



Cause for concern?

What is happening to the Professional Board for Probation Practice?

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There appears to be a disconcerting tendency in this country to delay important processes for long periods of time. This is true for the Child Justice Bill as well as the establishment of the Professional Board for Probation Practice.

Over a period of more than ten years a number of important developments have taken place to professionalise probation practice. These include the establishment of occupation-specific training programmes for probation practitioners, the development of post-graduate academic qualifications (Honours and Master's) in probation practice, the establishment of the occupational category of assistant probation officer, and the development of a SAQA approved training curriculum for APOs. In addition, the development of a Bachelor's degree in probation practice is in its final stages.

During the past ten years, probation officers in all provinces have received training in aspects relevant to their daily practice. Numerous workshops, on subjects ranging from the psychology of the criminal court, legislation relevant to probation practice, the probation officer as expert witness and restorative justice, to developing and implementing crime prevention programmes in disadvantaged communities were presented throughout the country.

The process of establishing a professional board for probation practice has also run its course during the past ten years. At a meeting of the Probation Advocacy Group (PAG) held on 29-30 August 1996, the then registrar of the former Council for Social Work even addressed the meeting on the procedures to be followed in establishing a statutory body for

probation officers. All the necessary steps were followed, and the process was finalised. The matter was even published in the Government Gazette. Everything was ready, and probation officers across the country were waiting for the establishment of the Board.

On 22 August 2006 a fax was forwarded by the National Department of Social Development advising of a meeting to be held in Pretoria on 23 August. At that meeting, apparently called by the acting registrar of the Council for Probation Service Professions, the matter of the establishment of a professional Board for Probation Services was to be discussed. The late notification of the meeting made it impossible for many interested parties to attend, including members of the Standard Generating Body (SGB) for Probation Work, probation coordinators and other important role-players across the country. At any rate, why hold a meeting to determine whether there is a need for a professional board for probation practice when, over a period of ten years, the process had gone its course, and was finalised?

Professionalising Probation

It would appear that some social work managers hold the view that probation is not a profession in its own right, but a specialisation of social work. A study of the historical development of both professions clearly proves this to be a fallacy. In fact, countries such as the USA had legislation formalising probation before there was legislation formalising social work – e.g. the Massachusetts Probation Act of 1878.

As far as the professionalisation of probation in other countries is concerned, a collaborative research project on that matter was conducted by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the British Home Office. The outcome of the research, edited by Koichi Hamai, Renaud Ville, Robert Harris, Mike Hough and Ugljesa Zvedie, was published in 1995 in a book entitled, *Probation Round the World: A comparative study*. This international research project studied probation practices in: Australia, Canada, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Sweden, England, Wales and Scotland. One chapter – Chapter 6 – is devoted specifically to “Probation as a profession”. Subsequent to this research, the UNICRI organised the “International Training Workshop on Probation”. This workshop led to the publication of the *Handbook on Probation Services: Guidelines for Probation Practitioners and Managers*.

A perusal of the contents of the abovementioned publications, and considering the fact that numerous books have been written on probation and that there are professional journals specifically devoted to probation, (e.g. *Federal Probation in the USA*), there can be no doubt that, internationally, probation is regarded as a profession in its own right. In several countries specialised qualifications in probation practice are offered and probation officers can register as such with professional associations. A study of international sources also reveals that, in some countries, probation officers come from disciplines other than social work. In fact, one of the UCT Honours/Master’s graduates in probation, who has no social work qualifications, was recently appointed as a professional probation officer in New Zealand.

Broadening the scope

At a workshop on “Transformation of Probation Service, View from National Department of Welfare”, organised by the

then National Department of Welfare (9-11 July 1997), there was agreement that “Probation officers need not be social workers. The base of probation officers must be extended beyond social workers”. With the establishment of the occupational category of assistant probation officer a few years ago, the base of probation practice has already been broadened to include practitioners outside the field of social work.

In July 2003 the National Department of Social Development contracted the Department of Social Development at the University of Cape Town to “facilitate and manage the development of a curriculum for assistant probation officers, a programme to re-skill probation officers, do research and set up an education programme in probation practice”. These tasks included the development of a curriculum for a Bachelor’s degree in Probation Practice – which has almost been completed. Furthermore, the University was to train probation officers in all provinces, and conduct research on probation-related topics. This, which has already been completed, was clearly aimed at the professionalisation of probation practice. During the past nine years, some 100 students have graduated with the post-graduate qualification in Probation at UCT. Several have also qualified at other universities offering qualifications Probation Practice, e.g. Johannesburg University, UPE, and Rhodes/Fort Hare. These were mainly practising probation officers.

The establishment of an SGB for Probation Work is another clear indication of the professionalisation of probation practice. Since its inception two years ago, the SGB has developed a number of unit standards for probation practice, and has almost completed the development of a Bachelor’s degree in Probation Practice.

Unjustified delays

Finally, some persons appear to hold the view that there has not been adequate consultation regarding the establishment of a professional board for Probation Practice. This is not true. A study of the minutes of the PAG over a period of ten years reveals that, in fact, there has been considerable consultation regarding the possible establishment of a board. For the past ten years the matter has been extensively discussed across the country among probation officers and other relevant role-players, such as NGOs and universities offering specific training to probation officers.

In the September 2004 issue of the SA Council for Social Services Professions’ Newsletter the following statement appears under the heading “Professional Board for Probation Services (PBPS)”: “The necessary regulations to establish the Professional Board for Probation Services in terms of the Social Services Professions Act 1978, as amended were published in the Government Gazette of 25 June 2004. This means that the process to establish this professional board is to be started shortly by calling for nominations of the persons to be elected as members and by requesting the Minister to make his appointments.”

What has become of the Board?

It is in the interest of providing a more professional service to South African criminal justice and social welfare systems that the professionalisation of probation practice is formalised by the prompt establishment of the Board for Probation Work. This has already been delayed unnecessarily for much too long.

Practitioners in the field of youth justice – especially probation officers, magistrates and prosecutors – are strongly encouraged to advocate for the establishment of the Professional Board for Probation Work, without any further delay.