

Work Engagement, Education, and Vocational Training of Inmates in the Sremska Mitrovica Penitentiary Facility*

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In this paper, the author analyses the importance of work engagement, education, and vocational training for the purpose of resocialising persons who serve prison sentence. The purpose of this paper is to observe the mentioned segments of treatment (their role in the process of resocialisation) from the point of view of correctional officers who work with the convicted persons, and at the same time to identify problems encountered in practice, as well as in the process of conducting treatment in terms of work engagement, education, and vocational training, and also following the expiry of prison term. Research, a qualitative study carried out with the application of the focus group method, was conducted during the year 2022 in the Sremska Mitrovica Penitentiary Facility. The main findings show that work, education, and training achieve their purpose in practice but also that there are still multiple stumbling blocks that stand in the way of successful integration into society once prison sentence has been served. Some recommendations relative to improvements in practice have been provided, these recommendations relying on the results of the performed survey, findings of some earlier research and legal standards that are of relevance for executing prison sentence and the position of convicted persons.

KEYWORDS: prison sentence / work engagement / education / vocational training

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Introduction

Work engagement of convicted persons serving prison sentence can be considered one of the most significant segments of treatment. In the context of executing prison sentence (*but also the purpose of punishment in general*) convicted persons' work can have multiple beneficial effects. As its two main features, we can identify a facilitated control of social order in daily prison life and contribution to (re)socialisation of inmates through various learning patterns which allow them to adjust their behaviour and adopt such values which are in accordance with socially acceptable norms (Alós et al., 2015).

Relative literature notes that creating and maintaining work habits is important and useful and, as pointed out by Bushway (2003), many inmates prior to the commencement of serving prison sentence were unemployed. Certain authors connect the absence of prior work experience (employment) to lower educational levels and slight professional expertise, which can be the main trigger for choosing to go on the path of criminal activity (Hunter & Boyce, 2009). The classical dynamic theories (rational choice theory, social control theory, etc.) imply that there is a structural relationship between committing crimes, employment, and welfare benefits (Mesters et al., 2016). On the other hand, the starting point of the integrative systemic theory of social behaviour is that employment stands for a protective factor which in addition to some other factors diminishes the risk of antisocial and criminal behaviour (Robinson, 2009). Therefore, work is significant as a protection factor, as a segment of correctional treatment, but also as a factor of desistance by those persons who after serving prison sentence gain employment and thus provide for themselves a reliable source of income.

In today's systems of execution, inmates' labour is complemented by education programmes, vocational training, and training for shortage occupations which are in high demand on the labour market (Vujičić, 2023), with the main objective of such programmes being, in addition to acquiring knowledge, to develop work skills and habits of persons serving prison sentence, along with them acquiring specialised qualifications (Ilijić et al., 2016). Besides the typical forms of education and training which are mainly aimed at crafts and trades (Knežić, 2017), there are also ground-breaking efforts which rely on "digital learning", which as such allows the convicted persons to acquire knowledge in the fields of information technologies, trading and business, as well as science and art (Farley & Pike, 2016). Even though enough time has not elapsed in order to perform evaluation of new forms of education and training in prisons, whereby positive effects could be measured through the success in finding employment once prison sentence has been served, we are of the opinion that such programmes should be supported.

As well, this topic has been investigated through some research in Serbia. A study that deals with the assessment of prison life has shown that work engaged convicted persons deem all aspects of prison life to be better than those inmates who did not perform any work in the facility (Ćopić et al., 2024). When the application of the institute of parole in practice was analysed, results have shown that the court take the fact of being works engaged as a decisive factor when evaluating the fulfilment of conditions for the application of the institute of parole (Stevanović & Vujičić, 2017; Vujičić et al., 2017). Contrary to work engagement, significance (impact) analysis relative to vocational training for shortage occupations on the labour market has shown that there is no substantial difference in recidivism rates between persons who during the prison sentence complete vocational training and those who do not (Stevanović et al., 2018; Vujičić, 2023). Regardless of the outcomes, work and vocational training are necessary in the system of executing, whereas problems could perhaps be seen through the (non-)functioning of admission and support to former inmates. The need for work and vocational training in prison is important not only from the aspect of resocialization of convicted persons and the functioning of the prison system, but also for economic reasons. Namely, the products of convict labor (for example food production) can reduce the financial costs of life of the convict population in prison (it contributes to the reduction of the state's budget funds that are directed to prisons).

The importance of work engagement and vocational training is also emphasised in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules) which in Rules 96–103 address this issue. Thus, for example, Rule 98 envisages that the work provided should be such that it will maintain or increase the prisoners' ability to earn an honest living after release and also that vocational training in useful trades will be provided so as for prisoners to be able to profit, and finally that within the limits compatible with proper vocational selection and with the requirements of institutional administration and discipline, prisoners will be able to choose the type of work they wish to perform. In the Law on Execution of Criminal Sanctions (LECS), as the *lex generalis* in this field, what underlies Article 98 of the LECS is that work of the convicted person is an integral part of the sentence programme and that the purpose of work is for the convicted person to acquire, maintain and increase his/her capacities for work, work habits and professional knowledge, with a view to providing conditions for successful reintegration. In addition to being able to work at the penitentiary institution itself, the enforcement judge may, at a proposal of the penitentiary institution warden, approve that the convicted person who has been categorised to a semi-open or open ward of the penitentiary institution work in a workplace outside of the penitentiary institution, provided that there are conditions for that, and the criminal offence of which the person has been convicted is not related to such job.

Although it is indisputable that success in the field of work engagement once prison sentence has been served is reflected on how treatment progresses in terms of subsequent categorisation to wards and/or treatment groups which offer a higher degree of benefits, then on parole or early release, there are potential problems with post-penal admission of former convicts.

With the above remarks as our starting points in mind, the purpose of this survey is to provide more in-depth information on how the employees of the Treatment Service at the Sremska Mitrovica Penitentiary Facility (the SMPF), as the institution with the highest number of inmates serving prison sentence in Serbia, see the role of work engagement, education, and vocational training in the process of resocialisation of the convicted persons. An additional purpose of this paper is to identify problems which are encountered in practice, while treatment itself is being carried out, in the segment thereof which is relative to work engagement and vocational training, as well as once prison sentence is served.

Method

Selection and Method of Data Collection

The qualitative study was conducted at the SMPF with the use of the focus group method, which entails the collecting of qualitative data and so by a certain number of respondents focusing on one topic and discussions on it (O'hEocha et al., 2012). The purpose of the group discussion is gaining an overview and scope of various opinions and views (Popadić et al., 2018), which in this particular case is the importance of work engagement, education and vocational training on the process of resocialisation of the convicted persons. A semi-structured protocol included questions from the following areas: work engagement, education and professional (vocational) training of the convicted persons, and problems encountered in practice.

Survey Sample

One focus group was created. It consisted of seven respondents, employees of the SMPF: Head of the Treatment Service and six correctional officers (educators) who work in the admission, closed, semi-open, and open wards of the penitentiary institution. The main criterion for respondent selection purposes was that they had performed the work of treatment officer for a period not shorter than ten years. The majority of the respondents already worked in all prison wards and are to date still working at the Treatment Service. As regards the educational profile of the focus group respondents, four of them are special pedagogues, two psychologists, and one is a social worker. When the focus group was first created, the respondents

were informed that anonymity was guaranteed and that they were able to suspend their participation at any time, should they be so inclined. All participants signed the informed consent form, thereby accepting to participate in the survey. Audio recordings of the discussions were made, from which a transcript was subsequently made, whereas the audio recordings were destroyed. The focus group was led by the author of this paper (focus group leader), whose role was unbiased, solely as discussion moderator, which entailed asking additional questions so as for answers to be explained in more detail, all the while not expressing his opinion.

Data Analysis

Once the focus group work was completed, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and prepared for further analysis. All personal data were removed as well as any data which might indicate who the participants of the focus group were, i.e., the transcripts were anonymised. For applied analytical approach purposes, the qualitative content analysis was also used (Mayring, 2014). We first identified transcript segments which matched the asked survey questions, as defined per the focus group protocol, and then we analysed their content and found supercategories which summarised the given content. Analysis units were words, phrases, sentence parts, entire sentences, and entire paragraphs.

Results and Discussion

Our survey has shown that the educators see work engagement as a very important segment of treatment, and as they note, the reason for this is “because inmates will return to society in which they are supposed to work, and it is hence important for them to acquire work skills and work habits”. In the educators’ view, treatment activities, but also directing towards performing work within the institution itself, has to be especially intensified if the convicted persons in question are those from closed and semi-open wards of the penitentiary institution.

Developing and maintaining work habits is crucial for the convicted persons to be better prepared for life outside the prison environment. Although this is indisputable that the focus group participants, they insist that work treatment is a group effort, i.e., that there is no possibility for every convicted person to be talked to individually regarding the significance of work in terms of the entire resocialisation process, and that “this is perhaps done by the instructors, sporadically or occasionally, but it is not a systemic effort”. They also note that “there is not enough room for such a form of interaction with the inmates”, which could perhaps also be interpreted as the Treatment Service being understaffed. Nevertheless, there has been some progress since some time ago the average

number entailed working with 120 convicted persons per educator, which number has now been decreased to 80. Although there is still a need for a higher number of staff in the Treatment Service, in order for treatment work with the inmates to be better quality, the focus group note that a potential increase in the number of staff would also have to go hand in hand with the provision of better working conditions, e.g., in the form of a larger number of offices which they (the employees) could occupy. Another problem has been identified in the segment of the educators' additional duties, which entail administrative and clerical work. In this connection, they note that if they fail to carry out all administrative activities, they could be held liable for a breach of work discipline, which is not the case if they fail to commit sufficiently to working with convicted persons. Consequently, this means that this is sometimes to the detriment of their main role – working on resocialisation of the inmates – that they have to perform other duties.

As a special problem we have identified that the persons serving prison sentence do not see any real benefit of work engagement but instead see it solely as a means of advancing in their treatment, in terms of receiving some perks. Although we can agree that it is indisputable that work is perceived in such a manner, we should also agree with the view that this is not enough. Accordingly, one of the focus group participants notes, with other participants agreeing with him, that “I personally need to talk to him about what benefits of him working here and maintaining work habits or developing work habits are [...] and what it means for him in the near future, once he is released and when on his third day out he won't know what to do with himself”. Such a view is in accordance with the position that programmes which focus on work are very important in the process of abandoning further committing of crimes. Even though prison work is typically simple, it is useful because it allows persons who never worked or could never keep a job, or persons with no formal education, knowledge and skills, to be involved in work and production process, i.e., to be productive. Discipline and self-respect become stronger in this manner, and it also strengthens the connection between working and work and earning a living (Alós et al., 2015).

A part of the convicted persons serving prison sentence in the SMPF are sent to work outside of the institution. In this case, they are the inmates who are housed in the open or semi-open wards of the penitentiary facility, and they also get paid for their work, by being paid a certain percentage of the agreed fee that the company pays to the prison. The focus group participants point out that the inmates are more motivated if they are given the opportunity to work outside of the prison environment. It is worth noting that there are some companies which are “satisfied with the quality of an inmate's work and are willing to give him a job, and they even suggest it” but problems occur in the segment which is relative to the distance between the place of residence of a (former) inmate and registered office of the company for which the inmate worked when he was serving prison sentence. As a result of this barrier, due to objective reasons, at times it is not

possible to make this idea happen, which would be a good indication of how former inmates are adequately accepted by the community. Although being given the possibility to conclude labour agreement is a good example, if we wish to be objective, this is still rather rare in practice. The correctional officers agree that the biggest problems are seen specifically in the field of post-penal support, since former inmates find it hard to get a job. In this relation, one of the focus group participants also notes that the former inmates “even if they try to become occupationally engaged, once information that they served prison sentence is obtained, they simply get fired”.

Vocational training is a segment of treatment which the focus group participants do not see as being isolated from education and work engagement, but as their complement – an addition which is not available to all convicted persons. Even though education and vocational training are not synonymous, there is a common thread which connects them in a broader sense, and it is that they should serve the purpose of the inmates acquiring knowledge and skills, and should contribute to their better position on the labour market, once they have served prison sentence.

Although primary education is compulsory, attending primary school is provided only to those persons who are in the closed ward of the penitentiary facility, which to an extent discriminates against those inmates who are categorised to the open and semi-open wards and thus cannot attend primary school. In practical terms, this means that it is only secondary education that is provided to all convicted persons, regardless of the assessed risk value, ward categorisation, and treatment group. Such practices in a way stand for a deviation from the Mandela Rules, specifically Rule 104, according to which the education of illiterate prisoners is compulsory, but also a deviation from the provision of Article 122 paragraph 1 of the LECS, which envisages that the convicted persons are entitled to primary and secondary education, which is to be organised in the penitentiary facility, in accordance with the regulations governing education. There is equality between all convicted persons in terms of education outside of the penitentiary facility. Hence, those convicted persons who have the status of a university student may sit exams, which in practice means *a special duly justified reason* based on which, pursuant to the provision of Article 129 paragraph 3 of the LECS, the warden may additionally grant to the convicted person an extraordinary pass or leave from the penitentiary institution for up to seven days.

What is worth mentioning, and what is also noted by the focus group participants, is that the situations are very common in which the same person receives work treatment and is also part of a specialised treatment programme. Vocational training for shortage occupations is carried out through various VET (*Vocational Education and Training Programs*) projects, some examples of such programmes – occupations being: baking, growing plants in a controlled environment, crop growing, screen printing, etc. A major part of these

programmes, according to what the educators say, “did not take momentum”. What is also pointed out is a very small number of convicted persons who take part in such forms of training. An additional problem is seen in the fact that some new vocational training programmes that have been introduced by the Ministry of Justice - Administration for the Enforcement of Penal Sanctions do not last long, up to six months, which is the “result of the need to adapt the programmes to large and small penitentiary institutions.” If we keep in mind the many differences between various types of penitentiary facilities, which are primarily reflected in the type of convicted persons serving prison sentence, type of crime and offence for which they have been sentenced to prison (Ćopić et al., 2024), it would also be necessary to make in practice a clear distinction in terms of the duration of specialised programmes.

As regards the importance of vocational advancement for successful resocialisation of convicted persons, the Treatment Service staff believe that such programmes yield better results in the closed ward of the penitentiary institution. In addition to this, they also note that such programmes are not enough if following his release, the former inmate does not find (suitable) employment. Research that has addressed the issue of the importance of vocational training shows that it has no positive effect either on finding a job (Bushway & Apel, 2012) or decreasing recidivism rates (Stevanović et al., 2018; Vujičić, 2023). Irrespective of such findings, specialised programmes, and vocational training should nonetheless be supported since they additionally motivate the convicted persons to accept treatment. They are a dynamic factor in the risk assessment questionnaires, which may reflect on further progress in treatment, in terms of reducing the overall score, with the inmates being downgraded to medium or lower risk, and which at the same time is of significance for the application of certain institutes of criminal law.

Based on the conducted survey, it is not possible to draw some general conclusions and give recommendations that could be applied uniformly by all penitentiary institutions in the country (especially if we take into account the peculiarities of all different types of penitentiary institutions and residential correctional facilities). On the other hand, these findings could provide a framework for further, more detailed research which would deal with the role of occupational engagement and vocational training in the very process of resocialisation. As regards the SMPF, it has been noted that there is not enough space to allow work with the convicted persons individually, since work treatment is a group effort. In practice, this would mean taking on a higher number of correction (treatment) officers, which would consequently result in a reduced number of convicts with whom every educator works, but also a higher possibility of better-quality individual work with the convicts. Furthermore, the correction officers should be relieved of administrative and clerical duties, but also be provided with better working conditions. In the very segment of work engagement

of persons serving prison sentence, the practice of concluding contracts between the penitentiary facility and companies should continue, which would contribute to a higher number of persons performing work outside of the penitentiary institution, and accordingly would potentially result in a possibility of them finding a job upon the expiry of prison sentence. With regard to education, it is necessary to ensure that primary school education is made available to all convicted persons, no matter what ward or treatment group they belong to, while the abovementioned good examples should be proceeded with. As for training for shortage occupations on the labour market, resources should be provided in order for the highest possible number of convicted persons, especially those with a low education level, to attend such trainings so as for them to earn appropriate certificates, which would make it possible for them to find jobs more easily once they have served prison sentence. Lastly, in order for work engagement and vocational training to be successful in the field of resocialisation, successful reintegration, and abandoning further committing of crimes, it is necessary to ensure appropriate post-penal support of the former inmates.

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