cannot always be guaranteed, as one respondent stated: 'It is not easy to visit prisoners all over the world with the number of volunteers that Eabt has. So that is practically impractical' (R7, The Netherlands).

##### Step 2: Students Apply for a Course

The respondents indicated that when students were interested in following a course from Eabt, they could inform the study program counsellor in the local prison or an employee of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service. These actors in turn pass on the information to Eabt. The students are then sent an application form and an introductory package. The purpose of this is providing information about the requested course, to estimate the language level of the potential students, to gauge their motivation, to check whether the requested course is in line with their previous education, to check which materials are allowed in the local prison, and to determine how long the students still have to stay in prison:

When they sign up [to follow a course] [...], they are given a small language test and a questionnaire in which they have to indicate how motivated they are. Then an assessment is made as to whether it is feasible to link the [educational] wish to reality and then permission is given. I do not know exactly how this works. Then a teacher is linked to the person who is going to check the homework (R14, The Netherlands).

### Step 3: Students start the course, do homework, and are assessed

After a successful application, Eabt sends a trial lesson to the students, which consists of an assignment of their reading comprehension and a first homework task to assess the student's level. If the trial lesson is evaluated positive, students receive the full course package. If Eabt feels that the student's language and—sometimes—calculation level is insufficient, a course in Dutch is first recommended or another course is sought that they feel is more appropriate. Suggesting an alternative course was considered as very positive by the respondents. In this way, Eabt tries to provide students with a course targeted at his/her educational level.

According to several respondents, this trial lesson is a way to lower the chances of ordering and delivering courses that are not adapted to the student's Dutch language skills and/or educational level. Although the trial lesson is done in a written manner, a respondent mentioned that an interview could be an added value to gauge the intrinsic motivation of the students, which could possibly lead to a course that is more in line with the student's needs.

When students have been given permission to start a distance course, a teacher from the Netherlands is assigned and the full course package is sent by post. Eabt relies on the help of local partners for the import of the course packages. Several respondents mentioned that there are often difficulties in getting a course package into prison by post. Prison staff is often suspicious of a package in a foreign language. In such situations, the visiting volunteers of the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service or employees of the Dutch embassies and consulates are used to deliver the course packages. However, this is also not always possible. A respondent gave the example of a Spanish prison where visiting volunteers were not allowed to get the course packages into prison. Therefore, Eabt was creative in finding a solution and currently the course packages are delivered with the help of a prison chaplain. In addition, in other countries, the delivery of course packages sometimes required some creativity:

In England, the regime is sometimes very strict. They are not even allowed to receive parcels, but they can receive letters. Yes, then I remove a parcel and send it in a couple of letters, then it fits in an envelope and then it is allowed to come in [laughs]. [ . . . ] But with a book that's almost impossible (R6, The Netherlands).

The course packages the students receive include pre-franked envelopes through which they can send their homework assignments to the Netherlands free of charge. This was experienced as important by all respondents as they believed that many students would otherwise not start or complete a course, if they had to pay for it themselves.

In addition, the respondents mentioned that the students must study independently, do homework assignments, and send them to the Netherlands. Eabt offers the students the opportunity to study at their own pace. This was valued by the respondents as this pace may vary between students:

There are, of course, prisoners who have no work or no lessons in prison, yes, they have a lot of free time. So some prisoners shoot like a spear through such a course [laughs]. They finish in a few weeks, for example, because they have a lot of time. Others who do have a job or have other [activities], they have a cleaning job or do sports every day, they do all kinds of things, they have less time available to follow that course and it takes them a bit longer (R8, The Netherlands).

However, several respondents pointed out that distance education is not feasible for every prisoner:

Well, it is often the case that they [prisoners] are going to study alone for the first time, and that is also extremely difficult because distance education is a very difficult type of education. That takes a lot of work, there is no fixed time to go to school, there is no teacher to motivate you and explain. No, you must do everything on your own. It requires self-discipline, but still, for many [prisoners] it is the first time they get a certificate for something, and that is very special (R1, The Netherlands).

In addition, several respondents indicated that the study facilities were very different in prisons across the world. For instance, it varies from one prison to another on how many prisoners are in one cell or what infrastructure is available for studying. The respondents argued that in some prisons there was only the possibility to study in a cell, while other prisons have classrooms where students can go and ask questions to a teacher. During the interviews, the respondents indicated that it would be an added value if a teacher would be available in the local prison to guide and support students in the self-study process, but in practice this was often not the available.

Several respondents reported that the students receive a certificate after the successful completion of certain courses. For most courses, it is sufficient to complete the homework assignment for each part of the course and pass. After students have successfully completed a course, Eabt provides the students with a certificate. For many courses (e.g., from the National Business Academy or Open University), an exam must be taken. According to the respondents, Eabt takes several efforts to organize this exam during detention abroad, which often requires creativity. For instance, several respondents mentioned that the exam can be organized under supervision in the local prison or at the Dutch embassy or consulate in the detaining country. The exams of the National Business Academy are normally completed on a computer. If this is not possible, a visiting volunteer can be appointed to print out the questions and take them to the prison. The respondents indicated that when it is not practically feasible to organize the exam during detention, the students will still be able to take the exam in the Netherlands after their release.

However, it is possible that the students are transferred or released during their course, which was considered as a breaking point by the respondents. In principle, the students can continue the course upon transfer or release. It is the students' responsibility to report a transfer or release to Eabt. The respondents regretted that, even though the information brochure states that this is the responsibility of the students themselves, in most cases it does not happen. Then, Eabt tries to obtain information about the students' place of residence through partners such as the Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service or the Dutch embassies and consulates. On top of that, the respondents mentioned that teaching materials are often lost during a transfer to another prison. Students do not always have a choice about what they can take with them. Often only limited luggage is provided or, as one respondent stated: 'Sometimes a package is simply not taken along during a transfer' (R8, The Netherlands). According to some respondents it was possible to send course packages after the transfer. Nevertheless, in many cases, the cost of receiving the package later is very high or the students must hope that there will still be room available for the package at the next prisoner transport. In principle, even in the event of prison **release**, the students can still complete the course. However, respondents pointed out that when prisoners are released, they have other things on their mind, such as looking for a place to stay or work. Therefore, the students often fail to complete it. In addition, one respondent mentioned that sometimes the students do not receive their course package until the day of release. In such cases, the course package was withheld by prison staff who did not trust the content of the package and therefore placed it with the prisoner's personal belongings.

### Support for Students During Their Course

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the students could receive support from (1) the Netherlands and (2) actors in the detaining country. In both cases, motivational and content-related support was provided, although according to the respondents they were interpreted differently.

First, the interviews showed that the support that was provided by Eabt and the teachers in the Netherlands was considered as structural support. The respondents indicated that motivational support was offered to the students, that consisted of feedback and tips on the homework assignments by the teacher and Eabt. The teachers not only corrected the assignments, but also provided feedback on how the students can (better) process



the subject matter: 'I also add something to motivate them, I do that as well. I do try to motivate them a bit 'watch out, look at this, look at that...' that's very important. We all do that' (R12, The Netherlands). For each homework that is corrected by the teacher in the Netherlands, Eabt also sends a letter to the students with, for instance, motivating and evaluating remarks, answers to questions asked by the students or current grades. In addition, the respondents mentioned that Eabt provided motivational support by sending postcards at key moments (e.g., when a course has been sent or when someone has obtained a certificate). These postcards were also sent at special events, such as Christmas or their birthday. In this way, Eabt tried to encourage the students. One respondent indicated that many students appreciated this as this is often the only post they receive.

Concerning the content-related support that was provided to the students from the Netherlands, the respondents cited that the students often have no or only limited access to the internet or books from a library. Therefore, Eabt sometimes provided extra teaching materials (e.g., dictionary or a handbook) to meet their needs. This was considered as helpful by the respondents, because in this way, Eabt considered the situation in which the students live. In addition, another respondent indicated that Eabt is creative in its search for educational providers. Sometimes the students ask for a course that is not included in Eabt's educational offer. When this is the case, Eabt searched for a provider who is willing/able to offer that course. The most important condition is that the course is available on paper, as in most prisons across the world, students have no or only limited access to the internet.

Next to the support offered from the Netherlands, the respondents indicated that the students could also receive support in the detaining country of visiting volunteers, local student counsellors, teachers, or fellow prisoners. Furthermore, in this case, both motivational support and content-related support were possible. The respondents cited that these types of support were not structural, but rather depended on the local prison context.

Firstly, the respondents indicated that the students may receive motivational support from various actors such as visiting volunteers who show interest in the course, fellow prisoners who encourage students to persevere, and, if local student counsellors and teachers were present, they could also motivate students to start or complete a course.

Secondly, in the detaining country, also content-related support could be provided. The respondents indicated that visiting volunteers sometimes provided content-related support, for example, by going through a homework assignment with the students or by clarifying questions. Besides, the respondents mentioned that when a student counsellor or a teacher was present in the local prison, they could follow up the students' learning. However, the respondents noted that not all students could rely on local student counsellors or visiting volunteers. Finally, some respondents stated that fellow prisoners could provide content-related support to students that were following a course from Eabt by helping each other to practice a language. Another respondent indicated that it also happened that students lent their Eabt-course to fellow prisoners, which happened most often with language courses.

### 3.1.2. Future Perspectives

#### Success Factors

The question 'what are for you the success factors of Eabt?' prompted respondents to think about what was currently going well. Throughout the interviews, four success factors could be deduced.

First, many respondents considered Eabt as an example organization, through which they were unanimous about the importance of Eabt's continued existence. Nevertheless, the respondents indicated that starting up a similar organization in another country would not be easy. Mainly the fact that they worked with volunteers made them unique and was considered as a strength. Especially because these volunteers were very passionate for the cause. As illustrated by a respondent:

The drive they [volunteers of Eabt] have, it is all run by people who are volunteers and therefore have a high level of commitment. There is also a greater desire to make things work [ . . . ] So I think they will go further than if they were just civil servants, who are like 'I only walk the normal way'. This involvement brings creativity and finding solutions (R14, The Netherlands).

Secondly, it was stated that over the past 15 years, Eabt has built up an extensive network of partners in the Netherlands and abroad. They have a clear overview of which partner they can/must address at which time. The respondents mentioned that such a network is very important for registering students, delivering course packages, sending homework assignments, etc. In other words, this network is crucial to make the operation of Eabt possible.

The free and wide range of courses at different educational levels was also seen as a success factor. Consequently, there is an educational offer for all students that meets his/her needs (e.g., vocational training courses, courses at primary school level or language courses).

Finally, also the way in which the homework support was done and how the students were supported during the course were seen as a success factor by the respondents, as taking distance education might be a very challenging experience. For more information see 'Support for students during their course'.

### Challenges

Next to the success factors, the respondents highlighted four challenges related to the working of Eabt. Despite these challenges, Eabt was perceived as a powerful organization that can inspire other countries and organizations to facilitate distance education for their nationals detained abroad.

The fact that Eabt works with volunteers was experienced by most respondents as a strength. However, several respondents pointed to the fact that this could also be a threat to Eabt's continuity. In particular, because of the average age of Eabt's board members and volunteers (i.e., most of them are aged 65 and over). According to the respondents, follow-up is necessary, such as looking for younger volunteers or letting Eabt 'merge' into a governmental organization (e.g., Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service or Humanitas).

A second bottleneck experienced regarding the continuity of Eabt is its dependence on subsidies, as one respondent pointed out:

Well, that is very simple, dependence on subsidies. [...] If there are other people at the helm in the Netherlands and cuts have to be made, then I do not know either. Then I think yes, you are dependent on that (R12, The Netherlands).

A third challenge that was expressed by several respondents is the dependency on the post for getting in contact with the students. The respondents mainly experienced difficulties with the import of course packages in certain prisons/countries and the long waiting times associated with correspondence by post. Postal communication was perceived by all respondents as a very time-consuming process that can have negative effects on the motivation of the students. In addition, several respondents experienced that sometimes parcels get lost or end up at the wrong addresses.

Lastly, the imbalance between the emerging digitalization in society and the lack of opportunities for digitalization within prisons was underlined. However, despite this imbalance, several respondents saw digital opportunities for the operation of Eabt. The respondents dreamed that students' homework could be scanned and sent by email, which would reduce the waiting times for sending by post. Furthermore, the respondents wished that contact moments could be organized via Skype between the students and teachers, so the students would be able to ask questions directly. This would also benefit the study motivation of the students and would provide an opportunity for the students to receive direct content-related feedback and support. In addition, the respondents indicated that

complete courses could be offered digitally. However, many respondents were aware that this is not an easy task for Eabt as they depend on the digital evolutions in the local prisons.

### 3.2. Quantitative Findings

#### 3.2.1. Motives of Students to Follow a Course from Eabt

In the pre-survey, the students were asked to indicate which motives for following a course applied to their own situation (see Table 1). They were mainly motivated to acquire knowledge and skills. The majority wanted to spend time in prison by doing something sensible or useful (96.6%; N = 56), or to learn about an interesting or important subject (86.4%; N = 51). The third most important motive belongs to the category 'to prepare for life upon release': To find work more easily after release (83.1%; N = 49), followed by being able to follow other courses more easily after release from prison (76.3%; N = 45). A third category is 'reasons specific to the prison context'. The most decisive motive in this category is making time in prison easier by taking a course (76.8%; N = 43). The fourth category concerns 'distance learning from home' and contains only one motive, namely because the course comes from the Netherlands. This was a motive for 65.5% (N = 38). Finally, in terms of the latter category 'social motives', just over half of the respondents studied to be able to help their families better (54.2%; N = 32). The other social motives were less common.

**Table 1.** Motives of students for following a course via Education behind Foreign Bars (Eabt).

Motives	(Very) Important (%)	N
<i>To acquire knowledge and skills</i>		
To spend time doing something sensible and useful	96.6	56
To learn about an interesting or relevant subject	86.4	51
To satisfy my desires to learn	71.2	42
<i>To prepare for life upon release</i>		
To make it easier to get a job after release from prison	83.1	49
So that the course can be a bridge to more courses after release	76.3	45
To be better able to cope with life after release	70.7	41
To improve my self-esteem	66.7	38
To make it easier to avoid committing crimes after release	56.9	33
It increases my chance of release	56.7	34
<i>Reasons unique to the prison context</i>		
To make serving time easier	76.8	43
To feel like a regular person instead of a prisoner during studying	58.6	34
To make it easier to get a job in prison	36.2	21
Because it is better than working in prison	10.5	6
<i>Distance course of the home country</i>		
Because the course comes from the Netherlands	65.5	38
<i>Social motives</i>		
To help my family better	54.2	32
In this way, I would like to reconcile with my family, friends. . .	31	18
To increase my chances on employment in prison in order to send money to my family members	31	18
Because also friend/fellow prisoners are learning	21.7	13
Because I was encouraged by others	17.2	10
To be part of a group within prison	10.5	6

#### 3.2.2. Results and Effects for Students Participating in a Course from Eabt

##### Satisfaction of Students with the Support Received

Throughout the course, students could receive support from the Netherlands (by Eabt and teachers) and from the prison in which they were staying (by prison officers and

fellow prisoners). In the post-survey, students' satisfaction with these types of support was questioned.

Table 2 shows that in general, students were more satisfied with the support they received from the Netherlands compared to the support they received from the local prison. In terms of the support from Eabt, the students were satisfied with the way homework was sent to their teacher in the Netherlands (87.1%; N = 27), but also with the way homework was sent to prison (77.4%; N = 24). Almost 76% of the students (N = 22) indicated that they had received the course material in full. In terms of the support from the teacher in the Netherlands, 77.4% (N = 24) were satisfied with the feedback they received from their teacher and 66.7% (N = 20) thought that their teacher had knowledge of the subject of the course. However, only less than half of the students (N = 15) indicated that they could make contact with their teacher when they needed help.

**Table 2.** Satisfaction of students with the support received.

Satisfaction with the Support	(Totally) Agree (%)	N
<i>Satisfaction with the support from Eabt</i>		
I am satisfied with the way the homework was sent to my teacher in the Netherlands	87.1	27
I am satisfied with the way the homework was sent to prison	77.4	24
I have received all my course material in full (e.g., CD-ROMs, books)	75.9	22
<i>Satisfaction with the support from the teacher in the Netherlands</i>		
I am satisfied with the feedback (the answers) of my teacher from the Netherlands	77.4	24
My teacher in the Netherlands has knowledge of the subject of my course	66.7	20
I was able to get in touch with my teacher in the Netherlands when I needed help	48.4	15
<i>Satisfaction with the support from the local prison</i>		
My fellow prisoners approved of me taking classes	58.6	17
Prison officers encouraged me to finish the course	30	9
I could ask questions about the course to my fellow prisoners	20	6
I could ask questions about the course to the prison officers	9.7	3

Also, the students' satisfaction with the support they received in the prison where they were staying was surveyed. Almost 60% (N = 17) felt that their fellow prisoners approved that they followed this course. Thirty percent (N = 9) indicated that prison officers encouraged them to complete the course. The students were less able to ask questions about the course in the local prison. Twenty percent (N = 6) indicated that they could ask questions to fellow prisoners and 9.7% (N = 3) to prison officers.

#### Assertiveness, Digital Skills and Language Skills

The pre- (T0) and post-survey (T1) measured the students' assertiveness, digital, and language skills (N = 30). Table 3 presents the percentage of the students that experienced an increase as well as a decrease in these skills. Fifty percent experienced an increase in their language skills, 46.7% in assertiveness, and 37.9% in digital skills. The mean of change varies from 1.69 (digital skills) to 0.44 (language skills). A somewhat smaller number of students experienced a decrease of these skills.

**Table 3.** Change in assertiveness, digital skills, and language skills (N = 30).

Skills	Increase				Decrease			
	Mean T0	Mean T1	Mean of Change	% of Population	Mean T0	Mean T1	Mean of Change	% of Population
Assertiveness	7.33	7.97	0.64	46.7	8.30	7.43	−0.87	40
Digital skills	7.00	8.69	1.69	37.9	8.29	6.96	−1.33	31
Language skills	7.75	8.19	0.44	50	8.61	8.13	−0.48	39.3

### Students' Perspective on Reintegration

Table 4 demonstrates that 66.7% of the students (N = 20) expected to have a better life after release from prison as a result of the course. The chances of easier avoiding committing crimes (39.3%; N = 11) and increasing the chances of release (20%; N = 6) were estimated to be less high. 60% (N = 18) expected to find work more easily and also to find a better or nicer job after release from prison due to the course. The students also felt that the course has contributed to the development of their social skills. Sixty percent (N = 18) indicated that the course allows them to control themselves better, 53.4% (N = 16) that they can better manage their daily living activities, and 50% (N = 15) that the course will improve their relationship with family and friends. In addition, 33.4% (N = 10) stated that the course has taught them to behave better in a group. Finally, more than half of the students (55.1%; N = 16) wanted to return to the Netherlands because of the course, while only a small minority (10%; N = 3) expected that the course gives them more chances to stay in the detaining country.

**Table 4.** Perspective of the students on reintegration.

Reintegration	(Totally) Agree (%)	N
<i>General perspective on reintegration</i>		
Due to this course, I will have a better life after release from prison	66.7	20
Due to this course, it will be easier to avoid committing crimes	39.3	11
Following the course has increased my chance for release	20	6
<i>Job opportunities after release from prison</i>		
Due to this course, it will be easier to find a job after release from prison	60	18
Due to this course, I will be able to find a better and more pleasant job after release from prison	60	18
<i>Development of social skills</i>		
Due to this course, I can control myself more	60	18
Due to this course, I can better arrange my daily living activities (household, bills, raising children, etc.)	53.4	16
Due to this course, my relationship with family and friends will be improved	50	15
The course has taught me how to behave well in a group	33.4	1
<i>Country after release from prison</i>		
Due to this course, I felt like returning to the Netherlands	55.1	16
Due to this course, I have more chances to stay in the country where I am now	10	3

## 4. Discussion

Since distance education opportunities for foreign national prisoners provided by their home country are scarce [17], this mixed-methods case study aimed to gain insight into the unique operation of Eabt by investigating professionals, volunteers and students involved.

#### 4.1. Professionals and Volunteers' Perspectives on the Progress of the Course and the Future of Eabt

The qualitative part of this study demonstrates that a course from Eabt progress via three steps: (1) Informing students, (2) signing up for the course, and (3) starting the course, doing homework, and being assessed. The students are mainly informed by means of written information. Previous research has shown that foreign national prisoners are confronted with language issues [28], which makes informing them about the available activities difficult [25]. Therefore, it is important to make information available in a language they understand [18]. For this reason, Eabt could focus more on the written announcement of the educational offer in languages as English or French for those students who do not master Dutch. The importance of oral information from visiting volunteers, employees of the local prisons, or the Dutch embassies and consulates is also underlined in this study. By actively involving all these actors in informing students, offering distance education to their citizens detained abroad becomes a shared responsibility [28].

After being informed, students may decide to enroll for a course from Eabt. After successfully completing a self-assessment test, students will be sent the course. The importance of assessing prisoners' needs and existing skills before the start of the course is underlined by other academics, as otherwise the risk exists that prisoners are considered as a homogenous group that does not differ regarding age, educational background, proficiency of basic skills, personal interest, etc. [32]. The importance of an assessment at the start also came to the fore during the FORINER project, since without an assessment of the student's level, courses can be too difficult/too easy in practice. During the FORINER project, 15 pilot projects throughout Europe were set up with the aim of offering distance education to foreign national prisoners provided by their home country [28]. The Confederation of European Probation [24] and the Council of Europe [15] also state that it is essential that students follow courses that are adapted to their level.

Next, student start the course, do homework, and are evaluated. The students follow the course at their own pace and make several homework assignments, which they send to the Netherlands to be corrected. Much of the communication between Eabt and the students takes place by post (e.g., in terms of sending the course, sending in homework assignments, or giving feedback). Although technology developments outside prison walls have changed the way in which distance learning materials are prepared, shared, and utilized, prisons have not followed these evolutions. As a result, a gap exists between the learning experience of the students in and outside prison [33]. For instance, many educational providers from outside prison walls increasingly use ICT to communicate with their students and to submit tasks [34], but this is often impossible in the context of distance education for prisoners. Although some improvements have been made during the past years, nowadays most prisoners still have no direct access to the internet [33].

This study does not only provide insight into how professionals and volunteers look at the progress of the courses of Eabt, but also into the types of support that are provided to the students. An important comment of the respondents is that distance education is not evident for every prisoner as it requires a lot of self-discipline. Previous research on (online) distance learning outside prison has emphasized that students need to have a high level of autonomy as they should be able to plan their study, set up goals, and self-evaluate [35]. Therefore, proving support to the learners is essential [36]. Throughout the interviews, it emerges that learner support is offered from the Netherlands and in the detaining country. The support from the Netherlands is structural, which means that all students receive it. The teachers motivate students through their feedback and tips on homework assignments and Eabt by sending postcards at key moments (e.g., course package sent or certificate obtained) and with special events (e.g., public holidays or birthdays). Content-related support is also provided as Eabt sends extra teaching materials (e.g., dictionaries or handbooks) and looks for the right educational provider if a student asks for a course that is not in their standard educational offer. Support in the detaining country is more likely to depend on the local situation. Examples of motivational support include visiting volunteers, fellow

prisoners, or teachers encouraging students, while content-related support is more about going over homework assignments or follow-up of the course. As in the FORINER project, we consider all types of support to be valuable and essential, both at the start of a course and during the study process [28]. The extent to which students could rely on support can possibly linked to the division Pike and Adams [37] make between ‘learning prisons’ and ‘working prison’. On the one hand, a ‘learning prison’ implies an environment in which prisoners believe they can learn independently and personally grow. Where distance learning is, for instance, integrated into the educational program so students can access the learning materials, computers, printers, etc. This links with the idea of Szifris et al. [6] that the environment of an educational department can serve as a safe place within the prison environment. A ‘working prison’ on the other hand entails an environment in which students do not get the space, time, and technology they need to learn independently [37].

In terms of how professionals and volunteers perceive the future of Eabt, this study demonstrates that the respondents have a great deal of appreciation for Eabt. During the interviews, several success factors emerged which they believe Eabt should continue to focus on in the future. The fact that Eabt works with volunteers is considered to be a success as these volunteers are enormously driven and very passionate. However, this was also regarded as a threat to Eabt’s continuity because of the average age of Eabt’s board members and volunteers. The broad network with partners in the Netherlands and worldwide is also considered as a success factor. This is necessary to make Eabt’s work possible. In addition, the wide range of free courses and homework support have also been identified as success factors. Finally, this study highlights the challenge of digitalization for Eabt. In most countries, prisoners do not have access to a computer with an internet connection. The discussion on whether secure and limited internet access should be possible in prisons has been going on for a long time [38]. Eabt would benefit by operating (partly) via the internet, but to achieve this, Eabt is dependent on situations in the local prisons. Using ICT with regard to distance education is a huge challenge for foreign national prisoners but is important as it could strengthen the communication between the students/professionals in the local prison and the educational provider from the home country [14].

#### *4.2. Students’ Motivation, Results and Effects of Participating in a Distance Course*

Our study highlights that students are mainly motivated to take a distance course from Eabt because they want to acquire knowledge and skills. Previous studies on other types of prison education have identified gaining skills and qualifications as an important outcome [6,7]. The wish to acquire knowledge and skills reflects an intrinsic motivation, which occurs when individuals participate in education because they enjoy the learning activity itself [39]. Additionally, motivations for preparing for life after detention seem to be important. Manger et al. consider this an extrinsic motivation as the outcome lies outside the course itself [39]. What is specific for our study population, is the fact that they are also motivated to follow a course as this is provided by their home country. The importance of these different categories of motivations is in line with previous research which has been conducted in the framework of the European FORINER project. Corresponding with research carried out among the general prison population in Belgium [40] and Norway [30], we can assume that the students involved in our study are aware of the future and the hope of a better life after detention, which motivates them to follow distance education.

Concerning their perspective on reintegration, the students seem to have confidence in the future. They expect to have a better life after release from prison as a result of participating in the course. In addition, they seem to have gained more confidence in the possibility of finding a good, nice, or better job after their release. This finding is contrary to previous research among foreign national prisoners that found that they are often pessimistic about their job prospects after prison [24]. The difference between the study of Westhrem and Manger [24] and our study is that in our study the students follow courses from their home country, mainly preparatory vocational training courses. This might be a reason why the students are more positive about the applicability of what they

have learned after release. By offering distance courses, Eabt considers the recommendation of the Council of Europe on foreign national prisoners. This recommendation states that it is important to work towards qualifications that are recognized and can be continued in the country where people are going to reside after release from prison [15]. For many of their courses, Eabt works together with other distance education providers, through which students can obtain recognized certificates. In case the course is not finalized during time of incarceration, students can continue their study after release from prison.

Besides, our study reveals that the students are most satisfied with the way homework is sent from the prison to their teacher in the Netherlands and vice versa, and with the feedback they receive from their teacher. This finding aligns well with research from the FORINER project [28]. The Confederation of European Probation points to the importance of providing support and encouragement to foreign national prisoners that are following distance education from their homeland. This is important given the stressful situation in which they find themselves and the difficult prison conditions in which they must follow distance education [41]. Since it is impossible for the students to rely on the support of teachers in the Netherlands at any time of the day, local prisons could also involve peer mentors to support the students while following distance education. Previous research already demonstrated that peer education is effective in enhancing health, hygiene awareness, and first aid knowledge among the prison population [42,43]. It could be valuable to see if peers can also play a role in supporting distance education, potentially in motivating fellow prisoners to complete assignments and asking how the course is going.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that following a course from Eabt might affect how the students experience their assertiveness, digital skills, and language skills. This is in line with previous research that focused on adult and continuing education for vulnerable adults [44].

#### *4.3. Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research*

While this exploratory case study provides a unique insight into the operation of Eabt, which is the only foundation in the world that provides distance education to nationals detained abroad, this study is subject to four limitations. A first limitation concerns the limited number of students in the pre- ( $n = 60$ ) and post-surveys ( $n = 31$ ). Therefore, the findings of the research must be interpreted carefully. Only students that applied for a course from Eabt between July and December 2018 were invited to participate. A possibility to enlarge the number of respondents would be to extend the time of the quantitative data collection. This would also enable to perform more advanced analyses, such as multivariate analyses.

Despite foreign nationals' equal rights to prison education, they have less educational opportunities than national prisoners [16–18]. Additional measures should be taken by prison authorities to give foreign national prisoners the same access as national prisoners [6], such as distance education from their home country. This case study and research from the FORINER project [28] show that distance learning from the home country is perceived positively. The FORINER project even led to the development of a European model to provide distance education for foreign national prisoners [45]. However, up until today, little efforts are taken by prison authorities to provide distance education to foreign national prisoners. Further research is needed to find out why no action is taken and what is needed to make distance education for foreign national prisoners a common practice in Europe. Furthermore, in case more foreign national prisoners across Europe or the world could have access to distance education, a larger-scaled research project can be set up.

Second, in this study the perspectives of the students are only included by means of the pre- and post-survey. Qualitative follow-up research could provide more in-depth insight into, for instance, the students' satisfactions with the course, the support they receive while following a course, the influence of the local prison environment on their study, and to which extent they feel that the educational offer of Eabt can contribute to their future professional plans. It could also be investigated to what extent the outcomes



that are included in the general theory on prison education [6] are experienced by distance education students. These outcomes include education as a hook for change, gaining skills and qualifications, and the extent to which the educational prison environment serves as a safe place. Although several efforts were undertaken, only two students could be interviewed. Due to this low number, it was decided to not include their insights into this manuscript.

Third, although face-to-face interviewing is the most accepted norm [46], in this study, many professionals and volunteers were interviewed by means of telephone or skype due to practical accessibility. Telephone interviews are often associated with a loss of non-verbal and contextual data. However, they also can offer the participants the opportunity to share more sensitive information and to feel more at ease [47].

Fourth, the study did not focus on the relationship between following a distance course of Eabt and recidivism rates and employment outcomes. As several reviews have demonstrated the potential of prison education in reducing the likelihood of recidivism and increasing the chances of obtaining employment after release from prison [6,8], it might be valuable to study if these outcomes also relate to distance education.

## 5. Conclusions

Although foreign national prisoners have equal rights on prison education, in practice, their educational needs are rarely met due to organizational and structural barriers. The Dutch foundation 'Educatie achter buitenlandse tralies' (Education behind Foreign Bars – or Eabt) offers a solution to this problem by providing distance education to their nationals detained abroad. This exploratory mixed-methods case study provides insights into the working of this unique organization. It also presents several contributions to the literature on prison education as currently distance education for foreign national prisoners is an under-researched type of prison education. This study reveals that foreign national prisoners are mainly motivated to take a distance course from their home country to acquire knowledge and skills, and to prepare for life after detention. What is specific for our study population, is the fact that they are also motivated to follow a course as this is provided by their home country. A second contribution to the literature is that supporting the distance learners seems to be essential as this type of prison education is not feasible for every prisoner. Support can be offered by their home country, but also by the local prison. This underlines the importance of the local prison education environment in supporting and motivating prisoners to follow a distance education course from their home country.

The study also has important practical implications for countries or organizations that would like to set up distance education for their nationals detained abroad. Among other things, it is important to set up an extensive network of partners all over the world, to further develop the digital learning opportunities in prison, and to provide both motivational and content-related support to the students.

Finally, the study suggests several avenues for future research. As up until now little efforts are taken by prison authorities to provide distance education to foreign national prisoners, further research is needed to find out why no action is taken and what is needed to make distance education for foreign national prisoners a common practice in Europe. Secondly, the quantitative data collection can also be extended to enlarge the number of respondents and to be able to execute more advanced quantitative analyses. Thirdly, qualitative research with students could be conducted to gain insight into their satisfaction with the course, the support they received, the influence the local prison context has on their study, and to what extent the course contributes to their future professional plans. Moreover, the relationship between following a distance course of Eabt and recidivism rates and employment outcomes could be a valuable path for future research.

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