

Selection, training, and further training of prison staff in Hungary

Selezione, formazione e aggiornamento del personale penitenziario in Ungheria

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Abstract

The prison service is a key part of the public administration, an organisation with specialised tasks that has an impact on the everyday life of society, often carrying out its activities without people being aware of them until very rarely. In law enforcement, it is important that the employee and the employer can work together in the long term, which is a fundamental pillar of lawful and safe work. Today, law enforcement in Hungary has also realised that it is no longer enough to provide career opportunities under the law, but that it is necessary to provide a career path for employees in which they can fulfil their potential, while ensuring the legitimacy of the performance of law enforcement duties. Meeting this dual challenge has created new challenges for law enforcement managers, as additional resources are needed to ensure that the *right person in the right job* principle is respected. In my study, I will outline the selection and training system and describe how the training of prison staff is currently carried out in Hungary in the light of the legislation in force.

Keywords: selection of prison staff in Hungary; training system; further training.

Sintesi

L'amministrazione penitenziaria è una parte fondamentale della pubblica amministrazione. Si configura come un'organizzazione che ha compiti specifici, che hanno un impatto sulla società. Le modalità di svolgimento delle sue funzioni incidono sulle persone destinatarie dei servizi erogati dall'amministrazione penitenziaria e sul modo in cui le stesse si formano e trasformano, a prescindere dal loro livello di consapevolezza. Nel lavoro delle forze dell'ordine è importante che si instauri e mantenga un livello di collaborazione tra dipendenti e amministrazione pubblica, che possa garantire legalità e sicurezza correlate alle funzioni svolte e alle modalità di svolgimento. Oggi anche le forze dell'ordine ungheresi si sono rese conto che non è più sufficiente offrire opportunità di carriera previste dalla normativa. È invece necessario fornire ai lavoratori un percorso di carriera in cui possano esprimere il loro potenziale, garantendo al contempo la legittimità dell'esercizio delle funzioni di polizia. Questa duplice declinazione ha creato nuove sfide per l'amministrazione penitenziaria. Nel contributo viene illustrato il sistema di selezione e formazione e il modo in cui la formazione del personale penitenziario viene ad oggi realizzata in Ungheria alla luce della legislazione in vigore.

Parole chiave: selezione del personale penitenziario in Ungheria; sistema di formazione; formazione continua.

1. Introduction

The Hungarian Prison Service has undergone significant changes in the last thirty years, focusing on adequately treating prisoners and their reintegration into society. These new expectations have challenged not only senior staff but also subordinate staff. In the past, the main task was ensuring prisoners served their sentences without incident. In contrast, the expectation today, especially with the entry into force of the Punitive Code on 1 January 2015 (Act CCXL of 2013, hereinafter referred to as Bv. Kódex; Punitive Code) was issued and became effective from 1 January 2015, is to reduce re-offending after release by reintegrating prisoners (Tóth, 2019).

In this context, it is the professional task of the staff to bring about changes in the prison population that will significantly improve their chances in the process of social reintegration and adaptation to the labour market. Professional task is strictly connected to the national view of punishment and the way it must be undertaken in the professional life. Prevention, rehabilitation, and treatment must be integral part to professional activities in prisons. This expectation means that professionals working in prisons have a very considerable professional task, workload, and responsibility, which is based on a system of initial and continuous training (Schuckertné, 2018). The situation is made more difficult by the fact that the staff faces a serious role conflict in the course of their work, as “the staff serving in the districts have to fulfil a kind of police/ policing role at the same time, while they are also expected to perform counselling, conflict management, and mediation tasks” (Fiáth, 2015, p. 11). These challenges can only be met by a well-trained, mentally healthy, stable staff, and a professional staff (Boros & Csetneky, 2002; Schuckertné, 2018).

2. Hiring prison staff at operative level

An important criterion of hiring prison staff at operative level is that the given position is matched with an employee whose qualifications, experience, knowledge, skills and competencies are such that they can meet the requirements (Sipos, 2008). During decision-making new hires are chosen from the candidates that have passed the aptitude test (Malét-Szabó et al. 2021). Applicants to the Hungarian Prison Service at operative level must meet several conditions. These include age 18, acting capacity, Hungarian citizenship, appropriate education, and permanent residence requirements. They must also be physically, mentally, and psychologically fit. A basic requirement is a clean criminal record, which is supplemented by a check of impeccable conduct in life. In addition to meeting these conditions, candidates must undertake that, while a member of the professional staff, they will be restricted to certain fundamental rights. These rights include but are not limited to, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, the right to vote, and freedom to choose one’s work and occupation, e.g. prison staff cannot take part in strike. These restrictions are less common in the *civil* sphere, where they apply in the workplace and beyond working hours (Fórizs, 2015; Tóth, 2019).

Recruitment of prison staff at operative level, especially those employees who perform specific educational and reintegration tasks too, should be extremely high priority by refining the recruitment process and testing occupational fitness. It would be especially important as “only those can appropriately motivate others and empathise with those entrusted to their care who themselves are ‘okay’”, Fekete asserts (Fekete, 2019, p. 141).

In the case of law enforcement bodies of internal affairs, a new system of testing for aptitude and admission was introduced on 1 January 2021. One important element of the

Dual-phase Integrated Aptitude Testing System (KLIR) created by Decree No. 45/2020 (XII. 16.) of the Minister of Internal Affairs is the development of a new and uniform system of competencies (Malét-Szabó & Takács-Fehér, 2021). The scientific basis of this new aptitude testing and selection system was initiated almost ten years earlier, in 2012 in the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the leadership of the Applied Psychology Team of the Internal Affairs Scientific Committee (Malét-Szabó, 2013; Malét-Szabó et al. 2021). During the creation of a uniform system of competencies for directors of internal affairs one basic procedure was to develop a system whose competencies are clearly measurable and observable (Malét-Szabó et al., 2021; Tóth, 2019). These observable behavioural traits precisely define the behaviour that is expected by the profession with regard to a given competency in practice.

To assess leadership competencies of prison staff who are at higher position in a complex way, in accordance with the behavioural traits examined, a Comprehensive Leader Selection System (KVR) was developed in the framework of the project entitled “New public service career model”, which was implemented on 1 February 2015 (Rigó & Simon, 2016). This leader selection system assesses the leadership competencies of the person examined by integrating three different psychological methods, including:

1. a psychological test supported by IT;
2. individual, pairwork and teamwork Assessment Center exercises;
3. and a semi-structured interview (Malét-Szabó, 2014; Malét-Szabó et al., 2021).

Uniform public services basic competencies are defined, which are expected from all employees in public service. The related research involved a broad sample of experts from all fields of public service, who, adhering to the above methodology (interviews with directors, online questionnaires, focus groups), developed a 12-point system of basic competencies (Malét-Szabó et al., 2021). These key competencies are as follows: observing rules and discipline; independence; determination; efficient labour; problem solving skills; decision-making ability; responsibility; tolerance for psychological strain; emotional intelligence; communication skills; conflict resolution; cooperation.

The presence of competencies is primarily assessed by psychological aptitude tests, but this is not necessarily enough. Real work environment, motivation, professional identity, career building opportunities should also be investigated.

New employees are often faced with ‘real’ work environment when they start their service. In order to avoid this, the penitentiary institutions give candidates a tour on the day of their job interview, who gain direct and immediate experience of the circumstances of their future service in case they should be hired (Tóth, 2019).

Candidates wishing to work in the penitentiary system have a wide range of qualifications and interests. Several competency tests have called attention to the fact that motivation is necessary for filling the position appropriately (even so because in prison work there is no promise of great professional career). The high fluctuation of prison staff in Hungary presents a lot of challenges for employers. Mapping the possibilities of reducing fluctuation and of delaying (or avoiding) burnout would by all means be necessary knowledge in Hungarian punitive justice (Fekete, 2019).

Professional identity is another important factor for career stability, and it is a life-long process. It is defined by work experience, professional knowledge and abilities, success and failure – especially in the field of penitentiary system (Ritoók, 1995). Professional identity is also connected to the way every employee gives meaning to his/her work, in addition to their job description given by the ministry and to the organisational frames. In

addition, it is significant to emphasise that the commitment of employees in the penitentiary system is highly dependent upon “communication processes in the given institution, the work environment, promotion opportunities and satisfaction with the management” (Rózsa, 2015, p. 32).

3. The system of internal training in the penitentiary system

In Hungary, both graduates and graduates of the closed system of penitentiary training can hold officer positions. This practice of dual officer training may have resulted from a personnel policy driven by high turnover and the need to fill the gap (Forgács, 2020). The two pillars of the closed system (internal) training of the Hungarian penitentiary system are the BVOK (Training Centre of the Hungarian Punitive System) and the Department of Punitive Justice of the Police College (RTF), now called University of Public Service (NKE) (Forgács, 2012). Around 80% of the reintegration officers are recruited from the former system, while the latter offers more in-depth education and training (Sztodola, 2017).

3.1. Vocational training of BVOK (Training Centre of the Hungarian Punitive System)

The Training Centre of the Hungarian Penitentiary System (BVOK) has been operating since 1996, providing primary and secondary vocational education and higher vocational training for the staff of the penitentiary system. Since 1980, the commander was obliged to provide newly appointed staff with an introductory training course before they were put on duty or started work, for 14 days and then for 15 days from 1998 (Kiss & Sövény, 2006). This introductory training helped to give the participants an objective view of the prison service and their career prospects. It also provided the organisation with important information about the new employee, such as his learning ability and discipline (Kiss & Sövény, 2006) At that time, the completion of this 15-day training and a successful examination was only prerequisites for entry into service (Forgács, 2020). This concise cycle of training raised several problems, contributing to the devaluation of the theoretical education of the profession. Several experts – including Kiss, Sövény, and Lipták – have argued that it is impossible to cover theoretical and practical knowledge in such a short period of training in sufficient depth to provide a sufficient background for service provision. Going further, self-employment carries serious occupational and safety risks (Kiss-Sövény, 2006; Lipták, 2004; Sztodola, 2017).

In 2008, the three-week and then four-week introductory training replaced the 15-day introductory training. Following this change, the initial training has resulted in better-trained prison officers who perform their duties to a higher standard. The introduction of several new subjects (IT skills, management skills, psychology of service behavior, formal skills, law enforcement hand-to-hand combat, etc.) has also contributed to this, thus improving the skills and abilities of the participants (Zakhar, 2011).

In 2010, the transition to a modular system was initiated with the introduction of a complex programme for the complete transformation of the vocational training, further training, and higher education system of the penitentiary system. This programme aimed at the multi-level modernisation of law enforcement education. In addition to supporting modularity, the educational programme thus developed ensured interoperability between different law enforcement agencies, which had significant benefits (Forgács, 2020).

The following significant change is related to 2016, when the new vocational training

system for the penitentiary organisation was developed. Following its adoption, newly created prison professions could be established. The first component of the training course “Law Enforcement Organiser, Prison Service Organiser”, which started in 2016 at the Education, Training and Rehabilitation Centre of the Prison Service (Education Centre), is the module “Basic Law Enforcement Tasks” (identical to the first module of the Prison Supervisor training course). The 350 hours of training over 3 months includes two weeks of in-service training, which is carried out during the joint training of the staff teams.

It is stipulated that the prison service must enroll a staff member recruited as an officer in the first specialised law enforcement training course and the training course for prison officers, which starts after his/her appointment. The most common form of vocational training at secondary level is the training for the profession of chief prison officer (10325001, this is the code for this vocational training activity). The training aims to acquire the competencies required to carry out the most typical tasks and duties in the field of the work of a chief prison officer and to train professionals who can carry out the professional tasks and take the necessary measures in the field of security and reintegration in the prison service. Duration of training 4x1 weeks (Büntetés-végrehajtási Vizsgaközpont, 2021).

3.2. Closed punitive justice training - Department of Prison Service

The other branch of officer training is linked to an institution of higher education. The subject structure of the full-time correctional course at the Police College (RTF) remained unchanged until 2012. At that time, the curricular structure was examined and it was found that students enrolled in the Department of Prison Service (hereinafter referred to as the BV Department) were basically well versed in the security and practical aspects of prison service (Forgács, 2018; Pallo, 2014).

The next milestone in the transformation of the training system also occurred in 2012, marking a significant transition. After 40 years of operation, the Police College was merged into the University of Public Service (UPS) on 1 January 2012, continuing to operate as the Faculty of Police Sciences. As part of the Bologna Process, the dual training system, which has a history of several decades, was replaced by a new multi-cycle training system from the 2013/2014 academic year.

The new multi-cycle system (Bachelor, Master, and doctorate) has made qualifications more easily recognized across Europe, improved the quality of training, and opened up a much more comprehensive range of opportunities for students. The system of three consecutive cycles of training has created fewer inputs and more transitional opportunities, giving more time to develop one’s skills.

The first cycle, which provides a Bachelor’s degree (BA), offers a high level of professional skills for post-graduate employment and a sound theoretical basis for continuing studies at the Master’s level. Students in the Bachelor’s programme have no professional knowledge, except for those coming from a law enforcement secondary school

The Master’s programme lasts four semesters and is typically attended by professionals with theoretical and practical knowledge in a related law enforcement field. The Master’s programme has two outcomes, one for a job in the field and one for a PhD (Forgács, 2018).

The doctorate prepares for an academic degree and is the top of the training pyramid, providing interested professionals with significant – mainly theoretical – knowledge of law enforcement, social sciences, or humanities.

The internal proportion of knowledge supporting the classical fields of penitentiary specialisation has changed significantly, and the new training system has had a significant impact on the number of subjects studied in the field of penitentiary specialisation and on the system of subjects. While the old system emphasised subjects related to law and security, the new subject structure has increased practical knowledge and a significant change in subjects with classical human values (Forgács, 2018).

A further change occurred in September 2015, when the Faculty of Law Enforcement of the University of Public Service started to prepare the transition to a 4-year training programme for full-time working students. With the support of the Hungarian Prison Service, the Bv. Department has also been involved in developing the concept of the 4-year training. One of the most essential objectives of university education is to provide profession-specific knowledge to ensure that the acquired knowledge provides a solid basis for meeting further practical requirements (Forgács, 2018).

4. The statutory background of further training for staff in the punitive system

It is not sufficient, however, to select suitable employees, furnish them with appropriate knowledge, develop their capabilities in entry-level training, it is also necessary to pay attention to continuous further training, life-long learning.

The further training of punitive staff is respective of two important laws: one is Hszt¹, the other is Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs². The law stipulates that the minister cooperates with the National University of Public Service in developing the official training system of the staff of internal affairs institutions, qualified further training programmes, preparing the teaching staff and the training of management.

Law enforcement further training has two levels, with the following different levels. Further training for staff of internal affairs bodies must be realised through:

- centralised further training programmes;
- professional in-house further training programmes organised by the internal affairs body for their own staff (21. § (4) of Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs).

A law enforcement staff member must complete at least one centralised further training programme and one professional in-house further training programme each year. A law enforcement staff member shall receive training only through registered programmes (22. § (1) (2) of Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs). The annual obligation of official staff to participate in further training must be defined so that leave from work to participate in further training cannot exceed 5 workdays (24. § (4) of the Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs). If a law enforcement staff member attends regular or extra-school training, the acquisition of which is a requirement for the performance of his duties or is necessary for the performance of a higher function,

¹ Act XLII of 2015 on the employment status of professional staff of law enforcement agencies (Hszt. 2015. évi XLII. törvény a rendvédelmi feladatokat ellátó szervek hivatásos állományának szolgálati jogviszonyáról).

² Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs on the further training of official staff of civil national security services under the minister of internal affairs.

his obligation to participate in in-service training for the year in question shall be deemed to have been fulfilled (26. § of the Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs). The financial sources necessary for completing the further training of the official staff – at least in the amount that secures the completion of their prescribed obligations – must be provided by the given internal affairs body from the national budget (32. § of the Decree No. 4/2019. (III. 11) of the minister of internal affairs).

Investigating the problem from the perspective of practice and realisation, we find that further training is an important part of professional identity, and staff deem it highly important, too. This phenomenon can be detected primarily among reintegration officers and management, the demand for training increases the higher we go in academic qualification. Hegedűs and Ivaskevics assert that “many members of staff enrolled in masters programmes after completing their BA, and completed their law enforcement professional examination; however, there was less emphasis on the demand for training from members of staff with secondary qualifications” (Hegedűs & Ivaskevics 2016, p. 79).

Based on commanders’ and managers’ interviews Hegedűs and Ivaskevics find, however, that the staff members are often reluctant to go to the training programmes. There are several circumstances in the background of this fact, for instance, overburden³, as well as the factor that these training programmes were often organised not during working hours but in their free time – even though the law stipulates otherwise⁴. Nonetheless, “when they had completed their training, they had a really good opinion and were asking when they were going to do it again. They understood that it was good. There are stress management solutions. When we send employees to participate in a couple of days’ training, they come back well rested and changed. They get a lot of help there professionally, too, during situational practice” (Hegedűs & Ivaskevics 2016, p. 79).

Employees in direct contact with the detainees – reintegration officers – are regarded as a high-risk group from the perspective of burnout due to the nature of their work. “The frequency of psychosomatic diseases is linked to the anxiety of the staff and their tiredness having to do with overburden, the lack of rest and recreation”, as Boros and Csetneky assert (2002, p. 227).

In order to prevent stress and burnout training is clearly recommended. Hegedűs and Ivaskevics stress that their interviewees also recognised the significance of that: “those that had already taken part in mental hygiene training almost without exception mentioned the necessity of mental care and support for the employees, while those that had not had such experience laid less emphasis on the importance of training and mental hygiene help” (Hegedűs & Ivaskevics, 2016, p. 79).

5. Conclusion

The most critical human resources strategic challenge for the present and the future in the operation of the prison system – in addition to the continuous replenishment of human

³ Overburden appears on several levels: on the one hand in the number of detainees per officers and the hours of overtime (Hegedűs & Ivaskevics, 2016).

⁴ Official staff must be provided with exemption from service for the time of their participating in further training programmes prescribed by their individual and obligatory further training plans including the time of examinations.

resources necessary to maintain the lawful and smooth operation – is the selection, retention, consolidation, establishment and continuous training of active staff. The Hungarian Prison Service places increased emphasis on targeted recruitment and quality selection, and the use of competency-based selection process systems facilitates career integration.

In my paper, I examined how the selection, training, and continuous training of prison officers in Hungary are carried out and how the current system has evolved. The developmental curve of the period examined in the study shows that the training, professional knowledge, and preparation of prison staff are key to the performance of daily tasks as well as to the fulfilment of the longer-term organisational mission.

Policymakers have consistently recognised the importance of this and have tried to adapt the training system accordingly, ultimately contributing to the objective, which is nowadays formulated as follows: “The tools and values of penitentiary law today do not dominate, but serve the individual as well as society” (Pallo, 2019, p. 1). In line with the principle of lifelong learning, continuous training and further education are of paramount importance to ensure preparedness; training that is ideal for the individual is the best foundation for professional confidence, initiative, creativity, sense of responsibility, independent judgment and can support the development and deepening of organisational loyalty required for the provision of lawful services (Forgács, 2020).

Adopting an appropriate selection and training system, coupled with a forward-looking approach to training, is instrumental in enabling individuals to maintain a long-term role-organisation balance. This field, often offering relatively little visible positive feedback to those working in it, underscores the need for every possible measure to support them in their work. Reintegration is not solely the responsibility of this narrow profession but a collective responsibility that we all share.

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