

"Utvei" - A New Digital Platform for Education for inmates: the Norwegian case

The Norwegian Education Act grants inmates the right to education. To fulfil this right, schools must give their students access to digital tools. The educational rights of inmates are challenged by the lack of a digital infrastructure adapted to this particular educational context. Addressing this is critical both for safeguarding the welfare rights of a vulnerable group and for achieving national goals of increased social participation and reduced recidivism.

The existing digital solution for education in Norwegian prisons, Desktop for Schools (DFS), does not meet the content and functional requirements of either the education sector or the correctional services. The technological lag in prison schools results in a real loss of rights for inmates.

"Utvei" – a new measure to safeguard educational rights and public safety

The correctional services and the education sector have jointly developed a new digital school platform, called "Utvei" – freely translated, "the way out". It is designed to meet the school authorities' need for digital tools to fulfil educational rights and provide education in accordance with the national curriculum, while ensuring compliance with correctional security requirements.



Jan-Erik Sandlie, Deputy Director of the Norwegian Directorate of Correctional Service, and Bjørn Lyngedal, Director of the Department of Education and Competence in Vestland County Municipality, are the project owners of the initiative to implement Utvei. In the photograph, Sandlie (centre, in a grey suit) and Lyngedal (far right) are flanked by key contributors from the school, the county municipality and the correctional services (www.agderfk.no).

The ambition of the project is that Utvei will bridge the gap. At the societal level, the goals are to increase qualifications, reduce social exclusion and improve reintegration into society. The project is regarded as a pioneering effort that renews current thinking on digital security in Norwegian prisons, and it has been a demanding and complex task requiring time and resources from all the parties involved.

Inmates in Norwegian prisons have the same right to education as the general population. Many have had inadequate schooling, and many struggle with reading and writing difficulties. The new solution includes tools designed to address this.

Education in accordance with the curriculum requires access to digital tools. For inmates to obtain formal qualifications, they need access to the tools for competence building that are relevant in today's educational, working and social life. Utvei delivers education in line with the principle of normality and the rationale behind the import model. The platform also provides reading and writing support, and it strengthens adapted education for inmates, a group with a higher prevalence of learning difficulties and additional challenges than students in ordinary schools.

Piloting and current status

The platform was piloted at Agder Prison in the spring and autumn of 2024. The joint evaluation in the autumn of 2024 concluded that the system meets the basic functionality required for education and satisfies the correctional services' requirements for control and security. Both parties wished to develop the pilot version further, including digital tools for vocational training, an examination solution, and further adaptations relating to security and control.

Utvei is now in use at four prisons: Agder Prison, Mandal division; Indre Østfold Prison, Eidsberg division; Bergen Prison; and Vik Prison.

"No one wants inmates to use educational tools to communicate freely with the outside world, or to plan and commit criminal acts," says Jan-Erik Sandlie, adding: "Everyone agrees that it is important for those released to take part in working life and succeed as ordinary citizens."

"We find it exciting to take part in the pilot project, which will make it possible to use the internet and digital tools in education within the prison walls. This is of course both limited and strictly regulated, but it allows us to provide an education that better prepares inmate students for the digital world and for working life. This is unique in Norway, and probably internationally as well," says Arly Hauge, County Director of Education in Agder County.

"Equitable digital tools in prison are necessary if education is to fulfil the right to education, provide the opportunity to sit examinations, and offer qualifications for life afterwards," says Bjørn Lyngedal. Vestland County coordinates the work on ICT in prison education on behalf of all the county authorities.

The technical solution

Utvei is built on a cloud-based solution using Citrix and Microsoft Azure. This provides an up-to-date IT platform, ensuring that education in prisons keeps pace with modern standards. Users work in a Windows 11 client with Office 365, including Microsoft Teams for Education. Teams for Education plays a central role, facilitating communication between teachers and students and serving as a tool for learning. Utvei also offers a limited number of whitelisted websites with full functionality, as well as a larger number of websites with read-only access, and isolated web browsers have been implemented. Alongside the control of communication, the security features include the ability to search internet logs and continuous screen recording.

Why it matters

The new platform helps ensure that the right to education is equal, regardless of whether it is provided inside or outside prison. Norway's legislation granting inmates the right to formal, qualifying education has been regarded as an essential factor in explaining the low recidivism rates compared with many other countries.

Under the new Norwegian Education Act, which includes the right to complete upper secondary education and to vocational retraining, a potentially large number of inmates fall within the target group for education. The importance of formal qualifications for participation in work and society is well documented, and nearly 50 per cent of inmates in Norwegian prisons have not completed upper secondary education, with even higher figures among young inmates. Utvei will therefore be a key measure in the efforts of the education sector and the correctional services to reduce youth crime.

The shared aim of the correctional services and the responsible school authorities is that Utvei will secure the right to qualifying education for inmates in the years to come. The joint plan is for the platform to be implemented in all Norwegian prisons.

(The interview quotations are taken from a news article published by Agder County Municipality, www.agderfk.no).