

## Norwegian Prison Officers' Perspectives on Professionalism and Professional Development Opportunities in their Occupation

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**Abstract:** *Despite increasing attention towards education as a quality measure for correctional services, little research attention has been paid to the qualification and training of prison officers. This article investigates how Norwegian prison officers understand their own professionalism and opportunities for professional development in their occupation. The analysis reveals that prison officers regard professionalism in line with a core value of loyalty, and guiding principles of humanity and equality for incarcerated persons. Further, the analysis shows that prison officers express pride and job satisfaction in their profession, and satisfaction with their education. Still, several of the officers highlight the need for continuing education in order to secure job mobility and further advancement within the correctional services. Knowing that the Norwegian education for prison officers is far more extensive than in other countries, significance of quality in prison officer education should be given more research attention.*

**Keywords:** *professionalism, professional development, professional discretion, prison officer, education*

One of the main tasks of criminal correctional services is to prevent new crimes from being committed after the sentence has been served (Storvik, 2006; Feierman, Levick & Mody, 2009; Hawkins, Lattimore, Dawe & Visser, 2009; Mathur & Clark, 2014). In the literature, an increasing attention towards education as a quality measure for correctional services has been put forward (Steurer & Smith, 2003; Davis et al., 2014; Manger, Eikeland & Asbjørnsen, 2019). In this line of research, focus has been on opportunities, motivation and needs of incarcerated persons (Brosens, de Donder, Dury, & Verte, 2015; Roth, Westrheim, Jones & Manger, 2017; Eikeland, Manger, & Asbjørnsen, 2009). Still, those who are closest to the incarcerated persons in their everyday lives, the prison officers, will have great impact and influence on the incarcerated persons' understanding of, and motivation for, education and training in prison (Westrheim & Eide, 2019). Increasing our understanding and knowledge about the qualification and education of prison officers are thus of crucial importance for quality development in correctional services and securing the educational rights of incarcerated persons. Addressing this gap in the literature, this article sets out to investigate how prison officers interpret professionalism in a Norwegian setting.

In an international context, the qualifications needed to become a prison officer vary across different nations, such as the United States, Belgium, England, and Norway (the Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2017). In Norway today, prison officers are qualified through a two-year higher education programme, which can be expanded into a bachelor's



degree. This article examines Norwegian prison officers' views on professionalism and career opportunities through the following question: *How do Norwegian prison officers understand their own professionalism and opportunities for professional development in their occupation?*

Existing research into the role as prison officer paints a picture of a risky, stressful professional role (Nylander, Lindberg & Bruhn, 2012; Finney, Stergiopoulos, Hensel, Bonato, & Dewa, 2013; Griffin, Hogan, Lambert, Tucker-Gail, & Baker, 2010; Kunst, 2011; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). Surveys of prison officers' psycho-social working conditions reveal possible explanations for experiences such as lacking a sense of accomplishment and work-related stress. Other studies, including Crawley and Crawley (2007), have further shown that the role of the prison officer is often negatively portrayed in the media and in society outside the prison, which contributes to the stigma and stress many prison officers experience (Crawley & Crawley, 2007; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Vickovic, Griffin, & Fradella, 2013).

Professionalism in the role as prison officer and in the relationship between prison officer and incarcerated person is only examined to a small extent (Evensen, 2006, p. 243). Tait (2011) is one exception, who, based on fieldwork in two prisons, presents a typology of prison officer's approach to care in their professional practice. According to this typology, there are five different approaches: *True carer, limited carer, old school, conflicted* and *damaged*. True carers are characterized by respecting incarcerated persons privacy and encourage them to help themselves with their support (p. 444), while limited carers have a more bureaucratic approach to their work in accordance with rules and regulations embodied in correctional services. Accordingly, they have a more pragmatic form of care and try to find practical solutions to the incarcerated persons' expressed problems (p. 445). Old school officers have the same bureaucratic approach to care as limited carers but makes a clearer distinction between "them" (incarcerated persons) and "us" (prison officers). For the conflicted carers, caring is about teaching incarcerated persons to be better people. In doing so they often conflate care and control. Many incarcerated persons thus experience them as "unpredictable" and "two-faced". The last typology is those who have a damaged approach to care. In this small group, Tait (2011) found that they had prior experiences of assaults and lack of support from managers, leading to emotional and practical withdrawal from incarcerated persons in their work (pp. 448-449). Tait's study is the first systematic examination of prison officer's approach (operationalisation and conceptualisation) to care in their professional practice (Tait, 2011, p. 140). Prison officer's approach to care is a product of their experience in their work environment, as well as personal qualities (Tait, 2011, p. 451). In our study we found the first three typologies present amongst the prison officers.

Internationally, the question of prison officers' professionalism has been linked to the relations between the prison officers and the incarcerated persons. In their study of employee-incarcerated relations in prison, Liebling, Price, and Elliott (1999) came to the following three conclusions: First, the relationship between prison officer and an incarcerated person is a complex one. This means that the ways in which situations unfold, are mediated by the relations between the prison officer and the incarcerated (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 90). In carrying out their job, prison officers must negotiate use of force (Evensen, 2006; Liebling et al., 1999) which can serve as a possible explanation of a lacking sense of accomplishment and work-related stress. However, Liebling et al.'s findings show that prison officers are reticent in their use of force (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 72). The relation between an incarcerated person and employee is both rule-based and non-rule-based when making decisions (Liebling et al., 1999; Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2012, p. 123). In other words, prison officers use *discretion* in their encounters with the incarcerated persons.

Another one of Liebling et al.'s (1999) findings concerns consistency and applies to both prison officers and incarcerated persons. Whereas incarcerated persons had an absolute perception of continuity, the employees were aware that differences between individuals and context would make this difficult. (Liebling et al., 1999, pp. 85, 90). This type of flexibility in

their work led to uncertainty among the prison officers about what it meant to “cross the line” (Liebling et al., 1999; Nymo, 2019). As a consequence of this, there were different degrees of variation in the prison officers’ execution of their work (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 85, Westrheim & Eide, 2019). As Nymo (2019) argues, a professional prison officer must always reflect on the situations she is facing and extract the knowledge necessary to understand the specifics of the individual situation (pp. 338-339). Only in this way can the prison officer increase his or her professional capacity for action. According to Liebling et al. (1999) the prison officers strove towards a balance between friendliness and professionalism in their work (p. 87). They wanted to be involved, and at the same time uphold safety precautions, and treat the incarcerated persons respectfully (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 87). In conclusion, the authors point out that the prison officers performed “peacekeeping work” in their interactions with the incarcerated persons. This was a skill that was taken for granted and was, in fact, considered “common sense” (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 82). “Peacekeeping” was often central to challenging conflict situations. Nevertheless, the prison officers described these situations as among “the best parts of the job,” and “a good day at work,” despite their problems and challenges (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 82).

In the above, we see that the research paints a picture of a complex prison officer role with a complicated and, at times, contradictory mandate. In connection with this role there are also several areas of tension, such as between using force on the one hand, and care and rehabilitation on the other. In carrying out this role, the individual prison officer’s self-understanding and perception of this is crucial. How can we then educate prison officers for such a complex role? In the following we will consider how the complex need for competence in the prison officer education in Norway is safeguarded, and furthermore, the extent to which the prison officers feel that their education provides them with competence to fill a role in connection with education and training for the incarcerated persons.

### **Education for the Prison Officer Role: A Changing Education**

The prison officer education in Norway has, historically, come a long way before now emerging as a good programme for people who want to work in prison (Langelid & Fridhov, 2019). We will not explore the historical development of the educational programme but will rather consider the education as it is today.

Even though we may often consider the Norwegian prison officer education as a professional study, it cannot be characterised in the same way (Molander & Terum, 2013), as educational programmes for social workers, nurses, social educators, or teachers. This is chiefly explained by two factors: the length of the education and the fact that the training is paid. The Norwegian prison officer education today is a two-year paid university college education at The University College of Norwegian Correctional Service (KRUS). Completing the education grants you the title *Høgskolekandidat i straffegjennomføring* (“University College Candidate in Correctional Studies”), and graduates have completed a course of study with a total of 120 ECTS credits. The education is considered to qualify as part of a bachelor’s degree of 180 ECTS credits. There is currently a continuing education programme that gives prison officers the opportunity to complete a Bachelor in Correctional Studies.

The current framework plan for the prison officer training was established on 1 September 2017 by the Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service (*Kriminalomsorgsdirektoratet*, KDI, 2017). The framework sets the standard for the current education by setting goals for what the education should qualify students for, the extent and content of the education, and the methods and assessments to be used. The framework also serves as a guideline for the programme description as it has been developed KRUS.

The framework plan for the current prison officer education states that the education should reflect the goals and values of the correctional service as these are incorporated in the Execution of Sentences Act (*straffegjennomføringsloven*) and the Norwegian Correctional Ser-

vices' business strategy (KDI, 2017, p. 3). The purpose of the execution of sentences is set out in section 2 of the Execution of Sentences Act:

A sentence shall be executed in a manner that takes into account the purpose of the sentence that serves to prevent the commission of new criminal acts, that reassures society, and that, within this framework, ensures satisfactory conditions for the incarcerated persons.

There must be an offer to undergo a restorative process while the sentence is being served.

In the case of persons remanded in custody, the Norwegian Correctional Service shall make suitable arrangements for remedying the negative effects of isolation<sup>1</sup>.

The fact that the prison officer education should reflect the correctional service's goals and values, means that it should educate future prison officers to take on a complex task in which they contribute to the execution of the sentence in a way that is reassuring to society, while giving incarcerated persons opportunities to change their lives in ways that are conducive to preventing future crime. Furthermore, the education should foster a fundamental respect for "the autonomous human being", who is responsible for his or her actions. This means that prison officers should, upon completing their education, be able to contribute to incarcerated persons' efforts to change their own way of life, both during imprisonment and when serving a sentence outside of prison.

The professional content of the prison officer education is divided into six different subject areas of different weight and duration: Introduction to the Role of the prison officer and the Norwegian Correctional Service (10 + 10 ECTS credits), The Law of Execution of Sentences and Other Legal Topics (10 ECTS credits), Safety, Security and Risk Management (30 + 7.5 ECTS credits), Community Reintegration and Social Work II (20 + 15 ECTS credits) and Professional Knowledge and Ethics (7.5 ECTS credits). The framework and course structure (KRUS, 2019) shows how the subjects should be covered throughout the education (KDI, 2017). The four semesters of the programme are set up to develop the candidates' knowledge and competence, with a close connection between acquiring theoretical knowledge and practical experience through working in prison. This means, among other things, that the candidates have work placement in prisons in the second and third semester, in addition to six weeks of summer service in both years. During their work placement, local supervisors are responsible for the candidates' training in collaboration with the teachers at KRUS. Thus, the programme entails integration of both experience-based and theoretical perspectives in the courses in line with other educational programmes for professions such as social workers, nurses or teachers. The courses Safety, Security and Risk Management and Community Reintegration and Social Work are the most comprehensive courses in the education, at 37.5 and 35 ECTS credits respectively.

In spring 2018, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)<sup>2</sup> accredited a supplementary course which gives the candidates the opportunity to complete a Bachelor in Correctional Studies. The supplementary module is organised as a session-based part-time study over two years (four semesters). The professional content of the supplementary course is organised as in-depth modules starting with two semesters of obligatory courses: the organisation of the Norwegian Correctional Service, and crime prevention in the service. The final year of study consists of further specialisation, in the form of one chosen optional course and a written bachelor's thesis.

<sup>1</sup> Ref Lovdata: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2001-05-18-21>

<sup>2</sup> Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (*Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen*, NOKUT). An independent expert body under the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research responsible for accreditation and evaluation of Norwegian education and of approving education from abroad.

### Perspectives on Professionalism and Competence

As an institution in society, the Norwegian Correctional Service relies on specialised knowledge to solve complex tasks. Professions often solve the institution's tasks by means of the specialised knowledge at their disposal. We have previously pointed out that the prison officer education is not considered a professional degree. However, since the term vocation or profession is not unambiguous, it may be understood in both a narrow and broad sense (Molander & Terum, 2013). We therefore rely on theory of professions in understanding prison officers' role and what they regard as professionalism in carrying it out.

According to Torgersen (1972), professions can be defined by a certain relationship between professional motivation and educational monopoly: "We say that we are speaking of a profession when 1) a certain long-term formal education is acquired by 2) people who are largely oriented towards attaining certain professions that, according to social norms, cannot be filled by persons other than those with the above education<sup>3</sup>" (p. 10). This definition makes it difficult to consider the role of prison officer as a profession. Although this occupational role has professional monopoly on executing sentences in Norway, the prison officer education is not required for carrying out this role. The way the job is defined today, any person above the age of 21 with an unblemished record and a general university and college admission certification may work as a prison officer (Johansen, 2007). Completion of prison officer training is, however, a prerequisite for permanent employment. Furthermore, even though the education is aimed at a specific occupation with a professional monopoly, it is not considered a long-term formal education with emphasis on theory and systematic scientific knowledge, which is one of the prerequisites for professions (Torgersen, 1972; Grimen 2008; Dale 2008). Today, however, the term 'profession' is more broadly defined and ambiguous (Molander & Terum, 2013) and it contains both descriptive and evaluative elements.

Thus, both organisational and performative aspects can be connected to the concept of a profession. The organisational aspects signify an occupational group's control of its tasks. This is partly achieved through external conditions, such as control of the access to their tasks and partly through internal conditions that control the performance of the tasks. The performative aspects denote what we often refer to as practice, where the profession's tasks are carried out. The prison officer role seems to fall within these boundaries of professionalism.

Research shows that the expectations that prison officers face in carrying out their work is complex and intricate (Tait, 2011; Storvik, 2006; Feierman, Levick & Mody, 2009; Hawkins, Lattimore, Dawe & Visher, 2009; Mathur & Clark, 2014). This requires a broad foundation of knowledge, where prison officers require knowledge within several and, to some extent, highly different, fields. All professions are characterised by a heterogenic knowledge base, according to Grimen (2013a), because professional knowledge is made up of many, and often very different, elements. The question is how strongly the various elements in the professions' knowledge are connected.

Here Grimen (2013a) argues that the most important connections in a profession's knowledge base are practical. First of all, this implies that there is not only one, but several types of relationship between theory and practice, where a professional practice of the occupation is characterised by complicated interactions between theoretical and practical applications of knowledge. Secondly, for the professions it means that there is no fundamental distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, but that in their professional practice they relate to the various elements of their knowledge base as a continuum.

The concept of competence, which is often described as being able to act, is another way of approaching the connections in professions' knowledge bases (Eide & Tolo, 2016). Competent actions, then, are actions guided by different types of knowledge, which the in-  
3 "Vi sier at vi vi har en profesjon hvor 1) en bestemt langvarig formell utdannelse erverves av 2) personer som stort sett er orientert mot oppnåelse av bestemte 3) yrker som ifølge sosiale normer ikke kan fylles av andre personer enn de med utdannelsen"

dividual performs in his or her profession. It can be experience-based knowledge, empirical knowledge and theoretical knowledge. In the professions, competence is expressed, not only in concrete practical actions, but also in the knowledge-based and ethical considerations that motivate the actions. In other words, the prison officers must have sufficient knowledge of criminology, execution of sentences, security and social work, as well as the goals and values of the correctional service in order to be able to act effectively and competently in their work.

The practical dimension here not only concerns the application of knowledge, but also the use of moral, political, and legal discretion. Grimen and Molander (2013) define discretion in this sense “as a form of practical reasoning, where the purpose is to reach conclusions about what should be done in specific individual cases, where the basis is weak” (Grimen & Molander, 2013, p. 179). Consequently, the term has two meanings. Firstly, discretion denotes a cognitive activity where things are separated, weighted, and lead to judgments and decisions in specific situations. Secondly, discretion describes a protected space for choices or decisions made based on such decisions. On this subject, Nymo (2019) emphasises that, although the occupation as prison officer is largely rule-based, prison officers may be expected to supplement the rules by exercising discretion in their daily work. Thus, discretion constitutes both normative and autonomous aspects of professional practice, also in the role of prison officer.

To understand the normative and autonomous aspects of professional practices, Grimen (2013b) points to the concept of *profesjonsmoral* (“professional morality”), which he explains as “norms and values that are specifically aimed at resolving moral problems in the interaction between professionals and between professionals and their clients” (Grimen, 2013b, p. 156). The primary task of professional morality, in this sense, is to establish conditions for collaboration between professionals and between professionals and their clients. It does not concern general moral norms and rules, but rather denotes the norms and rules related to the practice and interaction within the particular social responsibility given to the various professions. In this sense, one might say that professional morals can be understood in light of two perspectives. From the perspective of society, one may consider professional morality as a mechanism for professional self-justice to ensure that the profession acts in accordance with its mandate. From the professions’ perspective, professional morality is norms and values that serve as guidelines in specific situations. Reflections on and the reasoning behind such professional moral norms and values are commonly referred to as professional ethics.

Professionalism is thus a complex expression of the knowledge, skills and common values that prison officers possess, and which they have acquired through education and experience from working in prison. Through their education they have gained vocational-specific theoretical knowledge in several sciences such as criminology, psychology, and law. Furthermore, professionalism is expressed and further developed in the prison officers’ practice, through meetings with incarcerated persons and colleagues in the various prisons. Farkas and Manning (1997) explains this by using the term *occupational culture* which defines the “values, beliefs, material objects and taken-for-granted knowledge associated with a full-time occupational role” (1997, p. 57). However, this practice is based on the theoretical knowledge the prison officers bring with them from their education, but also on previous experiences from working in other institutions, or from life in general, and on the norms and values that have been established for the correctional service and the execution of sentences in Norway. This means that the concept of professionalism is not only related to a general competence or an occupational culture that all prison officers possess and are part of but also to a personal competence, such as life experience and personal characteristics (Skau, 2002).

### **Method: Qualitative Interviews**

This article is based on data from qualitative semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with prison officers in four selected prisons in Norway. The conversations are semi-structured in the sense that a thematic structure has been established in advance,

however, it is also possible for both the interviewer(s) and the participants to ask follow-up questions in the interview situation (Silverman, 2011). The purpose has been to collect data that shows prison officers' experiences in their workplace (Hatch, 2002) and to provide in-depth knowledge of prison officers' perceptions of their own role and practice. Based on specific situational descriptions, the prison officers have reflected on the choice of actions, feelings, motives, and underlying intentions and goals that motivate the way they perform their work.

The selection of institutions can be characterised as "maximum variation sampling", chosen with the intention of highlighting as much variation as possible in the selection (Patton, 1990). This selection emphasises three variation criteria: gender, size, and level of security. In collaboration with the Norwegian Correctional Service, a strategic selection has been made that meets the three criteria. Thus, the four prisons represent both female and male penal institutions, high and low security levels, and variation in the number of incarcerated persons. We would also like to add that the sample has a good age distribution; from young and relatively recent graduates, to older prison officers who had served in this role for a long time, and who were educated at an early stage of the prison officer education. The sample in the survey consists of 16 prison officers, eight women and eight men. Six of the participants work in prisons for women, and ten work in prisons with male incarcerated persons. None of the prisons have incarcerated persons of both genders. Around half of the participants have also worked at other prisons after completing their education, while the other half has only worked at the institution where they work today. The persons in the latter group have, however, been employed in various prison wings with both high and low security. Overall, the sample represents variation in line with the variation criteria the study is based on.

The project is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). All researchers are obliged to ensure that the participants in a given research project have given informed consent to participate in the study. We conducted interviews in four Norwegian prisons. To maintain anonymity, we have deliberately omitted the names of the prisons or the region where they are located. The conversations lasted from one to two hours depending on how much the participant wanted to share and talk.

In order for a qualitative study to be considered valid, reliable, and transferable, it must be *credible* (Thagaard, 2003; Drageset & Ellingsen, 2010). In this study, credibility and reliability were assured in that each of the researchers involved made a critical review of the collected data, the interview process and the analysis. We have also described the process of collecting and processing data in a stepwise, transparent and accurate manner.

### **The Prison Officers' Perspectives on Professionalism**

The understanding of professionalism can be related to the prison officer education's portrayal of the professional prison officer as an ethically conscious practitioner of a profession (Grimen, 2013b). When it comes to teaching ethics and professionalism as part of the prison officer education, the Norwegian Correctional Service's website states the following:

The aspirant must be aware that the occupation as prison officer and the system of contact prison officers create special challenges related to ethics and professionalism and the ability to work in the correctional service in accordance with its objectives, perspective on human life, values and principles. He/she should become aware of his / her own attitudes and values and act in a respectful way towards other people in performing his/her professional role. The candidate should develop reflexive ethical competence that will enable him/her to meet and solve the professional ethical challenges they will experience both in their work with incarcerated persons and in relationships with colleagues.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Norwegian Correctional Service (*Kriminalomsorgen*, <http://www.kriminalomsorgen.no/undervisning-etikk-og-profesjonalitet-ved-fengselsskolen.527177-237613.html>)

Prison officers define their professionalism within the Norwegian Correctional Service's goals for the profession. Many have a genuine and articulate view of human life. "The humanistic view of human nature is at the centre here. We try to see the people here, and not all that surrounds them" (Participant 13). At the heart of this view of humanity is a fundamental belief in the good in human beings, in the incarcerated person. "You need to have compassion. You need to know the regulations so that you know what you have to relate to. Commitment and a willingness to achieve something good. Respect for other people" (participant 12). The prison officers clearly show loyalty towards rules at the workplace and believe in the Norwegian rule of law. "You need to be able to carry out the tasks no matter what they are, whether it is a body search, collecting a urine sample or a cell inspection. And these security tasks must be done without being shameful or embarrassed" (participant 14). Loyalty, for the participants, is also about taking care of colleagues and emphasising the importance of maintaining their own, and not least, their colleagues' safety.

It is difficult to say what a professional prison officer is, because we are so different as human beings. You must follow the rules and routines when working in a prison. A dilemma that may arise is when you see an incarcerated person arguing with another employee. On the inside, you may know that the incarcerated person is right, but you will not go over there and take his side, because it is your colleague (...) you need to provide support in the situation. (participant 1)

The above quote concerns loyalty and principles that we, in this context, understand as the perceived ways of expressing loyalty, and in which situations one should be loyal, and towards whom. As such, the prison officers confirm Farkas and Manning's (1997) notion of secrecy as a feature of correctional work.

Another important principle is that the prison officers regard incarcerated persons as equal, without necessarily being able to treat them equally. "It's a little different from person to person, where they're at. So, I don't treat everyone the same way. There is something called equal treatment, but not identical treatment. It differs from incarcerated person to incarcerated person" (participant 9). The performance of the role seems to be based on respect for other people, and on equality and justice. "You are fair and treat the incarcerated persons with respect and in the same way. And at the same time, they are different. It goes without saying, but fairness should run as a thread through what you do" (participant 7). However, as described above, norms of secrecy and loyalty among incarcerated persons and officers creates tensions between the two groups (Farkas & Manning, 1997), as well as conflicts between the occupational values of loyalty and human justice within the profession.

It is mentioned that clear and clearly expressed values are the cornerstones of the system. Being aware of their own values and principles in carrying out the work is about showing, and being shown, trust and confidentiality in various collaborative relationships between incarcerated persons and employees. Among the central values are, as mentioned, the need to ensure one's own and one's colleagues' safety and security in the workplace.

I believe that my primary role, both as a supervisor and as a duty prison officer, but also as a good colleague, is to ensure the safety of the prison officers. You do this by engaging in dialogue with the incarcerated persons and achieving that gut feeling that tells you: Who am I encountering here? (...) My primary role vis-à-vis incarcerated persons is above all that they do not harm my colleagues. (participant 2)

Values and principles often appear as two sides of the same story. In principle, treating everyone equally does not necessarily mean treating everyone the same way. The prison officer may be friendly, but is not a friend, he or she is listening, but cannot believe everything he or she hears. "You must know that even though we are good friends, you may be deceiving me.



You cannot get disappointed or upset. You cannot take it personally. You cannot forget where you are” (participant 10). According to the participants, a professional prison officer should look for the human being in the incarcerated person but must also be able to clearly distinguish between the case and the person.

A professional prison officer is one who sees people and not just the case, one who can take care of the human being. I’m not that eager to constantly [get] people, do body searches, try to get something on the incarcerated person. I’m more interested in seeing people. Maybe it’s because I have been here for as long as I have, and met so many different incarcerated persons, and therefore know that there are many decent people here who have made some stupid decisions. (participant 6)

The “case” is the reason why the incarcerated person is in prison, but once he or she is there, he or she should also be treated as a human being.

The participants claim that a significant part of their professionalism revolves around having a conscious attitude to *closeness* and *distance* to the incarcerated. Both positions are important but are also a daily dilemma. Prison officers often refer to this as the distinction between the personal and the private, where professionalism is to be able to separate the two spheres from each other: One example of this “(...) is someone who manages to talk to incarcerated persons about how he likes to go fishing, and maybe also about the kind of fishing gear he likes to use on his fishing trips, without telling them who he is with, or about his children...” (participant 14).

It is easy to cross the line, either by getting too close or becoming too distant. The boundaries are not universal, but personal, which can make it even more challenging for prison officers to avoid having their boundaries tested and crossed: “I tell the candidates: I can’t tell you where your boundary is. It is something you must know and feel for yourself” (participant 1). When an individual prison officer experiences this type of dilemma, it is often discussed with more experienced colleagues. The development of the prison officer’s ethical reflexive competence therefore seems to revolve around making experiences through their work as a prison officers and discussing them with colleagues in the same situation. At the same time, they also state that they lack formal forums where such topics can be discussed with other colleagues.

As mentioned, the participants in our study express a strong professional pride and joy in working as a prison officer – regardless of the type of prison and the number of years in the profession. “I care about my job and go to work and enjoy it. That’s the most important thing to me. If I had not enjoyed it, I would have done the job badly, I guarantee it” (participant 8). This is despite the fact that many believe that the profession does not have a high status in society.

I thought being a prison officer was a very good profession, long before I considered becoming one myself. But I have later realised that it is not a well-regarded profession. I don’t think there’s anything people consider a good profession, in general. (participant 10)

According to the prison officers, the education and occupation are not given the status and recognition they think it should have. They explain the devaluation of the profession, as a consequence of an “academisation” of society, where the status of professions is linked to formal higher education and the number of ECTS credits, rather than experience-based knowledge and actual skills. However, the prison officers maintain pride in their work. “We can’t, like, thump our chests and brag about it, but we’re good at everyday life. I think there is a strong professional pride among the prison officers” (participant 3). One of the participants describes his job motivation more humorously:

There are people who have been here for 30 years. People ask me what it was like to work in the prison where I worked before. I was there for 18 years.

Well, I wouldn't have stayed there if I didn't like it there. I usually say that I'm lucky to be born with a good mood, and that helps. And then I say that I don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps. (participant 11)

As we have described above, the prison officers express pride and dedication to their profession, and humour is an important part, not only in carrying out the job, but also as a means to remain in the profession.

### **The Way into the Profession and the Road Onwards**

The prison officers' path to permanent employment is the prison officer education. For many prison officers, however, their career does not begin with the education, but with work in prison. The fact that they have become prison officers is more often explained as something that happened by chance than as a conscious choice of profession. For many of them, a temporary job in a prison became a way into the profession<sup>5</sup>. Experience from working in prison is often highlighted among the participants as an important factor in their decision to start this education:

My entrance into the profession was really just that I wanted to work with people with special needs. Prison seemed very exciting to me, but I didn't really know that much about it. I simply applied for the school, but before I started my education, I began working in prison to experience what it was like. (participant 4)

The prison officer education has changed significantly over time (Langelid & Fridhov, 2019). Prison officers in Norwegian prisons have different educational backgrounds and schooling, they also have very different work experience, and thus also different competencies. This also applies to the participants in our study. Some have limited amounts of schooling and extensive work experience, others have higher education, but may have little or no previous work experience. Regardless of when the prison officers completed the education, all state that they are satisfied with it. "I think it was a great year at school. (...), But some of the things we learned I might not use today" (participant 7). However, several point out that they would like to see a higher valuation of the prison officer education.

If I am going to say what I am most disappointed in regarding the education, it is that I find that KRUS does not adequately acknowledge its own education. It is no longer enough to complete the prison officer training, and it is not a system where you can really rise in the ranks. It grows more and more restricted every year. And when they announce vacant positions, the prison officer education is no longer enough. We suffer from a belief that everyone needs a master's degree. Preferably, you should have a bachelor's degree in something else, or a master's degree. You don't even need to have a master's degree in anything related to prisons. You could have a master's degree in strawberry picking, and still be considered superior to someone with just prison officer training. (participant 2)

When the participants explain what they think is the aspect of the prison officer education that best promotes learning, they all highlight practice: "I have learned through the experiences I have made at the various institutions where I have worked. I am not a theorist, I often tend to push that aside a bit, but I still tell the candidates I supervise that they should try to use the theory as well" (participant 1). The participants explain the importance of practice, both based on their own learning preferences as well as the type of knowledge and competence the prison officers should acquire according to the curriculum and learning outcomes.

I would probably say that it is practice, first and foremost, that has given me

<sup>5</sup> In Norway, Norwegian citizens that can document a clean criminal record, and are over the age of 20 may attend temporary, substitute positions as prison officers. In order to qualify for permanent employment as prison officer, completion of the prison officer educational program at KRUS is required.

competence. I remember that at school, I often thought ‘why should we learn this?’ But of course, I’m very happy that we learned a lot about The Law of Execution of Sentences at school. Because that was very useful. On the other hand, it is impossible to learn social work by reading a book. You can, of course, read up on some basic principles, but you need to try it out in practice if you really want to learn something about social work. (participant 10)

The fact that the practical part of the education is relatively large is emphasised as an important factor in developing the prison officer’s skills. However, a large practical component may also be an obstacle to further academisation of the education. However, it is not certain that all prison officers wish or need to extend their education with that extra year that can lead to a bachelor’s degree. Some participants, on the other hand, expressed a clear desire to supplement their education and get a bachelor’s degree. For these participants, the opportunities for changing jobs in the future, as shown by the quote above, are an important motivation:

The fact that the education does not lead to a bachelor’s degree means that we will be at the back of the line if we want to change jobs. Most employers look for candidates with a bachelor’s degree or more, these days. (participant 4)

The desire to attain a bachelor’s degree does not apply to all participants, but most express a desire to be able to take continuing education, regardless of whether it leads to an academic degree or not:

I would really like to take a conflict management course, and also something related to psychology. I don’t know if KRUS offers this, but you can do it outside of work. I want to study something related to ADHD and intoxicating substances. I would also like to take law courses. There is a lot I want to try. (participant 10)

The quote above shows that the prison officers want to develop and to strengthen their competence in their work. The fact that many prison officers do not participate in continuing education cannot be explained by neither the desire nor the will of the prison officers. KRUS has a large portfolio of courses offered to employees. For these courses, the institutions do not need to pay a participation fee for their employees, but nevertheless, their economy influences the available continuing education. “We need to apply for the courses at KRUS, because they are free” (participant 6). Continuing and further education thus becomes a financial issue. So even if prison officers send in an application to management to take a course other than those offered by KRUS, they are often denied on the grounds of insufficient financial means.

### **Discussion: Prison Officers’ Professionalism and Competence After Graduation and Opportunities for Further Professional Development**

The main findings in our study show that prison officers express pride and job satisfaction in their profession. The latter is connected to collegial relationships and a meaningful job. Prison officials also express satisfaction with their education but highlight the need for continuing education. Some express a need for short-term, thematically oriented courses, for instance related to issues concerning substance abuse, conflict management or educational opportunities for the incarcerated persons. Others wish to supplement their existing education and obtain a bachelor’s degree, which became possible in January 2019. Prison officers do, however, experience that their career opportunities and access to continuing education are limited due to financial circumstances. Under the current Norwegian government<sup>6</sup>, cuts in funding for the correctional service have further aggravated the situation.

The current prison officer education is a two-year paid college education at The University College of Norwegian Correctional Service (KRUS), which grants students the title “University College Graduate in Correctional Studies.” The content of the education is, as we

<sup>6</sup> Solberg II Government (2017 -)

have described it, highly complex, and implies that the prison officers acquire knowledge in several scientific disciplines, such as law, social science, psychology and health-promoting work through their education. Grimen (2013a) points out that a complex knowledge base is a characteristic trait for most professions, and that in itself, must be regarded as a prerequisite for professionalism rather than a threat to it. We would nevertheless like to point out that the comprehensive and complex expectations associated with the role as prison officer and its functions require more in-depth knowledge. One might therefore question whether a two-year education is sufficient to ensure in-depth knowledge. The prison population has changed significantly (Brosens, Croux, Claes, Vanderveede & De Donder, 2020; Brosens, De Donder, Smetcoren, & Dury, 2019; Gröning, 2019), and prison officers today face far greater challenges in their work than before, something that their education and its depth must reflect. The question is also raised as the prison officers themselves express the need for continuing education, and especially on conflict management, substance abuse issues and preventive work related to the incarcerated persons' mental health. When the prison officers call for further education within community reintegration and social work, this may indicate that these areas are not adequately covered in the courses in the education, as it is designed today. This is natural, since the various courses span several different disciplines, each of which are their own expansive subject areas, and this constitutes a significant part of the challenges related to the execution of sentences in Norway. These subject areas are therefore clearly emphasised in the supplementary module that leads to a Bachelor in Correctional Studies, both in the obligatory courses and in the optional specialisation units (KRUS, 2019).

Another explanation may lie in the structure of the education and, in particular, the alternation between training at KRUS and practical work in prison. Eraut (2009), among others, points out that learning in practice is contextualised, or as Farkas and Manning explains it, embedded in occupational cultures (1997). This means, among other things, that learning in practice is more strongly linked to specific situations where the learner experiences a need for knowledge development and learning. In other words, knowledge acquired through theory must be transferred to specific situations where this knowledge is considered relevant. Whether the prison officers work in prison wings with higher or lower security will highlight different areas of knowledge in the theoretical basis they bring with them from their education. This type of contextualisation means that prison officers will experience various aspects of social work and community reintegration as relevant, both during the course of their education and in their work experiences after graduation. Thus, if a prison officer starts working in a different wing, it may be likely that new values and areas of knowledge may become relevant, and consequently, that a need for professional development will arise.

The need for more knowledge can also be explained based on the prison officers' description of their own learning. They point out that prison practice is the most important learning arena. In this context, Young (2009), among others, highlights the distinction between context-dependent and context-independent knowledge. Context-independent knowledge is explained as universal and powerful, in the sense that it appears independent of the context it is a part of. It is not immediately accessible to all but must be acquired through education. Context-dependent knowledge is embedded in occupational cultures and is characterised by being practical and often procedural. Both types of knowledge are represented in the prison officer education's descriptions of learning outcomes. The question is, then, which forms of knowledge are at the forefront of the various learning arenas the prison officers engage with. Is it possible that the training that takes place in practice is more dominated by contextual, procedural and practical knowledge, rather than theoretical knowledge of a more general and context-independent nature? The question is made even more relevant by the fact that several prison officers in our study also serve as supervisors for prison officer candidates. When they describe themselves as "a-theoretical" in the sense that they claim to make little use of theoretical knowledge in their work, they reinforce the importance of the context-dependent and

culturally based knowledge they gain access to by working in prison.

The need for more knowledge is also linked to the need for further career opportunities. Torgersen (1972) argues that “the professional is interested in ascending through a hierarchy of professions” (p. 50). In this study, prison officials point out that they feel that they are part of a system, but that one “cannot climb very high” within that system. Many of them therefore considered the opportunity to build upon their prison officer education and attain bachelor’s degree as a part of their own skills development, and as a way of securing their own career opportunities. In the effort to strengthen the prison officers’ competence and further career opportunities, an additional 60 ECTS credits can be a way of strengthening the knowledge areas that are vital to the role as contact prison officer, such as incarcerated persons’ educational opportunities, preventive mental health work, addiction and career guidance.

At the same time, a Bachelor in Corrective Studies gives prison officers the opportunity to apply for master’s programmes in other disciplines, thereby opening up new career opportunities. In the Norwegian Correctional Service today, these are areas and responsibilities that are also carried out by other groups that work in prison. The prison officers, for instance, appear to have little knowledge of the school’s responsibilities and methods. Developing more knowledge about other professions’ working methods and responsibilities thus seems to be a relevant area to include in an extended course of study. Our study suggests that such an expansion would be appreciated and create enthusiasm among the professional prison officers that are responsible for the execution of sentences in the Norwegian Correctional Service today.

### **Afterword**

The education of prison officers must be characterised by high quality in order to meet the quality demands in correctional services. Given the fact that society and the composition of the population are rapidly changing, a two-year education program may fall short. Knowing that the Norwegian education for prison officers is far more extensive than the case being in United States, Belgium, and England, significance of quality in prison officer education should be given more research attention internationally (the Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2017). The goal is a society with as little crime as possible. Therefore, we need prison officers who are qualified to work in a broad and complex field. One step in the right direction might be to extend the Norwegian prison officers’ education to a bachelor’s degree with a possibility of taking a master’s degree if they wish to. However, this study shows that the correctional service still has a long way to go, both in a national and an international context.

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