

Towards Probation Based on Knowledge

Leo C. M. Tigges

Secretary General, CEP, The European Organisation for Probation

INTRODUCTION

In this contribution I would like to sketch the outlines of a project plan to develop a page of the CEP website in which the 'state of the art' in probation - scientific information in the professional field of the rehabilitation of offenders - is presented in a way that is relevant for the general public, politicians, policymakers and workers in the field.

Before doing that, I will describe the way in which scientific knowledge of probation is acquired and developed within CEP and informs the practice of its members. I will pay attention to the motivation for the quest for evidence based knowledge. Finally I will deal with the Probation Knowledge Base.

PROMOTING COOPERATION

Several means are at the disposal of the CEP to promote cooperation among its present and future members: conferences, a Register of Experts, Communication and projects carried out under the EU-umbrella, and the publication Probation in Europe.

Conferences

Every year six conferences are organised. There are recurring topics (every two or three years): What Works in Probation? Electronic Monitoring, Resettlement of Offenders. Other recent topics were: The Recruitment and Training of Probation Officers; Funding Innovation and Collaboration in Probation; The Implementation of the Framework Decision on Probation; The Foreign Offender.

Register of Experts

The field of probation is developing swiftly everywhere in Europe. Some countries have only recently established a probation system. In others, the probation organisations have extended their services from the traditional aftercare of prisoners to involvement at all levels of the criminal justice systems. And in every country probation organisations and services are looking for best practices to improve their functioning.

Being able to call on the wider experience of colleagues in other European countries would then be a valuable resource, which could save both time

and money. After all, every European country has among its staff experts in certain topics, such as offender risk assessment and the development of offending behaviour programmes. However, often these experts are not known outside their own countries.

With its Register of Experts, the CEP is establishing a database register of experts/training consultants who would be available for use by CEP member countries wishing to improve their probation services and extend their capacity to manage offenders successfully.

Applicants are subject to a vetting procedure by a panel. We now have more than 20 experts who will be of use to the CEP members.

Communication

The CEP has an extensive, knowledge based website: www.cep-probation.org on which a lot of information is gathered (for instance a description of the probation systems of the European countries, the reports on conferences). It is now being extended to a more interactive site on which members can participate in discussion. Two discussion forums have recently been opened: on the Framework Decision 947 and on the Training of Probation Officers.

Six times a year an electronic Newsletter is published and sent to our members with a lot of information on actual developments in Europe and in the CEP. In addition CEP now also sponsors the journal *EuroVista: Probation and Community Justice*, dedicated to linking research with policy and practice in probation and community justice throughout Europe.

Projects under the EU-umbrella

At the moment several projects with the financial support of the EU (action grants) are carried out in which CEP is a partner. For instance the STARR project, but also DOMICE (Best Practices in Case Management). RIRP (Reducing Influences that Radicalise Prisoners) was recently finalized. The reports are published on CEP's website.

For the first time in 2009 the EU decided to award the CEP an operating grant in which CEP's costs

are partly financed by the EU. The operating grant was also awarded for 2010. In future years the CEP will again apply for operating grants.

More projects are in preparation. A bid was developed which is about the implementation of the Framework Decision on the Transfer of Probation Supervision. Three universities (De Montfort [Leicester], Bucharest, Tilburg) will be the research partners. Another project for which financial support of the EU has been asked and is recently granted is to develop probation statistics. The Finnish Institute HEUNI will be the research partner.

The publication Probation in Europe

The last comprehensive description of the probation services in Europe dates from 2008. It contains a systematic description of the Probation Services in 32 jurisdictions. A new update is in preparation. New elements will be:

- The chapters will in principle be written by two people; one who is involved in the probation organisation itself (management or policy level) and a person from an academic institution to achieve a more balanced and critical view on the probation system.
- It will contain more information on the practice of probation measures and supervision, with a view to facilitating the transfer of probation supervision across Europe.
- It will provide an assessment of how far the probation situation in the various countries are in line with or deviating from the Probation Rules of the Council of Europe (2010).

OPTIMISM

Personally I am very optimistic about the contribution of academics to a probation system and practices that are more based on what we scientifically know of What Works in Probation. In the first place it appears that the universities are interested in developing "the science of probation". More and more universities nowadays have scholars that are carrying out research in probation topics.

An expression of this development is the existence of the Working Group on Community Sanctions and Measures of the European Society of Criminology.

Who would have thought ten years ago that twice a year academics would come together for several days during which you can nearly at a stretch listen to presentations from different researchers and teachers on a variety of probation related topics?

Some probation organisations are also more and more interested in collaboration with universities. We already know the long standing tradition in England and Wales of training probation officers at universities. In Scotland a lot of policy relevant research is carried out by the universities. In The Netherlands we now have the first special professor of probation (Peter van der Laan) and we have two universities of applied sciences (Utrecht: Anneke Menger and Jo Hermanns; Avans Eindhoven: Bas Vogelvang) that have formed 'probation knowledge circles. They carry out practice-related research. Those knowledge circles are partly financed by the probation organisations.

The CEP conference in Agen, France, in December 2009 on the Training of Probation Officers gave rise to a small group of people, mainly from universities that want to develop and pilot a curriculum for probation officers. A grant at the EU has been applied for.

MOTIVATION FOR EVIDENCED BASED KNOWLEDGE

Why do we in CEP want to increase the scientific knowledge on probation?

In the first place there are some real challenges for the future. To name some of them:

- Although one can observe in Europe on the one hand greater similarities in probation (probation more active and present in every country; similarities in main tasks and mission), on the other hand we see a lot of differences (position and standing of probation in the penal field, the seriousness of offences and offenders that form the target group of probation, improvised work methods versus evidenced based tools and systematic approaches). The more we get to know of each other's systems and working methods, the more we are questioning what was taken for granted in our own system. And in a world in which Europeanization is the trend, we

have to develop common standards, or at least if a jurisdiction has its own standards, it should be able to explain its scientific base.

- More alternatives to custody or more probation does not necessarily imply fewer custodial sentences. Net-widening has to be avoided as much as possible, otherwise we might end up – as in my opinion is already the case in England and Wales - in a situation in which there are a lot of custodial sentences **and** a lot of non-custodial sentences i.e. probation measures. The mission of Probation organisations is that they can offer real alternatives to custodial sentences. We have to carry out more research on how the phenomenon of net-widening functions and how it could be limited.
- The resettlement of offenders is in some countries still in its infancy. Every jurisdiction in Europe is struggling with the interplay between prison/probation/community/municipality. This is mainly an organisational issue (who does what and is responsible for what and when? Which organisation is responsible for the management of the resettlement process?). If any resettlement activities take place, then one can say that the activities of the different actors are not integrally planned or executed.

In the second place in probation we have an *internal motivation* to improve the quality of our work as we want to do it as well as possible. So we have to ask ourselves the question whether our own goals are achieved or not and what scientific evidence informs our work.

In the third place we have an *external motivation*; we have to show the added value and effectiveness of probation, especially in times where the financial means are limited.

It is very stimulating for CEP that academics are more often to be found at our conferences as speakers and/or presenters. They are the critical friends that hold up a mirror to our probation faces. The involvement of academics in our work and in reviewing our work will greatly contribute to the confidence that society and politicians have in the work of probation agencies.

TOWARDS A PROBATION KNOWLEDGE BASE

Goal

Around two years ago (5 March 2009) I sent to the members of the Working Group of Community Sanctions and Measures a short paper in which I formulated ten questions on the effectiveness of probation. I wanted to know whether these questions were the ten most relevant and whether it would be possible to start a project in which the scientifically based answers to these questions could be provided. This initiative led to discussions with Jo Hermanns and Anneke Menger of the Probation Department of the University of Applied Science in Utrecht. Together we developed the idea of a Probation knowledge base that would be published on the CEP website.

The goal would be to present “state-of-the-art” scientific information on the professional field of rehabilitation of offenders, relevant for the general public, politicians, policymakers and workers in the field.

The information should be presented in encyclopaedic format, arranged as answers to a limited set of questions. For each question an answer would be given of maximum 500 words. Of course links and literature references to more detailed information would be provided.

It should be made clear to the reader that the foremost experts worldwide contributed to the texts and agree with its content. Their contributions should be based on empirical research and should reflect the consensus among academics or should describe unresolved differences in schools of thought of the international scientific community on probation effectiveness issues. The text is meant to be valid on a general level, and must discard most national differences.

The CEP webpage: “what is known about rehabilitation services for offenders: what do scientists agree on”, implies a state-of-the-art text, not a discussion or an overview of opinions, practices and research. The knowledge base is not meant to be interactive.

Tasks and responsibilities

The Utrecht University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands (HU), represented by Jo Hermanns and Anneke Menger, will organize the gathering, selection and structuring of information and also the proposal of a final text for each question to the CEP.

The CEP will install a small steering group that is responsible for the final text. The steering group has a limited role:

1. Monitoring the progress of the project
2. Deciding on the formulation of the relevant questions
3. Checking whether the text might be harmful and is understandable for the probation sector

A number of international experts will be invited to contribute to the text.

The process

Step 1: Selecting the most relevant questions

Utrecht University will select, combine and reformulate the first draft of the questions by Leo Tigges and propose a draft to the steering group. One could think of questions like: what do we know about the effects of imprisonment? Why is reducing recidivism important? Can we prevent recidivism? What are the advantages and disadvantages of community service? When are probation services effective? What is the use of restorative justice? The steering group board decides on the outcome.

Step 2: Finding answers

Three experts on each specific question (as shown in qualified publications) are invited to formulate an answer in about 500 words. Utrecht University integrates the three answers in one text of 500 words and asks the three experts to comment on the result. One text is presented to the steering group. The editorial board of CEP finally decides and publishes the text on the website.

Experts that write interesting contributions will be encouraged to submit articles to the *European Probation Journal* or *EuroVista*.

Step 3: Publication

The text will be published on the website of CEP. Members will be able to comment to the steering group and/or provide additional information. The reactions themselves however will not be published on the website. Proposals for changes in the text are the responsibility of the representatives of Utrecht University.

FINAL REMARKS

CEP received a small donation from a Dutch charity that will cover some costs. The Experts will be offered a small sum as a token of our appreciation for their contribution.

During the discussion with the members of the working group after my presentation, two suggestions were made:

1. To circulate a text on the effectiveness of probation before the experts are asked to contribute.
2. To circulate the draft of the questions among the members of the working group for comments.

Utrecht University has welcomed these suggestions and will follow them up.

The first results of the project might be seen on the CEP website at the end of 2011. As soon as the text for one of the questions is finalized it will be published. The answers to the other questions will follow later.

I am convinced that this project will further strengthen the ties between the academic world and probation managers and practitioners. But more importantly knowledge of the effectiveness of probation will be made accessible to the general public. Public understanding of probation and support for its work are essential and we are convinced that the knowledge base contributes to this.