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Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis



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Introduction

One of the objectives of the WP5 is related to the understanding of the learning experience of the detainees participating in the piloting of the curriculum. For that purpose, interviews were conducted with some participants and also with the facilitators of the program and a case study that draws information from several participants during the implementation.

The questions from the interviews with the two categories of people (inmates and facilitators) share common elements: what the inmates learned (What was the most important thing you have learned by participating in the activities of the program? What changes did you notice in the behavior of the participants during and after the finalization of the program?), the experience with virtual reality (Could you describe your experience with Virtual Reality? How did it help you? Were there any difficulties related to Virtual Reality? In your opinion, what was useful about including VR in the program?), enjoyable/easy-to-teach aspects and unpleasant/difficult-to-convey aspects (What did you like most about the program? What did you dislike about the program?), utility (Which part of the program was most useful in your opinion?), etc. For the case study, 2 questions were asked from some participants in each country: Please summarize what you have learned in today's lesson; How can you use what you have learnt in your life?.

Participants

A total of 14 detainees participated in the interviews conducted as part of this study. The participants were distributed across four countries: 3 from Cyprus, 5 from Greece, 2 from Romania, and 4 from Spain. Additionally, 13 facilitators were interviewed, comprising 4 from Cyprus, 2 from Greece, 3 from Romania, and 4 from Spain. Furthermore, 6 case studies were developed during the project implementation. These included 1 case study from Cyprus, 1 from Greece, 2 from Romania, and 2 from Spain. *See table 1 below.*

Table 1.

Category	Cyprus	Greece	Romania	Spain	Total
Detainees (Interviews)	3	5	2	4	14
Facilitators (Interviews)	4	2	3	4	13
Case Studies	1	1	2	2	6

Thematic analysis - Detainees

Based on the codes identified from analysing the interviews with inmates, several themes have been outlined, including communication and interpersonal relationship skills, values, self-awareness, perspective taking, the use of virtual reality, motivation and future planning, challenges, and areas of improvement.

Communication and interpersonal skills

Effective communication was a recurring theme, including listening skills, expressing emotions, setting boundaries, and addressing disagreements constructively: "How to communicate my needs and boundaries." Participants mentioned learning to manage disagreements constructively and respect others' boundaries: "I've learned how to communicate better with the people around me.;" "I learned how to communicate effectively"; "I've refined certain aspects of my communication style to better suit different situations and bring out the most effective elements of my character."

Values

Participants reflected on their values ..." I have redefined the values that play an important role in my life... I have revised the values and learnt to put them in the right order (position) hierarchically, depending on where I stand today", often identifying themes like family, health, morality, and education as central to their lives. This reflection (through the program) helped them reassess their priorities and also consider how values align with their actions ..." I saw that I had many values but I was destroying myself, now I have foundations, I take care of myself and think about my children and these things I will

keep, I learned to recognize my values and see the important things and think about my future and set goals.”

Self-Awareness

Participants frequently reflected on their own behaviors and decisions, recognizing past impulsivity and learning to think more critically about their actions ...”I understood why we need to think about our actions and our values.”;” I recognized the mistakes I made in the past and in human communications.” Many highlighted a newfound understanding of their values and how these could guide their future actions, especially in building better relationships with others ...” The most important thing is to maintain the relationship with the family, and this can only be achieved if I know how to show them respect, if I know how to communicate and if I know how to manage conflicts.”

Perspective taking and caring for others

Group discussions fostered a deeper understanding of different perspectives and the importance of treating others with dignity ...”The program has significantly increased my empathy and deepened my understanding of others.”; ”I learned to see different perspectives of situations.”

Use of Virtual Reality (VR)

For some detainees, this program gave the opportunity to interact for the first time with the VR technology and experienced discomfort at first ...” This was a completely new way of learning for me, and although it felt strange at first, I began to appreciate the immersive aspect that VR brings to training.”; ”I felt dizzy at the beginning of using the glasses, as I was not used to them.”. It was seen as a unique and engaging tool for learning ...”The VR experience in the training program was great!”. Many found the VR component engaging and beneficial, citing its ability to simulate real-life scenarios like job interviews or conflicts ...”I also found the virtual reality experience particularly engaging, especially the conversations between a former prisoner and an employer considering hiring someone. Watching this interaction through VR goggles made the experience feel more real and impactful.”

Motivation and Future Planning

Many participants gained motivation to pursue future goals like education, employment, and law-abiding behavior ... ”My goals are to find a job that can support my family and stay away from drugs.”; ”The program has helped me set professional goals and think about my future.”

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

In terms of challenges, some participants noted specific challenges such as adjusting to VR, discomfort with sensitive topics, and group dynamics ..." The training program addresses several important issues, but it tends to approach them on a superficial level rather than diving into the factual, in-depth details."; "I found some of the very personal questions to be quite uncomfortable, as they touched on sensitive topics that I wasn't entirely prepared to discuss." Suggestions for improvement included deeper exploration of topics and better support during activities.

Thematic analysis - Facilitators

Based on the codes identified from analysing the interviews with inmates, several themes have been outlined, including challenges in implementation, utility of VR and practical sessions, program strengths, program weaknesses, impact on participants, facilitator experience and growth, suggestions for improvement.

Challenges in implementation

One of the difficulties/challenges facilitators faced in the implementation process was the technical difficulties with VR, such as connectivity issues ... "The lack of IT support made it difficult to install and use the VR equipment properly." and user discomfort (e.g., dizziness) even if not for all participants ... Participants felt dizzy using VR, and it disrupted the session flow.". Facilitators often needed to adapt materials due to their complexity or mismatch with participants' educational levels ... "We had to constantly adapt materials because the ones provided were too complex for inmates."

Utility of VR and practical sessions

VR activities were highlighted as both engaging and challenging. While they provided a novel and practical application of learned skills (e.g., job interviews, communication), technical issues and user discomfort were frequently mentioned ... "The job interview in the virtual environment was the most useful for the interns. It helped them practice key skills like communication in a safe environment." ... "The use of VR was interesting but caused some participants to feel dizzy and disoriented." ... "VR activities gave the beneficiaries the opportunity to practice something fresh and new, making them feel closer to the real world." Facilitators emphasized the importance of practical aspects of curriculum, such

as role playing ..." I would reckon that the most useful part was the role-playing activities as the beneficiaries could express experiences from their own lives and comprehend better the theory."

Program strengths

Facilitators appreciated as effective activities fostering group interaction and personal reflection "Promotes personal reflection of the participants". It serves to work on and reflect on each person's social skills. Doing a lot of group activities was good because it allowed them to listen to each other's points of view and, at the same time, to present their own, which was enriching."; "Group activities encouraged participants to listen to each other's points of view and express their own." Facilitators valued the program's ability to teach interpersonal and workplace skills.

Program weaknesses

In line with the difficulties regarding technical issues with VR, facilitators mentioned lack of sufficient training for facilitators, particularly regarding VR use ("I believe that more training sessions would have been necessary for the staff in charge of implementing the program to use and go through the practical sessions, which focused on the use of VR equipment."). Another weakness mentioned was regarding the content that was too long and dense ... "The content of the sessions was extremely voluminous, with a lot of information, which required an adaptation of the contents and a synthesis to deliver information adapted to the educational level of the working group (too many exercises to implement)."

Impact on participants

Communication skills were the most mentioned benefit for the participants ..."I noticed that they communicated more between themselves, as well, during the breaks and after the finish of each session ... For sure, their communication skills improved as they seemed to comprehend the ways to communicate better."; "I believe that they reconsidered not helpful behaviors and not beneficial choices of the past in the workplace, they improved their communication skills and it was obvious that they want to use these skills both during their detention and mainly after their release, when it will be crucial to find a job and believe in their selves and values." Some participants gained motivation for personal improvement and even took some actions towards goals ... "I observed that the participants showed an increase in their motivation and confidence. They started to set employment goals and develop a more proactive attitude towards their future. At the end, some of them expressed their interest in improving their skills and preparing for specific job opportunities, asking about other programs related to job placement in the prison, and in local administrations."

Facilitator experience and growth

Some of the facilitators reflected on their own personal values and interpersonal skills during the program ...” During the training I found myself reconsider, as well, which my personal values are, how I prioritize them and what actions I take in order to ensure them. Moreover, I thought about my own committed actions and if I actually have redirected my path in the past if needed, thus, it assisted me in reconsider my actions.” They appreciated the opportunity to practice and apply theories like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) ... ”Because I believe this is an intervention that I want to use as a psychologist, it was very helpful for me to understand the whole process of ACT and how we can use it as in a group.” They appreciated the structured nature of the activities and learned new methods.

Suggestions for improvement

Facilitators recommended simplifying materials, improving VR integration, and providing more comprehensive training for facilitators ...”Creation of more simplified modules and for those with a lower level of knowledge, a training on how to handle the VR machines and possible errors.”;”To begin with, my proposal would be for the modules to be a bit shorter with less activities, so the participants could concentrate more on the role-playing activities as these seemed the most efficient. As far as the practical part goes, the participants seemed really interested in the activities there and seemed eager to learn even more things. Therefore, I would suggest to focus more on this with tasks like tips on how to create a CV, how to search for a job, what the necessary documents in order to work are (as there are detainees from other countries too).”

Case Studies

From the analysis of the narratives provided by participants after each session, we extracted several important ideas/areas regarding learnings and benefits of the ICS curriculum: personal growth, communication, workplace integration, emotional management, decision making, the use of virtual reality.

Personal Growth: Self-Awareness, Reflection, and Value-Based Living

Self-awareness and reflection

Many detainees acknowledge that understanding their values, emotions, and behaviours is crucial for personal growth. They see these skills as tools for rebuilding self-esteem, making better decisions, and moving forward in life: "I have realized that my thoughts make me behave in a certain way, and this will help me to think twice before doing something", "Being mindful of relapse, what challenges me and how I might cope when problematic situations arise.", "Honestly, it starts with getting real about who you are. It's like taking a good, hard look in the mirror and figuring out what's driving you—your dreams, your fears, all of it.", "Being able to take a hard look at yourself—sometimes with a bit of humour—helps you understand who you really are. That self-awareness is key when it comes to starting over. It's not just about knowing your strengths but also owning your mistakes and figuring out how to do better."

Values-based living

Identifying and adhering to core values is seen as a guide for making life decisions and fostering a sense of purpose. This is the contribution of ACT background of the program: "I noticed that we don't really know our personal values and it got me thinking about them", "I think this activity will help me realize that even though life can be difficult at times, I am in control of my decisions. If I focus on my values and what I want to achieve, I can move forward without letting problems stop me.". Some detainees noted that understanding their values and the fact that people can have different values would help them remain grounded in their relationships and professional settings. "Values are different for everyone, but they're what give us the foundation to stand strong in society. They're like the rules we live by that help us figure out who we are and how we treat others. Even though everyone's values might not be the same, they're what guide us in dealing with people and fitting into the bigger picture.", "But the thing is, everyone's values and ideals are different. What's important to one person might not mean the same to someone else. Understanding this diversity—why people think and act the way they do—is a big step toward better relationships and communication. At the end of the day, though, it's up to us to decide how much effort we're willing to put into becoming better versions of ourselves. For example, if I value honesty, I need to start by being honest with myself about my flaws and mistakes. Then I can work on fixing them, whether that means apologizing to someone I've wronged."

Communication: Active Listening, Empathy and Conflict Resolution

Active listening and empathy

Detainees recognize the importance of listening to others and understanding different perspectives to improve relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. They aim to use these skills to reduce misunderstandings and build stronger connections: "Active listening is key. This means giving the right eye contact, adjusting our voice to a respectful volume, and making sure we don't interrupt or change the subject. All these little things show the person we're talking to that we respect them and their point of view. Most importantly, we need to listen without immediately paraphrasing or putting our own spin on what they're saying. We have to let them speak their truth and take the time to fully understand their perspective before responding."

Conflict Resolution

Learning to manage anger and resolve conflicts constructively is seen as pivotal for maintaining peace in personal and professional relationships: "I can use what I've learned by maturing and doing a self-check, which helps me handle different situations at work without getting into conflicts. By looking for alternative solutions, I can find ways to solve the problems I face, staying calm and focused on finding a way through challenges instead of letting them turn into conflicts.", "I learned that when we run into a tough situation at work, there are different ways to deal with it. We can use strategies to avoid getting stuck or making things worse. It's all about finding the best way to handle things without letting stress or conflict take over."

Workplace Integration: Professional Readiness, Rights, and Responsibilities

Professional Readiness

Skills like creating resumes, presenting qualifications, and navigating workplace challenges (by setting healthy boundaries, for example) are viewed as key to securing and retaining jobs: "I'll make a plan when I go for an interview", "I can use what I've learned by keeping my resume short, honest, and clear

when looking for a job. In the interview, I should focus on my strengths but also be real about my weaknesses, showing I'm open to learning and improving. If they ask about my criminal record, it's up to me whether I want to bring it up or not. If it comes up, I can share it in a way that doesn't sound bad or make things awkward. The key is to be upfront, but also control how I tell my story and keep things positive.", "It will help me to learn to say "no" when something doesn't seem fair or when I can't do something. Sometimes I say "yes" to everything out of fear, but now I know that it is important to take care of myself and to set limits when necessary, and this will help me at work, because sometimes I don't say what bothers me for fear that others will get angry. Now I know that I can say what I feel calmly and clearly, and that it is important for others to respect my boundaries.", "I can use what I've learned by setting clear boundaries with myself and the people around me to build healthy, solid relationships. At work, if I'm honest, respectful, and stay true to my values, I can ask for what I need, negotiate, and get what I'm after— as long as it's realistic. Setting those boundaries helps me stay grounded and focused, while still being able to go after my goals without stepping on anyone's toes.

Rights and responsibilities

Understanding workplace rights and responsibilities helps detainees feel more confident and prepared for employment: "It helps me to know what rights I have at work, but also what my responsibilities are, so I can respect them.", "I can use what I've learned by understanding my rights at work, but also remembering I've got responsibilities. By respecting myself and the people I work with, I can do my part and help keep things running smoothly. It's all about working together, building trust, and making sure everything gets done right. That way, we can create a solid, positive vibe where everyone pulls their weight and things get done efficiently."

Emotional management

Recognizing and managing emotions, particularly anger, is viewed as crucial for maintaining composure and avoiding destructive behavior. Stepping back to assess situations before reacting helps detainees handle conflicts constructively: "Instead of letting my anger take over, I can step back, take a breath, and think things through. By doing this, I can stay calm, avoid unnecessary drama, and handle things in a way that's better for everyone involved."

Decision making

Many detainees emphasize the practicality of using their training to make better decisions in life. Applying learned concepts to make thoughtful life choices, from managing personal data to resolving workplace conflicts. "I can use what I've learned by being careful about where and why I share my personal information. Whether it's for work or in my social circles, I need to think about who I'm sharing it with and if it's really necessary. Protecting my privacy is important, so I should always make sure I'm making informed decisions about what I disclose."

Virtual reality training

VR simulations are particularly appreciated for providing realistic scenarios to practice skills such as job interviews, workplace behavior, and conflict resolution. Detainees see VR as an engaging way to prepare for real-world situations, boosting their confidence and readiness. "The opportunity to use virtual reality (VR) during the training was a game-changer for me. It allowed us to experience real-life scenarios, such as job interviews and different workplace situations, in a way that went beyond just theory."

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of the RECOMMIT project's pilot phase provides an in-depth understanding of the learning experiences of detainees, shedding light on both the effectiveness of the curriculum and areas for improvement. The findings, derived from interviews with participants and facilitators, as well as case studies, highlight critical aspects of personal development, workplace readiness, communication skills, and the integration of Virtual Reality (VR) training.

A key strength of the program is its ability to foster **personal growth** among detainees. Many participants reported increased self-awareness and reflection, emphasizing how the program helped them understand their own behaviours, values, and the consequences of their actions. This is particularly evident in the development of **value-based living**, where participants were encouraged to assess their decision-making processes and align them with positive societal norms. Furthermore, the emphasis on **emotional management** allowed individuals to recognize triggers, regulate their responses, and develop healthier coping mechanisms—an essential skill for reintegration into society.

Another notable strength is the program's impact on **communication skills**, particularly in terms of **active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution**. Many detainees expressed that they had never been given the tools to actively listen and engage in constructive conversations before participating in the program. Facilitators observed that over time, participants became more open to discussing their experiences and demonstrating greater empathy toward their peers. This transformation is crucial, as improved communication skills enhance social interactions and contribute to smoother reintegration into both personal and professional environments.

The **workplace integration** component of the program was also well-received, with detainees gaining valuable insights into their **rights and responsibilities** as future employees. By addressing the importance of professional readiness, the curriculum empowered participants with knowledge about legal protections, workplace ethics, and essential employability skills. Many expressed that this information was particularly useful, as it provided them with a sense of direction for life after incarceration.

A groundbreaking feature of the curriculum was the incorporation of **Virtual Reality (VR) training**, which added an interactive and immersive element to the learning process. Participants found the VR experiences engaging and beneficial in helping them apply theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios. The simulations allowed them to practice decision-making and problem-solving in a safe environment, making abstract concepts more tangible. However, despite its advantages, VR training also presented challenges. Some participants faced **technological difficulties**, such as discomfort with the equipment or an initial struggle to adapt to the virtual environment. Facilitators noted that while VR was a valuable tool, it required further refinement to ensure accessibility and ease of use for all learners. Despite these strengths, several weaknesses were identified in the program. One of the primary concerns was the **varying levels of participant engagement**, with some detainees struggling to remain motivated throughout the course. While many found the sessions informative, others faced difficulties in maintaining focus, particularly in theoretical sections that lacked interactive components. Additionally, facilitators highlighted **challenges in tailoring the curriculum to individual learning needs**, as participants came from diverse educational backgrounds and had different levels of prior knowledge.

Another area for improvement relates to the **structuring of certain topics**, especially those related to **rights and responsibilities**. Some detainees reported that while they understood the legal and ethical aspects presented, they struggled to see their practical application in their personal circumstances. This suggests a need for more **case-based learning**, where real-life examples and role-playing exercises can enhance comprehension and engagement.

To strengthen the program's impact, several suggestions can be considered for future iterations. First, **enhancing the customization of learning materials** by incorporating adaptive teaching methodologies can help address the diverse educational backgrounds of participants. This could include offering differentiated content, providing additional support for those who require it, and incorporating more **interactive and experiential learning opportunities** beyond VR, such as group activities, storytelling, and real-world simulations.

Second, **expanding the use of VR** while addressing accessibility concerns can further enrich the learning experience. Investing in **simplified VR onboarding sessions** for participants unfamiliar with the technology may help ease the transition and reduce any initial discomfort. Additionally, creating **more structured VR scenarios** that gradually introduce complex decision-making elements but can make the experience more user-friendly and effective.

Lastly, **enhancing follow-up support** for detainees post-program completion can ensure that the skills acquired are sustained over time. Establishing mentorship programs, offering additional workshops, or creating digital resources that participants can access after their release could significantly improve the long-term impact of the curriculum.

In conclusion, the RECOMMIT project has demonstrated a strong potential to contribute to the rehabilitation and reintegration of detainees by equipping them with essential life and professional skills. The program's strengths lie in its focus on personal growth, communication, workplace readiness, and innovative VR integration. However, to maximize its effectiveness, addressing participant engagement, curriculum adaptability, and technological accessibility will be essential. By refining these areas and continuing to innovate, the program can further support detainees in building a stable and productive future, ultimately contributing to reduced recidivism and successful reintegration into society.

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