

**International Expertmeeting on the Accreditation of
Behaviour Programs for Offenders**

The Hague, 23 October 2008

Report

The Expertmeeting was organised by the Office of the Accreditation Panel
for Behavioural Interventions of the Dutch Ministry of Justice

1. Introduction

The International Expert Meeting was opened by the chairman, mr. Richard Harding, former Inspector of Custodial Services of Australia and currently working at the University of Western Australia, Law and Public Policy. Next, a general introduction on the phenomenon of accreditation Panels was presented by mr. Peter van der Laan, member of the Dutch Accreditation Panel.

General introduction by Peter van der Laan

The Accreditation Panel for Behavioural Interventions for Offenders in the Netherlands was established three years ago, in August 2005. The panel has since assessed nearly 50 interventions. Although the panel is effective, it is faced with several dilemmas. During the Expert Meeting, these dilemmas were presented so that we can share our experiences and learn from one another.

In 2006 I compiled a list of accreditation panels worldwide. I found that most panels focus on the assessment of behavioural interventions intended for adult offenders. In preparation for this Expert Meeting, a draft guide comparing eight accreditation panels was compiled by mrs. Pauline Aarten. It showed that most countries follow the accreditation model: behavioural interventions are developed, submitted, assessed, adapted if necessary, and then implemented. Panels differ only in a marginal way, but these differences might in fact be quite important. For example, panels differ in task description, size and composition. Some panels have their own authority, whereas others advise their justice department to make the final decision. There are four general themes that make a comparison between panels interesting: the accreditation criteria, the assessment domains, the organisation of the accreditation process, and whether or not to perform site accreditation. These aspects have been discussed in workshops. The results of these discussions are elaborated further on in this report.

2. Assessment criteria

'All criteria are equal, but some criteria are more equal than others.'

Every panel has adopted the quality criteria from England and Wales, but has made their own changes and/or additions.

What is the reason for making additions and changes to the assessment criteria?

While at first sight it may seem that all panels use the same criteria, a closer look reveals that some panels classify certain aspects of criteria under other criteria. They consider the set of criteria to be almost complete. The only criterion that could be added would be 'ethics'. Denmark introduced this criterion. It assesses whether participants in a programme are treated properly and accepted as they are. Programmes must score two points on this criterion (the maximum score in Denmark) or they will not be accredited. Other countries definitely recognise the importance of this criterion. In those countries, ethics are often interwoven with other criteria or are more implicitly present in the assessment. Ethics is also an aspect of site accreditation.

It must be noted that Scotland and Canada use specific criteria for re-accreditation. This comes down to two questions: firstly, what changes have been made to the programme, and why? And secondly, what are the results of the programme in terms of recidivism?

Are all criteria equally important?

The overall view is that there is no need to employ weighting factors. Weighting does not matter in the end; the outcome will be the same. All criteria are more or less of equal importance. If they are essential, they are in. And if they are in, you have to look at them. Some criteria are viewed as more fundamental than others, thereby implying some kind of order.

All criteria are related to a greater or lesser extent, which also eliminates the need for weighting factors, although the organisations that submit their programmes for assessment will find some criteria easier to meet than others. Furthermore, the emphasis on criteria in the assessment may differ, depending on the programme and period of time.

Although all criteria are more or less equally important, three criteria stand out. The criterion known as *theoretical basis and model of change* is more or less the summary of the programme. This includes all other criteria. The general experience is that if the theoretical basis and the model of change are not right, the programme will not work.

The *continuity* criterion is gaining importance in various countries. It also serves as a lever to activate the system within which interventions are carried out and to steer it in the right direction for effective implementation. However, this was put into perspective: reducing the rate of recidivism will require more than carrying out an effective programme in the right way.

The *evaluation* criterion raises the most concerns. There is often no budget for a thorough evaluation of the effects of a programme, or the evaluation budget is

spent on something else. It might be necessary to agree in advance with regard to who will fund the necessary evaluation. Ideally, accreditation panels should have their own evaluation budgets. The English panel therefore uses the evaluation criterion as a way to put pressure on the Home Office to introduce evaluation funds. A proposal was made to introduce incentives for cross-country evaluation of interventions, or to seek EU funding for evaluation. Another idea proposed was to launch an international website that could include summaries of (previous) accredited behavioural interventions and evaluations of their effects.

How are criteria being used?

Although the criteria are comparable, their use varies considerably from country to country. Some countries assign exact scores to criteria (e.g. 0, 1, 2 or even 3 points, as in Scotland). This may have the disadvantage that programme submitters who submit a programme for the second or third time will only improve the lower scores without revising the programme as a whole. Other countries use more general assessments without any scores whatsoever, and their assessments will evaluate the criteria in a more general fashion.

In some countries, panel members prepare the assessment individually and will reach a consensus during the panel meeting. In other countries, it is only during the meeting itself that the assessment takes place. Countries also differ as to when a programme is or is not accredited, and whether preliminary accreditation is possible.

3. Delivery of interventions – and supervision of the delivery

'Use your influence to get site reviews done'

Accreditation comes in different forms and sizes: programme accreditation, site accreditation and auditing. Not every country has adopted these types, and the interpretation of these forms differs per panel.

The supervision of the delivery of behavioural interventions has two elements: on the one hand there is the supervision by trainers (e.g. using DVDs, Intervention and Supervision). This is sometimes referred to as the clinical side of site accreditation. On the other hand there is the supervision of the location and the organisation where the intervention is implemented: this concerns the issues of whether or not there is sufficient capacity for delivery, whether the organisation is properly equipped for the intervention, and whether the trainers have the proper education, etc.

The supervision of the delivery of interventions is important for several reasons. The first reason is that the accreditation of programmes that are not properly implemented is useless. It can even have a 'nothing works' effect, i.e. if programmes are not properly implemented, there will be no results and this may lead people to think that nothing works¹. The second reason is that the results of an evaluation of a programme's effectiveness are difficult to assess without any knowledge of the implementation. Thirdly, for proper assessment of programmes, it is important for panels to be informed about the delivery thereof. In the fourth place, effective implementation of programmes is very costly and an audit is therefore also a way to justify the expenses.

Experience shows that (good supervision of) proper delivery is very difficult to achieve. For example, budgets are spent for other purposes than proper programme implementation. There is also the risk of 'dumbing down the programme', i.e. implementing the programme as cheaply as possible, and thus with poorly paid (and poorly trained) personnel. Some countries also find that those involved in the actual implementation do not care about (poor) delivery results. The panel must therefore ensure that implementation results are considered important. For example, Sweden has introduced a financial condition: programmes that have not been properly delivered will (possibly) not receive any further funding. The conclusion therefore is that panels must use their influence to ensure supervision or there will be (almost) no supervision.

Supervision of delivery is often referred to as 'site accreditation'. This term might not be entirely correct. Organisations responsible for implementation regularly change due to changes in personnel, prison populations, budgets, etc. and accreditation for long periods therefore does not seem to make any sense. Implementation is an ongoing process: it requires much more frequent monitoring. Audits and reviews have been proposed as alternatives to site

¹ It must be noted, however, that an evaluation of implementation in England and Wales did not show any relation between the quality of implementation by a prison in general and the effectiveness of programmes.

accreditation. Furthermore, there have been warnings that audits focus on structures rather than on the delivery of programmes.

Why do some panels not include site accreditation?

Some countries do not (the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway) or no longer (Scotland, Finland) include site accreditation. Canada suspended it for several years, which was partially due to the poor results of site accreditation: not a single site met the accreditation criteria. This had a negative impact on the reputation of the accreditation panel. They will resume site accreditation starting 2009, but it will be implemented by another panel than the one that also evaluates the programmes. In England and Wales, the accreditation panels were involved in the design of prison visits.

Panel members are unanimous in their opinion that site accreditation should not be the responsibility of accreditation panels. These panels lack the opportunities to carry out this task, and they are not equipped for this job. The general opinion was that site accreditation should be handled by an independent organisation rather than being left to the organisations that also implement the interventions.

What important role can auditing play in accreditation?

Programmes must be implemented strictly according to manuals. However, where monitoring is concerned, one should be aware of the risk of overdoing it. Trainers should be able to use some flexibility, and anticipate problems and learning styles of participants, situations that might arise, etc. Rather than using too much energy to do everything perfectly, proper implementation should be sufficient.

Can offender programmes be internationally generalised?

Countries may in some cases adopt programmes that have proven to be successful in other countries. Such 'imported' programmes will be reassessed by the accreditation panels, since they must be adapted to the culture and organisational structures of the country in which they are implemented. Further investigation into this issue was suggested.

4. The organisation of a panel

'Don't be an advisor and assessor at the same time.'

The organisation surrounding the panel is very important. Having a good organisation is essential for the credibility of an accreditation panel. Society and the field need to have faith in the panel and its high-quality decision-making regarding offender programmes.

What are the important aspects that surround the composition of an accreditation panel?

The panel must first of all have the technical capabilities to properly use the criteria. This means that they must have a sufficient understanding of the quality criteria applicable to their usage. Secondly, the panel must have credibility with authorities and with the professionals implementing the interventions. In other words, the panel's opinions must be reliable and valid. Thirdly, the panel must be a good representation of the field and the stakeholders. This requires a broad representation of disciplines, from both the scientific community and the practical expertise from the field. Proper adaptation of the programme to ensure the responsiveness of prisoners may require the involvement of former prisoners in the development of programmes. The actual inclusion of these ex-detainees in a panel does not seem useful.

Should a panel keep some distance with respect to submitters and developers, or should they work with them?

There was consensus on the notion that a panel should be able to keep sufficient distance, in order to be able to properly assess a programme. After all, an advisory role implies some degree of involvement in, and interference with, a programme, which will make an (independent) assessment more difficult. Nonetheless, some countries provide advice or recommendations during the initial stage of the development process of a programme. For example, Norway uses a pre-assessment. England and Wales occasionally perform a 'dry run' to identify any criticisms that a program will meet during implementation. Individual panel members in Scotland and Sweden may give their opinion if requested by the developers. Panels in Denmark do not provide any advice, but the panel secretary may. Canada also does consultation: submitters may elucidate the intervention through a Powerpoint presentation. Panels in the Netherlands, on the other hand, do not provide any advice to developers beforehand. All countries recognise the risk of too much involvement in the development of interventions. The conclusion was: don't be an advisor and assessor at the same time.

What is the importance of evaluating the panel?

The question is what criteria should be used for evaluating the panel itself. What is the advantage of having a panel? Does a panel help to reduce recidivism? Panels assess interventions that must help to reduce recidivism. The panel only has an assessment role. The conclusion therefore was that the evaluation of a panel primarily requires an investigation as to whether the assessment procedures were followed properly and whether the right decisions were made.

What are the consequences of the existence of a panel?

Panels should manage expectations. Panels only assess the quality of the programme design. The mere fact that a programme is accredited does not guarantee that the programme is going to be successful. Accreditation provides only the appearance of security to outsiders: if a programme is accredited, it must be safe. This may make it seem less urgent to conduct a thorough evaluation.

Various panels also found that the accreditation system blocks the development of new programmes and improvement of existing programmes, and that it hampers innovation. Panels are too static. The accreditation of programmes can also narrow one's vision: people who are entirely focused on programmes tend to pay less attention to continuity, case management and other relevant factors.

How can the integrity of panel members be controlled?

There is a general consensus that the integrity of panel members is of crucial importance. Integrity is self-evident and self-regulating. Members who have a certain interest in the outcome of an assessment (conflict of interests) should withdraw from the decision-making process. Nevertheless, corridor chats and lobbying by organisations are difficult to prevent. Establishing effective regulations for such informal contacts is difficult. To ensure its integrity, it is important for a panel to operate as transparently as possible, e.g. by listing any additional activities of members on websites and in annual reports.

5. Expanding the scope of assessment

'Expanding the scope to a more social capital-oriented approach'

Accreditation panels primarily assess general and specific repressive behaviour programmes that are developed for adult offenders. These interventions can be prison- and/or community-based.

Do accreditation panels need to look beyond these domains?

The makeup of a panel is decisive for the assessment domain on which it focuses. For example, the Norwegian panel virtually only includes psychologists with extensive knowledge of cognitive behavioural programmes. This makes it difficult to submit other types of programmes.

Overall, all panels focus on programmes for offenders. This is also referred to as tertiary prevention: the prevention of recidivism. Primary prevention is also referred to as general prevention: the prevention of criminal offences in general. This type of prevention targets larger populations than only offenders (e.g., the general prevention of juvenile delinquency targets schools). Secondary prevention aims to reduce risks (for example, risk prevention may be targeted at peer groups that have a negative impact on a young individual). The question is whether panels could or should also assess programmes aimed at secondary prevention. Within that context, a variety of programmes and activities could be considered that could help to reduce recidivism even though this is not their primary objective. Examples of such programmes include literacy training, vocational training, budgeting skills training, domestic and independent-living skills training: people with a vocation have better job opportunities and are less likely to become repeat offenders. This category also includes motivation programmes. The question is, however, how to measure the effectiveness of these programmes in terms of reducing recidivism, since reducing recidivism is not the primary objective of these programmes.

The second possibility would be for panels to focus more on system accreditation. Thus, panels would assess the total system of offender treatment, of which the behavioural intervention is only a component. England and Wales already have experience with this approach. System accreditation requires a more holistic approach. The question is whether this is not at odds with the 'what works' approach that focuses on a customised, individual approach to the problem. It must be noted that youth interventions tend to be more holistic due to the educational elements of those programmes. There are already several panels that assess youth interventions. The Netherlands is the only country that specifically focuses on programmes aimed at both adults and juveniles. In fact, the majority of programmes assessed by the Dutch panel are intended for juveniles. Some other countries as well (such as England and Wales) have occasionally assessed youth interventions or are considering this option (such as Scotland). Scotland still has some doubts about this issue: youth interventions tend to have primarily an educational objective. The question is how this is compatible with reduction of recidivism as a primary goal.

The third possibility for expansion would be to use panels as a resource for policy advice. Panels have extensive expertise that should not be left unused. This could

have the disadvantage of causing organisations or politicians to feel threatened by a panel.

The general consensus is that a shift of interventions focussed on human capital to interventions focussed more on social capital would be desirable.

Why is the focus only on adult offenders? What about forgotten groups such as women and aboriginals?

Some countries are (more or less cautiously) developing and assessing programmes for women. Other countries still meet some resistance in this regard: it could mean that a variety of new programmes would have to be developed. In that case, expanding existing programmes by adding modules for specific target groups might be simpler. It was noted that programmes for specific target groups might have a stigmatising effect, and that should be prevented.

Are there any limits to the possibilities for expansion?

Expanding the scope of panels could have the advantage that this might prevent panels from focusing too much on programmes and criteria only. Various panels are working with subpanels or have the possibility to hire external parties for assessing specific interventions. It was pointed out that working with subpanels occasionally results in highly detailed, technical assessments of interventions, thus blocking further innovation of interventions. Having one single, large assessment panel can also be a disadvantage: it can become a power block and thus also impede innovation.

More international exchange can also result in an expansion of the scope

In order to obtain a clear overview of which interventions have been assessed by which panels, it was proposed to compile a list of all interventions assessed thus far. There was also much enthusiasm for establishing some sort of international association, supported by a website or other instrument, in which all panels could share their knowledge and updates on interventions could be recorded.