

'A bit of a halfway house': Practice tutor assessors, professional identity and practitioner socialisation

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Abstract

This article explores professional identity among Practice Tutor Assessors (PTAs), including how they seek to socialise new recruits into the profession. PTAs are an under-researched group who play a key role in assessing the vocational component of the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) in England and Wales, completion of which is a prerequisite for qualifying as a Probation Officer. Drawing on focus group data from a wider study exploring staff experiences of the PQiP, the paper analyses how PTAs understand their role, values, and contributions to probation training. The findings show that PTAs occupy a 'halfway house' between frontline practice and organisational structures, which enables them to remain connected to probation practice while being insulated from the pressures of case management. Participants emphasised their commitment to longstanding probation values while also highlighting tensions between these values and organisational challenges, such as risk assessment and staffing shortages. The study demonstrates that PTAs act as important agents of practitioner socialisation; they are 'guardians' of a professional identity who, in a demanding environment, are crucial to the transmission and reproduction of knowledge, skills, and values to new recruits.

Keywords

Practice tutor assessors, probation, professional identity, professional qualification in probation, training, values

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Introduction

The training of Probation Officers (POs), Burrell and Petrillo (2023: 174) observe, reflects ‘unremitting shifts in the structure, governance, roles and practice methods’ of the Service. Historically, training drew primarily from social work knowledge and methods (McWilliams, 1986), but it was not until 1971 that POs were required to hold a social work qualification to practise (Canton, 2024). This combination of knowledge and methods was underpinned by an ideology of service which put clients first, together informing professional identity among practitioners (Tidmarsh, 2021). However, as the ‘temperature’ (Garland, 2001) of the penal policymaking climate heated from the 1980s onwards, the relevance of social work knowledge and values to probation practice began to be questioned (e.g. Dews, 1994). The welfarist ethos of social work, Canton (2024) argues, was no longer commensurate with a Service that was expected to be both punitive *and* managerial, as clients were reconstituted as ‘dangerous’ and ‘undeserving’ (Garland, 2001). As such, probation training was severed from social work in 1995. When training was eventually reinstated in 1998 via a Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS), it was more criminologically oriented, focused in particular on the management of risk (Keysell, 2023). The DipPS also introduced a ‘work-based competency assessment’ (Fowler et al., 2023: 192) in the form of a Vocational Qualification (VQ). The DipPS was succeeded by the Probation Qualifying Framework (PQF) in 2010. This pathway introduced a blended learning model, pairing in-person teaching with online content (Fowler et al., 2023).

The PQF was replaced by the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) in 2016. The first iteration of the PQiP combined academic study towards a BA (Hons) in Community Justice, delivered through a mix of in-person and online learning by one of three university providers,¹ with an on-the-job VQ. Only external applicants who were university graduates could apply for the PQiP, with pathway lengths dependent upon the relevancy of their degree. The 15-month pathway was a Level 6 qualification, akin to the final year of an Honours degree. To be eligible for this pathway, trainees must have completed a minimum of three ‘required knowledge modules’ (HMPPS, 2022: 15) – on the criminal justice system, understanding crime and criminal behaviour, penal policy and punishment, and rehabilitation – at undergraduate level. Trainees on the 21-month pathway, known as the ‘Extended PQiP’ (HMPPS, 2022: 15), had to complete the knowledge modules at Level 5 in the first six months of their training, prior to studying for the Level 6 qualification. In late 2020, an internal Probation Service Officer (PSO) ‘Pathfinder’ (now called the ‘progression’ pathway) was introduced to enable PSOs to progress to PQiP through a fast-track route. This enabled practitioners without higher degrees to access the qualification, following completion of an assessment that was marked by university providers. The current iteration of the PQiP was introduced in 2023. A third, 27-month pathway was added in March 2023 for those without a university-level qualification, with trainees completing modules at Levels 4, 5 and 6. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the overwhelming majority of the higher education components are delivered remotely.

The timing of the VQ element has also changed. Where, under the first iteration of the PQiP, the VQ was completed within 12 months, it is now completed in just nine months,

in line with the timing of the Level 6 curriculum. This element of the PQiP is overseen by Practice Tutor Assessors (PTAs), whose core responsibilities include monitoring learner progress and undertaking quality assurance. In particular, this work involves observations of trainees' skills in 'risk assessment and management, developing relationship with supervisees, planning and delivering appropriate interventions and ensuring compliance with organisational requirements in meeting deadlines and quality assurance targets' (Burrell and Petrillo, 2023: 175). Mention of PTAs' probation scholarship is rare, often limited to a brief explainer of their role or the use of select quotes in projects with broader foci (e.g. Tidmarsh, 2025). This is despite the vital role they play in socialising new staff into probation. In a notable exception, Davies and Durrance (2009) observe that PTAs, albeit in their previous guise as Practice Development Assessors (PDAs), have contributed to the vocational element of probation training since POs qualified through the DipPS. Based on group interviews, part of a larger study of learner and teacher experiences of the DipPS, Davies and Durrance (2009) found that PDAs positioned themselves as integral to probation training, not least because they felt that Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) were too busy to contribute meaningfully to trainees' learning environment. Trainees, moreover, appreciated how the experience and knowledge of PDAs supported their learning. To our knowledge, however, Davies and Durrance's (2009) work is the only research that integrates the perspectives of those responsible for delivering vocational training – a gap our study aims to address.

In addition to a lack of scrutiny of the PTA role, there is a general lack of empirical research on trainees' experiences of the PQiP, although Fowler et al. (2023) is a notable exception. This dearth is particularly odd, for two reasons. First, HMI Probation (2025a) note that successful recruitment campaigns since unification have resulted in thousands of new staff joining the Service. Second, attrition rates are high: 20% of learners withdrew from the PQiP in the year-end September 2024 (HMI Probation, 2025a). Instead, research on the PQiP is typically reflective, produced by academics working within the higher education institutions which deliver training who have deliberated upon their own roles, values and teaching practices (e.g. Ainslie and Riley, 2025; Eden-Barnard, 2025; Keysell et al., 2025). These accounts focus on the academic component of the PQiP rather than the VQ. By extension, then, no research has explored how PTAs make sense of their role nor their contributions to training. This paper seeks to address this crucial gap in the literature by examining professional identity – defined by Ibarra (1999: 764–765) as 'the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that people use to define themselves in a professional role' – among PTAs, as well as how it is 'transmitted' (Ainslie and Riley, 2025) to new recruits.

The first part of the paper provides a brief overview of professional identity in probation. The second part outlines the methodology on which data were generated, as well as the positionality of the authors. The rest of the paper draws on data generated through a focus group with PTAs. The third part positions PTAs as a group who are vital to the 'transmission' (Ainslie and Riley, 2025) of probation values. In this sense, they can be understood as 'guardians' (Burke et al., 2017) of probation identity who are crucial to the socialisation of new recruits into the profession. This line of analysis continues in the fourth part, which reports on some of the challenges learners face throughout the

PQiP and how PTAs contribute to their ‘enculturation’ (Robinson, 2018). The paper, therefore, contributes to a small literature on experiences of the PQiP while providing an empirical account of PTAs, as an important yet neglected group in probation scholarship.

Professional identity in probation

Much work on professional identity in probation takes as its starting point the words ‘advise, assist, befriend’, articulated in the Probation of Offenders Act 1907. This phrase functioned as an ‘expression of the Probation Service’s mission and values, or its *ideology of service*’ (Tidmarsh, 2025: 36; emphasis in original). Such values were complemented by ‘the emerging “science” of social work’ (McWilliams, 1983: 129) in the first few decades of the Service’s existence. Probation drew from the casework approach that defined social work, affording practitioners the freedom to operationalise the ‘advise, assist, befriend’ mantra in the pursuit of rehabilitation (Tidmarsh, 2021). Accordingly, for much of the 20th century, professional identity among practitioners was formulated around social work knowledge, methods and values (McWilliams, 1986).

And yet, social, economic and political shifts in the last few decades of the 20th century challenged how the Probation Service was expected to work with its clients. Robinson et al. (2012) summarise the impact of these changes through several penal ‘adaptations’ the Service has been compelled to make to demonstrate its legitimacy. From the 1980s onwards, a *managerial* adaptation emphasised the pursuit of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in probation practice. This was enforced through performance targets and audit, mechanisms which attempted to render the Service more accountable to taxpayers (Tidmarsh, 2021). Concurrently, the rise of *punitive* discourses reframed probation as ‘punishment in the community’ and its clients as ‘offenders’ (Raynor and Vanstone, 2007: 67). Taken together, these adaptations prompted a succession of changes which sought to reshape identity and practice. For example, the implementation of National Standards – which promoted greater consistency via standardised supervision practices – removed ‘advise, assist, befriend’ from official government documents for the first time in 1992 (Deering, 2010). This was followed by the abandonment of social work training requirements for practice in 1995. Against this backdrop of political drives towards punitiveness and efficiency, Nellis (1995) questioned the relevance of ‘generic’ social work values encapsulated in probation’s historic ‘advise, assist, and befriend’ mantra. Gelsthorpe (2007: 486), then, identified ‘a *lacuna* in the value base’ (emphasis in original) which has contributed to the Service’s struggles to articulate an identity commensurate with the priorities of late-modernity.

This challenge to the Probation Service’s knowledge, methods and values has prompted scholarly interest in practitioner identity. Despite the rise of *punitive* and *managerial* adaptations, Robinson et al. (2012) highlight the persistence of *rehabilitation* as a factor in how probation staff make sense of their work – a point supported by numerous studies. Participants in Deering’s (2010) research on individuals enrolled on the DipPS acknowledged, but did not necessarily subscribe to, the New Labour Government’s ‘punishment in the community’ agenda. As such, he concluded that the aim of recruiting a

‘new breed’ of trainees without a commitment to social work values had not been achieved. Annison et al. (2008), too, show that identity among probation practitioners is inherently *people-oriented*. Most respondents from three separate studies agreed that wanting to perform interpersonal work was the main determinant in applying for a career in probation. These studies were conducted against the backdrop of considerable organisational reforms to the Service, and client-focused attitudes have been shown to be key to enduring such change. For example, participants in Robinson and Burnett’s (2007: 331) study of staff experiences of the National Offender Management Service reforms sought to concentrate on their work with individuals under supervision to navigate top-down impositions. This suggests that professional identity in probation has proved ‘durable’ (Grant, 2016) in the face of ongoing changes.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence on identity in probation is from Mawby and Worrall (2013). Based on 60 interviews with probation staff who had held a variety of roles, they developed a typology of occupational identities within probation. *Lifers* had worked in the Service for all, or most, of their working lives; they were social work-trained and typically viewed their profession as a vocation in which they could live out their values. *Second careerists* entered the service after a considerable period of time in an unrelated occupation. This group were trained either in the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work or the DipPS. *Offender managers* joined probation after 1997 and trained via the DipPS. This group were comfortable with terms like ‘offender’ and ‘offender manager’, which indicates that attempts to change probation’s organisational culture had filtered through to occupational identity (Mawby and Worrall, 2013). The majority had not experienced probation as anything but an enforcement agency; consequently, they were more receptive to risk assessment technologies. And yet, despite their distinct characteristics, Mawby and Worrall (2013) identify several themes that cut across each ideal-type, including shared values based on commitment to clients. Accordingly, it is possible to speak of a professional identity in probation which draws on the sediment of ‘advise, assist, befriend’ whilst being receptive to changes to the social, economic and political contexts in which the Service operates.

Mawby and Worrall’s (2013) research was conducted prior to *Transforming Rehabilitation (TR)* – a programme of reform that sought to recapture a ‘professionalism’ which the presiding Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government argued had been lost amidst a series of top-down reforms, via the market provision of services (see Tidmarsh, 2021). However, studies during *TR* demonstrated a familiar adherence to probation identity and values, despite frustrations with part-privatisation. For example, Robinson et al.’s (2016) research on the transition from public to private employment reported on experiences of ‘liminality’ – that is, a betweenness felt by staff as they struggled to adapt to the newly established Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) to which they were transferred. Staff continued to identify with *public sector ethos* but nonetheless experienced a loss of identity, not least because ‘probation’ was removed from organisational and job titles. For Burke et al. (2017), this enforced ‘migration’ *marooned* some staff whose new location in the private sector isolated them; but it also made *pioneers* of others, mainly senior managers who wished to seize the opportunities presented by *TR*. Most common, though, were the *guardians*: determined not to dwell on

the negative aspects of the reforms, this group were ‘very much informed by a defence of a vocational profession and ethos they valued’ (Burke et al., 2017: 200). Similarly, staff in Tidmarsh’s (2021, 2022) ethnography of a CRC sought to make sense of their identity with reference to the *profession* as opposed to the organisation for whom they worked. Hence, what unites these studies of identity after the *TR* reforms is the desire among staff to help individuals under supervision, which took precedence over their personal opinions on the *TR* reforms.

Identity has also been a salient theme in studies of a ‘unified’ Probation Service. Robinson et al.’s (2025) case study of a Probation Region shows how staff make sense of their role with reference to both ‘organisational’ and ‘occupational’ influences. Where the former refers to discourses of ‘probation’ and a sense of place – namely, the Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) in which staff worked – the latter concerns probation values as an ‘anchor’ through yet more change. Despite some evidence of *dis-identification* with the Service, these organisational and occupational factors enabled many staff to ‘maintain their identities as workers, even in extreme conditions’ (Robinson et al., 2025: 1276). Likewise, Tidmarsh (2024, 2025) draws attention to how concerns over staffing shortages and high caseloads have impacted morale in probation. Some staff identified with the consistency of processes within the Civil Service (where probation now sits), especially relative to the CRCs from which many informants moved; but most negatively associated unification with an excess of bureaucracy. And yet, a commitment to clients was (mostly) unshaken: rather than feeling *marooned* by unification, to borrow from Burke et al. (2017), staff mobilised client-centred professional identities as a buffer against organisational reforms.

The summary of the literature presented thus far demonstrates the extent to which frontline practitioners predominate in probation scholarship on identity. Other groups, by contrast, are seldom the focus of such research. For example, there is surprisingly little research on SPOs, as line managers to practitioners. This small literature shows how SPOs are located *between* frontline staff and managers, pushed and pulled between these groups (Coley, 2020; Westaby et al., 2022). Regional Probation Directors (RPDs) are another group whose voices are ‘rarely heard’ (Robinson et al., 2026: 302). Other research on specialist roles includes Fowler et al.’s (2026) analysis of the experiences of residential workers in Approved Premises, Court Workers, Victim Liaison Workers and prison-based probation practitioners, through the lens of ‘dirty work’. They demonstrate that staff in such roles reframe the ‘tainted’ nature of their work as part of a process of professional self-legitimacy. Likewise, Robinson’s (2018, 2019, 2020) study of probation work in two Magistrates’ courts in England found that, against the decades-long backdrop of pressures to expedite justice, staff continued to call upon probation values to make sense of their role. Thus, Robinson (2018: 331) conceptualises court staff as existing within a ‘cultural bubble’ because they were to a certain extent insulated from the challenges that beset the wider probation field.

The rest of the paper, therefore, similarly seeks to understand professional identity among PTAs, an under-researched and specialist role, including their contributions to the socialisation of new recruits. It draws on data generated as part of a project on staff experiences of the PQiP, details of which are presented in the next section.

Methodology

This paper draws on data generated as part of the larger project on staff experiences of the PQiP. The overarching aim of the research was to explore if and how the PQiP prepares practitioners for a career in probation. We conducted eight focus groups with a total of 38 participants. Focus groups were organised according to job role. The sample included 18 PSOs enrolled on the PQiP; five newly qualified POs; five SPOs with line management responsibilities over trainee and newly qualified staff; seven PTAs, who deliver the on-the-job, vocational element of the PQiP; and three PQiP Academics with responsibility for university-based learning. All participants were allocated pseudonyms.

There are 12 Probation Regions in England and Wales, and training is (unevenly) distributed among four universities. We approached one university, and they agreed to partake in the research, although they will remain nameless to preserve the anonymity of staff. The participating Probation Regions will also not be disclosed, as this information would identify the university. All probation research in England and Wales must be approved by HM Prison and Probation Service's National Research Committee (NRC). Once we secured access from the NRC, a University of Leeds research ethics committee, and the relevant RPDs whose regions overlapped with the university, a call for participants was shared through internal communications in the regions and through university email. Thereafter, individuals were asked to email one of the researchers if they wished to partake, and informants were selected through purposive sampling. That the sample was self-selecting means it could be skewed towards those who wanted to discuss whether the PQiP adequately prepares staff for practice. As such, our research does not claim to provide a national picture of the PQiP nor of the experiences of PTAs; rather, it provides a valuable, in-depth perspective on an under-researched group.

This paper draws exclusively from the focus group conducted with PTAs, all of whom had all worked as frontline probation practitioners. The average length of experience within the Service among the PTAs was 18 years. The longest serving PTA had, at the time of the focus group, worked in probation for 24 years while the least experienced had worked in the Service for 10 years. Qualifying as a PO is a prerequisite for working as a PTA: in this study, four had qualified through the DipPS, two through the PQF, and one via the PQiP. All focus groups were conducted on Microsoft Teams in January and February 2025 before being transcribed verbatim, and NVivo14 was used to sort and code the data. We employed a three-stage approach to data analysis (Cresswell, 2013). This began with 'open coding' of interview transcripts, which identified major categories. Thereafter, we undertook a further 'axial' coding exercise, where one major open coding category was identified and revisited to create categories around the core phenomenon. Finally, 'selective coding' was utilised, in which we took the model and developed propositions which interrelated the categories and developed themes for analysis. Here, it is worth briefly reflecting on our positionality as researchers (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). One of us (Tidmarsh) is an 'outsider', having never worked in probation or the criminal justice system. Cracknell, by contrast, can be described as an 'insider', having qualified as a PO through a previous iteration of training (see Cracknell, 2016). This combination of insider and outsider perspectives thereby encouraged ongoing reflexive dialogue during

coding and interpretation, enabling us to critically examine both taken-for-granted assumptions within probation culture and our own readings of participants' accounts.

Professional identity among PTAs

As argued above, a constant within the literature on professional identity in probation has been a shared value set that unites different generations of staff (Mawby and Worrall, 2013; Robinson et al., 2025). The specific values cited are typically a belief in the capacity of an individual to change, non-judgemental attitudes towards offending behaviour, and a desire to work with individuals (Annison et al., 2008; Deering, 2010; Robinson, 2018; Tidmarsh, 2021). Indeed, the PTAs in this current study were no different, articulating an 'enduring constellation' (Ibarra, 1999: 764) of values:

I know when I joined the Service, I was very passionate about *believing people's capacity to change*. I think that's absolutely fundamental. It's having that genuine belief that people could have done horrendous things, but actually, *understanding the reasons why they've committed that offence*. Taking the time to get to know people. I do think having a procedurally just approach is really fundamental. So, believing in the values of procedural justice, giving people a voice, having that integrity, being honest and open, transparent about any decisions that we are making. Really feeling passionate about people's desistance journey, *genuinely caring about them*.

(Helen, PTA; our emphasis)

However, there was a recognition among PTAs that the constancy of organisational change has impacted the Service into which trainees enter. This demanded, among other things, a sense of 'resilience' and 'adaptability'. As Catherine (PTA) put it:

Probation changes a lot. We've all been in the Service for quite some time, and we've been through significant changes and things that have torn the Service apart. We've kind of had that resilience...to kind of stick with it and keep going with it, but it runs more into kind of being able to adapt but also being open to learning to adapt. So, it's being able to link in with resilience and adaptability with changes to the Service, but more so wanting to make those changes to improve as well.

This resilience was crucial to how PTAs made sense of their own careers in probation. That the average length of experience among the PTAs in this study was 18 years meant most had experienced three significant organisational restructurings – namely, the National Offender Management Service reforms, *TR*, and unification. This constancy of change, alongside a fatigue with frontline practice, influenced many participants' decisions to become a PTA:

I'm at that point in my career where I've been working on the frontline for a long time and we all know that working with cases, the percentage sometimes is quite low of success in terms of

people making significant changes. It's just really nice to be in a role where people want to be there, people are interested in what you're saying, and it's nice to be passing on that knowledge, that experience to people who're new to the Service and sometimes they struggle with processes and stuff like that. I really enjoy working with them in that manner as well as with their practice and everything else.

(Louise, PTA)

This response highlights, with Ibarra (1999), how prior experiences of practice continue to shape professional identity in a different job. Here, Louise was able to reconstruct her professional self by progressing into the PTA role, as it allowed her to live out her values in a non-client-facing job. Amanda (PTA) called upon the language of 'vocation' used by Mawby and Worrall's (2013) *lifers* to frame this progression into the PTA role for experienced POs:

I think it does sometimes feel that a lot of our sort of experienced POs who see probation as a vocation are in the PTA teams doing that bit.

Becoming a PTA meant that she and others were able to maintain a closeness to practice while being insulated from the pressures of case management. As such, several PTAs in this study described the role as a 'halfway house':

a halfway house between being at the coalface and helping people deal with being at the coalface, without actually being at the coalface.

(Gareth, PTA)

I was probably ready to do something different than working on a supervision team at that point, but I didn't want to totally leave practice behind and go and do something completely office-based. So, it was a bit of a halfway house for me. [...] I do like to see people do things properly and I want people to understand why they're doing them and I want to sort of work with people to develop and be like the best they can be at what they do.

(Amanda, PTA)

These responses indicate that a sense of *betweenness* – namely, the establishment of distance between the challenges of sentence management, of managing a caseload, whilst retaining opportunities to help people to develop – was integral to how PTAs in this study understood their professional identity. The satisfaction derived from helping staff was a common theme. Fiona (PTA) drew parallels between the pleasure she experienced from learners' progression and her ability to inspire to change among people on probation when she managed a caseload:

What attracted me to the role is developing people with enthusiasm in terms of people who want to make that change for people, because I was like that with my people on probation as well. [...] I'll sort of do anything that I can do to help with that. I do get quite a great, great pleasure when I see my learners qualify and being with them through what is a rough journey.

Fiona's comments suggest that the PTAs in this study bear a striking resemblance to the *guardians* in Burke et al.'s (2017) study of identity after *TR*. This group 'blended resilience with pragmatism in an attempt to mediate and manage the impact of the reform and ensuing organisational changes, in order to remain resolutely focused on their deeper and enduring commitment to a probation ethos' (Burke et al., 2017: 198). In much the same way, the data presented in this section indicate that PTAs are committed to probation in spite of yet more restructuring, deploying the skills and values honed throughout their careers in frontline practice to develop the next generation of practitioners. PTAs, therefore, are a distinct group of staff whose worth lies in their positioning as *distanced from but close to* practice. This betweenness means that PTAs, like the 'pracademics' in Ainslie and Riley's (2025) reflections on the former practitioners who are responsible for delivering the academic component of the PQiP in higher education institutions, are ideally situated to transmit probation values to new recruits. This socialisation is considered in the next section, against the backdrop of the 'rough journey' (in Fiona's terms, above) embarked upon by trainees as they complete the PQiP.

PTAs and professional socialisation

The previous section argued that PTAs embody probation values and are a key staff group through whom they are transmitted. The transmission of such an ideology of service is typically viewed as crucial to the socialisation of would-be professionals (Freidson, 2001), part of what Robinson (2018) describes as the process of *enculturation*. The space PTAs occupy, *between* frontline practice and management, means they are vital to how 'new members acquire the norms, values, behaviours and other tools' (Robinson, 2018: 322) of probation culture. This section, therefore, considers how PTAs contribute to the socialisation of probation professionals, as well as wider concerns with the PQiP and what that says about identity, culture and practice.

As Phillips (2014) asserts, 'back stage', computer-based administrative work, as distinct from the 'front stage' work delivered *with* clients, has become increasingly prominent in probation practice. However, there was a strong sense among PTAs that the Service into which trainees are being socialised is markedly different from their expectations:

I don't know what the national picture is obviously, but it sometimes feels like we get trainees who have no idea what they're getting into. [...] It does feel like people need to understand the job for what it is, not what they think it is. There's a lot of paperwork; it's very boring. You're going to be sat at your computer quite a lot, and I think sometimes people expect it to be something that it's not.

(Bethan, PTA)

For Helen (PTA), this dissonance manifested as a gap between skills that are required ‘in the room’ and those that are enacted on a computer:

The people who’ve struggled have been the people who can be really good in the room. They can have all of those kinds of skills, but then they haven’t got that analytical brain. They’re not able to sort of take apart the information or look at patterns of offending, look at things with that magnifying glass and really think about things in that way. Having the ability to reflect, being open to challenge, revise their risk assessments on the basis of the information that’s come to light.

The lack of an ‘analytical brain’, as Helen put it, arguably extends to the Service at large, for a recent House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2026) report detailed how risk of harm is sufficiently addressed in just 28% of cases. However, Gareth (PTA) offered a partial rebuke to Helen’s testimony by acknowledging how many learners have recently graduated from university and, predictably, lack an innate understanding of risk. He articulated the worth of PTAs as an experienced staff group who can pass on their knowledge of how to recognise small yet important details – notably, through the observations conducted as part of the VQ element of the PQiP:

You don’t know to ask these little questions or the tiny little things behind the breaking of a mobile phone and a door not working properly. That’s all related to DV stuff. How would you know? You literally finished uni[versity] five months ago. And that’s great because then the next time they come across that thing, those questions are there, they’re lined up ready to go.

Gareth’s response demonstrates the value of PTAs’ tacit knowledge, particularly around risk, in professional socialisation, as he mobilises his ‘halfway house’ position to inform the acquisition of skills and behaviours among new recruits. And yet, while it is understandable that trainees do not arrive in the Service as analytically minded practitioners capable of assessing risk, PTAs doubted whether the PQiP could successfully equip learners with such skills given how successive iterations of training have been shortened:

There is this huge pressure in terms of time, both time that they’ve got to develop, but also time that we’ve actually got to gather the evidence and say that someone has done everything that they need to, to qualify.

(Amanda, PTA)

Trainees must collate particular forms of evidence to be assessed by PTAs in order to progress. Gareth (PTA) implied that the condensed timeframe over which the PQiP, and specifically the VQ element, takes place means PTAs are pressured into signing off skills based on a single observation:

My bug bear with the VQ is the one-tick situation, what's that all about? You've evidenced something once. It's a completely false narrative 'cause there's no way we're signing off on a one-tick. I don't know a PTA that does it. It means we're seeing something two or three times and then we'll use it or we see it once to such a high standard that we know that that's okay.

This disgruntlement differed markedly from PTAs' remembering of their own period of training. A particular cause for concern was the perceived degradation of the academic component. Louise (PTA), for example, expressed surprise at the lack of essay writing on the PQiP:

When I started as a PTA – I've been in the job just about two and a half years now – I was absolutely gobsmacked by the fact that [trainees] only had four essays. I was really shocked because when I did my TPO, we had loads more essays. We had 12 NVQ units and for every NVQ unit, we had a 2500-word academic overview that we had to write. [...] I just felt that I had that real academic feel...and it felt like I was doing a degree.

There may be an element of nostalgia (see Mawby and Worrall, 2013) to how Louise remembers the DipPS, not least because research on trainees' experiences of this pathway found that regular assessment inhibited opportunities for critical reflection (Annison et al., 2008). Nevertheless, participants in this study reflected positively on the in-person nature of their training, hinting at the cultivation of a professional identity firmly grounded in academic study:

When I was doing the PQiP, I had to go into De Montfort and so the fact that I had to actually go in there, physically, I felt like I was at university. I was actually participating in a qualification on something that was, I want to say worthwhile.

(Fiona, PTA)

When I did my training – I appreciate this is probably quite old-fashioned and I accept I'm a dinosaur – we actually went into university and had traditional lectures. They were [by] really inspirational where people like Mike Nellis talked to us, and I can still remember some of the things that he said.

(Bethan, PTA)

These comments resonate with Fowler et al.'s (2023) research on the delivery of the PQiP during the Covid-19 pandemic – which, as far as we are aware, is the only study that focuses on trainees' experiences. Focus groups with new recruits revealed that many struggled during the pandemic because the shift to online learning meant they were not co-located with more experienced members of staff, including PTAs. As such, participants did not experience the 'camaraderie of the PQiP' (Fowler et al., 2023: 200) in the same manner as previous cohorts – including Fiona (see above), who qualified via the PQiP prior to Covid-19. Some have argued that online training does have advantages,

particularly as a way to collapse the geographical distance between trainees' homes and the higher education institutions in which it is delivered (see Dominey, 2010); but for others, the lack of face-to-face learning can inhibit the development of reflective practice and peer support (Burrell and Petrillo, 2023; Cracknell, 2016). Indeed, PTAs in this study commented on the lack of exposure to more experienced staff, particularly as a result of high levels of stress and sickness:

I think the bit that seems to be lacking for me is that exposure to experienced staff, which can sometimes be difficult because it seems that a lot of the teams that learners are placed in might have lots of problems with sickness or lots of problems with maybe less experienced staff who are less comfortable with people co-working with them 'cause they're still trying to get their own head around the job.

(Amanda, PTA)

Amanda's response speaks to how learners enter a 'high-pressured role within an environment in which qualified colleagues were struggling' (Millings et al., 2025: 266). For example, a thematic inspection on recruitment, retention and training found that 'the volume of new and inexperienced staff has placed additional pressures on managers and the already depleted PO grades who are called upon to mentor and support learners' (HMI Probation, 2025a: 8). It highlighted how learners may lack the confidence to approach more experienced staff for help, not least because of caseload pressures on the latter. This leads to situations in which co-working is decidedly one-sided, with learners taking on the bulk of tasks. In some Probation Regions, mentoring hubs or support days delivered by PTAs have been established to assist trainees; however, this is no substitute for 'having an identified, experienced colleague who can provide more immediate support and guidance' (HMI Probation, 2025a: 39). Indeed, Louise (PTA) linked this lack of experience to staff retention:

We've got learners' successes being very, very dependent on the personalities, expertise, and experience of others. If we ain't got that right, they're going to struggle 'cause if there's only one person or they're not getting the support that they think they need, that's how we haemorrhage staff as well. I had somebody qualify who was, honest to God, one of the most amazing learners that I've ever experienced. So clever, so talented, very young and quite fresh out of uni[versity] as well, but she was just so good. She left. She was like, 'I can't. This Service is just run so badly. I don't want to be part of it.'

Louise's experience with her learner deciding to leave the Service is not atypical. For example, a House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2026) report notes that retention rates have improved slightly – the leaving rate decreased from 9.5% to 8.5% at the year-end September 2025 – but none of the 20 PDUs inspected by HMI Probation (2025b) in their most recent annual report was rated 'good' or 'outstanding' on staffing. Regardless, Gareth (PTA) was clear in his view that the role of PTAs is to help to develop

those who are proficient ‘in the room’ with clients. Developing this intuitive feel for practice among practitioners, he argued, is crucial to the transmission of probation values:

We need people who, in the room, can inspire [clients] to look at themselves in a different way, be honest with themselves, and then change their lives. What we really want in the Probation Service, though, it’s people that can complete an OASys in under five hours ‘cause they got another one to do. That’s where the Probation Service has lost its way. And when I have professional discussions with my learners, we ask them about the Probation Service and the values of the Service, does the Service uphold those values? I’m quite happy for them saying, no, absolutely not.

While it is important not to draw too sharp a distinction between the ‘front stage’ and the ‘back stage’ (Phillips, 2014) of probation practice, Gareth admitted to qualifying learners whose primary skill lies in their ability to work *with* clients:

I have qualified people whose OASys are just good enough, but they are exceptional in the room. That’s what I care about. As a practitioner of 20 years, I know that writing a good OASys does nothing for the client.

Despite no longer managing a caseload, Gareth’s comment highlights how he finds a way to resist organisational imperatives, to safeguard a professional identity that he perceives to be commensurate with a client-centred ideology of service. His willingness to qualify someone whose OASys is ‘just good enough’ implies that the PTA extends beyond assessing competence into normative statements about what a probation professional ought to be – namely, ‘exceptional in the room’. The way that he understands his role thus resembles that of ‘guardian’ (Burke et al., 2017) who is protecting the Service from itself.

The data presented in this section suggest that the condensed timeframe in which the PQiP is delivered, poor (if slightly improved) staff retention and a lack of experienced staff to mentor new recruits are impairing trainees’ socialisation in the Service. Louise’s anecdote about a talented trainee who left the Service because it is ‘run so badly’ emphasises how current performance is viewed as ‘unsustainable’ (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2026: 1). Individuals are often proficient with clients ‘in the room’, further demonstrating how probation values have endured throughout organisational change; however, the PTAs in this study expressed frustration with the overall quality of the PQiP and the wider environment in which trainees work.

Conclusion

This paper sought to address a notable gap in the probation literature by examining professional identity among PTAs, as a group of staff who play a central role in supporting and assessing new recruits but who thus far have largely evaded scholarly attention. Drawing on focus group data generated as part of a broader project exploring experiences of the PQiP, the analysis has shown that PTAs occupy a distinct and important position in

the Probation Service that is defined by *betweenness*: they are no longer responsible for the day-to-day management of cases, yet remain closely connected to frontline practice through their role in developing, assessing and supporting trainees. Their accounts illuminate both the persistence of a long-standing ideology of service and the tensions that arise when these values are enacted within an organisational context characterised by widespread challenges. From this 'halfway house', PTAs are able to maintain a degree of distance from the pressures of contemporary probation practice whilst retaining a strong commitment to the values and purposes that continue to underpin professional identity.

The findings presented in the paper support Burrell's (2022: 445) contention that 'the PQiP encompasses all the tensions relating to current probation practice'. PTAs interpreted their own role through the lens of distance, or 'insulation' (Robinson, 2018), from frontline practice. They described moving into the role after extended periods in sentence management, often motivated by fatigue with the limited success that accompanies working with people on probation. Participants consistently drew upon longstanding probation values, including a belief in individuals' capacity for change, a commitment to fairness and the importance of constructive relationships, when describing both their own careers and the qualities they sought to cultivate in trainees. PTAs' accumulated knowledge and experience of practice helped trainees recognise subtle indicators of risk and develop the reflective skills required in complex cases. As such, several framed the role as a *halfway house*: one that enables experienced practitioners to remain connected to probation practice and values while stepping back from the pressures associated with managing caseloads. This intermediary location echoes other roles, such as 'pracademics' (Ainslie and Riley, 2025), who occupy a space that is neither managerial nor frontline. It suggests that PTAs can be viewed as 'guardians' (Burke et al., 2017) of probation values; they embody a 'durable' (Grant, 2016) professional identity described in previous research, which endures even as the wider organisational culture is degraded. In this way, the findings suggest that PTAs understand their role as extending beyond the assessment of competence; they are active participants in the reproduction of professional identity and culture, particularly as it relates to the tacit knowledge that is not easily codified in formal training frameworks.

Concurrently, though, the accounts presented in this paper reveal a broader tension between the values that PTAs seek to instil in trainees and the organisational priorities that shape contemporary probation work. From their position *between* practice and management, participants frequently contrasted the relational aspects of probation work – being effective 'in the room' – with the demands associated with risk assessment. The data, moreover, highlight several challenges affecting the training environment in which this socialisation occurs. PTAs expressed concerns about the compressed structure of the PQiP, the perceived reduction in academic depth compared with earlier training pathways, and the pressure to evidence competence within limited timeframes. These concerns were compounded by wider organisational conditions, including staff shortages, high sickness rates and limited access to experienced colleagues. Future research should thus continue to examine the experiences of non-frontline staffing groups within probation, whose perspectives offer valuable insights into how professional identity is maintained, negotiated and reproduced amidst ongoing institutional change.

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Note

1. A fourth university provider won a contract to deliver the PQiP from 2022.

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