

Researching Probation and Community Rehabilitation

We are committed to the development of knowledge, through research, to inform probation policy and practice.

(Probation Institute Code of Ethics Value 7)

Introduction

The Probation Institute Code of Ethics prioritizes research because:

- Methods of working with service users vary according to their different risks and needs and their social contexts
- The effectiveness of different interventions should be judged on the basis of evaluation and research that can be widely disseminated and scrutinized
- Supporting and contributing to research is essential for the development of good practice.

(Code of Ethics Value 7)

At times of change it can be difficult to step back and either apply the insights of existing research or conduct new research to gain insights for the future. But unless this is done, practitioners and policy makers may run the risk of making decisions without the benefit of high quality knowledge and information which is fully relevant to the changing environment. Disseminating existing research findings and supporting new research is essential to the maintenance of a vibrant professional identity and community, especially when organizational structures are changing rapidly. This paper identifies key principles and issues relating to research that are relevant to probation and community rehabilitation. Further position papers on specific aspects of research are planned.

The PI expects members, employers and partner organizations to abide by the Probation Institute Ethical Practice Guidelines which advise all members to engage in research in the following ways:

- When working with service users, identify their individual risks, needs and social context, and in light of their case characteristics ask whether there is existing research and knowledge to inform effective practice and interventions. The service user should be at the heart of how we build and evaluate programmes and practice
- When new knowledge and evaluations emerge, disseminate their findings and bring to the attention of colleagues and key stakeholders. Consider what we can learn from research into other sectors and multi-agency work, and how this may be applicable and useful to inform probation practice and policy
- Show awareness of the limits in our existing knowledge base in relation to effective probation practice. Consider how new evaluation processes and methods could be built to enhance our understanding in this area
- If practice, programmes and policy appear to conflict with the weight of evidence on what counts for effective practice, bring this to the attention of managers and decision makers and be prepared to challenge constructively through using arguments underpinned by evidence
- Facilitate opportunities to evaluate programmes and practice by ensuring that relevant data and outcomes are methodically collected and accurately recorded
- Be open to and honest when participating in evaluations and sharing your experiences of delivering programmes and practice
- Show openness to continuous learning, being proactive in keeping informed of the latest research or developing understanding of new areas of practice.

Principle 1: A wide range of research from different disciplines can offer valuable evidence and insights to practitioners and policy makers

We need research that will assist practitioners and policy makers to intervene effectively in the lives of service users. This might be:

- comprehensive literature reviews or summaries of existing research
- small-scale practitioner-led research that focuses on a specific issue, offering modest insights, evidence or practical recommendations
- evaluation research instigated by employers but conducted by independent organizations or academics, providing evidence and recommendations for future policy and practice

- academic research that may provide few direct practical recommendations but offers a range of insights and perspectives that provide the opportunity for vital critical thinking and debate.

There should be no hierarchy in terms of the research disciplines that are considered relevant to Probation and Community Rehabilitation. Criminology, Social Work, Sociology, Psychology, Politics, Geography, Law, Forensic Science and Medicine all have valid perspectives on crime, criminal behaviour and criminal justice. No doubt there are others.

Research from other countries often offers fresh insights (Robinson and McNeill



2016) but there are well documented pitfalls in comparative research (Teague 2016). The Probation Institute's position is that it encourages and supports the use of international research to promote learning but that special care is needed when considering the efficacy of policy transfer from other

jurisdictions, particularly with regard to the question of its relevance to the UK

Principle 2: Research methodologies should be transparent, appropriate for the data being collected, ethical and theoretically justified.

There should be no hierarchy of methodologies. Quantitative and qualitative research methods provide complementary, not contradictory, data. *'The concept of a "hierarchy of evidence" is often problematic when appraising the evidence for social or public health interventions'* (Pettigrew and Roberts 2003:527). Evaluation research, for example, should always take account of the influence of context on both process and outcomes (Pawson 2013). There are also numerous innovative research methodologies that should not be dismissed out of hand if they offer genuinely alternative ways of collecting and analysing data (McNeill and Beyens 2016).

Assessing the quality of research is a universal academic challenge and, while there are some core requirements that are commonly agreed, there are also vast areas of legitimate disagreement. The system of peer review employed by many journals goes some way towards defining and maintaining research standards but even the most reputable journals are often criticized for what they choose or do not choose to publish.

Research methodologies should be transparent, appropriate for the data being collected and theoretically justified. Empirical research must be conducted diligently, honestly and skilfully. In other words, it must be ethical.

Principle 3: NOMS, NPS, CRCs and other providers in the sector should encourage and support researchers in obtaining the funding, approval and access required to undertake meaningful research

The three main obstacles to undertaking applied research are obtaining funding, approval and access. The difficulties are compounded by the interdependence of these processes, so that it is often difficult to obtain one unless the others have already been put in place.

Sources of funding range from major academic research councils (such as the Economic and Social Research Council) to central or local government funding, charitable funding and, finally, commercial commissioning. It is important that all funders have transparent procedures for monitoring and consulting about the progress of research and the use of research grants without seeking to unduly influence the direction or findings of the research.

Obtaining approval for research may take several different forms. All universities require their own researchers to undertake a demanding process to obtain ethical approval. NOMS also requires all prospective researchers to obtain approval before commencing research. This latter process currently poses particular challenges that appear to discourage all but the most persistent researchers and risks losing valuable research opportunities. There is a need to review this process.

Obtaining access to staff and service users is often a local decision. In times of rapid organizational change, it is understandable that senior managers in the NPS and CRCs are wary of inviting researchers to observe, conduct interviews or read



documents that expose the challenges the new organisations are facing. However, it is only through openness and mutual trust that good practice in difficult times can be acknowledged and disseminated, while difficulties can be resolved and lessons learned.

Principle 4: The wide dissemination of research findings is essential to the maintenance and development of good practice

Research is typically disseminated through:

- Research reports to funders, which should normally be placed in the public domain within a reasonable space of time
- Academic and professional conference and seminar papers
- Academic peer reviewed journals, such as the *British Journal of Criminology*; *European Journal of Criminology*; *Criminology and Criminal Justice*; *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*
- Professionally-focused journals which may, or may not, be peer reviewed, such as *Probation Journal*; *European Journal of Probation*; *British Journal of Community Justice*
- Newspaper articles and social media

Funders should not unreasonably delay or refuse permission for research to be disseminated.

Employers should encourage and support a research-aware working environment by employing staff such as librarians, research officers or knowledge managers whose role is to curate research for the benefit of practitioners.

Principle 5: The Probation Institute encourages and supports members and partners to engage actively in conducting and disseminating research that enhances practice and critical thinking about all aspects of Probation and Community Rehabilitation.

The PI will disseminate and draw attention to research findings through *Probation Quarterly*, online professional networks, the use of blogs and other social media, conferences and seminars and the development of a Centre of Excellence. The PI also promotes the Graham Smith Awards which are focused on practitioner research.

Conclusion

In times of significant change such as that brought about by the implementation of *Transforming Rehabilitation*, one of the first casualties is likely to be research and the creation of new knowledge. Research takes time and money, and its findings usually affect the medium or long term, rather than the short term. Yet unless future policy and practice is underpinned by research evidence and insight, work with offenders in the community will succumb to the vagaries of politics and fashion, losing its integrity and professionalism. The role of the Probation Institute, as it aspires to being a Centre of Excellence, will be to work to ensure this does not happen.

References

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