

Fact and Fiction: another perspective on probation training

Paul Senior replies to Mike
Nellis' article, in *CJM* 39.

The innovative and creative potential of the new award for probation officers offers a new paradigm for the training of professional workers. It will need time to take root. It will not have been helped by the recent Mike Nellis article in *CJM* which by omissions, misunderstandings and fanciful assertions will distort the outsider's view of the attempt with these new arrangements to transcend the problem of integration in professional education and training. Nellis' account is deficient by virtue of three crucial errors:

- It describes university education through a romantic, traditional and ultimately elitist view of purpose and function
- It fails to locate the new award in the changing nature of Higher Education provision and the core mission of

- professional education
- It fails to grasp the nature of integration the award demands

Measuring a degree

Nellis makes much of the two year time span to assert the 'DipPS is not a degree in the traditional sense of the term'. The juxtaposition of three years against two creates the illusion that we are talking about one year less to complete this degree. However if you set 24 months against 32 months and take out the six months of holidays the difference seems less stark. But the real issue is how you measure a degree. The investment in Credit Frameworks has given HE a language and a currency to base judgements upon time and effort. The sums works. This is not to deny that it is hard work for the trainees and that for some the intellectual development required over this period is demanding (this is not confined to nongraduates). The insert by Geet Chaudrey and Caron Meikle should not be ignored for trainees minimising reduced salaries is an advantage. The employee contract remains key. Services have to uphold their part of the bargain which is to allow, indeed, to enable the trainee to be a trainee for all their working week. Compared to many of our traditional students we have captured far more 'real-time' for learning and development. The 'intellectual integrity' of the final degree is not threatened.

Practice and the academy

Nellis tells us only one year is 'academic' and by implication this downgrades the other time which is spent on professional practice. This is surely an out-of-date and unhelpful juxtaposition. For the past ten years HE has begun to realise and develop models for accrediting practice. No longer do social work degrees take four years because practice cannot be academically accredited. Sandwich courses have found innovative and robust methods of assessing practice and work placements. Accreditation of Prior Experience

and Certificated Learning also enable credit to be obtained and the student to focus their learning in new areas. Those interested in learning have argued convincingly that professionals learn effectively and deeply whilst on-the-job and the task of the institution is to ensure such learning can be assessed for academic purposes. For instance the work submitted for our Foundation Practice portfolios show achievement of the appropriate learning outcomes at Level 1 of a degree. It is hard work for the trainees but what they demonstrate are those qualities which we eventually look for in graduates: criticality, reflexivity, evaluative and analytical qualities and the ability to translate theory into practice. Further where programmes have invested time in thinking through the academic accreditation of the NVQ this has sharpened the debate on academic standards. It seems remarkable to me that despite this element being a regulatory requirement some programmes have simply given credit to the NVQ whilst also criticising NVQ as mechanistic. What does Nellis mean when he says 'not all universities have been willing to give academic credits to a portion of the NVQ'? How have these programmes been validated? These processes are not easy or self-evident but are at the nub of professional degrees.

Underpinning and overarching knowledges

It is in discussing the nature of knowledge where Nellis demonstrates myopia about recent thinking on the development of professional knowledge. Maybe inadvertently, he sets up a hierarchy between what he terms 'overarching' knowledge and 'underpinning' knowledge. Eraut has tried to unpack the complexity of this interrelationship to show how symbiotic the relationship is between propositional (overarching) knowledge, process (underpinning) knowledge and personal knowledge. The professional practitioner emerges

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from the synthesis of those three elements. To denigrate part of that knowledge as already available and somehow inert and not dynamic ignores the key task of PDAs to help students make sense of the interaction between the different kinds of knowledge base. It may be that in practice some trainees enjoy only Gramscian 'traces' of original theory. But as researchers and academic commentators on service development it is our job to use such insights to further and deepen our understanding. Professional training is quintessentially about practice. The key skills of 'graduateness' enable that integration to take place in ways which ultimately transform knowledge. The contrast Nellis suggests is thus a false dichotomy. It misunderstands the nature of the enterprise and downgrades process knowledge to the level of technical support - and yet he maintains he is concerned about intellectual potential. What he calls 'cutting edge' probation-focused criminological education' can only occur if there is interaction between different kinds of knowledge. It is developing this capacity which is uniquely required of HE tutors.

The central driving force of the

new degree is integration. For the first time in professional training the learner is both student, trainee and employee at the same time. This needs to be exploited both in the delivery and in the partnership between HE and the agencies. This is a hard task to achieve and lessons must still be learnt from the early stages of development. I would not want to pretend that the theoretical framework of integration has yet achieved its practical outcome but I do believe that it should and must transform our thinking about what this education is primarily about. It is not about a 'rampant vocationalism' nor simply a training of the technician for rote delivery of probation practice. It is about the creative, analytical and reflective capacities of graduate level professional workers undertaking a difficult job. HE has to ask itself how far our teaching uses and responds to the practice of our students/trainees. PDAs should utilise academic learning through their trainee's practice. Whilst it might be wonderful to experience Jimmy Boyle's message (and I remember Dick Pooley from my training for the same reasons) it is not the heart of the degree. What I want to see

consistently from my students is an ability to use and develop their knowledge and understanding to make them effective reflective practitioners.

For the first time in many years when I taught a sequence on Organisational Context the trainees were able to bring direct observations of the reality of working in an agency. They were then able to work with and learn from the propositional knowledge of organisational behaviour and theory and then seek to synthesise this in their future practice. It is that which 'deepens motivation, increases dedication and stimulates the imagination'. This new award has exciting potential and we must not be waylaid by traditional assumptions about intellectual development.

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References

- Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence* Falmer Press.
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