Probation and Correctional Practice Training: New initiative at Fort Hare and Rhodes

By Brian Stout

On 20 September 2002 in East London a conference of criminal justice professionals in the Eastern Cape was held to launch the honours programme in Probation and Correctional Practice offered jointly by the Universities of Fort Hare and Rhodes. This launch marks the culmination of a two-year development process.

History and development

The process of developing the probation and correctional practice programme at Fort Hare began in 1999. A connection was made between De Montfort University in the United Kingdom and Fort Hare and a link was initiated with British Council funding. Criminal justice modules were introduced into the basic social work programme, which both served to increase the training that the Fort Hare students were receiving and allowed the modules that would make up the future honours programme to be piloted. The teaching was based on De Montfort modules, adapted to fit the South African legislation and situation.

At the same time, Rhodes was developing a course of its own in Probation and Correctional Practice. A number of meetings took place between the two departments and it was decided that the best approach for the students, the two departments and the region would be to work together and offer the programme jointly. Thus, when the Department of Education announced the incorporation of Rhodes East London into Fort Hare management structures, the two departments already had a strong working relationship on which to build.

The introduction of this new programme is particularly well timed, given the developments within the criminal justice social work sector in South Africa. The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) is placing a new emphasis on rehabilitation following their conference in Durban in 2000. The Department of Social Development is leading the process of establishing a new registration board for probation officers, and liaison has taken place with that department, both provincially and nationally, to ensure that graduates of the programme will be able to register with that body. In particular, however, the programme also reflects developments within child justice and the Child Justice Bill.

Admission criteria

The programme is designed to build on basic social work training, so a social work degree is a necessary prerequisite for admission to the programme. The programme is being offered in 2002 as an honours programme for a small number of students, and as the fourth year of the existing social work degree for the remainder.

Two new modules to the three-year social work programme have been introduced to assist in the delivery of the honours programme. The first of these is Orientation to the Criminal Justice System, which provides an introduction to working with offenders and to the South African criminal justice system. This module gives all social work students a taste of criminal justice, allowing them to make an informed choice regarding whether they want to take the Probation and Correctional Practice programme in their fourth year.

The second new module in the three-year programme is Values, Ethics and Anti-discriminatory Practice. This teaches students to be aware of the discrimination faced by them and their clients and trains them how to take steps to challenge discrimination and to eliminate bias, both intentional and unintentional.

Content of the programme

The programme is a two-semester, one-year programme, which is made up of a practice placement, a research project and four taught papers.

Practice placement

Fort Hare and Rhodes have been placing final year students with criminal justice social work agencies for many years. Both universities have long-standing relationships with the relevant departments as well.

We now recall the students at the beginning of the first semester to provide them with some additional, specific placement preparation. This was done for the first time in 2002; students were trained in court work skills, criminal justice legislation and computer skills. We keep in close contact with students throughout their placements.

Research projects

All students who take the programme are expected to carry out a research project while they are on placement.

The intention is to raise the profile of research within the programme and to build closer links between research, teaching and practice. We hope that by creating a culture of research the programme will continue to be vibrant, contemporary and relevant.

The outline of the four taught modules is as follows:

Transformation policy

There are three main elements to the
transformation policy module.

- The legal basis for working with offenders, including the relevant legislation and the judicial processes.

- Criminology. Our students will have taken criminology options during their basic degree and in this section we briefly revisit the theories in light of their experiences on placement. Particular attention is paid to cognitive-behaviourism as research has shown that methods based on the cognitive-behaviourist approach are most effective in addressing offending behaviour.

- Victimology. Victimology has traditionally been a neglected aspect of both criminal justice teaching and practice. However, we are finding that a number of our students are being offered placements where they will be expected to work with victims. In this module we consider the theory of victimology including perceptions of victims, the needs of victims and the theoretical frameworks of victimology.

Probation and correctional practice

This module links the theoretical aspects of the transformation policy module with the much more practical skills training of the later probation services module. There are three main aspects to this module:

- Assessment. The students are trained in the four main aspects of assessment: the seriousness of the offence; the risk posed by the offender; the strengths of the offender and his or her ability to respond to interventions and the criminogenic needs of the offender. Special attention is paid to the assessment of risk.

- Stages of change and motivational interviewing. We teach the students the concepts of how change is neither a one-off event nor a linear process, but a cycle which often includes relapse.

- Effective practice research. Extensive research has been done regarding what techniques are effective and ineffective in working with offenders, in what has become known as the ‘W hat Works’ research. This module includes teaching on the findings of this research.

Youth at risk

The field of child justice is undergoing the greatest transformation at present in South Africa with the proposed introduction of the Child Justice Bill. We find that almost all our students work with young people for part or all of their placements. For this reason we include a module looking specifically at child offenders. This module includes teaching on:

- The Child Justice Bill. We cover the background to the Bill and the main philosophies that have informed it. The main provisions of the Bill are also taught, with particular attention given to the new emphasis on assessment, diversion and the preliminary inquiry.

- Restorative justice is applicable to many of the modules throughout the programme, and it is briefly introduced during the Orientation to the Criminal Justice System module. However, the emphasis on restorative justice in the Bill suggests that the most appropriate time to cover restorative justice in detail is the Youth at Risk module. We teach the theory and history of restorative justice and provide the students with basic training in facilitating a family group conference.

- Child sex offenders. There is an increasing awareness in South Africa of the need to address the behaviour of children who sexually abuse other children. The introduction of the SAYStOP programme into the Eastern Cape means that an increasing number of our students will be expected to work with this group of children. We provide them with basic training regarding child sex offending, to create foundational skills and knowledge that SAYStOP training can build on.

Probation services

This module is divided into two distinct sections: working with offenders and victims, and managing within the agency context.

- As this is the final module, it builds upon the material covered in earlier modules. Students develop an action plan for working with an offender, in line with SMART objectives. They are taught how to implement the plan, and monitor its success. They are also trained in the writing of a pre-sentence report. Good practice in working with victims of crime is also covered in this module.

- The second section of this module concentrates on preparing the students for the world of employment. Students are taught how to manage themselves within a criminal justice agency, to manage stress, contribute to team working, manage time and manage conflict.

Conclusion

The Probation and Correctional Practice programme is built on solid principles in line with the established needs of the main employers: the Department of Correctional Services, the Department of Welfare and the criminal justice NGOs. It is informed by research and by training practices both in South Africa and abroad. Recruitment is healthy. There are 25 students enrolled in the programme in 2002, and we expect a similar number to enrol in 2003 followed by a sharp increase in 2004 and 2005, reflecting the higher student numbers in the first two years of the Fort Hare social work programme. We expect that the programme will make a significant contribution to training and research in criminal justice in the Eastern Cape for many years to come.