

Conference in Agen, 17 and 18 December 2009

Recruitment and training of probation officers in Europe – in Denmark

Workshop: the ongoing training of probation officers

Revision of Danish training scheme

A new, revised prison- and probation officer training scheme will be launched in Denmark in January 2010. It is a three-year course, comprising two years of practical training and one year at school.

The training course takes a systematic approach to the **practical training** by defining learning goals for how the trainee will gradually become a fully skilled probation officer. The trainee is offered guidance and tuition concurrently with his daily work at the prison.

The instructional strategy used is **problem-based learning (PBL)**. Some of the subjects taught are law, conflict management, self-defence, psychology and social science. The tuition is based on themes and problems commonly experienced in connection with prison work. The trainees work independently with the assignments given, and there is an interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum.

Reason for revision of probation officer training scheme

In order to manage its future tasks, it is fundamental to the Danish Prison and Probation Service that the Service succeeds in recruiting, training and retaining competent staff who are able to guide and support inmates and simultaneously maintain security and control schemes, thereby contributing to the enforcement of prison sentences, safeguarding other inmates against assaults from their fellow inmates and safeguarding the staff members themselves.

The **main tasks** of the Danish Prison and Probation Service to be solved by the probation officers are:

- To enforce control and security relative to sentence enforcement in prisons and
- To support and motivate inmates to live a law-abiding life.

The **revision of the prison- and probation officer training scheme** focuses in particular on:

- Improved personal and professional competences of the probation officers relative to the challenges caused by ever more complex problems in inmates and the ever higher demands for treatment and documentation;
- Increased competition for labour, which means that the training – and the job – will have to be considered attractive and challenging;
- The working environment of prisons, which poses special challenges on each individual officer, to make sure that prison staff maintain the necessary personal strength by means of professional competencies and personal skills to avoid exhaustion;
- The essentiality of collaboration about task management – also with external persons; and
- Methods of providing each individual officer with a basis for continued development.

The **complexity** of the work increases due to the problems in inmates and the demands posed by the management of tasks. Accordingly, it has been emphasised that the individual probation officer trainee will not learn specific solutions in connection with the training, but how to analyse problems and find individual solutions – within the framework following from the Danish rules and regulations.

To be able to work in this manner, it is essential that probation officers acquire more than professional and personal skills; they also have to work intensely with work **ethics**.

The proportion of inmates **with an ethnic background other than Danish** has increased considerably, as has also the proportion of inmates with **addiction problems and mental disorders**. Moreover, crime becomes more and more international, and we see ever more transnational organised crime. A very special challenge is the handling of inmates involved in terrorist acts and the efforts to avoid additional marginalisation of 'risk groups' during their incarceration. Altogether this is a great challenge to our security, while we also need to focus on support and motivation.

Offenders with short sentences and good personal situations are, to an ever greater extent, sentenced to community service and recently also to electronic tagging and home detention (**non-prison sentences**), which obviously implies that we now have a heavier clientele in prisons.

The **considerations of due process** are obviously very crucial to our daily work. At the same time, probation officers have to prepare themselves for ever greater demands from users and society – just like the rest of the public sector. Inmates, and their significant others, demand information and involvement to an ever increasing extent – just like outside the prisons. If such

demands are not met to a relevant extent, the conflict level will presumably increase and the image of the Prison and Probation Service will suffer a negative impact.

In other words: "We have to manage those people who have been abandoned by others" and "We have to motivate people to a positive change of behaviour in an environment of compulsion".

Recruitment

Targeted efforts are made to recruit prison- and probation officers to reduce the drop-out rate during the training period and subsequently because of psychological wear, etc. The employment procedure focuses mainly on four areas:

1. **General suitability**, which indicates whether the applicant's attitudes and behaviour are deemed to match the values and tasks of the Prison and Probation Service. Accordingly, the applicant needs to understand the two facets of our primary task and to see the tasks from society's perspective, which means that the right to use force also implies a particular personal responsibility.
2. **Mental strength**, which is an essential element in the work involving inmates of the Prison and Probation Service. Accordingly, it is essential that the applicant has self-respect and a background that makes him able to resist pressure from inmates and to reflect on his own situation to avoid mental stress from the work.
3. **Physical fitness**, which is required to complete the self-defence training. Moreover, the applicant must also have an understanding of the necessity of keeping fit to be able to exercise force in a safe manner and to promote mental wellbeing.
4. **Suitability for training**, which indicates whether the applicant has the requisite intellectual capacity to complete the theoretical education. Accordingly, the applicant must have good Danish skills (be able to read and express himself orally and in writing) and be able to combine different professional subjects to pursue a specific behaviour.

Professionalism

The purpose of revising the prison- and probation officer training is to make the profession more professional. By improving the professionalism of probation officers, the profession will gain higher status internally in the organisation and among external partners.

Professionalism relates to the fundamental competencies determining how the individual probation officer looks at his profession and the way the work is done, including his professional identity.

Professionalism means that the individual prison- and probation officer:

- understands that his profession is based on both **theory and practical experience**;
- understands the **core competencies** of the profession mentioned above and is able and willing to use such competencies, so that in specific situations he is able to strike a balance between the function of control and security and the function of support and motivation to show a holistic understanding;
- has made himself familiar with the **ethical guidelines** applicable to the profession and is able and willing to follow those guidelines;
- is able and willing to follow **recent developments in the profession**, including updating and continuously developing his own professional and personal competencies;
- is able to **reflect** on his own and his colleagues' work, including being able to give and accept constructive **criticism**;
- knows the competencies, fields of work and powers of his own staff group and is able to use that knowledge for constructive **collaboration with other staff groups**;
- is conscious of the powers that he exercises on behalf of society and in accordance with the tasks and values of the Prison and Probation Service, so that he is able to **disregard any personal views** contrary to such values; and
- has cultivated a sense of **professional pride**.