TRAINING FOR PROBATION SERVICE OFFICERS: LESSONS FROM EVALUATION

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Abstract This article describes and discusses the implementation and impact of a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) programme for Probation Service Officers (PSOs). This was a work-based programme integrating assessment of practice with assessment of learning about the concepts and ideas that underpin the practice of this group of staff. It used a variety of teaching and learning methods, including group tutorials, distance learning materials, and practice workshops run by the Consortium. This evaluation draws on information and evidence gathered from a range of sources, including managers, tutors, trainers and PSOs.

This CertHE programme has now been superseded by the new qualifications framework introduced into the probation service in April 2010. The article seeks to identify learning from the CertHE which can inform and improve the development of new training arrangements. It identifies the importance of factors such as good communication between the university and the probation service, as well as adequate protected learning time for PSOs and the provision of skilled and supported practice tutors. The article also explores the extent to which the CertHE has been a useful, effective and stimulating programme of study for the PSOs who undertook it.

Introduction

This article describes and discusses the implementation and impact of a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) programme for Probation Service Officers (PSOs). This CertHE programme was developed and delivered jointly by X University (XU) and the Y Probation Training Consortium (YTC). It was a work-based programme integrating assessment of practice with assessment of learning about the concepts and ideas that underpin the practice of this group of staff. It used a variety of teaching and learning methods, including group tutorials, distance learning materials delivered using a virtual learning environment, and practice workshops run by the Consortium. This evaluation draws on information and evidence gathered from a range of sources, including managers, tutors, trainers and the PSOs themselves.
This CertHE programme, and other similar programmes run elsewhere, has now been superseded by the new qualifications framework introduced into the Probation Service in April 2010 (NOMS, 2010). The article seeks to identify learning from the CertHE experience which can inform and improve the development of new training arrangements. The article also explores the extent to which the CertHE has been a useful, effective and stimulating programme of study for the PSOs who undertook it.

A Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) is an academic qualification that sits at Level 4 in the National Qualifications Framework (Ofqual, 2010). This means that it is one step on from qualifications such as A-Levels and BTEC Nationals. It is the equivalent of the first year of an undergraduate degree.

**Background to PSO training**

Probation Service Officers are employed by the Probation Service in a wide variety of roles: working as offender managers, taking responsibility for the enforcement of orders and licences, representing the Service in Magistrates’ and Crown Courts, running accredited programmes, developing and maintaining unpaid work projects, supporting victims, and providing specialist input in areas such as drugs, alcohol and accommodation. The increase in the size of the PSO workforce has been one of the most significant changes in the shape of the Probation Service over the past two decades (Oldfield and Grimshaw, 2008).

Historically, PSOs have been recruited with a wide range of past work experience. There was no requirement for PSOs to hold a particular qualification or to achieve one whilst in post. Some PSOs brought with them academic or vocational qualifications, others will have undertaken no study or training since secondary school. This contrasted with the position for Probation Officers (POs) who were obliged to hold a professional qualification (until recently the Diploma in Probation Studies and, before that, the Diploma in Social Work). PSOs, being paid less than POs, are cheaper to employ.

The role boundary between the PSO and PO grade has been the subject of debate and controversy, including within the trade union (Napo, 2009). It is also interpreted in different ways in different places. Recent developments have seen PSOs taking on an increasing number of tasks that would once have been the preserve of POs: supervising 'medium risk' offenders, producing fast delivery reports for courts, running offending behaviour groups, and running training sessions assessing the competence of other practitioners. The consequences of this blurring of boundaries have included some increased job satisfaction for PSOs but also concerns about training, work-related stress and appropriate levels of pay (Bailey, Knight and Williams, 2007).

Attention to the training requirements of PSO staff has developed at a slower rate than the expansion of responsibility and importance of the PSO workload. This point was noted in the skills profile research undertaken for the National Offender Management Service in 2007 (Knight and Stout, 2009). PSOs have always had access to in-service training options. The arrival of accredited programmes as a key aspect of probation practice and the key role played in the delivery of these programmes by PSOs gave some staff access to formal
and assessed training in the areas of effective practice and groupwork. In some parts of England and Wales, PSOs were able to demonstrate their competence by achieving National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) awards at Level 3. Work was also done, jointly by the Community Justice National Training Organisation and Napo, to develop a Certificate in Community Justice, a qualification that combined academic and practice assessment. These developments were all addressed in Probation Circular (PC) 136/2001, which recommended a core programme of learning for all new PSOs, with the opportunity for more experienced staff to progress to an NVQ or to a Certificate in Community Justice.

Further Probation Circulars setting the national curriculum for PSO training and confirming the level of central funding available for this work followed. PC 41/2005 set out a programme of learning covering areas such as 'orientation to the criminal justice system', 'risk of harm' and 'enforcement and compliance'. It suggested that all newly-appointed PSOs should complete this programme of learning within nine months of appointment and acknowledged that, given the short duration of the programme and lack of assessment framework, it could not lead to the award of a qualification (National Probation Service, 2005).

PC 18/2007 introduced the concept of 'passport to practice' a short induction programme intended to ensure that no PSO worked with offenders without a basic introduction to the aims and purposes of the organisation. It also created two distinct phases of training: the first consisting of eight modules considered essential for all new PSOs; and the second consisting of modules intended for those working with Tier 3 offenders and those in specialist posts, for example in court or in approved premises. Probation areas were also encouraged to assess the development of PSOs by using methods such as professional discussion and the completion of workbooks and reflective journals by PSOs. Whilst clearly linking to NVQ3 units, successful completion of the PSO learning and development programme did not lead to a formal qualification or award (National Probation Service, 2007).

PC 15/2008, the circular setting the framework for the PSO learning and development programme for the period 2008 to 2010, sought to place a stronger emphasis on the assessment of PSO learning (National Probation Service, 2008). It made little amendment to the content of the curriculum for PSOs but added the requirement that programmes must include arrangements for the assessment of learning and strongly encouraged probation areas, probation trusts and regional training consortia to develop assessment systems that led to the formal accreditation of PSOs’ achievements.

The response to this requirement for assessment and accreditation took different forms in different places. Some PSOs completed portfolios containing evidence of their learning and practice competence, others achieved NVQ awards or clusters of NVQ units. In a number of places, some PSOs had access to programmes offering both academic and practice assessment and leading to the award of a higher education qualification. A number of universities, working in partnership with probation employers, offered a CertHE. PSOs with such a CertHE were then able to have advance standing onto the
Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS), the PO training course, shortening the amount of time spent as a trainee before qualification.

A new qualification framework for the probation service was implemented in April 2010. This framework provides qualifications for both PSO and PO grade staff. For the first time, it establishes a required qualification for PSOs. This qualification is the Level 3 Diploma in Probation Practice, a vocational award that sits on the same rung of the National Qualifications Framework as A-Levels. All newly appointed PSOs will be expected to achieve this during their first year in post and existing PSOs are to be given the opportunity to achieve it if they wish. The framework also replaces the DipPS with a new qualification for POs, still fixed at honours degree level and blending assessment of both academic and practice work. A new vocational qualification, the Level 5 Diploma in Probation Practice, is an integrated part of this award. There are two routes to this new award: one for qualified PSOs who undertake a programme of work-based study leading to an honours degree; and a shorter route (an option for both existing PSOs and new entrants to the probation service) for those with an honours degree in a relevant subject area who achieve a graduate diploma. Under the new training arrangements, PSOs who have completed the CertHE that is the subject of this article are awarded advance standing onto the new honours degree, as they are assessed as having met the requirements of the first phase of the new qualification.

The need to ensure that PSOs are adequately trained and able to achieve appropriate qualifications has been one of the factors driving the development of this new framework. The decision to set the qualification for PSOs at VQ Level 3, whilst supported by many within the probation service, was not universally welcomed. Some contributors to the consultation process argued that it would be a more accurate reflection of the complexity and demands of the PSO workload to require PSOs to hold the CertHE (which sits one step above VQ Level 3 in the National Qualifications Framework) (NOMS, 2009).

**Work-based distance learning**

Since the inception of the DipPS in 1998, higher education qualifications for probation practice have been delivered on a work-based blended learning basis. This means that students undertaking these qualifications are employed by the probation service and study alongside their jobs. University course materials are delivered 'at a distance' with use made of e-learning techniques alongside more traditional distance learning methods involving the use of workbooks and guided reading. DipPS programmes have involved some face-to-face contact between students and university teachers in workshops, seminars and tutorials. Some commentators (e.g. Treadwell and Mantle, 2007) have argued that this is not an appropriate teaching approach for professional programmes, while others (e.g. Dominey, 2010) have sought to outline and describe best practice.

One key difference between the CertHE, as delivered by XU and the YTC, and the DipPS is that CertHE students were not additional to the agreed staffing level of their team or workplace. By contrast, they were members of the team sharing responsibility for carrying a workload and covering in times of work pressure and staff shortage. Agreements, drawn up between the probation service and the university, specified how
much time PSOs were allowed for study and the extent to which their workloads would be reduced to allow for this. Employers, therefore, had to decide how to manage the reduction in capacity of those staff undertaking the CertHE.

Delivery of work-based distance learning programmes also relies on staff, both in the probation service and in the higher education institutions, who teach, tutor, supervise and assess students in their practice and academic work. For example, the CertHE programme required probation service mentors to support and assess PSOs in practice. The role of the mentor was similar to the more familiar role of the Practice Development Assessor (PDA) on the DipPS but with a couple of key differences. First, as PSOs are existing employees of the probation service and presumed to be competent in their job, the mentor does not have as great a responsibility for practice teaching as the PDA. This presumption of competence can, though, be challenged by the process of observation and assessment for the CertHE, requiring significant input from the mentor and the PSO’s line manager. It is the role of the mentor to help the PSO with the process of integrating ideas and concepts from the course materials into their practice.

A second difference is that, unlike PDAs, mentors on the CertHE programme did not have to be qualified NVQ assessors, as the programme allowed for practice to be assessed without using the NVQ framework. There were two reasons for this: first, a number of probation areas did not have the capacity to extend NVQ assessment opportunities to PSOs on the CertHE; second, offering an alternative practice assessment route ensured that the CertHE was available to other employers in the sector (e.g. from youth justice or the voluntary sector). Decisions about the appointment, training and supervision of mentors were made by each probation area sending PSOs on the CertHE programme. In some cases, the mentor was an experienced PDA. In other cases, the mentor was a colleague PO with a generic caseload.

Employees on work-based distance learning programmes are also likely to be working with university tutors, whose job is to ensure that they access the distance learning materials and receive the help and support they need with tasks such as assignment preparation and writing. On the CertHE programme, a tutor was allocated to a small group of students, usually numbering around four or five, from the same area and met in person with the tutor group about eight times during the 12-month programme. As well as these group tutorial sessions, tutors and university module leaders were available to PSOs by telephone and via email.

Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between the university, the regional training consortium and the employers set the structure for the CertHE. The SLAs dealt with a comprehensive range of issues: programme management; payment of fees; provision of learning opportunities, learning materials and qualified tutors and mentors; recruitment and selection of candidates; and arrangements for study time and workload relief. The role of the YTC manager in developing SLAs and then overseeing their operation was crucial to launching the programme, making it work in practice and dealing with the problems that arose.
Despite having a strong probation focus, the CertHE programme was open to practitioners from other agencies in the sector seeking a training and qualification route for staff. A handful of students from youth justice and the voluntary sector did join the programme and achieve the qualification. This brought opportunities for inter-professional education, for example by looking at case studies from different perspectives and challenging assumptions about the approach and practices of other agencies.

**Evaluation of the Certificate**

The CertHE that is the focus of this article has now been superseded by the new Probation Qualifications Framework (PQF). No more PSOs will complete this award, although many will undertake the new awards offered by the PQF. It is timely to draw together a number of different strands of evaluation of the CertHE and seek to identify the lessons that can be learned from its delivery and applied to the new awards. Since the start of the programme, both the university and the consortium have collected data about PSO recruitment, progress and completion. This data provides considerable information about student numbers and completion rates which can be compared in a number of ways: by probation area, by start date, by gender.

In addition, the university has evaluated individual CertHE modules and the consortium has evaluated the in-service PSO workshops that are an integral part of the programme. These evaluations have taken the form of questionnaires completed by PSOs at the point when assignments are submitted or at the end of a training event. Such evaluations provide a snapshot of student satisfaction, but also allow for common themes, either supportive or critical of the programme, to emerge. Questionnaires completed by PSOs after the completion of the programme have also been used to gather feedback about the student experience of the CertHE as a whole.

These evaluations give a good picture of the experience of PSOs, but do not capture the views of their mentors and line managers. The perspective of these staff is important, as these qualifications need to do more than provide PSOs with an interesting and rewarding programme of study; as work-based distance learning programmes they also intended to have a positive impact on the way that PSOs do their job. This article also, therefore, draws on findings from semi-structured interviews carried out with CertHE mentors and with line managers responsible for PSOs who had undertaken the course. This was necessarily a small scale evaluation project and a semi-structured interview was identified as the most practical research tool, achieving a higher response rate than a postal questionnaire but gathering more focussed data than an unstructured interview format (Denscombe, 2007).

Training managers in probation areas were asked to identify mentors and line managers to be interviewed and asked to select staff from a range of practice backgrounds and with a variety of experiences of the CertHE. As a result, interviews were conducted with line managers from offender management teams, from prisons and from programme teams. Managers from both cities and rural offices were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with mentors who were qualified NVQ assessors and experienced trainers and also with those who had no previous experience or qualification in the areas of practice...
development and assessment. This is a small scale evaluation but this process did seek to capture as wide a range of situations and circumstances as possible.

It is relevant to note that the interviewer was a consortium manager with responsibility for the CertHE programme and known to all the mentors and two of the line managers. This is one reason why the decision was taken to ask area training managers to nominate staff to interview. As a result, the choice of interviewees was not influenced by any knowledge or opinion held by the consortium manager. It is likely that, where the interviewee knew the interviewer well, this will have had some impact on the interview process. Interviewees were made aware that their participation in the interview was voluntary and that their comments would be used anonymously in any article or publication.

**Findings**

From 2006 to date, 201 PSO’s have registered on the Certificate programme; 176 have qualified and 1 is yet to complete the programme. The remaining PSOs left the programme for a variety of reasons including academic failure, ill-health, leaving their job and changes in personal circumstances which made continuing to work and study impossible. A number of these achieved sufficient credit for the award of a University Certificate in Professional Development (UCPD). A UCPD comprises 60 credits compared with the 120 required for the award of a CertHE.

PSOs have completed evaluations forms and provided verbal feedback on the programme. All respondents responded positively on the relevance of the programme to their job. For example:

> Interesting throughout, especially the reading around the material.

> Overall I found the programme content to be very relevant to my work and very interesting and stimulating to study.

> I feel that the course is excellent for PSOs to develop as practitioners and understand why they do the things they do with offenders - this means that they become more effective.

In relation to support from mentors and tutors, there was a varied response from CertHE students. Where mentors had also worked as PDAs the response was positive.

> The support from my mentor and NVQ assessor has been exceptional.

However, in some cases, PSOs felt that the mentor had not been able to support them sufficiently for a variety of reasons, such as lack of familiarity with the programme, limited time to undertake the mentoring role or a number of changes in mentor.

> [...] mentor not able to give the support needed for the portfolio...she is in a split post and not able to give the support required.
I think mentors need to be better trained before taking this role. Ideally PDAs should be in place to work with you [...] I felt a lot of the time I was on my own, apart from my tutor there was no one else around I could turn to for advice.

I have had three mentors allocated to me so far, I didn’t meet the first one, the second I only met twice.

The mentor role was key to supporting work-based learning and where difficulties were experienced, evidence from PSOs shows that it impacted on their learning and, for some, on their progression.

The role of the university tutor was generally recorded positively, although a handful of PSOs reported problems contacting their tutor and receiving guidance about academic work. For example:

My experience with my mentor and tutor was extremely positive and [they] were a great source of support and help throughout the course.

Initially I did not get any support from my tutor, [she] gave very unhelpful feedback and she was difficult to contact. However, after speaking to her this did improve slightly.

I feel fortunate that I had a tutor that was so responsive and replied to questions quickly and efficiently.

Almost all PSOs reported that they had been allowed to take a day each week for study. This was more a difficulty early on in the programme but once the programme had become embedded and employers were more familiar with the Certificate programme, this became less of an issue. However, for a number of students workload management posed on-going difficulties. Although students were entitled to 20 per cent workload relief, this was frequently not put in place. As a result, although PSOs were permitted not to come into the office on their study day, they were often compressing five days of work into their four days in the workplace. A number of students reported that they worked late evenings to keep on top of their work and three said they went to the office at weekends to catch up with work:

My workload was eventually reduced in light of participation as a Certificate student.

Although it was agreed at the beginning of the Certificate to a 20% reduction in my workload, this never materialised. This was discussed on a number of occasions to no avail.

The one day for study was not enough and I was working in the evenings and weekends as well.
A number of PSOs did voice reservations about the online learning aspects of the Certificate programme. The majority were neutral or positive about distance learning but a number of comments suggested that PSOs would have preferred more face-to-face contact with university staff.

*I really feel that students would have benefitted more from seminars held either at the university or at different probation areas.*

*I think that a workshop per semester would maintain motivation, i.e. actually going to the university 2-3 times or maybe at the start of each module for 1 day/ half day.*

Overall, responses from PSOs were positive about the programme and they were able to identify clear improvements in their practice and greater knowledge that underpins probation practice.

The interviews with mentors and line managers covered similar themes. All 14 mentors reported positively on the existence of a specific qualification for PSOs. Of those, 13 mentors said they could identify improvements in the PSO’s practice, particularly in relation to the understanding of diversity issues, risk, assessment skills and linking theory to practice. The fourteenth mentor said that they did not know enough about the practice of the PSO to comment. Six mentors commented that the students were more reflective in their practice, which led to overall improved performance.

All mentors reported being clear about their roles and responsibilities. They had sufficient knowledge of the programme to undertake this role. Additionally, 10 mentors said that they had received workload relief or that the role was part of their full-time job. The four that noted workload as an issue were all in split posts, mentoring a single candidate alongside other competing duties. Only two mentors reported that having a PSO on the programme had wider implications for the team; this may link to many PSOs having to work additional hours to manage their work. Five mentors noted that there was not any backfilling for the study days and this work was either absorbed by the team or by the student. All mentors responded that arrangements for providing extra resources to teams when PSOs are on the programme should be improved. Also, 12 of the mentors said that more time should be given to the mentoring role as there was development work needed but insufficient time to undertake this.

Those that had been recruited to undertake the mentor role for a single cohort of the programme noted this was unsatisfactory, as they felt that it took a year to understand the programme and feel confident in the role. Where mentors were in split posts there was a lack of clarity of line management responsibilities for this part of their role. All mentors in this situation reported lack of support and guidance from their line manager, who they felt had limited understanding of the programme and therefore was unable to assist them in developing their practice.
The university and the consortium ran quarterly training workshops for mentors. These events were an opportunity to provide information about the programme, provide training (in areas such as observation of practice, giving feedback and assessing competence) and share emerging good practice about working with PSOs undertaking a programme of work-based learning.

Seven line managers were interviewed for this project. The views of line managers on PSO development reflected that of the mentors, in that they argued that PSOs capable of work-related study should have this opportunity. Their judgment of the programme also reflected that of the mentors: it was a suitable programme for PSOs, it increased their skills, knowledge and confidence in practice bringing 'improved offence focussed work' and 'better understanding of diversity'. Five managers noted that it improved the PSO's reflective skills, which in turn meant more thought was given to practice, and performance improved. As examples of the positive views of managers, comments included:

- **Good programme, good opportunity for PSOs.**
- **Very popular with staff, a good programme.**

All line managers felt that arrangements for providing extra resources to teams when PSOs are on the programme should be improved. Only one manager said provisions had been put in place for backfilling the time that the PSO was on study days. Others had managed the time within the team's resources. One manager noted that providing a mentor from the team was also a drain on the team's resources. Their preference was that this resource was provided from the training unit.

Two managers noted that covering work for candidates who are undertaking the programme was particularly difficult due to the small team size. In the main, line managers reported positively on the work of the mentor. Six felt that the mentor needed more time to undertake the role. All reported that the role of mentor should be separate from that of the line manager. This was argued on the basis that the line manager had insufficient time for this task, was out of touch with relevant theory and had a focus on meeting targets rather than staff development.

**Best practice points and implication for the new training framework**

A number of relevant points arise from these findings. Despite its relatively short life, the CertHE programme became well thought of by PSOs and their line managers. Line managers were keen that other PSO grade staff be given access to this training. This pent-up demand for PSO training was also a finding in the work undertaken by Knight and Stout (2009).

The evaluation also provides evidence that the CertHE improved the practice of PSOs and that the linking of the academic and practice curriculum was important in this
improvement. This evidence comes from the comments made by PSOs but also from their mentors and line managers.

The new professional qualification for PSOs, the Level 3 Diploma in Probation Practice, does ensure that a greater proportion of PSOs receive feedback and guidance about developing their practice. The lack of formal academic input and assessment in the new award does mean that, in comparison with the former CertHE routes, PSOs will not be involved in the same level of debate and discussion of concepts and ideas.

This CertHE was a generic qualification for staff working with offenders in the community. It had some choice of modules creating specific pathways for those working in offender management, delivering interventions, working with substance users and in youth justice. The accessibility of the CertHE to a wide range of PSOs and its relevance to those not in offender management roles was welcomed by both mentors and line managers.

I was pleased that staff in accredited programmes were able to focus on intervention as a module. (Line Manager)

[...] the option module gave the student the opportunity to focus on an area of work related to their job. (Mentor)

Similarly, the Level 3 Diploma in Probation Practice offers a considerable choice of units providing options for staff in a variety of roles. By contrast, the new honours degree and graduate diploma are offender management qualifications, intended for those who are going to manage and supervise high risk offenders in the community. The current framework does not provide a straightforward mechanism for PSO staff in specialist roles to access work related higher education and allow this study to inform their practice.

As with this CertHE, the higher education element of the new honours degree and graduate diploma is largely delivered by distance learning methods. Evidence from this evaluation suggests that students are likely to welcome approaches that blend a distance learning approach with some face-to-face input and support. Comments in the evaluation also remind teaching and tutoring staff to ensure that distance learning techniques are used in a way that seems relevant and useful to students.

These findings are in line with other studies of the opinions of work-based distance learners in the probation service. For example, Collins et al. (2009) note that Trainee Probation Officers (TPOs) valued the support received from other students on their programme as much as from probation and university staff. Madoc-Jones et al. (2003) concluded their study of the use of e-learning approaches with TPOs in Wales by advocating the need to strike a balance between online learning and face-to-face contact.

The evaluation does reveal the extent to which the successful implementation of this CertHE depended on the goodwill of local line managers and mentors. Arrangements for covering work shed by PSOs on the programme were almost always dealt with at team level with few examples of formal funded backfill arrangements. In some work settings,
making arrangements to reduce the workload of PSOs was more straightforward than others. PSOs working in hostels could work fewer shifts. By contrast, the arrangements to reduce the workload of PSOs in prisons required complex, and not always successful, negotiations between probation and prison managers.

Under the arrangements for the DipPS, trainee POs were supernumerary and, in principle if not in practice, their workload was selected simply to meet their learning needs with no requirements that they share in the peaks and pressures of the work of their team. Nonetheless, many DipPS students found the programme rushed with too little time for learning (Davies and Durrance, 2009). The new training arrangements adopt a model more similar to that of the CertHE. Findings from this evaluation suggest that, in the absence of clear policy statements and associated funding arrangements, the provision of workload relief and study time for academic work will rely on the willingness and ability of local middle managers. It is a concern that budget cuts will have an impact on goodwill and creativity, leading to considerable time pressure for students.

The evaluation also highlights some points about the appointment of and support for the probation staff who work in a mentor, assessor or practice teacher capacity with colleagues who are training. Evidence from this evaluation echoes arguments made elsewhere (Davies, 2011) and suggests that there are a number of reasons why this role is better undertaken by someone in a specialist role. Staff in a specialist role do not have to balance the conflicting, and potentially incompatible, demands of an offender management job. It is easier to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to work as a practice teacher and assessor and are supported and supervised in that role. Managing the workload of mentors in split posts was as much of an issue as managing the workload of PSOs undertaking the Certificate programme.

**Conclusion**

In the Trusts where it was offered, managers, mentors and PSOs viewed the CertHE as a popular and successful qualification. It was seen to benefit the probation service in terms of improved performance and to offer PSOs working in a wide variety of roles the opportunity of professional and personal development. It integrated academic and practice knowledge and assessed them both. This integration was achieved through effective partnership working by staff in the university, at the regional training consortium and in the probation areas. For some PSOs the CertHE has provided an accelerated route to probation officer qualification, both under the current and previous training routes. In an environment where PSOs are taking on more complex cases and are responsible for difficult judgments, the CertHE also helped students become more aware of the limits of their knowledge and the importance of seeking help and advice in risky situations.

This is a small scale evaluation of one particular approach to PSO training delivered for one English region and, as a result, it is not possible to draw wide and general conclusions from its findings. However, the evaluation may offer some relevant and timely pointers for the implementation and development of the new probation training framework. The issue of staff time emerges strongly from the evaluation. Undertaking higher education qualifications requires time for PSOs to study. The HEI sector works on the basis that a
notional 10 hours of study are needed for each academic credit. Even allowing the widest possible definition of study to include all practice learning as well as academic learning time, it is no surprise that PSOs completing the 120-credit CertHE in a year found themselves under pressure. Work-based learning also requires mentors, assessors and tutors to have time to teach, give feedback and assess. The evaluation suggests that, in this case, the mentoring and assessing role was most effectively delivered by practice staff with knowledge and experience in the area of training and assessing.

The resource demands of the CertHE were met more often by a combination of goodwill and flexibility rather than by formal systems for managing the workload reduction of staff involved in delivering or receiving training. It will be a challenge for the new work-based qualifications for PSOs and POs to continue to operate in this way; goodwill and flexibility being qualities perhaps more likely to be evident in new schemes and always under threat at times of financial constraint. However, and more positively, this encouraging evaluation of the CertHE does provide evidence that work-based distance learning delivered by the probation service in partnership with higher education can produce effective outcomes for both PSOs and their employers.

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