

Changes in Probation Training in England and Wales: The Probation Qualification Framework (PQF) Three Years On

Caroline Skinner*
Rachel Goldhill*

Abstract

This article draws on the personal experience of two lecturers delivering the academic programme of the Probation Qualification Framework to students employed by a number of different Probation Trusts. It considers the current qualifying arrangements and identifies a number of issues that have come to the fore over the first three years of implementation. Specifically, it establishes the importance of all stakeholders, students, the employing Trust and NOMS understanding what is of fundamental importance for work-based distance learning study. The changing composition and characteristics of the student body and the ways in which new developments in professional knowledge are included in the curriculum are explored with particular focus on the new group of graduate entrants at Part 3. The authors remain committed to the belief that those who work in the criminal justice system of England and Wales, supporting change and rehabilitation with a complex and vulnerable client group must have a nationally recognised qualification which includes both employer responsibility for quality practice based learning and a Higher Education award.

Keywords: Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) - Probation Qualification Framework (PQF) - Reflective Practice - Professional Knowledge - Desistance

Introduction

This article contains the views of two lecturers delivering the academic component of the PQF with students employed by ten different Probation Trusts. Both of us were involved with the Diploma of Probation Studies (DipPS) from its inception in the late 1990s as Practice Development Assessors (PDAs) and then latterly as academics. It is necessarily a personal view; nevertheless it raises a number of pressing issues that we believe will be of interest to Probation and Higher Education personnel which, once acknowledged, can be readily addressed. Observations are offered on the changes in probation officer qualification, with the move DipPS to the PQF three years into the programme. It includes thoughts on the implementation of the new qualifying arrangements along with an assessment of its strengths and limitations for delivering the knowledge and skills necessary for probation staff. Recognising that this article has been written as the Probation Service fights for survival

* Caroline Skinner is senior lecturer at The Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth. Email: carrie.skinner@port.ac.uk

* Rachel Goldhill is senior lecturer and regional tutor at The Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth. Email: rachel.goldhill@port.ac.uk

against plans to privatise seventy per cent of its work (Transforming Rehabilitation 2013), recommendations for improvements on qualifying arrangements may seem somewhat pointless. However, we are firmly committed to the belief that those who work in the criminal justice system of England and Wales, supporting change and rehabilitation with a complex and vulnerable client group, must have a nationally recognised qualification in Higher Education. Therefore this is written with principled optimism that the knowledge base required to effect desistance from harmful behaviour will continue in some guise or other.

Background Context

Probation training has been a contentious issue for several decades with the need for a quality educative process that promotes the highest possible standards of practice (Whitehead & Thompson 2004; Nellis 2007; Durnescu & Stout 2011). Complex political processes have evolved to embrace new priorities and emphasise different issues. The earliest ad hoc training arrangements developed into the formalised Certificate in Qualification of Social Work (CQSW) of the 1960s which became the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) in the early 1990s. Following the 'Howard Gap', named after the Home Secretary Michael Howard who ended the social work affiliation with the probation qualification and left the Service without recruitment and training arrangements for two years (Hanson 2008 in Annison 2013), the DipPS emerged. In 2010 the PQF replaced the DipPS.

The last three decades have altered inextricably the way that rehabilitation is understood and delivered with the association between politics, economic circumstances and penal policy affecting the service and its work with courts, communities and offenders (Feeley & Simon 1994; Garland 2001). Chui & Nellis (2003) describe the post-war rehabilitative model of justice as one that took into account the individual circumstance of each offender as much as it did the crime, recognising that external influences can affect an individual's propensity for crime. This suggests a cause and effect explanation for criminal behaviour that allowed practitioner experts, such as probation officers, to advise on appropriate treatments. Since the 1970s, doubt has been cast on the effectiveness of such methods along with a moral and ideological critique that identified the potential for discrimination where excessively long and intrusive interpersonal treatments were imposed (Lewis 2005).

Simultaneously, the ascendancy of the free market neo-liberal ideology, espoused by successive governments since Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, promoted a crime control model of justice, expressing punitive sentiments and delivering tougher sentences to replace penal welfarism. Garland (2001) identified the elevation of victims as significant; individual victimisation became transformed into a collective and common experience used to justify support for tougher sentences. Populism, whereby electioneering advantage is sought through public appeasement, has been embraced by all the main political parties at the expense of informed strategies reflecting the evidence of research or professional views.

Relationships between government and criminal justice agencies became transformed as control of working practices, including training and awards have become micro-managed centrally and subject to changing ideology. Garland (2001) concludes that a profoundly different way of approaching crime has unfolded over the past 30 years influencing the way that practitioners make decisions, allocate resources, deploy their powers and are regarded by the public, media and politicians.

Probation qualifying arrangements have become focused on criminological rather than social work training (Annison 2007) with recruitment for training now employer-led.

Trainees/students are employees of their local probation Areas/Trusts and as such gain access to qualifying only if workforce planning determines it viable. As employees, they need to demonstrate practice compliance to the aims of the organisation which in recent years has become dominated by the managerialist and public protection agendas delivered via target driven risk assessment and management (Farrant 2006). The Regulatory Framework for the PQF sets out the need for learners to work to NOMS' purpose of protecting the public and reducing re-offending by delivering the punishment and orders of the courts and by helping offenders to reform their lives (MoJ 2010:11). Indeed their value as an employee is determined by their competence in delivering these principles with work routinely monitored for compliance. In this sense, knowledge and skills that compliment the needs of the employing organisation will necessarily be prioritised and the curriculum has consequently become tailored to these needs.

The traditional university based professional qualifying routes no longer exist. The DipPS required a competence based vocational assessment combined with a Higher Education degree to be undertaken within two years as the route to qualifying as a probation officer. It was designed to equip the trainees undertaking it for their role in public protection and reducing crime (Home Office 1998). Significantly, the curriculum to be delivered to probation students by the HEIs became determined by the Home Office and latterly the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) through the practice of awarding contracts. Currently just three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remain involved in the delivery of the PQF -Portsmouth, De Montfort and Sheffield Hallam.

Criticism of combining academic learning and competence-based assessment (NVQs) in the qualifying vehicle of the DipPS was largely centred on fears that reflective learning would become marginalised in favour of a skills based approach (McGowan 2002). Nellis (2001) identified the potential for intellectually impoverished knowledge as operational know-how only acquired in the workplace through learning and observation, superseded 'overarching knowledge', the "...deep understanding of the forces which shape the social and penal context in which probation officers are being asked to practice, the competing perspectives on this issue and the ethical theories which permit judgement of both the means and ends of probation practice" (Nellis 2001:423). Treadwell (2006) vividly described his fears that probation qualifying programmes of the 21st century would 'foster an enforcement-driven mentality' as trainees imbibed the prevailing discourse around risk and the public protection. Inherent in these criticisms is the belief that the probation task is essentially a moral endeavour "designed to give concrete expression to the social rights of citizens" (Raynor & Robinson 2009:15). Within probation in England and Wales, practitioners are required to make judgements concerning individuals that have serious and far reaching consequences. It is argued that such judgements over breach, recall, licence conditions, drug testing, electronic monitoring, programme and other interventions, should be in the hands of those who have developed sufficient moral integrity to engage with matters of human complexity (Millar & Burke 2012). Such a view recognises the risks inherent in ignoring the essential humanity of probation work in order to protect against unnecessary punitivism and exclusion.

Humanitarian values supportive of rehabilitation need to be articulated clearly in reports, records, meetings and with the individual concerned, if probation is not to be debased. Producing accurate and balanced risk assessments means evaluating complex information and having a deep understanding of the personal and situational factors that may have contributed to the commission of the offence (Burnett, Baker & Roberts 2007; Fitzgibbon 2007)). Comparative professions with similar powers to impact on the individual both positively and negatively, - doctors, teachers, lawyers, and social workers, have lengthy qualifying arrangements and strict ethical codes to protect their client groups; work with offenders

should be no exception. Probation employers need to be able to attract quality candidates, perhaps those considering careers in these other professions, with comparable qualifications, status and remuneration (Dominey 2010).

Despite a coercive and punitive subtext, organisational effectiveness depends on the 'professional relationship' (Burnett & McNeill 2005) as a core condition for changing the behaviour and social circumstances associated with recidivism. Probation work, uniquely amongst criminal justice agencies, remains inherently a 'people profession' (Thompson 2009) with the need for practitioners to utilise skills associated with social work - client-centeredness, empathy and warmth. Practitioners need to be able to engage and motivate individuals in a programme of change aimed at helping them lead law abiding lives.

The PQF Structure

The rationale for the move from the DipPS to the PQF was to enable current probation service officers to train without losing job security and employment benefits. It also offered a way to facilitate a fast-track qualification, the Graduate Diploma, for existing and newly recruited staff with relevant degrees. It introduced for the first time qualifications for PSOs who work with lower risk offenders alongside a new qualification for Probation Case Administrators and more flexible qualifications leading to eligibility for Probation Officer posts. The aim was to secure a suitably qualified workforce equipped to meet the needs of the 21st century (Skills for Justice 2013).

For existing staff to be selected for the PQF they must complete the Community Justice VQ Level 3 or the Certificate in Higher Education, pass a test designed to assess ability in written communication and judgement and be successful in interview. There are three entry points into the PQF; Part 1 and Part 2 which together comprise the Foundation Degree in Community Justice and allow the successful individual to progress to Part 3, the Honours Degree in Community Justice. Graduates with a relevant degree (the list is currently limited although there have been moves to widen it) are able to commence at Part 3 providing they have been in practice for at least 9 months and completed six level 5 VQ in Community Justice units (PI 07/2010).

Probation officer professional knowledge necessarily entails an understanding of complex political, economic and social processes that affect how and why people offend, the way they are punished and the best ways to help them desist. Practitioners will have direct engagement with people whose lives, in many cases, are characterised by trauma, deprivation and exclusion. They will therefore require a broad understanding of known factors related to offending (social and individual) and a strong but flexible set of skills that can be adapted to meet the diverse needs of the individual. The VQ Level 5 in Community Justice evaluates these skills; starting in Part 2 it requires successful completion of 12 units for the degree to be awarded. Completion of each of the three levels takes 9 months so that the full PQF programme is now 27 months.

The academic component of the PQF is delivered via blended learning. This is a mixture of online teaching, face to face workshops and assessed written assignments. While acknowledging the various benefits of e-learning (Madoc-Jones, Buchanan & Senior 2003; Stout & Dominey 2006), face to face contact and learning through discussion has been maintained through University led workshops. Adult learning theory (Rogers 1989) proposes that mature students learn best when they can link their life experiences to the learning process and workshops are designed with a mixture of taught input and group exercises to assist in the assimilation of new knowledge. The taught curriculum delivered through online

units and workshops was developed utilising our experience from the DipPS programme and drawing on recent research and literature on criminal justice, penology and probation work. We recognised there had been changing priorities within the employing organisation and noted carefully the information outlined in the PQF specification for tendering. Whilst the dominant discourse remained risk, punishment and public protection, an emerging interest could be discerned in the ways in which offenders could be supported into desistance through the acquisition of skills and the enhancement of well-being (Casey, Day, Vess & Ward 2013).

Most Trusts have committed themselves to the Offender Engagement Programme (OEP), an initiative that draws on the desistance model. Desistance theory requires practitioners to have an awareness of the adverse effects of social circumstances on personal behaviour. Farrell (2007:93) argues that it starts by asking what can the criminal justice system do to assist the processes of evolving a new identity disassociated from offending and utilises social context theories of maturational reform, narrative theory and social bonds alongside the development of human and social capital. The objective is to promote these aspects through the facilitation of pro-social networks enabling the acquisition of new skills and encouraging the individual to develop a 'coherent pro-social identity' (Maruna 2001:7). The related Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision (SEEDS) training is in the process of being rolled out to staff. SEEDS brings together a tested range of evidence-based practice approaches to effective engagement that emphasise the need for a close, personal relationship between practitioner and client that model acceptance, respect, support, empathy and belief in order to produce a positive climate for change (Lewis 2012). Some of the Trusts have been involved in the Professional Judgement Pilot where staff work to relaxed National Standards reducing the amount of time spent on bureaucracy and facilitating better engagement.

However, it should be noted that tensions are evident between such 'humanistic practices' (Burke & Millar, 2012) embedded in the Offender Engagement Programme and the necessity of meeting politically-led goals endorsing managerialism, privatisation and market values (Burke, 2012). We have observed how this new focus on the desistance research has produced a form of dual narrative within the service – punishment and coercion versus rehabilitation and inclusion, which can at times appear in conflict. The tensions that this can generate for practitioners has led to an emphasis being placed on the resolution of professional moral dilemmas 'balancing the principles of justice and the demands of a technicist environment with creating and maintaining positive working relationships with offenders' (Gregory 2011:48). The programme of learning begins with an examination of the personal, professional and organisational values that guide attitudes and beliefs. The premise is that professionals' values are important in decision making as they determine how we behave in relation to others (offenders, colleagues, fellow students, other agencies etc...). Helping students to recognise the role these values play in practice judgements and decision-making begins the process of critical thinking. Understanding and working with diversity is also introduced early in the programme to establish building blocks for legal and ethical practice.

A number of written assignments require students to include accounts of offenders' diversity issues so that they are able to recognise their own potential for discriminatory practice and become aware of the differences and similarities between themselves and others. Students are helped to develop reflective practice - the ability to critically analyse the research and literature pertaining to probation work. On successful completion of study the goal is to produce quality staff trained to an advanced level who model the highest professional standards.

Three years on – some observations

Some distinct differences in student composition within the PQF are coming to light. Learners recruited onto Part 1 and 2 of the PQF are all PSOs, some with many years of experience working in the service. By contrast, the majority of learners on the DipPS were recruited from outside the organisation with little direct knowledge of the probation service. From the induction onwards, it was apparent that an entirely different student group had enrolled onto the Community Justice Degree. The total sum of knowledge about the organisation contained within the groups was extensive with PSOs who had been working in Courts, Approved Premises, Prisons, Youth Justice, Drug & Alcohol, Integrated Offender Management teams as well as generic offender management, programmes and unpaid work. Some had experienced a variety of roles over the years, others had been in one role albeit for a considerable length of time but all had worked directly with this client group and had considerable understanding of their particular specialism. Significantly, PQF students were able to incorporate new knowledge; while some found the necessity for change in their practice initially challenging and deskilling, for the most the discomfort was temporary. Having previous relevant work experience seemed to facilitate the integration of theory into practice with students learning to adapt their practice and appreciating the rewards of doing so.

Enthusiasm and engagement with the learning programme from the start was more readily discernible with students on the PQF than the DipPS. This may be because a significant number of DipPS trainees had recently graduated with Criminology, Community Justice or Psychology degrees and further academic study was viewed as unnecessary and frustrating. By contrast few of the PQF students entering at Part 1 had studied at higher level recently or at all and while some expressed anxiety about their ability, most were excited by the opportunities presented. These students should not be seen as a homogenous group; included in the DipPS were PSOs who had chosen to train and within the PQF there are individuals for whom the training represents a strategic pathway towards better remuneration, professional recognition and, more recently, improved job security and prospects. Nevertheless, the level of learner participation and interaction with tutors has been considerably greater than with DipPS trainees. Students' greater familiarity and confidence with technological advances and the ability of university teachers to use these tools to stimulate ideas and discussions in increasingly creative ways has contributed to a sense of lessening the 'distance' between student and tutor for which distance learning has been criticised (Treadwell 2006).

Recent data from NOMS on the diversity of those enrolling on the PQF has captured a number of significant differences in the gender, ethnicity, disability and age in comparison with those who studied under the DipPS arrangements. There are fewer students undertaking the PQF than enrolled on the DipPS despite the push to train up PSOs post Sonnex. This may reflect the uncertainty that Trusts are experiencing over the future of the service. University of Portsmouth records identify that since 2010 and time of writing (Summer 2013) 426 students have enrolled on the PQF with 279 students beginning at Foundation Degree and 147 on the Graduate Diploma. Of these just under 11% withdrew from the programme of the Foundation Degree and just over 2% withdrew from the Graduate Diploma. We are not able to make comparisons with the DipPS over attrition (drop out) rates as no data is available although our observations are that those students in the Foundation Degree who have less support within the workplace are the ones who withdraw or struggle to complete.

Table 1 below identifies some of the differences between DipPS trainees and PQF students.

Table 1

	<u>DipPS</u>	<u>PQF Community Justice</u>	<u>PQF Graduates Diploma</u>
<u>Male entrants</u>	26%	21%	27%
<u>BAME</u>	16%	22%	18%
<u>Disabilities</u>	4.5%	15%	20%
<u>Age on Enrolment</u>			
Under 25	34.1%	1%	11%
25-34	43.2%	40%	80%
35-44	15.9%	24%	9%
45-55	6.8%	25%	0%
55+	0%	5%	0%

(Adapted from NOMS 2013)

With regard to the age of the students entering the PQF, those entering the Community Justice degree are on average older than the majority of trainees from the DipPS (NOMS 2013) although those entering the Graduate Diploma are on a par with the DipPS entrants. As already mentioned, a greater willingness has been shown by those on Part 1 & 2 of the PQF to participate in online and workshop discussions, to examine contentious practice issues and disclose information about their own practice successes and shortcomings than had been evident in the DipPS trainees. Increased maturity might assist with confidence in expressing their opinions and thoughts coupled with greater practice experience to draw on but the positive outcome is that students are able to quickly grasp the benefits of reflection for their practice.

In recent years the probation service has seen a large increase in women at main grade levels (Bailey, Knight & Williams 2007:125; Annison 2007; Mawby & Worrall 2011). The probation service pre 1990 was unequivocally male dominated yet there is now an approximate 70/30 split in favour of women. Annison's (2013) article presents a detailed analysis of the pace and scale of the change in gender dominance and she notes (2007:151) that the first intake of the DipPS across England and Wales entailed a similar gender split. The lack of male students enrolling on the PQF continues to be an issue. Among several possible explanations Annison (2007) offers is the fact that young women have grown in confidence in identifying and taking opportunities for career advancement; that the bureaucratisation of probation caused by public sector reform and managerialism requires staff with strong computer and organisational skills and the changes in the way interventions are delivered lends them to adaptable working. During the New Labour Government years (1997- 2010) the probation service recruited increasing number of PSOs (Mills, Silvestri & Grimshaw 2010) growing to a point whereby they accounted for 46.4% of frontline staff in 2008. The gender balance for this staff group was similarly female with statistics gathered by the Ministry of Justice (2010) showing a 67/33% split. Current data (see Table 1 above) confirms the small number of men entering the PQF.

As a career in probation appears to have become less appealing to men a number of explanations have been advanced as contributing to this trend. In 2004 both POs and PSOs were given the title of 'Offender Managers' (OMs) leading to the blurring of role boundaries and concerns about deprofessionalisation. Annison (2013) quotes Acker (2006) as identifying that restructuring of management can lead to more interesting work, but when restructuring is applied to frontline employees they generally acquire additional responsibility without the benefits of additional remuneration. As in other professional occupational groups, the feminisation of staff has been observed to hinder an organisation's capacity to achieve and maintain professional status. Bolton & Muzio (2008) identify that "a common and recurrent theme is the gendered processes of professional projects that marginalize,

downgrade and exploit women and women's work". Fitzgibbon (2013) suggests that probation staff now share the dubious status of the 'precariat' a term used by Guy Standing (2011) to describe on-going insecurity within employment defined by a number of identifiable factors – job shortages, unclear job descriptions, minimal opportunities for career progression, lack of protection and regulation, deskilling and casualisation. The probation service as a small section of NOMS, an organisation now led predominantly by male prison officials, is likely to see further downward pressure on pay levels coupled with higher workloads and will struggle to make its voice heard. It may be that some or all of the above have contributed to the lack of men entering the PQF as confirmed by Table 1.

It has long been recognised as vital to the effectiveness of the probation service to have a representative workforce that reflects the ethnic composition of the communities being served (NPS 2001; 2003). On a more positive note, the numbers of students entering the PQF who have come from minority ethnic backgrounds has increased. Several HMIP reports on Race Equality (2000; 2004) in the service had been critical of the drop in trainees from minority backgrounds entering the DipPS. The previous CQSW and DipSW had made good use of the 'access to higher education courses' in recruiting non traditional students. The DipPS attracted many young graduates in their twenties but was also very white (NOMS 2013). The data (Table 1) supports our impressions of changes with more students entering from minority backgrounds.

Under the Equality Act 2010 HEIs have a duty to both identify and support students with learning disabilities. The data collected by NOMS (2013) confirms an increase in the numbers of students enrolling on the PQF with registered learning disabilities. This corresponds to nationally rising trends of students with disabilities in HEIs mostly in the category of 'dyslexia' (Harrison, Hemingway, Sheldon, Pawson & Barnes 2009). Unfortunately, this is sometimes used as a catch-all description for a range of specific learning difficulties and every individual requires a thorough assessment to correctly determine the learning need and access appropriate support. Students with learning disabilities on the PQF are more likely to have had a formal assessment of their workplace needs as employees and the information contained in the assessment report can, with the consent of the individual, be relayed to the university and be used to gain access swiftly to effective academic support. All HEIs recognise that working to support the diversity needs of the student will enhance their overall experience of study and improve retention rates. The Disability Advice Centre is available to PQF students and on registering their disability they are signposted to its services. However, we acknowledge that this can sometimes make the student feel as if they are left to their own devices to manage their disability and that more is needed to maximise their opportunities for success on the PQF.

Graduate Entrants

We have observed that the arrangements for graduate students to enter the PQF at part 3 have been a challenge to both employing Trusts and the University. Graduates have approximately 9 months work experience before the start of the university programme in which to learn the role of the PSO and complete 6 VQ Level 5 units. For some this is a huge and unrealistic demand and some Trusts have chosen to extend the graduates contracts so that more time is spent in practice before beginning the academic programme in order to raise their levels of professional competence. The relevant degree needed to secure a place on the programme has to be 'recent' and if over two years, an essay is set to 'test' the academic skills and knowledge of the candidate. Graduate students need attend just four university run workshops, pass three pieces of assessed work and twelve units of the VQ Level 5, to successfully attain the Diploma and be qualified to practice. Missing out on Parts 1 & 2 of

the PQF appears to have impacted on the level of understanding graduates bring to their academic studies in relation to values and ethics. Demonstrating an ability to work to organisational processes has been unproblematic, but professional artistry, making 'judgements of quality' (Schon 2001:7) necessary for successful management of complex cases has not always been evident. The assignments and discussions of graduate students tend to emphasise an ability to 'follow procedures' rather than demonstrating an ability to think through the intricacies of risk assessment and management.

This raises the question of whether the competing requirements of public protection and desistance and the associated tensions between these approaches can be adequately addressed within such a short time frame. Will graduates from the PQF remain stranded at a level of practice concerned with procedures and targets or can they evolve into skilled and reflective practitioners displaying nuanced judgements concerning justice, fairness and proportionality? Clearly employing Trusts will share concerns about graduates displaying deficits in analytical assessment skills and being insufficiently knowledgeable for practice. Yet those organisations that value compliance with 'policies, procedures, systems and computers' (Whitehead & Statham 2006:226) over reflection may find their staff are "trained rather than properly educated practitioners, technicians encouraged to do as they are told, rather than professionals who might think independently, question orthodoxy and produce creative and inspired work which adapts to new challenges in a changing society" (Bhui 2001:638). Ironically, this may be exactly what the private sector want in those they employ to deliver the rehabilitation revolution!

Organisational Factors

A key difference for the student studying under the PQF rather than the DipPS is that they are no longer supernumerary and do not have a protected caseload. Student workload is managed differently by different Trusts. Some have developed specific guidance for managers and assessors providing clear indication of what sort and number of cases should be allocated as the student progresses through the programme. They may make use of workload management tools designed to fulfil a duty of care to the individual student to protect from overload. For instance, students studying on part 1 of the PQF are treated as 0.8 of a full time employee; in parts 2 and 3 they are 0.6. They would also get credit for reports and Tier 4 cases. Other Trusts offer only vague suggestions for PSO learners to have sufficient opportunities to gain knowledge and understanding that all too easily can be compromised by the demands of the workplace. In these offices excessive caseloads are common and demanding work and training schedules further erode study time. It is reported that some team managers received little preparation about staff commencing the PQF with the result that student experiences are extremely variable. Knowing that others studying on the PQF are less pressured can build a sense of injustice and resentment; it also, we would argue, discredits the legitimacy of the PQF.

The decision to remove the Practice Development Assessor (PDA) role from the PQF is, in large part, responsible for these disparities. Probation Trusts have implemented differing combinations of support, learning development and assessment to PQF students. In the DipPS arrangements, the PDA played a significant role in determining appropriate levels of learning for the trainee. PDAs undertook the assessment of the Community Justice NVQ Levels 4 awards, managed the learning allocated to the trainee by providing learning opportunities, supervision and coaching. Both trainees and PDAs had the benefit of one of nine Training Consortia that developed and co-ordinated induction, training arrangements and development programmes throughout their region. They also provided guidance on appropriate workload and learning experiences that helped standardise trainee experience

within different Probation Areas. In some Areas cases allocated to the trainees were put on the PDA's caseload which meant that s/he had responsibility for total oversight of all assessments, interventions, records and breach decisions. Most PDAs had detailed knowledge about each of their trainees that enabled informed decisions to be made about sequencing appropriate learning and offering support whenever needed. Regular supervision was provided as part of the 'developmental' role whereby trainees could reflect upon their practice, make links with the professional knowledge and gain fresh insight into the dynamics of the cases they were supervising. In short the PDA was able to 'cultivate and defend the work-based space for learning' (Davies & Durrance 2009). Although in some offices practitioners with a development role have been reinstated they hold no sway over maintaining relevant caseloads to promote the 'overarching knowledge and critical awareness' (Davies 2011:73) necessary for professional practice.

DipPS trainees also complained of being 'time-poor' (Annison, Eadie & Knight 2008; Davies & Durrance 2009) having insufficient time to absorb new concepts but this pressure seems to have become substantially worse for some students under the PQF. The demands of the workplace has meant that some use annual leave allowance as study time or submit extenuating circumstance applications to request an extension. Students who experience some sort of crisis in their personal lives – ill health, relationship breakdown, bereavement, can find the timescales and workplace demands particularly unforgiving and could also account for decisions to withdraw from the programme that we have noted in some Trusts.

Of concern are the high levels of physical and emotional sickness which seem to occur where students have been given insufficient time to assimilate their professional and academic knowledge. An example of how pressure can build would be if a PSO in a programmes team is moved to an Offender Manager team at the start of Part 2, as happens in many areas. Complex office procedures including OASys assessment and risk management procedures are expected to be understood alongside demanding target requirements for a new caseload whilst simultaneously trying to keep up with PQF study expectations. The most competent students struggle in these circumstances. Dominey (2010) argues that employers should not expect staff to undertake the core professional qualifications in their own time, yet for many this is the reality. Negative cultures espousing anti-intellectualism that questions the need for academic study in relation to probation work have been noted by Treadwell (2006) and can quickly flourish without strong leadership espousing the value of professionally trained staff within a learning environment. Team colleagues, if not overtly discouraging, can also prove a barrier to learning; students have spoken of tensions arising, particularly with admin staff, viewing them as 'shirkers' if they take their study days. It is difficult to decline work knowing that it will be reallocated to an overloaded colleague and those that do so run the risk of being seen as 'troublesome' and 'selfish'. Clearly these are not ideal conditions for professional development to take place.

Additionally, there is often no formal recognition made of the student's changed status by managers, colleagues or admin personnel and the fact that they are enrolled with a Higher Education institution embarking on a professional qualification can go unnoticed. This may well reflect the fact that there has been a freeze on probation officer posts in many Trusts due to budget constraints made worse as they undertake the compulsory workforce planning exercise required for the new structures designed to 'Transform Rehabilitation'. Many PSOs on qualifying will not find PO posts within a Public Probation Service depleted by 70 per cent; the needs of the other providers are unknown at present. The impact of this lack of opportunity for professional progression is, no doubt, indicative of an organisation in the midst of massive structural change and what looks worryingly like the threat of closure.

Recommendations

The uncertainty facing the probation service following the publication of the Coalition government's Transforming Rehabilitation strategy document has meant that there are a great many 'unknowns' about the future of training. Nevertheless, the new national probation service 'tasked with protecting the public from the most dangerous offenders' (MoJ 2013) will continue to require trained and qualified staff and the private, voluntary and not-for-profit sectors that win government contracts under the payment by results schemes will similarly find the need for trained and experienced staff if they are to avoid tragedies.

1. Openly value staff training and development

The distinguishing factor between a positive and negative experience on the PQF is the extent to which the employer organisation is committed to the ideal of a 'learning organisation, whereby learning is integrated into the organisational processes at every level (Gregory 2007). An organisation that is supportive of the benefits of professional study makes all the difference to the student experience. It would seem that this requirement was insufficiently emphasised in the transition from DipPS to PQF in that some managers appear to have been unprepared for PSOs to be 'freed-up' for training. Without top-down support the PSO/student remains in danger of being viewed as an operational resource rather than a learner (Davies and Durrance 2009).

2. Reinstate the 'Developer' in the workplace Assessor Role

Several early commentaries on the PQF arrangements foresaw the problems that removing the PDAs would have (Davies & Durrance 2009; Dominey 2010) and experience would corroborate this. Without an advocate in the form of a Learning Development Assessor embedded in the workplace many of the problems identified above will go unresolved. Experienced practitioners are far better placed to uphold the value of the learning environment than lone PSO/students and can also provide smooth facilitation of practice opportunities to support individual requirements. This role should include practice development; coaching, teaching, observing, constructive feedback, supportive supervision, etc., that demonstrates how professional knowledge informs practice and gives permission to the student to develop their own creative practice persona. Graduates, in particular, would benefit greatly from such support.

3. Better liaison between the HEI and the Employer Organisation

At both student and management level, better communication between the academic and relevant staff in the employer organisation will produce many positive benefits. We all have been aware of students, new to higher education, who seem surprised at the demands the PQF would make on them; for instance, the need to move from their current role say in Approved Premises into an offender management team. A meeting for prospective students prior to formal recruitment with both employer and HEIs present would allow those who had not been provided with sufficient information to make an informed choice or had not thought through the demands of the PQF to be filtered out. Regular meetings between University staff and workplace assessors and developers would promote joint responsibility for learning progression and enable the early identification of individual students with learning needs requiring support. Tutorials requested by students experiencing problems or with a declared learning disability could be offered with an academic member of staff along with signposting to relevant student support services. Whilst phone tutorials are currently offered to those who

fail an academic assignment, we acknowledge that these could be perceived as impersonal and unsatisfactory and not be reaching many who would benefit. Some students might gain more from personal face to face tutorials with a lecturer, particularly at the start of the PQF and this is something that the HEIs should consider offering.

Importantly, closer liaison between the university and the employer organisation could support the graduate student group. Graduates acknowledge gaps in their learning by making requests to be able to access earlier Part 1 & 2 online units and workshop notes. Under university registration procedures, these past learning artefacts are not available but we are aware of a proposal for some amendment to the graduate programme that could see a broader curriculum being delivered. This can only be beneficial to support the development of key knowledge and skills in this student group.

Improved communication between workplace assessors and the university would assist in a better understanding of the work based learning project (WBLP), the final piece of assessed work. Having the opportunity to discuss what is required in terms of the professional and academic assessment criteria would enhance the overall feedback and enable queries and concerns to be quickly addressed. It would also enrich student learning and practice development from this important assignment.

Conclusion

The experiences of students on the PQF appear to indicate that in some employer Trusts their needs have not been sufficiently prioritised or even recognised. In some ways this is understandable; the ending of the DipPS and the move to the PQF occurred as yet more changes to the structure and governance of the probation service were forecast. The 'permanent revolution' (McLaughlin, Muncie & Hughes 2001) of public sector reform aptly describes the fortunes of the probation service over the past decade. It has coped with its nationalisation in 2001 (Criminal Justice and Courts Services Act 2000), the 'joining' with the prison service and transformation into NOMS just four years later (Offender Management Act 2007), the formation of self-governing Trusts and LDUs (Offender Management Act 2007) and now the coalition government has decided to do effectively dismantle the service altogether. Perhaps with such upheavals it was inevitable that staff qualifying arrangements would drop down the list of priorities. Staff development and progression are often the first casualties of reform, especially when budget cuts must be made. It can seem all too easy to save money by downgrading qualifications required for the job but in the long run it could prove an expensive mistake. It will be important that future practitioners have appropriate access to the conceptual tools necessary for the role of the probation officer. The new providers of probation services should recognise that an educated and motivated staff group will be their greatest asset with trust, mutual respect and fairness the necessary ingredients for organisational effectiveness. Failure to provide staff with the skills and knowledge needed for the job can only heighten the risks to public protection and increase reoffending.

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