

Training Needs Assessment in the Albanian Prison System: A Human Resource Development Perspective

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Abstract: *This study assesses training needs of prison staff in Albania following the 2022 structural reform establishing a Training Center within the General Directorate of Prisons, identifying competency gaps and proposing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening initial and ongoing training programs. The study adopted a qualitative triangulated methodology incorporating: (1) consultative meetings with prison leadership; (2) a review of training curricula, regulations, and annual plans; (3) in-depth interviews with Training Center staff; and (4) observation of active training sessions. The findings point to four principles that ought to run through every training program; staff need to see their roles as interconnected around rehabilitation, they should model pro-social behaviour consistently, human rights must inform everyday practice rather than just theory, and employees need to feel genuine pride in their work. Beyond these foundations, different staff groups require different things. Line officers struggle with integrity issues, emotional intelligence, and communicating ethically. Managers lack skills in leadership and performance tracking. Social workers and healthcare staff need deeper grounding in rehabilitation programming, mental health care, and addiction treatment. The findings suggest several areas for improvement, including curriculum revision, the development of rehabilitation-oriented training programmes, the establishment of a staff training database, and greater attention to adult learning principles in course design and delivery. Following the 2022 reform, no previous study has examined training needs across the Albanian prison system in a systematic way. The findings provide new knowledge about prison staff development in post-communist countries.*

Keywords: Training needs assessment; prison staff development; human resource management; penitentiary training; adult learning; organizational development

INTRODUCTION

The professional development of prison staff is widely recognised as an important element of an effective prison system. Staff training influences institutional security, rehabilitation practices, and respect for human rights in custodial settings (Council of Europe, 2020; McGuckin, 2020). In Albania, reforms undertaken as part of the country's European integration agenda have included efforts to strengthen training and professional development within the prison service.

The reform of the Albanian prison system has placed increasing emphasis on the professional development of prison staff. A significant step in this process was the adoption of Order No. 174 of 19 October 2022, which established a dedicated Training Center within the General Directorate of Prisons. Supported by international

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Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK partners, including the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the reform reflects broader efforts to align prison administration and staff development practices with European standards.

While the establishment of the Training Center represents an important institutional development, there has been no comprehensive assessment of the training needs of prison staff across the system. European Commission progress reports have repeatedly highlighted the importance of strengthening professional capacities within the prison service. However, limited information is available regarding the specific training needs of different staff groups and the extent to which existing training programmes address these needs. This issue is particularly important given the diverse responsibilities of prison personnel, whose work extends beyond security functions to include rehabilitation, reintegration, and the protection of human rights.

Against this background, the present study examines the training needs of prison staff in Albania following the 2022 reform. The aim is to assess current training provision, identify areas where additional knowledge and skills are required, and provide recommendations for the further development of initial and in-service training programmes. The findings are intended to support the strategic work of the Training Center and contribute to the continued professionalisation of the Albanian prison service.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What training programmes and approaches are currently used within the Albanian prison system?
2. What training needs and competency gaps are perceived among different categories of prison staff?
3. How can existing training programmes and delivery methods be strengthened to better support staff development and organisational objectives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Training Needs Assessment in Correctional Settings

Training needs assessment (TNA) is commonly used to identify gaps between the knowledge and skills employees currently possess and those required to perform their roles effectively (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). In prison systems, assessing training needs is especially important because staff are expected to maintain security while also supporting rehabilitation and reintegration. The literature generally describes TNA as involving three interrelated levels of analysis: the organization, the tasks performed, and the individuals responsible for carrying them out (Noe et al., 2017).

Studies of prison staff training highlight the importance of preparing personnel for both the operational and interpersonal aspects of their work. Alongside training in security procedures and emergency response, prison staff require skills in communication, conflict management, ethical decision-making, and working constructively with people in custody (Liebling et al., 2011; European Commission, 2022). This broader understanding of professional competence is reflected in the Council of Europe's Prison Rules, which stress the need for regular staff training and place particular importance on respect for human rights and the treatment of prisoners (Council of Europe, 2020).

Adult Learning Principles in Staff Development

Training prison staff through adult learning principles—what educators call andragogy—marks a real departure from the old classroom-style teaching still common in many public sector trainings. Knowles (1984) laid out the core ideas: adults learn best when they direct their own learning, draw on their life experience, see the immediate use of what they're studying, and tackle real problems rather than abstract theories. Research backs this up. Adults in professional settings get the most out of training that takes their experience seriously, connects

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK directly to their daily work, and gets them actively involved rather than passively listening (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

This matters especially in prisons. Correctional staff deal with unpredictable situations every day. Participatory methods—role plays, scenario-based exercises, group problem-solving—prepare them better for the messy reality of prison life than lectures ever could. Studies show these approaches build stronger communication skills, sharper ethical judgment, and calmer crisis responses (Boyle, 2018). The Council of Europe's Trainer's Manual for prison staff pushes this same direction, urging trainers to use active learning that shows staff what good practice looks like and gives them space to think through their own experiences.

Prison Staff Roles and Training Requirements

Prison staff perform a wide range of functions, and their training needs vary accordingly. Officers working in security-related roles require training in operational procedures, safety, and incident management, while professionals such as social workers, healthcare staff, and educators need specialist knowledge relevant to their fields as well as an understanding of the prison environment in which they work (Bennett, 2016). Efforts to strengthen and harmonise prison staff training across Europe have also led to the development of common frameworks through the European Prison Training Academies Network (EPTA).

Recent studies have drawn attention to the importance of interpersonal skills in prison work. These include communication, emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and the ability to build constructive relationships with people in custody (Watson, 2020). Particular attention has been given to pro-social modelling, an approach that encourages staff to demonstrate respectful and responsible behaviour in their daily interactions with prisoners. Research suggests that such interactions can contribute positively to the prison climate and support rehabilitation efforts (Mackie & Reynolds, 2020).

Albanian Prison System Context

Developments in the Albanian prison system have taken place alongside wider justice reforms associated with the country's European Union integration process. Law No. 81 of 2020, *On the Rights and Treatment of Prisoners and Detainees*, sets out the main principles governing prison administration, placing particular emphasis on humane treatment and rehabilitation. These priorities are also reflected in the Strategy for the Development of the Prison System 2019–2022, which highlighted the importance of strengthening staff training through basic and in-service programmes, leadership development, career progression opportunities, and the establishment of a dedicated training centre.

External reviews of the Albanian prison system have noted improvements in staff training over recent years, while also pointing to weaknesses in the assessment of training needs and the evaluation of training outcomes (McGuckin, 2020). Against this background, the present study examines the training needs of prison staff following the 2022 reform that established the Training Center within the General Directorate of Prisons.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design and drew on several sources of information to develop a broad understanding of training needs within the Albanian prison system. Combining different sources of evidence made it possible to compare findings across the data and strengthen the overall analysis (Patton, 2015). The study was carried out in three stages: consultations with key stakeholders, a review of relevant documents, and the collection of primary data through interviews and observations.

Data Collection Methods

Phase One: Stakeholder Consultation

The study began with meetings with the Director General of Prisons, Mr. Admir Abrija, and the Deputy Director General, Mr. Femi Sufaj, who also serves as Director of the Training Center. These discussions helped clarify the purpose of the study, identify key areas of interest, and ensure access to relevant information and stakeholders.

Phase Two: Document Review

Relevant policy and training documents were reviewed to understand the current training framework within the Albanian prison system. These included:

- The initial training programme and training modules for prison police officers
- The intermediate-level training manual
- Specialised training programmes for staff working with juveniles and women
- The Training Center's annual training plan
- Internal regulations and relevant legislation
- International assessment and evaluation reports (McGuckin, 2020)

Phase Three: Interviews and Observation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two members of the Training Center staff: the Head of the Curriculum Sector and a curriculum specialist. The interviews focused on the organisation and delivery of training, perceived strengths and weaknesses of existing programmes, areas where additional training was needed, and current evaluation practices. In addition, a training session was observed to gain a better understanding of teaching approaches and participant involvement.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, drawing on the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The document review examined training objectives, course content, and existing evaluation practices. Interview data were reviewed to identify recurring themes related to training needs, challenges in programme delivery, and areas for improvement. Observations of training sessions were used to compare planned course content with classroom practice and to provide additional context for interpreting the interview and document review findings.

Limitations

The study was based on qualitative data and was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of training needs within the Albanian prison system. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of all prison staff. An important limitation is that the study did not include interviews with frontline prison staff or people in custody, whose perspectives would have provided a broader picture of training needs and practice. Future research could use surveys and a larger sample of participants to examine these issues

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK in greater detail. The number of interviews conducted was also limited, although this was partly offset by the use of multiple sources of information, including documents, interviews, and observations.

FINDINGS

Training Center Structure and Capacity

The Training Center operates with 11 staff positions distributed across three sectors (Table 1).

The creation of the Training Center has strengthened staffing capacity compared with the previous organisational arrangement. At the same time, interviewees pointed to limited expertise in several specialist areas, particularly psychology, rehabilitation, and clinical practice.

Table 1: Training Center Staff Structure

Sector	Positions	Number
Weapons and Physical Training	Sector Manager	1
	Training Specialists	3
Security Procedures	Sector Manager	1
	Training Specialists	2
Social and Communication Skills	Sector Manager	1
	Training Specialists	2
Total		11

Source: Order No. 174, dated 19.10.2022

Current Training Programs

The Training Center currently provides several types of training for prison staff.

Initial Training for Prison Police Officers: The main entry-level programme for prison police officers consists of 45 days of classroom-based instruction (240 hours), followed by a three-month practical placement in a prison institution. The curriculum is organised into 19 modules. The first part introduces participants to the criminal justice system, the prison environment, human rights standards, professional ethics, communication, cultural diversity, and behaviour management. The second part focuses on operational aspects of prison work, including prisoner supervision, security procedures, transport, the use of force, and emergency response.

Intermediate Level Training: In addition to basic training, the Training Center offers an intermediate-level programme lasting two weeks. Topics covered include the use of force, violence prevention, incident management, suicide prevention, the prevention of violent extremism, risk assessment, leadership, and management.

Specialised Programs: Specialised training programs are also available for staff working in women's prisons and juvenile facilities, reflecting the specific needs of these populations.

Collaborative Training: Cooperates with international organisations and development partners, including AHC, the OSCE, and the European Commission in Albania. Through these partnerships, staff receive training on topics such as radicalisation, mental health, professional ethics, and the prevention of corruption.

Training Methodology

Training is delivered using interactive methods based on guidance from the Council of Europe Trainer's Manual. Participants are encouraged to take an active role in the learning process through discussion, practical exercises, and group work. In recent years, training-of-trainers programmes have helped strengthen the pool of available instructors. However, interviews indicated that only nine trainers are currently active in delivering courses, which places constraints on the number and frequency of training activities that can be offered.

Training Evaluation

The review found that training evaluation remains underdeveloped. Existing evaluation practices focus largely on participants' views of trainers and training sessions, while little attention is given to assessing what participants have learned or whether training has led to changes in knowledge, skills, or professional practice. Another issue concerns the current training needs assessment form, which requires approval from several levels of management. This may discourage staff from expressing their views openly and could affect the reliability of the information collected. Strengthening evaluation procedures would provide a stronger basis for future training planning and improvement.

Training Needs Across Staff Groups

Although training needs varied across staff categories, several themes emerged consistently throughout the data.

Understanding the Rehabilitative Role of Prison Staff

Interviewees emphasised that prison work extends beyond security and control. Staff at all levels, and particularly prison officers, play an important role in supporting rehabilitation and reintegration. Training should therefore help staff understand how their daily interactions with prisoners can contribute to these broader objectives.

The Importance of Role Modelling

Participants repeatedly highlighted the influence that staff behaviour has on both prisoners and newly recruited employees. Respectful communication, ethical conduct, and constructive interpersonal relationships were seen as essential aspects of professional practice. Experienced staff also serve as important role models for new employees during practical placements and on-the-job learning.

Human Rights in Everyday Practice

Interviewees stressed that human rights should not be treated as a stand-alone topic within the curriculum. Instead, human rights principles should be reflected throughout training and linked to practical situations that staff encounter in their daily work. Case studies, practical exercises, supervision, and engagement with external monitoring bodies were suggested as ways of strengthening this aspect of training.

Strengthening Professional Identity

A recurring theme was the need to strengthen employees' sense of professional purpose and commitment to public service values. Participants noted the value of drawing on the experience of

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK respected practitioners, discussing real events from prison practice, and highlighting the wider social importance of prison work for prisoners, their families, and the community.

General Staff Training Needs

Table 2: Identified Training Needs - General Staff

Competency Area	Specific Content
Professional Ethics	Integrity, human dignity, code of conduct
Communication	Team communication, information exchange
Emotional Competence	Emotional intelligence, motivation techniques
Pro-social Skills	Pro-social modeling, ethics in prisoner work
Organizational Culture	Climate in closed institutions

Note: These topics should be addressed theoretically AND practically

Mid-to-Senior Level Staff Needs

Table 3: Identified Training Needs - Management Staff

Competency Area	Specific Content
Decision Making	Evidence-based decision-making
Performance Management	Monitoring, evaluation, performance systems
Supervision	Administrative, developmental, supportive, mediatory
Staff Development	Motivation strategies, performance management

Training Needs of Specialised Staff

Social Services Staff

Interviewees highlighted the need for additional training on the social protection and support services available to people leaving prison. Greater knowledge of these systems would help staff support prisoners during the transition back into the community. Training was also considered necessary in the areas of mental health, including the identification of common mental health problems and appropriate forms of support. Participants further emphasised the need for practical guidance on the design and delivery of rehabilitation programmes.

Healthcare Staff

For healthcare personnel, training needs centred on substance misuse and available treatment options, as well as the prevention and management of mental health problems. Participants also stressed the importance of strengthening links with community-based health and support services to ensure continuity of care, particularly for individuals with substance use disorders following release.

DISCUSSION

Alignment with International Standards

The findings suggest that the Albanian prison system has made important progress in strengthening staff training in recent years. The establishment of a dedicated Training Center, the introduction of a range of training programmes, and the use of interactive teaching methods are all consistent with recommendations promoted by the Council of Europe. At the same time, the study identified weaknesses in the assessment of training needs and the evaluation of training outcomes. Similar challenges have been reported in other prison systems undergoing institutional reform (Bennett, 2016; McGuckin, 2020).

Particular attention was given throughout the study to human rights and the role of prison staff in supporting rehabilitation. These priorities are consistent with both Albanian legislation and the European Prison Rules. However, interview data suggest that such topics are often treated as separate areas of instruction rather than being incorporated throughout the curriculum and reflected in everyday professional practice.

Training Needs and Organisational Development

Many of the training needs identified in this study are similar to those reported in the international literature on prison staff development. In particular, participants emphasised the importance of communication skills, ethical conduct, emotional intelligence, and constructive relationships with prisoners. These skills are increasingly recognised as central to effective prison practice and to the creation of a positive prison environment (Liebling et al., 2011).

The findings also point to the importance of strengthening professional identity among prison staff. Participants repeatedly stressed the need for employees to understand the broader purpose of their work and to see themselves as contributors to rehabilitation and public service, rather than solely as providers of security. Training needs identified among managers reflected the complex nature of prison leadership. Supervisors and senior staff are expected to manage security issues while also supporting staff development, organisational change, and rehabilitative work. The findings suggest that leadership training should therefore extend beyond administrative procedures and include coaching, supervision, communication, and staff support. Among specialized staff, the strongest needs related to rehabilitation programmes, mental health, and substance misuse. These findings highlight the growing importance of treatment and rehabilitative services within the prison system and the need to ensure that staff have the knowledge and skills required to deliver them effectively.

Implications for Training Delivery

The study also highlighted the importance of how training is delivered. Although the Training Center has adopted interactive approaches consistent with adult learning principles, interviews suggested that these methods are not applied consistently across all courses. Greater attention to teaching methods, participant engagement, and practical application could strengthen the overall effectiveness of training.

Another issue concerns the limited number of trainers available to deliver courses. At the time of the study, only nine trainers were actively involved in training delivery. This places pressure on existing staff and may affect the Training Center's ability to respond to future training needs. Expanding the trainer pool and supporting the continued development of trainers are therefore likely to be important priorities.

Implications for Research and Practice

Research on prison staff development in post-communist countries remains relatively limited, and little has been published on training needs within the Albanian prison system. By documenting current training provision and identifying areas where additional support is required, this study provides a basis for future research and discussion.

The findings also have practical relevance for the Training Center and the General Directorate of Prisons. They point to specific areas where training can be strengthened, including leadership development, rehabilitation practices, mental health, substance misuse, human rights, and evaluation procedures. Addressing these areas would help ensure that training remains responsive to the changing demands placed on prison staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training Content

The findings suggest that future training should place greater emphasis on the rehabilitative role of prison staff. Regardless of their position, employees should understand how their daily interactions with prisoners can support rehabilitation and reintegration.

Training should also reinforce the importance of professional conduct and role modelling. Staff behaviour, communication style, and attitudes influence both prisoners and newly recruited colleagues. For this reason, ethical practice, respectful communication, and professional responsibility should be reflected throughout training rather than taught as isolated topics.

Human rights should be addressed across the curriculum and linked to practical situations that staff encounter in their daily work. Case studies, discussion of real situations, and scenario-based exercises may help staff apply these principles in practice.

Participants also highlighted the importance of strengthening professional identity. Training programmes should provide opportunities for experienced practitioners to share their experiences and should highlight the wider contribution of prison work to rehabilitation, public safety, and community well-being.

Rather than introducing separate courses on topics such as integrity, emotional intelligence, communication, motivation, and ethics, these themes should be incorporated into training activities and teaching methods across programmes.

Management and Leadership Training

Managers and supervisors would benefit from additional training in leadership and staff development. Priority areas include decision-making, performance management, supervision, staff motivation, and the use of information for planning and evaluation. Training should support managers not only in administrative tasks but also in their role as leaders and mentors.

Training for Specialised Staff

Social services staff would benefit from greater knowledge of social protection systems and community services available to people leaving prison. Training should also strengthen their capacity to design and deliver rehabilitation programmes and to respond to the mental health needs of prisoners.

For healthcare personnel, priority areas include substance misuse, treatment options, and cooperation with community-based health services. Mental health prevention and care should be further developed through multidisciplinary training involving both healthcare and non-healthcare staff.

Training Delivery and Evaluation

The Training Center should continue to use interactive teaching methods that encourage participation, reflection, and the sharing of professional experience. Greater consistency in the use of these approaches across programmes would strengthen learning outcomes.

The study also identified a need for stronger evaluation procedures. Training should be assessed not only through participant feedback on trainers and courses, but also through measures that examine what participants have learned and how training influences professional practice. Existing assessment tools should be revised to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest feedback.

Organisational Development

A practical priority is the consolidation of existing training records into a single database that can support planning, monitoring, and reporting. This would make it easier to track staff participation in training and identify future development needs.

The Training Center would also benefit from additional specialist expertise, particularly in areas such as rehabilitation, psychology, and mental health. Where possible, experienced staff from within the prison service should be supported to take on training roles, while external expertise can be used to address specific gaps.

Finally, the number of active trainers should be increased. Expanding and supporting the trainer pool would improve the Training Center's ability to respond to training needs across the prison system and ensure the long-term sustainability of its programmes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the training needs of prison staff in Albania following the establishment of the Training Center within the General Directorate of Prisons in 2022. Drawing on document review, interviews, observations, and discussions with senior prison officials, it provides an overview of current training provision and areas where further development is needed.

The findings suggest that important progress has been made in strengthening staff training. The creation of the Training Center, the introduction of a range of training programmes, and the use of interactive teaching methods provide a solid foundation for future development. At the same time, the study identified a number of areas that require further attention, particularly the evaluation of training outcomes, the assessment of training needs, and the availability of specialist expertise in areas such as rehabilitation, mental health, and substance misuse.

Across all staff groups, participants emphasised the importance of rehabilitation, professional conduct, human rights, and the influence that staff behaviour has on prisoners and colleagues. The findings also highlight the need for different forms of training for operational staff, managers, social services personnel, and healthcare professionals. While many of these needs are already recognised within the prison system, the study points to areas where training provision could be strengthened and expanded.

The recommendations presented in this report are intended to support the ongoing work of the Training Center and the wider prison service. Particular attention should be given to leadership development, rehabilitation practices, mental health, training evaluation, and the continued development of trainers. Strengthening these areas would help ensure that training remains relevant to the demands placed on prison staff and responsive to changes within the prison system.

The study has several limitations, most notably the absence of frontline staff and prisoner perspectives. Future research could build on these findings through larger-scale surveys and additional qualitative work involving a broader range of participants.

Overall, the findings suggest that the 2022 reform has created new opportunities for staff development within the Albanian prison system. Continued investment in training, informed by regular assessment of staff needs, will be important in supporting professional practice and strengthening the rehabilitative role of the prison service.

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