

CEP Conference

Cooperation between the probation service and universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands

I. Introduction

Probation officers do a difficult and complex job. Probation is aimed at contributing to a safe and humane society and its social impact is huge.

Nobody can do it without good preparation and, even after thorough training, it cannot be done by everyone. General qualities for doing the job include a strong sense of social commitment and clear value orientation. Personal competences include striking a delicate balance between maintaining distance and building a relationship, and between control, structure and support. Moreover, probation officers need to continue learning throughout their careers. Scientific knowledge on criminality and reducing recidivism is improving all the time and probation practice is constantly and rapidly changing.

And nowadays European countries need to join forces. We are expected to execute European legislation together, and probation measures cross borders. This common task means that our mutual exchange of information has a strong basis and clear direction during this conference.

What I have to tell you about the Dutch situation will be easier to understand if I first give a brief outline of the Dutch education system after secondary school.

Our educational system is structured in three levels:

Secondary vocational education: professional colleges

Higher professional education: universities of applied sciences

Academic education and research: universities

The vast majority of probation officers are educated as social workers at universities of applied sciences. This kind of education is the official level for probation officers. They have learned to act professionally at a high level and to deal with complex social situations. They're not trained as academic researchers, although it is assumed that they are aware of academic research results relevant to their profession. Some probation tasks, such as supervising labour penalties, can – under specific conditions – be done by officers educated at secondary vocational schools. And policy advisers and senior management in probation services tend to be university graduates.

The Bachelor degree programs at the Universities of Applied Sciences have a scope of 240 ects, that is four years full time study. The programs consist of a major program of 210 ects (three years and a half full time study), and a minor program of 30 ects (six months full time study). Students can choose a minorprogram out of many possibilities.

II. Cooperation between probation and universities:

I will explain our growing cooperation in terms of a missed connection from three perspectives, which we repaired in three steps. But first some words about the – negative – result of this missed connection.

About ten years ago, social professionals working with involuntary clients in different judicial contexts began to complain. In many organizations such as probation, youth protection, closed youth institutions, forensic psychiatric clinics, or prisons, there was general discontent about the competences of professionals starting out, those who had graduated as social workers. A large number of employees left the organizations within a year, partly because they had no realistic picture of working in a judicial context. The degree programmes at the universities of applied sciences did not match up properly with the requirements of the job. As a result, the organizations had to spend a great deal of money on additional training, but which in fact taught the graduates the most basic principles of working with involuntary clients.

How did this situation arise? Why were students not simply trained for working with involuntary clients in judicial contexts, or more specifically, as probation officers? And what have we done about this problem in the Netherlands over the past ten years? What happened to allow cooperation between probation and the universities of applied sciences to evolve from being a major problem into a powerful force?

What are the success factors from which we can learn with a view to developing a European curriculum?

Step 1: Working in an involuntary versus a voluntary context

Dutch social work degree programmes have long been almost entirely focused on helping people in a voluntary context. Until a few years ago, Dutch social workers were collectively averse to anything which was even remotely ‘patronising’. The underlying values were voluntariness and personal autonomy of clients. The idea of ‘force’ was something that should be avoided at all costs. The dilemmas of working in an involuntary context were not explored and this of course had repercussions for the theory and methods taught. It was chiefly this *content-based* orientation of voluntariness which made it difficult for fresh graduates to connect to the work of probation officers.

As the basic questions in this field were ignored in universities, a systematic method was never created. At this time I was involved as an in-company trainer for additional training of probation officers. It became very clear to me that what they had learned at university was more of a hindrance than a help in their jobs. If you have only learned how to work with clients who ask for help in the correct manner, how can you deal with unacceptable behaviour? If you have only learned to think about voluntary aid, how can you comprehend the reactance of clients in an involuntary context?

We discussed these experiences as trainers with probation service management. This was in about 2001, about the time of the rise, in The Netherlands, of What Works. What Works led to the first substantial academic support for the professionalism of probation officers. The spirit of the times was on our side. Yet what was really on our side was that the probation services recognized the opportunity and grasped it: it assigned us the task of drawing up a basic method for the probation service. It asked us to combine in this method the best

practices of probation officers with the academic knowledge of What Works. At the end of 2003, this resulted in book about professional probation work, a basic method for working with involuntary clients. At the same time, the probation service had other experts develop an instrument for diagnosis and risk assessment (RISc, 2003). These steps towards professionalization had more consequences than we could have foreseen at the time. For the first time, the profession found itself a common language. A common language which enabled exchange. And for the first time, there was a method which could be taught, so degree programmes could devote systematic attention to this specialist field. However, before things could reach that stage, the probation services and universities first had to rectify a second missed connection.

Step 2: Unity versus differentiation

In repairing the second missed connection, the spirit of the times again helped us. Around this time, the Netherlands was shocked by some crimes committed by clients of probation or youth care. The most notorious was the death of a little girl called Savannah, killed by her parents who were under Youth Protection supervision. These incidents, combined with the existence of a new 'teachable' method, were a wake-up call for the universities of applied sciences: many of them tried to adapt their social work Bachelor's by devoting greater attention to the basic competences of working in judicial contexts. Each university started to do so individually. The probation services, however, asked the universities of applied sciences to coordinate their strengths and develop a single, national curriculum. This is tricky in our country, as we have a wide variety of Bachelor's degrees taught at many different universities.

Within the social and judicial fields alone, there are currently about twelve different Bachelor's degree programmes. For instance: social work, social pedagogical work, pedagogical work, cultural social work, social management, social judicial work, safety management etc. Dutch students have a wide choice! Probationary work, however, demands precisely a combination of social, judicial and pedagogical competences, with added insight into issues such as safety and social management.

How do you develop nationally-supported teaching for probation officers with twelve different degree programmes taught at eighteen different universities of applied sciences? The Ministry of Justice cannot act on this, as education comes under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

A pragmatic solution was found in the development of a minor on working in an involuntary context, with a small group of four motivated universities of applied sciences. They came together in this initiative and asked representatives in the professional field to join in. A group of dedicated lecturers, educational managers and field workers was created. They acted as a strong group, working contrary to the competition between the universities of applied sciences, and often outside working hours, on creating a joint, identical minor which was taught at these four universities of applied sciences. The professional field played a major role in the development stage. It provided input for the project group. The minor was also presented twice, at two different stages of development, to a national conference comprising 80 professionals, who spent an entire day providing feedback on it. The minor was ready and recognized by the professional field within two years. It became a 30 ECTS credits minor (six months of full-time study) in the final year, open to students of social, judicial, pedagogical and safety studies. It has already been taught for three years and there is great interest from

students. In Utrecht, the minor is one of the most popular of the over 100 minors on offer. The professional field recognizes an improvement in the quality of new employees if they have taken this minor and there are also indications that employees starting out become less disillusioned and leave the organization less quickly. They have a more realistic picture and opt more consciously and with greater motivation for this complex work. The minor therefore leads not just to better graduates but also to improved preliminary selection. Rather than in their first year in the probation service, students discover whether they are suited to this profession in the final year of their studies. They have a sound basic knowledge of involuntary transactions, reactance and motivation, psychopathology and criminal conduct, risk assessments, research and reporting. On the basis of this content-based success, over the past three years another five universities of applied sciences have joined the group so that the minor is now taught at nine universities of applied sciences. In 2010, the minor is about to be implemented nationally at most of the 18 universities of applied sciences. So, this working in an involuntary context minor gained the national coordination and unity probation asked for, within just a few years. Not enforced top-down, but acquired bottom-up, via high-quality and sound cooperation with the professional field.

An important result, but not good enough. A third missed connection therefore came into sight and needed to be solved.

Step 3: Connection between research, education and professional practice

Probation can only continue to evolve within a properly functioning cycle of reflection on practice, practice-based evidence, evidence-based knowledge and professionalization.

Ten years ago, this cycle was not well organized in the Netherlands. At the one hand we had professional higher education *without* a research tradition and on the other university education with mainly *fundamental* research. There were few links between the two. This led to the phenomenon that we call the Innovation Paradox: we spend a great deal of money on increasing and new knowledge, but this generally does not result in improved and new practices. The gap between academia and professional practice needed to be bridged by practice-based or application-based research. The Netherlands started to invest heavily in this about seven years ago. Universities of Applied Sciences rapidly developed the research function with the emphasis on practice and application. To this end, researchers with 'a feel for practice' were appointed who conduct research programmes together with lecturers and students. This step led first to closer and improved cooperation with professional practice. The professional field and universities of applied sciences started up joint research programmes focused on solving problems facing professionals in practice. Next, it also led to improved links with the universities of science. Joint research programmes were developed, with fundamental and applied components. Our dual system gradually got thinner walls. So here, too, the times were on our side. And again – credit where credit's due – it were initially the probation services which recognized and grasped the opportunities. They took the initiative to create two special research groups at two universities of applied sciences. Probation Services contribute to the cost and provide input on the research programme. The research groups include employees from the probation service as well as lecturers. They conduct practice-based research for improving probation practice and methods in involuntary contexts. They are already at work for nearly two years and have evolved into allies and critical friends.

The research programmes provide a clear framework for these two roles.

On the one hand they conduct independent research which leads to general knowledge of probationary work. This knowledge does not always correspond to current probation service practice, may be critical of current policy and can serve as an impetus to discussions and new developments. This often involves PhD research in conjunction with the universities.

Examples include:

Qualities of effective professionals (who works

Moral practices

Balancing between structured decision-making and professional 'intuition'.

On the other hand the research groups conduct research which leads to specific and immediately applicable knowledge within current policy frameworks. This is often in the form of altered methods or an improved instrument for probation officers. Examples include:
The development of some modules for revised probation supervision
The development of an instrument for indication.

In addition to research, they are responsible for developing curricula at Bachelor's and Master's degree levels. They are currently working together on the updating and theoretical expansion of the national minor. A Master's degree on working in an involuntary context is also under development.

To summarize:

In the Netherlands, the probation services and the universities of Applied Sciences work together intensively. Lecturers, trainers and probation officers developed a joint basic method for probation. Lecturers and probation officers together developed a minor, which is currently taught by almost all social degree programmes in the Netherlands. Researchers, lecturers and probation officers work together on practice-based research within research groups which were jointly initiated by the probation service and the universities of applied sciences. By creating these research groups and cooperation with them, the probation services organized their feedback system effectively. And it is scientifically proved that an effective feedback system is a main feature of effective professionals.

III. How to proceed?

Satisfaction is not a Dutch national trait. We always want something more. Yet I speak on behalf of the professional field and many universities of applied sciences when I say that a great deal has been achieved within a short space of time.

How do we need to proceed?

1. We are going to continue along the same path. Currently we aim for a longer degree programme, 60 erts, with even closer ties with the professional field. In this programme, students work in the probation service right from the start. And the professional field plays a crucial role in coaching and assessing practical competences.
2. We are currently investing in continuous learning routes for probation officers from secondary vocational colleges to the Bachelor's degree programmes at the universities of applied sciences. And from the Bachelor's degree to a professional

Master's degree on 'working with involuntary clients'. This is under development, in both directions, in Utrecht.

3. We are happy to participate, together with others, in an initiative to develop a European degree programme. The first steps towards this are currently being taken in the Netherlands by two universities of applied sciences. Lessons can probably be learned from the process in the Netherlands. Start small with a group of enthusiastic and motivated universities in a couple of countries. Work in an open structure which allows others to join in and benefit from it. And create a proper functioning cycle between professionalization and research. Who knows, we could be back here in three years' time. With a European curriculum in which students, lecturers and researchers from different countries work together. With the aim of consolidating an effective, European and humane probation service.

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