

The New Probation Training

Mike Nellis highlights the importance of defending the intellectual standard of probation training.

The creation of a Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS), separate from the Diploma in Social Work, was announced in July 1997. It was a clear victory for those who had campaigned to retain probation officer training in higher education, and to resist a switch to the purely agency based training that Michael Howard had at one time envisaged. The new qualification was to consist of a two-year 'undergraduate' degree provided by one or more contracted universities in nine new regional consortia of Probation Services, and a level 4 NVQ, the latter to be acquired through work-based supervised practice to specified occupational standards. These arrangements are funded by the Home Office but administered at arms length by the newly-created Community Justice National Training Organisation (CJNTO).

Many people in universities and agencies, in the Home Office, and in the NTO have worked hard to make these new arrangements a success in a short period of time. Clearly, there is considerable variation among the regional consortia in the way that services are delivered. Some universities, partly because of the size of the area they serve, use distance learning more than others. There is variation too in the use of new technology. Crucially, there are differences in the way that the academic and practical elements have been 'integrated'. Not all universities have been willing to give academic credits to a portion

of the NVQs in the way anticipated by the original Home Office guidance. But this is only one element of what might be meant by 'integration' and, to help ensure that the intellectual potential of the new qualification is most effectively realised, this article seeks to sharpen up the rather impoverished vocabulary with which the question of an 'integrated curriculum' has hitherto been discussed.

Underpinning and overarching

The prevailing view is that the degree provides the 'underpinning knowledge' necessary for the achievement of the NVQs, but this is misleading. Much of the 'underpinning knowledge' necessary for the achievement of the NVQs is already available from the Probation Service: it is, by definition, the knowledge that enables the agency to do its job, day by day. It is already in the heads of many practitioners, and it can be - and is - best mediated to trainees by PDAs. The university may add a little to underpinning knowledge, but it is extremely patronising to the Probation Service to claim that it is the main source of it. Far better to think of the university as complementing 'underpinning knowledge' with equally essential 'overarching knowledge' - ideas and perspectives on the policy context in which the service is developing, theoretical explanations of crime, crime control and intervention techniques, new research results, new developments in moral philosophy relevant to the ethics of probation practice. In short, the knowledge (and the opportunity for deep reflection on it) that the Service itself cannot easily generate, and which therefore makes contracting with an external provider sensible and helpful.

It follows from this that the degree element of the DipPS should be at a high academic standard. It should undoubtedly be tailored to the specific needs of probation practitioners and should inform the NVQs without being wholly driven by them in the way that 'underpinning knowledge' implies. But it should be driven as

much by the probation-relevant aspects of any undergraduate criminology degree (or a selection of them) as much as by competencies. If it is not, in what sense can it be said to be a degree? And if it is not really a degree, are not the genuine undergraduates on these programmes (a minority overall) being seriously short-changed? Insisting upon a strong academic element does not mean that we should be teaching probation trainees about the finer points of postmodern theory, but it does mean that they should engage for instance, with David Garland's views on the future of the Probation Service or Ben Bowling's on the limits of multi-agency responses to violent racism.

I am not sure that all my colleagues in the probation training world will think it worth knowing these things, and I am far from sure that those in the Probation Service will. But what, if not intellectual excellence, did Services think they were signing up for when they contracted with universities? Conversations with some probation colleagues lead me to believe that they won't be happy until everything that is taught on the degree has been tallied to a specific competence. There does need to be a strong affinity between the themes of the NVQ modules and the university curriculum, and a firmly vocational emphasis. Nonetheless, a major opportunity for the renewal of intellectual energy, via each new cohort of trainees, will have been lost to the Service — the relationship between the intellectual and the, practical becomes as mechanistic as this, and if a short, cutting-edge, probation-focused criminological education is not also valued in its own right.

For, vital though competencies and occupational standards are, there is more to becoming 'good at' probation than technical mastery. This was illustrated for me by a trainee who heard Jimmy Boyle speak eloquently about his transition via the Barlinnie Special Unit, from gangster to sculptor, writer and penal commentator, "Listening to him" the trainee said afterwards, "increased my motivation for the job one hundred per cent". Not every trainee will be lucky enough to get inspiration

direct from Jimmy Boyle but there are other ways in which a degree can - and should indeed set out to - deepen motivation, increase dedication and stimulate imagination. Strangely, in the current training debate, one hears nothing at all about the importance of these qualities in the making of effective probation officers, or the part that a degree can play in fostering them.

Balancing practical and academic content

It should, however be acknowledged that, for all its strengths, the DipPS is not a degree in the traditional sense of the term. Condensing a three year degree's worth of credits into two years (only one year of which is academic) compresses the period in which intellectual development has to occur and inevitably limits the range and depth of what can be covered. It favours faster rather than slower learners. But status notwithstanding, the DipPS could still nonetheless evolve into an ideal professional qualification, if the right balance is struck over the two year period between the academic and practical elements. There is every reason to support and consolidate what has been created so far, and the most important task for trainers at the present time is to explore the integration of the DipPS in a way which respects the integrity of both elements of the training. Like two coloured threads (of equal worth) they can be seamlessly entwined, but neither dissolves entirely into the other.

That, of course, begs the question of whether the new training arrangements will survive in the relentlessly modernising Probation Service. They are vulnerable in two ways. Firstly they may not be able to meet the full staffing needs of the Service in the necessary time. That alone may prompt a reconsideration of (quicker) agency-based training, although the better

solution would be to increase the size of some of the existing courses, and/or increase the number of universities involved in delivering programmes. Secondly, they are vulnerable because there is no clear rationale for university involvement. As indicated, the idea of 'underpinning knowledge' is insufficient to justify this, and if it further emerges that many of the teachers on the new courses are probation staff, seconded or re-employed in higher education, who could just as easily deliver the same quality material on site, in their own agencies, the case for contracting with higher education will have been seriously weakened.

To assure the future of the new arrangements, a more robust public defence of the link with higher education needs to be made, in terms of the contribution it can make to 'overarching knowledge'. Unless it is public, and tied to a broader defence of universities, the intellectual potential of the programmes might easily be downgraded. The struggle to retain probation training in higher education will have been wasted if universities are expected to do little more than accredit knowledge which the Probation Service could have generated, discovered and transmitted on its own. This creates the illusion that the qualification is of a higher intellectual standard than might actually be the case. Many universities will be tempted by the money on offer for training, but there might come a point when intellectual integrity requires them to say no. David Blunkett's recent announcement of a two-year vocational degree complicates the picture, but, while I cannot be certain, I doubt - if probation training is ever reduced to this level - that they will attract the same quality of applicant as the present training arrangements have done so far.

It is ultimately on the quality of the applicants, and the quality of the training

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experience they are given, that the quality of the Probation Service will depend. To ensure that both present and future trainees can excel in their training, intellectually and practically, structures are needed which quite literally give them the best of both worlds. It is within our capacity to construct these, but until we accept that the key training

issue is the curriculum - it was after all the main reason that probation was split from social work training - it is by no means certain that we will.

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The Trainees View

Geet Chaudhry and Caron Meikle describe their experience of the DipPS

We have worked for the West Midlands Probation Service for about ten years - most recently as Probation Service Officers in Birmingham Magistrates Court. Although this was a varied and interesting role it offered little chance to work with individuals as they passed through the criminal justice system. The new training arrangements for probation officers provided a welcome opportunity for us to take on new challenges.

At a time when the basis of probation training had moved from social work and the future emphasis of the service is unclear (enforcement? punishment? care? control?), our elation at passing through the rigorous selection process was tempered with some apprehension.

From the outset we were aware that the integration of a two-year degree course with a level 4 NVQ would pose problems. We have had to cope with the very real pressures of completing pre-sentence reports, supervising offenders and undertaking court duty during our three practice placements while keeping up to date with our university assignments.

There are plans to streamline and organise the assessment schedule in future years to reduce the burden a little. Despite the pressure we feel positive about the course and all we have gained from it.

Two years is a very short space of time in which to complete a qualification of this sort, and there would be advantages to extending the course. The reality for trainees like us though - mature students with financial and family commitments - is that the prospect of more than two years on a reduced salary with trainee status would probably have ruled it out as a career choice.