

## Post-qualifying Training in the PBNI

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**Summary:** The continued professional development of staff is essential in order to maintain a highly skilled workforce that is well trained and able to practise in an environment that demands high levels of competence from Probation staff. There have been a number of changes in recent years in social work education and training which have been designed to improve social work practice and management at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These changes come at an opportune time in that, as a consequence of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 and the Sentencing Framework Implementation process, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) has recruited a number of social work qualified staff who now have the opportunity to engage in the new post-qualifying framework. There are also opportunities for established Probation staff at practitioner and manager levels. While social work is not the identified qualification for Probation Officers in England and Wales, it remains the core qualification for Probation Officers in Northern Ireland. In this paper the author highlights the importance of continued professional development for social work qualified staff within PBNI.

**Keywords:** Post-qualifying framework, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership, modules, requirements, accreditation.

### Introduction

Social work education and training in Northern Ireland has gone through a number of significant changes in the past few years. A programme of reform began in 2001 and the first part of this programme was completed with the launch of the Honours Degree in Social Work in 2004. Upon completion of this degree, graduates are required to complete satisfactorily an Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) before

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being deemed fully qualified. A consequence of this development in qualifying training for social work was the review of post-qualifying education and training in Northern Ireland. As a result of this review, a new Northern Ireland post-qualifying framework for post-qualifying education and training provision was developed and introduced in April 2007.

However, post-qualifying training is not new to Northern Ireland. The PBNI had been very much involved in post-qualifying training since its inception in 1991 with the establishment of the UK-wide PQ framework. This was regulated by the General Social Work Community, and candidates were required to demonstrate six competences, PQ 1–6, at a post-qualifying level. In 2003 the number of candidates participating in post-qualifying training increased significantly with the expectation that newly qualified Probation Officers complete the PQ1 (consolidation of qualifying level competences) within a two-year period. For those candidates who wished to further their development through post-qualifying, PBNI offered an accredited More Complex Work programme that evidenced competence at PQ 2–5 levels. PQ6 (Enabling Others) competency was achieved in a number of ways, notably successful completion of the Practice Teachers Award.

While a significant number of Social Workers/Probation Officers throughout the UK achieved success through the UK PQ framework, there was a recognition that there was a need for a more flexible approach in Northern Ireland for PQ – an approach that would offer all social work agencies seamless learning opportunities, alignment to cover a range of structures and opportunities, comprehensive provision and academic and professional pathways. The flexible nature of the framework should enable candidates to match their training to their developmental needs at various stages of their careers.

One of the strategic priorities in the PBNI Corporate Plan (2008–2011) relates to organisational excellence and the assertion that ‘We will provide new opportunities for continuous learning and development for all staff’. Post-qualifying training can provide the opportunity for social work staff to take responsibility for their learning by involving themselves in one of three awards that are outlined in this paper. The recent legislative changes have had significant implications for PBNI, as the organisation is now dealing with an increased responsibility and workload. This will necessitate new bodies of knowledge and expertise and there will inevitably be an increasing emphasis on professional development for all PBNI staff.

When we consider continued professional development (CPD) and post-qualifying (PQ) training, an assumption could be made that they are one and the same. Patricia Higham (2009, p. 1), however, tells us that CPD and PQ are related terms with somewhat different meanings.

Continued professional development (CPD) denotes flexible learning and development undertaken after successful completion of a professional qualification. Although CPD learning does not always have to be assessed or result in an award, CPD activity should always result in personal and professional development. CPD, a broader concept than PQ, is the over-arching concept within specific PQ awards and activities are located.

Post-qualifying education and training (PQ) is designed normally as specific assessed modules or awards whose content and assessment are prescribed by a social work regulatory body, and whose aims are to develop social workers' practice in accordance with employers' requirements. The principle of demonstrating practice achievement underpins PQ.

Post-qualifying training therefore allows for recognition of the continued professional development of social work staff at all levels and to have this training accredited.

### **Aims of the new Northern Ireland PQ framework**

These are threefold:

- to develop practitioners beyond beginning levels of competence in specialist areas of practice
- to promote inter-professional learning and multi-professional practice
- to develop leadership and management skills.

The NI PQ framework became operational on 1 April 2007 and is an education and training framework for social workers wishing to develop and enhance their skills and qualifications throughout their career in the social work profession. It has a range of professional requirements that can be achieved through a modular approach to education and training leading to three professional Northern Ireland Social Care Council awards.

These are the Specific Award, Specialist Award and Strategic Award (see Table 1). These awards can be linked to academic awards including postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma, master's degree and doctorate. PBNI approached the challenge of the new PQ framework by assigning Probation Manager Pat Best to undertake the development of modules relating to the awards. Part of this work involved coordinating with the University of Ulster and the PQ Partnership. PBNI's strategy has therefore been to design 'in-house' programmes at each level in order to provide opportunities for continuous professional development for social work staff in line with learning and development policy.

**Table 1.** Summary of professional/academic achievement for all three PQ awards

<i>Award type</i>	<i>Requirements</i>	<i>Professional achievement</i>	<i>Academic achievement</i>
Specific (new staff)	Three general, three core	PBNI/Criminal Justice module evidences three requirements at Specific Level. In order to achieve the full Specific Award it is necessary to complete three further PQ requirements through an individual assessment route.	30 credits towards the MSc in Professional Development
Specialist (established staff)	Nine general	PBNI Criminal Justice/ Probation modules (×3) and nine requirements leading to the Specialist Award	90 credits towards the MSc in Professional Development. For candidates who have achieved 30 credits at Specific Level: with a total of 120 Credits this will lead to a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work Professional Development
Leadership and Strategic (middle and senior managers)	Nine general	Leadership and Strategic Award (modules to be devised)	90 credits towards the MSc in Professional Development

These programmes, being accredited by both the Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training (NIPQET) Partnership and the University of Ulster, will enable staff to accrue both professional and academic credits towards the abovementioned awards. The advantages for PBNI are high-quality, externally validated processes that will enhance the performance and credibility of staff. The benefits of in-house programmes are that PBNI is already delivering good-quality training inputs to staff which can then be accredited. Staff are not required to attend courses at university and their learning and development is more applied and integrated in the work situation.

### **Specific Award**

The Specific Award is primarily intended to enable new practitioners with a basic qualification in social work to develop the range of knowledge and skills associated with competence 'in depth' in a specific area of work. The aim of this award is to produce well-rounded practitioners who are confident and competent in a particular area of work and to prepare them for movement into more specialist working.

The NI Specific Award has six PQ requirements and three core requirements that describe the range of professional activity appropriate to this award. In November 2007 the Probation/Criminal Justice Programme was validated at Specific Level by the NIPQET Partnership and University of Ulster as part of the MSc in Professional Development for Social Workers. Within this programme, probation staff are tasked to evidence three of the six requirements that were deemed to be most relevant to probation practice. The three core requirements are integrated and are evidenced through the three general requirements. The module involves candidates producing three pieces of work for assessment, including two written assignments and one direct observation.

Successful completion of the Criminal/Justice Programme (three PQ requirements) will result in the achievement of the Probation/Criminal Justice module; candidates can also claim 30 credits towards the MSc in Professional Development and three requirements at Specific Level. An important outcome of this involvement in PQ study at an early stage in a Probation Officer's career is the opportunity for practitioners to demonstrate their move 'from competence to capability' (Higham, 2009, p. 203). This is essential given the responsibilities of new practitioners,

which include assessment of risk and needs, supervision of offenders, provision of reports, partnership and multidisciplinary work. Practitioners' ability to reflect critically on their practice will also ultimately benefit service users, as will working with a competent, informed professional.

For any staff who wish to achieve the full Specific Award (i.e. all six PQ requirements), this can be achieved through individual assessment routes, i.e. verbal assessment, direct observation or assignments.

Since January 2008, 18 new Probation Officer staff have enrolled in this programme, at various stages – either on completion of their AYE or on commencing employment with PBNI. The completion date for the first cohort of probation staff (10) for the Criminal Justice/Probation Module is June 2009. A further 13 Probation Officers will commence the Criminal Justice/Probation module at Specific Level on successful completion of their AYE throughout 2009/2010.

Support for the new post-qualifying framework has been and will continue to be provided by staff from PBNI's Learning and Development Unit. Support to date has been in the form of information sessions, practice workshops and individual support to both candidates and Practice Assessors. Close liaison with the relevant post-qualifying staff at the University of Ulster has also been essential.

### **Specialist Award**

Work in conjunction with the UUJ and the NIPQET Partnership has led to the development of a framework for the accreditation of a Probation/Criminal Justice Programme at Specialist Level. The Specialist Award is intended to meet the needs of those involved in complex decision-making requiring high levels of professional responsibility and accountability. Probation staff can commence this award on completion of the PBNI/Criminal Justice Module at Specific Level and must have three years' post-qualifying experience or be able to provide evidence that they are working at a specialist level. Staff at this level need to develop high levels of specialist knowledge, skills and expertise in their work. There are nine PQ requirements that describe the range of professional activity required within this professional grouping, and when all nine are met the NI Specialist Award is achieved.

The design of the Specialist Award programme follows a similar format to that of the Specific Award programme, with three modules

each accruing 30 academic/professional credits towards a possible 90 credits towards the MSc in Professional Development and a full Specialist Award in social work. The plan is for this programme, once accredited, to be implemented during 2009.

The three modules are:

1. Specialist Practice in Probation/Criminal Justice
2. Inter Professional Work in Probation/Criminal Justice
3. Managing and Enabling Change in Probation and Criminal Justice.

Methods of assessment for these modules include a case project, verbal presentation, assignment and a direct observation.

This means that staff will be enabled to accumulate credits within their place of work and at a pace that suits their individual needs for continued professional development. These modules will be particularly beneficial for Probation Officers who can move into the various specialist areas within their practice and complete modules at various stages throughout their career.

The new modules have been designed to reflect adult learning approaches and people taking responsibility for their own learning and working at their own pace: 'Adult learners need to see that the professional development learning and day-to-day activities are related and relevant' (Speck, 1996).

The new modules devised at post-qualifying Specific and Specialist Levels should enable probation staff to make a clear link between post-qualifying training and their daily work.

### **Leadership and Strategic Award**

The Leadership and Strategic Award in social work also has nine requirements and is for staff who demonstrate high levels of competence within and outside their agency context. These staff are moving beyond the detail of their own practice and need opportunities to explore a wider perspective where they can influence developments and influence others. In the future a further development for PBNI will be to provide opportunities for staff to accrue credits at this level. An individual assessment route is available at present for any staff who are working at this level.

Since the start of the NI PQ framework in April 2007, 30 Probation Officers have enrolled for the PBNI/Criminal Justice module: this gives a real sense of PBNI's commitment to continued professional development. Thirty probation staff have already achieved the full PQ UK Award, and a number of staff have achieved credits towards this award – a considerable achievement, and one that reflects the commitment of probation staff to their continued professional development.

## **Challenges**

While PBNI has a considerable record of achievement under the UK PQ Framework, the challenge for PBNI as an agency in terms of ensuring the continued professional development of its workforce is to provide the opportunities to ensure that staff are aware of and can avail of the appropriate training/resources in order to meet their developmental needs. A question often posed by practitioners is what is the benefit of post-qualifying study? The commitment and resolve of staff as adult learners is a crucial aspect of professional development and, as mentioned above, probation staff have already demonstrated a considerable commitment to their professional development. The Probation Officer's responsibilities are many and varied, and an ability to reflect critically on knowledge, skills and values can only be of benefit to the service user.

A significant amount of training is provided within the agency on a regular basis with the ultimate aim of ensuring that probation staff have the necessary skills and knowledge to cope with the professional task. A challenge is to align as much training as is relevant to the new NI PQ framework at all levels.

At present, all new probation staff are engaged in PQ training at certain levels; established staff will need support and encouragement to involve themselves in such training. Other challenges are workload easement and time for study/reflection.

The fact that in PBNI the Practice Assessor is now at middle manager grade has helped to increase awareness for staff at this level of PQ training, and has also enabled PQ to be part of the supervision process.

## **Conclusion**

Continuous professional development is important for all staff in an environment that demands high levels of professionalism from

probation/social work staff. The benefits include personal growth, opportunity to gain credits for academic growth, career advancement and, most significantly, improvement in the quality of service delivery. Post-qualifying training through the Criminal Justice/Probation modules can offer opportunities for staff to evidence their continued professional development at all levels, and provides formal recognition of expertise.

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