



Ministry  
of Justice

# Probation services officer progression pilot

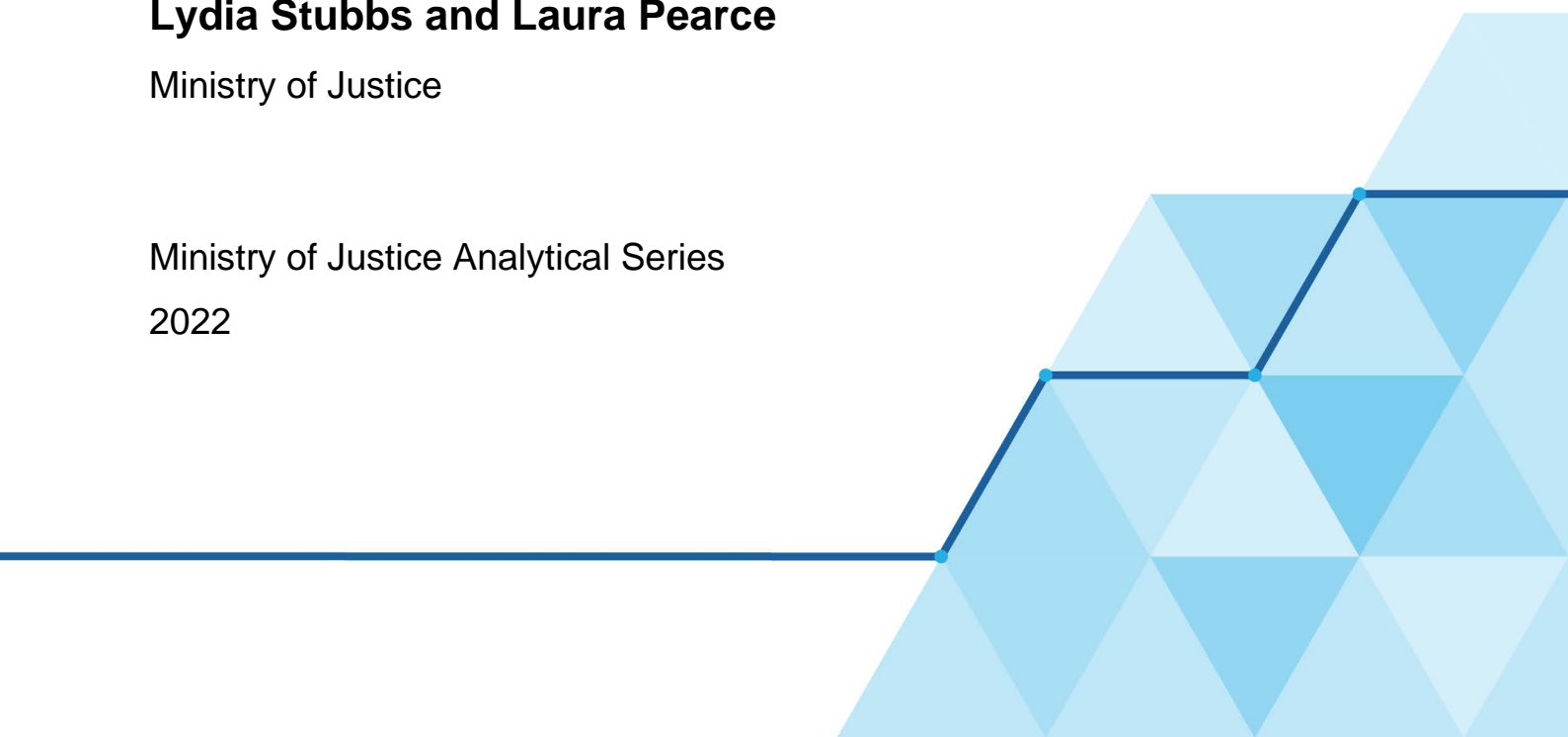
## Findings from a process evaluation

**Lydia Stubbs and Laura Pearce**

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# 1. Executive summary

This report presents findings from a process evaluation of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Probation Services Officer (PSO) Progression Pilot. The pilot tested an accelerated 13-month work-based training pathway for existing PSOs. It was open to PSOs in the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Companies. The pilot ran from January 2021 to March 2022 across four probation areas, forming two pilot regions. It was available to 50 eligible PSOs who had offender manager experience. PSOs both with, and without, an existing Level 5 (foundation degree or equivalent) qualification (referred to as 'graduates' and 'non-graduates', respectively) were eligible. Learners were required to undertake specific Level 5 and Level 6 academic modules, delivered by two higher education institutions. This was completed alongside the Vocational Diploma in Probation Practice Level 5. Those who successfully completed all elements were awarded the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) and were eligible to apply for probation officer posts.

Before the creation of this new pathway, the only way to obtain the PQiP was through a 15 or 21-month training programme, depending on the amount of recognised prior learning held by the learner. This route is known as the 'PQiP programme' and is only open to applicants with a Level 5 qualification ('graduates').

The process evaluation aimed to understand learner and probation stakeholder experiences of the pilot and capture any lessons learnt.

## 1.1 Approach and interpreting findings

A mixed methodology was used, combining qualitative and quantitative data collected between January 2021 and April 2022 from probation stakeholders. Probation stakeholders are defined in this study as senior probation officers, practice tutor assessors and probation learning managers. The report describes applicant and learner characteristics, and academic grades achieved by learners. Findings are also presented from applicant, learner, and probation stakeholder surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic and related probation regimes affected pilot delivery, and consequently the experiences of learners and stakeholders. The pilot was also relatively small (50 places). Overall, a degree of care should be taken when interpreting findings as they may not be generalisable to other cohorts or contexts. For example, the selection process may differ for future cohorts, and there may be differences in the method of module delivery, workloads, and training provision across time or regions.

## 1.2 Key findings

### Selection Process

- Applicants reported general satisfaction with the selection process, acknowledging the opportunity for non-graduates and transparency of the process. However, respondents frequently commented on the lack of feedback on their applications.

### Pilot outcomes

- There were 122 applications for 50 pilot places. Available data highlighted that almost half of the cohort did not hold a Level 5 qualification when they applied for the pilot (45%,  $n=55$ )<sup>1</sup> or started the pilot (48%,  $n=24$ ). The average (*median*) age of applicants, where known, was 38 years, with a range of 22 to 65.
- Of the 50 learners who were offered a place on the pilot, 41 (82%) were known to have completed the programme.<sup>2</sup> This includes 23 of the 26 who held a Level 5 qualification at the start of the pilot, and 18 of the 24 who did not.
- Graduate and non-graduate learners achieved similar grades on average across the Level 5 and Level 6 academic modules of the progression pathway.

### What was perceived to work well?

- **Overall experience** – most respondents to the learner surveys reported that they were satisfied with their overall experience of the pilot. The majority of respondents to the stakeholder survey said they had a positive experience of

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<sup>1</sup> A further two applicants were awaiting Level 5 qualification results at application stage, received prior to commencing the pilot.

<sup>2</sup> A small number of learners preferred not to disclose their academic grades, so their status is unknown.

managing or assessing learners. Probation stakeholders were highly impressed with the capabilities of the pilot cohort, praising them for their dedication, motivation and perseverance through difficult times.

- **Academic component** – most learners said they felt prepared for the Level 5 and Level 6 assessments. The quality of teaching and support from one of the higher education institutions was commended in particular; it was suggested that some tutors went above and beyond what was expected.
- **Vocational Diploma in Probation Practice Level 5 (VQ5)** – experiences of the VQ5 were broadly positive, with several learners stating their previous experience as a PSO made it easier to meet the qualification requirements. Some learners identified receiving constructive feedback on their practice as the most useful aspect of the pilot.
- **Professional development** – the majority of learners agreed that their caseload met their development needs, and most learners and stakeholders were confident that the pilot has prepared learners for the transition to qualified PO. Learners suggested that studying probation theory through the academic component of the pilot, and then applying that learning through the VQ5 and case management, helped to improve their practice.

### **What was perceived to work less well?**

- **Timescales** – most learners and stakeholders expressed concerns about the compressed timescales of the pilot. There were challenges for learner wellbeing, particularly when learners were completing four or five Level 5 modules. A number of stakeholders also reported that they found the increased time pressure stressful.
- **Approach to module delivery** – higher education institutions use varying degrees of distance learning during business as usual, however, some components which were previously face-to-face, were moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some learners in one of the pilot's regions reported they



were dissatisfied with the self-taught nature of the academic programme and perceived there to be a lack of support from tutors.

- **Workloads and caseloads** – there were mixed views reported on the efficacy of learners co-working high risk or complex cases with an experienced probation officer and reported challenges with redistributing learners' PSO caseloads. Some learners felt their caseloads were too high or lacked development opportunities.
- **Training** – overall it was felt that some of the training the learners were placed on as part of the pilot was unnecessary for experienced PSOs, and there were reported issues with the timing of the training events.
- **Preparation for progression** – some learners identified specific gaps in their probation knowledge and skills following programme completion, and a small number expressed concern about moving into a PO role with these perceived gaps.

### 1.3 Conclusion and Next steps

Learners and stakeholders reported that the pilot offered a much-needed career progression opportunity for experienced and capable PSOs. Learners enjoyed furthering their professional development through academic study and exposure to more complex cases. Stakeholders expressed how rewarding they found it to manage and assess experienced learners. Both learners and stakeholders emphasised perceived issues with the shortened timescales. Completing the Level 5 modules in the timescales provided was highlighted as especially difficult for non-graduate learners and for those who had not studied academically for a long time. However, non-graduate learners achieved similar grades to those with a previous Level 5 qualification indicating that the pathway was successful in increasing accessibility for internal staff and non-graduates.

Recommendations for how the design and delivery of the pilot could be improved are outlined at the end of this report.

HMPPS have reflected on the findings from this evaluation and have subsequently developed a second iteration of the PSO progression pathway. This new route, which

commenced in March 2022, was open to both graduate and non-graduate PSOs with and without offender manager experience across all probation regions. The timeline for the pathway was also extended from 13 months to 15 months.

## 2. Context

This report presents the findings from a process evaluation of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Probation Services Officer (PSO) Progression Pilot. The pilot formed part of the commitment from HMPPS to increase accessibility to the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) for internal staff and non-graduates by better recognising prior experience. It is also part of the organisation's wider target to increase the number of qualified probation officers (POs) (Ministry of Justice and HMPPS, 2020).

The evaluation aimed to explore the views and experiences of learners and probation stakeholders who participated in the pilot to identify learning for future iterations of the progression pathway. The pilot ran between January 2021 and March 2022, originally covering two probation regions in England (referred to as Region A and Region B, throughout). Following a restructure (unification) of the probation service on 21 June 2021, the pilot covered four probation regions.<sup>3</sup>

The pilot tested an accelerated 13-month work-based training pathway for existing PSOs in the National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) to gain the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP). As the pilot commenced before unification, learners from CRCs were originally seconded to the NPS. The pilot was open to PSOs with and without a Level 5 qualification (referred to as 'non-graduates') and with at least 12 months of recent experience as an offender manager (OM) in a probation delivery unit. Before the creation of this new pathway, the only way to obtain the PQiP was through a 15 or 21-month training programme (known as the 'PQiP programme') which is only open to applicants with a Level 5 qualification (referred to as 'graduates').<sup>4</sup> Once awarded the PQiP, individuals are eligible to apply for probation officer (PO) posts. A full list of the pilot eligibility criteria is provided in Appendix A along with further information on probation unification, and the PQiP programme.

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<sup>3</sup> Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (2021). Strengthening probation, building confidence. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/strengthening-probation-building-confidence>

<sup>4</sup> For more information on current qualification requirements for probation roles, see Appendix A.

## 2.1 Background to the pilot

The selection process ran between September 2020 and December 2020 and comprised three stages: an application form, an interview, and a written assessment. Further detail is provided in Appendix F. There were 122 applicants and the 50 top-scoring applicants were offered a pilot place (30 in Region A and 20 in Region B). This compares to 431 Trainee Probation Officers starting the PQiP training programme in 2021/22 across the same regions (HMPPS 2022b).<sup>5</sup>

The pilot contained three core components which learners completed whilst working as a PSO (designated as a 'trainee PO') and managing a caseload. The programme combined academic study with the assessment of learners' practice and was split into two parts: part one covered the Level 5 academic modules and the first 45% of the Vocational Diploma in Probation Practice Level 5 (VQ5), whilst part two covered the Level 6 modules and the remaining aspects of the VQ5. The academic components were delivered via distance learning by two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), one in Region A and one in Region B. Learners were asked to dedicate up to two days per week to academic study for the Level 5 modules and up to one day per week for the Level 6 modules. Workload relief was provided to accommodate this. An important part of the pilot was to assess whether non-graduate learners could complete the academic modules in the condensed timescales provided, which required multiple assessments to be completed at the same time. Further details of the three components can be found in Appendix B, along with a timeline.

Learners were assumed to have already completed the core HMPPS PSO learning and development (referred to as L&D and usually covered at the beginning of the PQiP programme and at the start of a PSO role) prior to starting the pathway, meaning they could start the VQ5 immediately. Learners completed an L&D programme delivered by the probation service, which was consistent with that offered to PQiP learners. This included blended learning activities (such as e-learning and workbooks) and training events. Furthermore, alongside managing a PSO caseload in their own name, learners were required to co-work high-risk cases with POs throughout the pilot.

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<sup>5</sup> HMPPS (2022b): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2022>

## 2.2 Previous research

Based on a limited evidence review, there appears to be a dearth of published research on experiences of the current PQiP pathway introduced in 2016. Exceptions include Martin and Fowler (2018) who discussed online delivery of academic components, and Robinson's (2016) initial pathway analysis based on the perspective of learners, employers, and HEIs. A higher volume of studies focus on PO qualification routes preceding the PQiP, such as the graduate diploma under the Probation Qualifications Framework (PQF). Stress was reported as a common experience within a small study of learners but viewed as inevitable and as a way of preparing learners for a career in probation. Learners argued that the programme was too condensed, but on the whole, they felt equipped for the move to a qualified PO (Smyth & Watson, 2018).

Skinner and Goldhill (2013) tutored PSOs as part of PQF delivery. They noted that, although some learners reported feeling initially uncomfortable with the changes to their work, their existing knowledge seemed to help them integrate theory and practice. The authors also observed learners struggling with poor work-life balance. Further, Collins et al. (2009) found in their survey of 110 trainee probation officers that small numbers reported experiencing problems with stress and wellbeing. The authors also highlighted the importance of support from peers, and then-called practice development assessors; a finding that was echoed by Gregory (2007) in their interview study with 15 recent PQF graduates. Treadwell (2006) highlights how some trainee POs without experience of undergraduate study felt isolated and 'left without adequate guidance'.

Other findings include a perceived lack of breathing space by learners when completing academic modules (Davies & Durrance, 2009; Treadwell, 2006), the utilisation of learners for extra office tasks (Gregory, 2007; Skinner & Goldhill, 2013), caseloads and prescriptive training reducing the opportunity for reflective practice and critical thinking (Cracknell, 2016; Treadwell, 2006), and a desire for more interactive learning from the HEI (Davies & Durrance, 2009; Gregory, 2007; Goldhill, 2010; Cracknell, 2016).

The findings from this process evaluation build on the current evidence base by exploring learner and stakeholder experiences of a new, accelerated non-graduate training pathway for experienced PSOs.

## 3. Approach

The sections below summarise the research objectives of the evaluation, the methods of data collection, how analysis was conducted, and guidance for interpreting the findings.

### 3.1 Research objectives

This process evaluation sought to understand how the design and delivery of the pilot affects access to the PQiP for experienced PSOs, addressing the following aims:

- To describe the characteristics of applicants and learners and how they progressed through the selection process and pilot.
- To understand learner and probation stakeholder experiences of the pilot programme and explore whether this experience varied amongst subgroups of learners (particularly by region and non-graduate status).
- To explore the perceived impact of the pilot on the skills, capabilities and knowledge of learners, and to monitor how the pilot affects self-reported job satisfaction and engagement of learners.
- To identify potential ways to improve the programme and capture lessons learnt.

Evaluation of the selection process is outlined in Appendix F, because future cohorts would not be selected in the same way as in the pilot. It is important to note that the pilot was not compared against other progression routes within this evaluation.

### 3.2 Methods

A mixed methods approach was taken including questionnaires, online surveys, and semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Fieldwork was conducted at three time points; to explore the selection process, part one of the pilot (including Level 5 academic modules), and part two of the pilot (including Level 6 academic modules). Views were gathered from applicants, learners, and probation stakeholders (senior probation officers (SPOs), practice tutor assessors (PTAs), regional probation learning managers and learning leads).

Learners' grades for the Level 5 and Level 6 modules were obtained from the HEIs along with information on the number of extensions or resubmissions, including how many learners requested them, for the Level 6 modules. Management information (MI) was also recorded by the pilot team throughout the study.

Appendix B outlines the three phases of evaluation, with further detail on each phase in Appendix C. Appendix D details a breakdown of the learner survey and interview samples.

### **3.3 Analysis**

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted on the data from the applicant questionnaires, the academic module data, and the quantitative data from the four online surveys. Statistical significance testing was not considered appropriate or necessary given the small number of pilot applicants and learners, and the type of evaluation being conducted. Subgroup analysis by certain characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity) was not possible in most cases due to the low numbers in some categories. Key differences between subgroups are reported where relevant.

The free-text survey comments and transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were analysed thematically using a deductive-inductive approach. A coding frame was first developed that captured the general topics explored through the surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The coding frame was then amended during analysis as recurrent and more specific themes emerged, with responses categorised systematically within the frame.

### **3.4 Interpreting the findings**

All applicants and learners, and all SPOs and PTAs involved for the duration of the pilot were provided the opportunity to take part in the evaluation. As shown in Appendix D, the survey samples were broadly representative on key characteristics. However, legacy CRC learners and those from Region B were underrepresented in the interviews, as were SPOs and PTAs from Region A in the midway interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, no learners offered feedback after withdrawal. The views portrayed in this research report may not be fully representative of all learners and stakeholders involved in the pilot.

## 4. Findings

The findings presented in this report are grouped by topic. Each topic is a combination of findings from MI and university data, the applicant questionnaire, survey responses, and interview and focus group data. Findings from the pilot selection process are presented in Appendix F; they are referenced throughout the report as relevant to discussion.

### 4.1 Applicant and learner characteristics

Of the 122 pilot applicants, 50 were offered a place on the pilot. Six of the 122 applicants withdrew from the selection process, because they were offered, and accepted, a place on the main PQiP programme. Appendix E provides a full breakdown of the characteristics of the 122 pilot applicants and 50 pilot starters. Notable statistics are presented in Table 4.1 and compared to the 2021/22 PQiP intake where possible (HMPPS, 2022). It should be noted that the PQiP intake is much larger than the pilot cohort, and covers a larger geographical spread, making comparisons less reliable.

The majority of pilot applicants identified as female (79%), as part of a white ethnic group (85%) and were PSOs employed by a CRC (63%). Just under half were non-graduates. The average (*median*) age of applicants, where known, was 38 years ( $SD=8.5$ ) with a range of 22 to 65 years. The average (*median*) length of time spent in an offender manager (OM) role for applicants was two years and two months ( $SD=51.4$  months). Half ( $n=25$ ) of those offered a place had spent five or less years as a PSO, and most ( $n=17$ ) of these were non-graduate.

Applications from PSOs employed by CRCs had a lower success rate than their NPS counterparts (32% and 56%, respectively), and the success rate of male applicants was 27 percentage points lower than for female applicants.<sup>6</sup>

The ethnic makeup of the pilot starters broadly matched that of the 2021/22 PQiP cohort, and the gender balance of pilot applicants matched that of the PQiP cohort, although a

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the substantial difference in population sizes, caution should be exercised in interpreting this finding.



greater proportion of pilot starters were female. A much higher proportion of pilot starters were aged 40 years or above, compared to the PQiP (41% and 19%, respectively).

**Table 4.1: Key characteristics of pilot applicant, starters, and completers, compared to 2021/22 PQiP starters, where known (number, and percentage)**

Characteristic	Pilot applicants		Pilot starters		PQiP starters		Known pilot completers	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>		<b>50</b>		<b>1,518</b>		<b>41</b>	
Non-graduate	55	46	26	52	-	-	18	44
PSOs employed by a CRC	77	63	25	50	-	-	21	51
Aged 40 years or over	45	43	19	41	292	19	18	47
Female	92	79	44	90	1,210	80	37	93
White ethnic group	98	85	41	84	978	84	35	88
Six year or more PSO experience	52	44	25	50	-	-	21	51

Note: Percentages exclude non-responses and non-disclosures.

Forty-five learners completed part one of the pilot, and 41 learners were known to have completed all elements: 26 in Region A and 15 in Region B.<sup>7</sup> This represents a known completion rate of 82% for all learners who were offered a place. There is a lack of available data on the number of learners who subsequently progressed to the PO grade.

Some learners withdrew (including for personal reasons) and a small number did not reach the required pass mark of 40% for the academic modules.<sup>8</sup> A slightly larger proportion of known pilot completers were aged 40 years or over, identified as female, or identified as part of a white ethnic group, compared to pilot starters. Of the seven known non-completers, five were non-graduates upon application, and five had five years or less previous experience as a PSO. However, with small cohorts such as this, it is not possible to say whether these differences are significant. Reasons for non-completion are omitted for confidentiality purposes.

<sup>7</sup> Two learners preferred not to disclose their academic grades, so their status is unknown.

<sup>8</sup> Learner withdrawals included applicants or learners withdrawing at any stage of the process, from the point of an application being confirmed as successful.

It is worth highlighting here that fewer differences emerged in the data between graduate and non-graduate learners than was perhaps anticipated. Whilst a number of graduate learners and stakeholders suggested it was beneficial to have (particularly recent) degree-level experience, there was the general view that already possessing a Level 5 qualification did not necessarily provide an advantage; previous qualifications may have been completed some time ago, or were not academic in nature.

## **4.2 Satisfaction, engagement, and wellbeing**

Respondents to the midway learner survey ( $n=36$ , out of 46) and final learner survey ( $n=31$ , out of 45) were asked to report their overall satisfaction with their experience of the pilot. In both surveys, most learners said they were either satisfied or very satisfied and a minority said they were dissatisfied. In the final survey, nearly all of the dissatisfied learners were based in Region B and, in both surveys, all had completed the maximum number of Level 5 modules.

Learners were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements on job satisfaction and engagement. In the final survey, all respondents agreed that they are interested in their work. Nearly all agreed that their work gives them a sense of personal accomplishment and most said they are proud to work for their organisation. However, around half of respondents agreed they would recommend their organisation as a great place to work.

SPOs and PTAs were asked in the stakeholder survey ( $n=23$ , out of 42) how they would describe their overall experience of managing or assessing learners on the pilot. The majority of respondents reported it to be a positive or very positive experience. Probation stakeholders from both regions praised the pilot cohort as dedicated, motivated and highly capable, and expressed admiration for how they persevered through challenging times. Some emphasised how rewarding they found helping experienced PSOs upskill and reach their potential, and that they enjoyed watching learners' confidence improve throughout the pilot. A few PTAs also suggested that getting the pilot learners through the VQ5 improved their communication and organisational skills.

“Compared to the PQiP intakes, I think you’ll see a stark difference in terms of proactiveness and motivation. I think these guys knew exactly what they were entering into, so they knew it would be a battle and [...] a steep learning curve.”

(Stakeholder, Region A)

Several learners emphasised that completing the pilot gave them a great sense of achievement, with some suggesting they were grateful for finally having the opportunity to progress their careers. Indeed, probation stakeholders hoped that introducing an internal progression route will improve retention by better valuing existing staff. One learner who had previously unsuccessfully applied to the PQiP programme commented that they were prepared to leave the service if they did not get onto the pilot.

“The most positive [aspect of the pilot] is the sense of achievement [...] I feel like I've been on the glass ceiling for a really long time and doing this pilot, it feels really good that it's now going to open up so many more opportunities [...]. As stressful as I found it, I'm really pleased I've done it.” (Learner, Region B)

## Wellbeing

Despite these positives, the perceived negative implications of the pilot for learner wellbeing was a recurring theme in the data. A number of learners said that, had they fully understood the intensity of the pilot, they would have been unlikely to apply. A few stakeholders explained they found managing learners’ emotions to be difficult and stressful, and that they felt a great deal of pressure to get learners through the programme. It was suggested that pressures were exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 itself as well as the related ‘Exceptional delivery model’ to safeguard staff and people on probation during the pandemic,<sup>9</sup> and the unification of the probation service. The following further comments were made on wellbeing:

- Whilst several learners and stakeholders reported that learners’ previous experience as a PSO meant they were somewhat resilient to the pressures of the

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<sup>9</sup> HMPPS (2020). *Exceptional Delivery Model: Action Plan*. Accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exceptional-delivery-model-action-plan>

pilot, most felt the timescales in the first six months were unmanageable, especially for those completing the maximum number of academic modules.

- It was highlighted that learners often worked evenings and weekends to keep on top of their workload, reportedly leading to poor work-life balance and high stress levels. Some said they were using annual leave to meet deadlines.
- Learners with caring responsibilities reported feeling this pressure acutely, with some commenting that the stress of the pilot had a negative impact on their family life. There was the general view that the timescales and inflexibility of the pilot failed to take into account the differing personal situations of learners, raising issues around equality and fairness.

“I was logging on in the evenings and I appreciated that there would be some of our own time working. But every weekend I was logging on. It was really stressful. It really has an impact on home life, especially during the beginning where I was home schooling as well.” (Learner, Region A)

### 4.3 The academic components

In both regions there was an increase in the number of first-class marks given between Level 5 and Level 6 components. Specifically, 10% ( $n=14$ ) of module grades at Level 5 and 38% ( $n=64$ ) of grades at Level 6 were in the 70 or above bracket (first-class grade).

Notably, there were no substantial differences in the average module grades received by graduate versus non-graduate learners for Level 5, or Level 6 components in either region. Across both levels in Region A, the mean average grade achieved was 64 for graduates ( $SD=10.1$ ) and 63 for non-graduates ( $SD=8.7$ ). In Region B, the average grade achieved was again 64 for graduates ( $SD=5.8$ ) and 61 for non-graduates ( $SD=6.8$ ). Similarly, there were minimal differences in the grades achieved when broken down by age and years of PSO experience.

Table G.2 in Appendix G outlines descriptive statistics on known grades achieved by the learners.

## **Experiences of the academic timescales and assessments**

Amongst respondents to the midway learner survey who undertook at least one Level 5 module ( $n=31$ ), over half felt they did not have enough time to complete the Level 5 component. Fewer reported feeling this way about the Level 6 modules in the final survey. Similarly, most respondents to the stakeholder survey said timescales for the Level 5 modules were too short, or far too short, but about right for the Level 6. Nevertheless, most learners agreed they were prepared for the Level 5 and Level 6 assessments. In the final survey, all of the respondents who disagreed were based in Region B. A greater number of respondents reported finding the Level 5 assessments difficult compared to the Level 6 assessments. The following comments were made on timescales and assessments:

- **Level 5** – a few learners, including some non-graduates, said they felt able to manage the assessment deadlines. However, the majority said they found the timescales too intense and some felt they were ‘rushing through’ content with limited time for reflection. There was also notable frustration with the fact learners were unable to ask for deadline extensions or resubmit assessments.

It was suggested that the Level 5 timescales were especially difficult for non-graduates, given that in some instances they had to complete five modules. One stakeholder said the three learners they managed were all ‘terrified’ due to their lack of experience of writing at degree level. However, it was emphasised that graduates who had not studied academically for many years likewise encountered a steep learning curve. Arguably, this is reflected in the midway survey where respondents aged 40 or over were twice as likely to report finding the Level 5 assessments difficult compared to those aged below 40. As noted above, however, there were no notable differences in the grades achieved between age groups.

- **Level 6** – there was reportedly not enough time between levels for learners to recover from possible burnout or take leave. Some learners, including non-graduates, did find the Level 6 timescales more realistic in terms of what can be achieved and said the modules were more engaging with a clearer link between the assessments and probation practice. However, others felt the timescales were still too short due to clashes with the VQ5 and having to balance

the academic work with their increased caseload, with around one fifth of learners receiving extensions for at least one deadline. A number of learners again reported that shortened timescales inhibited their learning, as they were not able to explore the modules in depth or make full use of the resources provided by the HEIs.

“I found having three modules to complete alongside each other, and having to learn how to write academically, extremely tough and it impacted heavily on my work life balance” (Non-graduate learner, Region B)

“That early academic stuff, it's always a massive hurdle for people. And if you're a non-graduate, haven't written an essay ever, or since you were 18 and you're now 35 or something [...] we've got to really sort that out I think.” (Stakeholder, Region B)

### **Views on teaching and support from the HEIs**

Some learners suggested a lack of face-to-face teaching contributed to feelings of isolation and affected motivation, whilst others appreciated not having to commute on study days and found this beneficial for work-life balance. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic HEIs delivered modules remotely to varying degrees, with some face-to-face elements switching to a remote format in response to the pandemic.

Most learners from Region A said they found the HEI highly supportive, praising tutors for their extensive knowledge and their approachability. The module coordinator was singled out as offering excellent and individualised support. It was suggested that tutors in this region went above and beyond what was expected to ensure the success of the pilot. Whilst several learners commented that they found the teaching sessions and workshops helpful, a small number said they could either not find time to attend these or that they found the sessions to be less detailed than expected.

The small number of respondents to the learner surveys who described the support or teaching as poor or very poor were based in Region B. Some learners reported that the tutors were accessible and helpful, with the module coordinator again praised in particular. Others found support to be deficient, with several learners saying they found tutors to be

unresponsive. Most expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived to be a lack of interaction and teaching from the HEI, particularly for the Level 5 modules. There was the general view in this region that self-directed learning was not an effective form of delivery and that it discouraged peer-led discussion. One graduate learner, who completed their degree over a decade ago, said they felt the HEI had ‘lost sight’ of how difficult writing an essay can be for adults returning to education.

“I have not undertaken academic writing at this level before [...] I found distance learning [...] to be difficult for me and self-led reading was quite overwhelming”  
(Graduate learner, Region A)

#### 4.4 Experiences of the VQ5

In the surveys, nearly all learners indicated that they understood what is expected of them in the VQ5 and that the units felt relevant to probation practice.<sup>10</sup> A number of learners said that, due to their previous experience as a PSO and OM, they felt the VQ5 ‘ran on in the background’ and that they could meet the requirements fairly easily. Some SPOs and PTAs echoed this and said learners were able to complete more complex assessments to provide richer evidence. It was noted that where learners came to the pilot with an established caseload, or were allocated complex cases from the outset, PTAs could use a wider range of assessment tools.

It is worth noting, though, that a few learners found the VQ5 challenging, with one non-graduate saying they found it even harder than the academic component. The professional discussions were highlighted as being particularly difficult by several learners due to the amount of preparation reportedly required.

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<sup>10</sup> The midway survey, five learners said they were not completing the VQ5 as part of the pilot and were routed away from further VQ5 questions. However, some of these learners went on to complete the final survey, where they said they had completed the qualification. This discrepancy suggests it was not always clear to learners which parts of the PQiP programme they were required to complete.

## **PTA support**

Learners were assessed and supported by practice tutor assessors (PTAs) who tested their ability to apply theory to practice through work-based assessments including reflective logs, professional discussion, and observations.

Nearly all respondents to the learner surveys said they were satisfied with the support they received from their PTA and that the feedback they received was of excellent or good quality. Several said this support was the one of the most positive aspects of the pilot, and most learners indicated that their PTA helped to make the VQ5 an enjoyable experience through their continuous encouragement and constructive feedback.

A number of learners said having their work scrutinised was uncomfortable initially, but that it became easier once they built a relationship with their assessor. However, one learner said they found the level of scrutiny from their PTA demoralising. A few stakeholders did suggest that learners sometimes struggled with having their practice examined, with one commenting that some learners believed they were already doing PO-level work in their previous role and therefore assumed they already met the expected standard for the pilot.

Respondents to the stakeholder survey were asked whether the level of support they needed to provide learners was higher or lower than expected from previous experience. Nearly all of the 13 PTAs said the level required was about the same as expected. Most agreed they had enough time to provide this support, but a few highlighted they had to offer increased support to some learners due to differing levels of practice upon joining the pilot. This is discussed further in the later section on professional development. One stakeholder in Region B attributed the success of VQ5 delivery to the fact that most of the pilot PTAs were experienced assessors.

## **Experiences of the timescales**

There were mixed views on the timescales for the VQ5. Some PTAs and learners found them manageable, and it was highlighted that learners' previous experience of the VQ3 meant less time was spent familiarising them with the assessment process. However, the majority of respondents to the stakeholder survey said the timescales were too short, whilst a number of learners said they found the milestones difficult to meet due to not



having appropriate cases to collect specific evidence. It was suggested this could be at least partially remedied by allowing learners to use their recent experiences as a PSO as evidence for the VQ5.

Some stakeholders and learners reported that reaching the first milestone at three months was highly pressured, particularly where learners were completing four or five Level 5 modules. There was the expectation that learners would be assessed from day one, but not all PTAs felt able to do this due to the competing demands on learners' time in the first few months. This led to some PTAs going for 'easy win evidence' or delaying aspects of the VQ5 to reduce the pressure.

"That first milestone was a nightmare. It was just, you know, for the other [PQiP] learners that milestone is at the six months stage, not at three months. So, losing a couple of weeks trying to get their caseloads down, then trying to do the VQ planning. And they're bombarded with quite a lot of core training and the academic stuff, that three month one was a real push at points." (PTA, Region A)

Several other concerns were raised around the VQ5 timescales:

- It was noted that some legacy CRC learners found it harder to 'hit the ground running' due to the practical challenges of transitioning to NPS, and because of the differences in core learning, systems, and processes.
- A small number of PTAs and learners suggested the pacing of the VQ5 was ill-suited to an experienced PSO cohort, particularly where learners joined with an existing caseload. It was suggested that some learners were keen to make rapid progress and use higher-risk cases to collect evidence earlier on in the programme.

## **4.5 Workplace support, caseloads, and case management**

As the pilot commenced prior to the probation reform in June 2021, learners who had applied from CRCs were initially seconded into the probation service. A number indicated the transition was an isolating experience with minimal support to help them adapt. A few

suggested they felt overwhelmed by being almost immediately given cases which they had no experience of managing in the CRC, for example, people convicted of sexual offences.

Most of the learners who were relocated to a different office due to business needs said losing their support network was challenging. Some explained that it was hard to establish rapport with colleagues due to remote working practices put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. One learner highlighted the importance of multi-agency working in probation practice and how moving office meant they had to rebuild trust with partner agencies.

Equally, learners who stayed in the same office spoke about how important they found familiarity with team members for their confidence and in helping them settle into the trainee role.

### **Line management, mentorship, and peer support**

Most learners expressed satisfaction with the support they received from their line manager (SPO), with several highlighting their feedback to be one of the most positive elements of participating in the pilot. A few reported being unhappy that their SPO changed during the pilot, explaining it undermined their progress and led to inconsistency in feedback; one SPO said that being moved towards the end of the pilot was ‘illogical, upsetting and frustrating’.

Around half of the SPOs who responded to the stakeholder survey said the actual level of support they needed to provide learners was about the same as they had expected before the pilot, and that they had enough time to provide this support. Learners and stakeholders raised several other points:

- A few respondents highlighted perceived differences in support offered by operational SPOs and PQiP SPOs.<sup>11</sup> It was felt that local PQiP SPOs embedded in the same team as learners could offer the most appropriate support due to their familiarity with the PQiP programme.

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<sup>11</sup> Most learners had PQiP SPOs, whose primary role is to formally supervise and line manager trainee POs and oversee their learning and development during their time on the programme.

- Several learners commented on how supportive their SPO was in helping them identify shadowing opportunities and in proactively removing cases from their caseload that were not complex enough.
- It was also reported that SPOs did not always fully understand the difference between the pilot and the PQiP programme, and that their high workloads meant they were unable to support learners' development as much as they would have liked.

The majority of learners who were assigned a mentor spoke highly of the relationship, even where they reported having more experience than their mentor. A couple of learners noted their mentors were less available due to sick leave and high workloads, and others expressed disappointment that they were not allocated a mentor despite asking for one.

A recurrent theme was the perceived importance of peer support. Learners emphasised how crucial they found linking up with others in the pilot cohort for academic advice, to share experiences, and for a feeling of camaraderie, with a few saying they would not have completed the pilot without this support. However, a minority of learners said they did not feel part of this support network due to their specific location.

### **Caseloads and workload relief**

At the time of completing the midway survey, learners received a 60% reduction in their caseload, meaning they should have been managing around 15 cases in their own name. In the midway survey, just under half of respondents said they currently managed between six and ten cases in their own name and most said they were co-working one to five cases. In the final month of the pilot, the caseload reduction was 40%, equating to around 20 cases. In the final survey, almost half said that, during the final month on the pilot, they were managing between 11 and 15 cases in their own name with a small number saying they managed more than 20. The majority said they were co-working 6 to 10 cases. This is broadly in line with the main PQiP programme. The reported increase in caseloads

between surveys was in line with the reduction in workload relief in the latter stages of the pilot.<sup>12</sup>

The following views were expressed regarding caseloads and workload relief:

- **Redistribution of caseloads** – substantial difficulties were reported in redistributing learners' PSO caseloads. Some learners in Region A said getting their caseloads down to an appropriate level did not happen until they were three or four months into the pilot.
- **L&D** – the majority of learners agreed that their cases met their development needs, with their comments suggesting they enjoyed being exposed to new scenarios and dynamics. However, caseloads for some learners were reportedly lacking in learning opportunities, especially where they retained the cases they managed as a PSO.
- **Study days** – whilst it was acknowledged that one or two study days per week was beneficial, a number of learners said they struggled to use them for academic work due to the demands of case management, the VQ5, and in-house training events. Others said they were strict with using the study days as intended, but this meant catching up on case management work in their own time.
- **Workloads** – in both the midway and final learner surveys, slightly under half of respondents said they were satisfied with the level of workload relief they received. Around half indicated that they found their workload too high, the majority of whom completed four or five Level 5 modules. Some learners reported struggling with the number of cases they were assigned, particularly as they transitioned to the Level 6 and workload relief was reduced. Frustration with the lack of time they had available to dedicate to people on probation was expressed. It was also suggested that learners were used as an additional resource by their team and that they found it difficult to decline tasks when colleagues were also struggling with workloads.

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<sup>12</sup> Due to the timing of the midway survey, caseloads during the first four months on the pilot (when learners received an 80% reduction in their caseload) were not captured.

- **Co-working** – there were mixed views on the efficacy of co-working. Some learners, including those with over a decade of experience as a PSO, said it was great to gain experience with high-risk and complex cases with the support of a trusted PO. This appeared to be the case particularly where they had an existing relationship, or they co-worked with their mentor. Others reported that POs struggled to make time for co-working and were reluctant to be observed by experienced PSOs. One PTA said learners were being ‘left to their own devices’ as it was assumed they could handle cases alone.

“[...] sometimes I feel like, does anybody actually know what co-working is? Because to me it was never clear and to the probation officers, although we signed a co-working agreement to say ‘these are the cases we co-work’, there was never guidance on who undertakes what task. You know, you're told the case is ultimately in the probation officer's name, but you do the work [...]” (Learner, Region B)

## 4.6 Views on the professional development of learners

### Learners' level of practice upon joining the pilot

A few probation stakeholders said that, generally speaking, it was right to assume that learners had already completed the core PSO learning and they did not need to revisit it. Furthermore, most respondents to the stakeholder survey agreed that their learners' level of practice upon joining the pilot matched the expected level. However, a minority of stakeholders disagreed with this statement, with some suggesting there was considerable variation in practice levels, especially between legacy CRC and NPS learners. Indeed, one legacy CRC learner with comparatively less experience as a PSO said the up skilling required seemed ‘insurmountable’ at times. It was highlighted that learners found writing OASys<sup>13</sup> reports to the required standard particularly difficult, even where they had over a decade of experience as a PSO. Several PTAs felt learners lacked proper oversight from managers in their PSO role and needed a great deal of support in improving their practice. Consequently, the pilot eligibility criteria, in particular the statements of support from line

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<sup>13</sup> The Offender Assessment System (OASys) is the risk assessment tool used by HMPPS.

managers, were reported to not always be an accurate indicator of a learner's ability to undertake the pilot.

### **Skills and knowledge**

In the final learner survey, respondents were asked to report their overall satisfaction with their professional development during their time on the pilot. Nearly all said they were satisfied, and all agreed that the pilot improved their knowledge of probation practice. Almost all respondents agreed that the pilot helped them to develop their OM skills. Similarly, most stakeholders said they were satisfied with the improvements in learners' skills and knowledge. The following comments were made on this topic:

- **Linking theory to practice** – some learners emphasised how much they enjoyed studying probation theory through the academic component, and the ability to apply that learning through the VQ5, particularly through the professional discussions. A number of learners suggested that the pilot had made them a better practitioner by increasing the defensibility of their decision-making and by providing them with a deeper appreciation for why interventions and programmes are designed the way they are. A few stakeholders also said learners demonstrated a heightened understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of probation practice and acknowledged this as an important part of becoming an independent practitioner.
- **Reflective practice** – whilst it was reported that the timescales did not always allow for as much reflection as desired, some learners said reflective practice was successfully built into the programme. Indeed, one learner identified this as the biggest difference between working as a trainee versus as a PSO. Others said that the pilot reawakened their interest in probation practice by encouraging them to reflect on their skills and that the programme has increased their understanding of how subconscious biases affect case management.

“[...] but I honestly think that all PSO's should do that Level 5 qualification, I felt like I've been doing this job all this time and there's so much that I don't know. How can that be?”  
(Learner, Region A)

“I actually found [the academic side] really useful and it put things into place for me. It sounds silly given that I've been in the service [many] years, but like you know, you'd hear things are called the Good Lives model, R&R, and all this and you're like, I don't really understand what that means because I've never gone into it in depth. And I think until you've studied something and had to incorporate your theory [...] and then marry it up with your practice and analyse it, you don't make those links.” (Learner, Region B)

### **Training events**

Reported experiences of the internal training events were broadly negative. Whilst some learners said they found them to be a helpful refresher, with trainers adapting the content to suit an experienced audience, most learners and stakeholders felt the cohort had to attend training and complete workbooks that were unnecessary for experienced PSOs. There was the general view that the training was not tailored to individual learning needs, making it an inefficient use of learners' time. Moreover, some felt the training events were too frontloaded or that certain events were delivered too late to benefit learners who worked with complex cases early on in the pilot.

Learners expressed disappointment with the perceived lack of training focused on working with high-risk cases, especially the parole process and the use of toolkits. The training on working with people convicted of sexual offences was highlighted in particular as not meeting learners' expectations. It was also reported that training timetables had inaccurate information with event dates confirmed at the last minute, leading to schedule clashes.

### **Preparation for progression to PO**

Upon qualification in April 2022, learners were eligible to apply for PO posts where, for the first nine months, they would be identified as a Newly Qualified Officer (NQO), the same as PQiP graduates. This means that learners will be provided with workload relief and ongoing L&D to consolidate learning completed during the pilot.

In both learner surveys, most respondents said they were confident that the pilot had prepared them for the transition from PSO to qualified PO. There was the general sentiment amongst learners that, although they are not confident in every area of probation practice, the pilot had equipped them with the necessary skills to progress in

their careers. Similarly, most respondents to the stakeholder survey reported that they were satisfied that their learners were prepared for the transition.

However, some learners expressed concern about perceived gaps in their knowledge, which were partly attributed to the shortened length of the pilot. Child protection, the parole process, MAPPA, working with people in custody, gangs and extremism, and sentence planning were mentioned in particular. A couple of learners flagged that trainees are not allowed to work with people serving a life sentence, despite this potentially forming a big part of a PO's caseload.

“Learners get a lot of protection and [...] I definitely felt at the beginning it was too much protection. I felt a bit de-skilled not working with lifers, they are massive part of our caseloads and learners just don't have anything to do with them. I couldn't get my head around that. It didn't make sense.” (Learner, Region A)

## 4.7 Views on future pathways

A second iteration of the PSO progression pathway commenced in March 2022 across all probation regions. It was open to all graduate and non-graduate PSOs who had passed their six-month probationary period, rather than just those with OM experience. To bring it in line with the shorter PQiP programme, the pathway was lengthened by HMPPS to 15 months, with the Level 5 modules completed over the first six months and the VQ5 over the duration. Learners were able to resubmit assessments or receive deadline extensions for the Level 5 component. Although this iteration started before the pilot evaluation had completed, emerging findings were taken into consideration during its design. Learners and stakeholders were aware of the new design and expressed the following opinions:

- The extended timescales were viewed as a much-needed change to the pathway. However, a minority felt that 15 months may still cause too much pressure for those learners who have to complete most Level 5 modules in that time.
- Whilst OM experience was viewed as essential for successful completion of the pilot in its current form, respondents reported that this criterion could be removed if time to develop OM skills is built into the programme before VQ5 assessment



begins. This was perceived by respondents as important to make access to progression for all PSOs as fair and open as possible.

- Although it was hoped that unification would help resolve the challenges faced by legacy CRC learners, there were concerns that the different L&D provisions that existed between CRCs and NPS will continue to place them at a disadvantage.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, learners and stakeholders reported the pilot offered a much-needed career progression opportunity for experienced and capable PSOs. Learners' previous PSO and OM experience was acknowledged as important to help most learners 'hit the ground running' from day one, and in the collection of high-quality evidence for the VQ5.

Learners enjoyed furthering their professional development by deepening their understanding of probation theory and practice, and through exposure to more complex cases. Learners flagged SPO, PTA, and mentor feedback about their skills as invaluable. Stakeholders expressed how rewarding they found it to manage and assess experienced learners and were impressed with the dedication, motivation, and perseverance of the pilot cohort. Although a slightly higher number of pilot non-completers were non-graduate learners, there were no substantial differences in the academic grades achieved by graduate status, suggesting that levels of previous academic attainment should not present a barrier to undertaking an accelerated progression route. However, completing the Level 5 modules in the timescales provided was highlighted as especially difficult for non-graduate learners and for those who had not studied academically for a long time.

Both learners and stakeholders emphasised perceived issues with the shortened timescales with implications for learner stress and wellbeing, echoing previous research findings (e.g., Collins et al., 2009; Skinner & Goldhill, 2013; Smyth & Watson, 2018). Many learners and stakeholders felt the pressure of academic and VQ5 deadlines affected learners' work-life balance, particularly in conjunction with caring responsibilities, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. For some learners, this was exacerbated by issues with caseload distribution and being placed on training viewed as unnecessary given their previous experience. The perceived importance of peer and PTA support, a desire for more interactive academic teaching, and dissatisfaction with the lack of breathing space and additional office tasks were in line with findings from previous studies (Davies & Durrance, 2009; Goldhill, 2010; Gregory, 2007; Skinner & Goldhill, 2013; Treadwell, 2006; Cracknell, 2016). A number of learners also felt that some areas of probation practice were not adequately covered by the programme, such as child protection and managing parole

cases, resulting in a perceived lack of confidence in these areas. Nevertheless, similar to findings from Smyth and Watson's (2018) study, most learners and probation stakeholders said that learners were prepared for the transition from PSO to qualified PO.

## 5.1 Recommendations

A wide range of suggestions were made for improving pilot design and delivery. Suggestions to extend the timescale of the programme to at least 15 months were common, allowing at least six months for the Level 5 component along with deadline extensions to increase flexibility and improve learner wellbeing. Both changes have been implemented through the second iteration of the progression pathway. Other frequently reported suggestions have been summarised below for considerations with future cohorts:

- **Selection process** – ensure PSOs fully understand the demands, structure, and content of the programme before applying. Attach greater weight to work records and provide more support to help those less familiar with the use of Civil Service Success Profiles prepare for the application and interview process.
- **Academic component** – provide learners the opportunity to complete some or all Level 5 modules before joining the pathway. HEIs could consider opportunities for more collaborative, interactive teaching sessions and peer-to-peer discussion.
- **Vocational qualification** – recognise prior learning within PSO role towards VQ5 evidence, without disadvantaging non-OM experienced PSOs, and adapt unit timings to better account for learner experience and capability.
- **Workplace support, caseloads, and case management** – wind down caseloads before learners start on the pathway, ensure learners are managed by the same, experienced (ideally PQiP) SPO for the duration, where possible. Ensure learners time is protected for tasks which complement required learning and development.
- **Professional development** – tailor learning plans based on training needs analysis and adapt training to cover topics such as the use of toolkits and managing high-risk cases in greater depth. Allow learners to co-work higher risk cases earlier, with appropriate support, to help achieve VQ5 milestones.

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## Appendix A

### A.1 Probation Unification

On 21 June 2021 the probation service moved to a unified model that afforded responsibility for the management of all individuals subject to probation services to the National Probation Service (NPS). Before unification, there were seven divisions of the NPS. These divisions were reconstituted as part of the unification process to form 12 probation regions. Based on the previous structure, this pilot is considered to have covered two probation regions. Following the restructure, this would now include four regions (HMPPS, 2021).

### A.2 PQiP Programme

To be eligible for the PQiP programme applicants must hold a valid Level 5 qualification which may include a Diploma of higher education (DipHE), a foundation degree, a level 5 award, a level 5 certificate, a level 5 diploma, a level 5 NVQ or equivalent qualification.<sup>14</sup>

The Regulated Qualification Framework for the PQiP contains four required Level 5 modules:

- The Criminal Justice System
- Understanding Crime and Criminal Behaviour
- Penal Policy and the Punishment of Offenders
- Rehabilitation of Offenders.

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<sup>14</sup> HMPPS (2022a). Accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-guidance-core-probation-roles-and-qualification-requirements>

The PQiP programme takes 15 months if learners have previously covered three of the modules within their level 5 (or equivalent) qualification prior to applying for the PQiP; otherwise, learners participate in a 21-month 'extended PQiP' programme.

### A.3 Pilot eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria for the PSO Progression Pilot were as follows:

- Must have passed probationary period.
- Must have successfully completed the VQ3.
- Must have been in an OM role in a probation delivery unit (or equivalent in CRC) for the last 12 months – applicants may have moved to a non-OM role in the three months before applying, but must have been in an OM role for at least 12 months immediately prior to that.<sup>15</sup>
- Must have Good or Outstanding in last Staff Performance and Development Record (or equivalent in CRC).
- Must have been free from incomplete formal disciplinary and/or performance procedures that are currently ongoing.
- Must have undertaken the pilot as a full-time employee – the pilot could not be modified for part-time learners in the time available. Part-time PSOs could apply if they met the other eligibility criteria and were prepared to work full-time from day one of the training course and its duration.

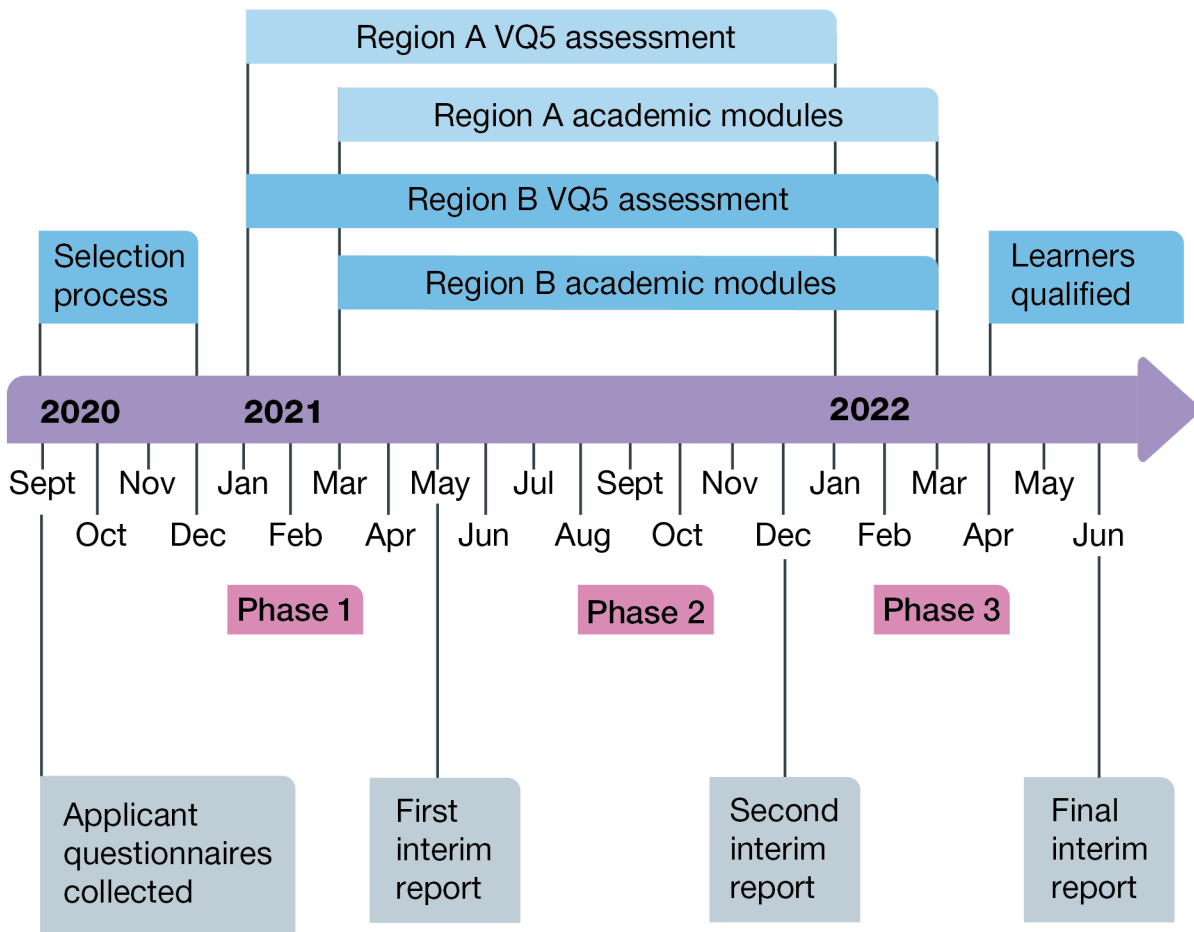
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<sup>15</sup> PSOs can work outside of offender management teams, for example in Approved Premises, in the courts, or in Unpaid Work.

## Appendix B

### B.1 Timeline

Figure B.1: Pilot and evaluation timeline



### B.2 Delivery of the pilot

There were three main components of the pathway:

- **Level 5 academic modules** – delivered and assessed over four months, compared with six months in the 21-month PQiP programme. All learners had up to five modules to complete, with the number depending on how much recognised prior learning had been completed (see Appendix G for a breakdown). Due to its



time-bound nature, it was not possible for learners to request extensions or resubmit assessments whilst on the pilot.

- **Level 6 academic modules** – all learners were required to complete all four modules in eight to nine months. Learners were able to request extensions and had the opportunity for one resubmission per assessment if they did not meet the pass mark of 40% on their first submission attempt. In one region, learners had been on the pilot for around 14 months by the time they handed in their final assignment. In the other region, the pilot timescale was just under 13 months.
- **Vocational qualification (VQ5)** – learners needed to achieve 25% of the award by month three, 45% by month six, 70% by month nine and 100% by month 13. Again, due to the programme being a time-bound pilot which was not guaranteed to be continued into future years, they were unable to defer to a later cohort if they did not reach these milestones. Learners on the PQiP programme may be referred to the Probation Qualifications Assurance Board (PQAB). The board has the authority to grant extensions, deferrals, and to withdraw or suspend learners from the programme.

Learners completing at least one Level 5 module received an 80% reduction in their caseload between months one and five of the pilot. Between months five to nine, learners received a 60% reduction in their caseload. In months ten to 13, this dropped to 40% due to learners having less protected learning time.

Alongside managing a PSO caseload in their own name, learners were required to co-work high-risk cases with POs throughout the pilot. Both PSOs and POs work in offender management teams and are engaged in sentence management. The boundary between the two roles is set out in statutory guidance and is mainly related to risk level, with POs supervising people on probation who present a low to high risk of harm and PSOs supervising low to medium risk (HMPPS, 2022a). In practice, POs more typically manage those who present a medium to high risk of harm.

The HEIs use varying degrees of distance learning under business-as-usual delivery. Sessions that would have been delivered face-to-face were moved to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Appendix C

### Methods used in each evaluation phase

Each phase is discussed in turn alongside a description of the data sources used and, where relevant, the sampling approach taken. A breakdown of the samples achieved is provided in Appendix D.

#### Phase one

The first phase occurred between January and March 2021 and covered the pilot selection process (for findings on the selection process, see Appendix F). Following this phase, the first interim report was delivered to HMPPS in June 2021. The data sources are outlined below:

- **Applicant questionnaire** – after submitting their EOI forms, applicants were asked to fill in a questionnaire which requested information on protected characteristics, the length of time spent in a PSO and OM role, and previous qualifications. The questionnaire was returned by 118 of the 122 applicants, a 97% response rate. All who went on to join the pilot did return a questionnaire but some preferred not to disclose their personal characteristics.
- **Applicant survey** – all applicants were invited to complete an online survey on their experiences of the selection process. The survey was open for four weeks between January and February 2021 and received 77 responses, an overall response rate of 63%. Of these respondents, 33 were offered a place on the pilot.
- **Semi-structured interviews with Senior Probation Officers (SPOs)** – to explore stakeholder experiences and views on the selection process, all 14 SPOs involved in both sifting and interviewing applicants were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview over video call. Interviews were held in February and March 2022. Four SPOs participated, two from Region A and two from Region B. Each of these SPOs sifted between 12 and 20 EOIs and sat on five to eight interview panels.

## Phase two

The second phase was carried out between August and October 2021 and focused on part one of the pilot, with the second interim report delivered in December 2021. The following data sources were used:

- **Grades for the Level 5 academic modules** – the HEIs provided grades for the individual modules for all learners, apart from one who withdrew and could not be provided the opportunity to opt out of the data share.
- **Midway learner survey** – all 45 learners who completed part one of the pilot were invited to complete an online survey. This survey was open for eight weeks between August and October 2021. In total, 36 learners submitted their responses, an overall response rate of 80%.
- **Semi-structured focus groups and interviews with probation stakeholders** – participants comprised regional probation learning managers and learning leads, SPOs, and PTAs. The interviews and focus groups were conducted over video call in October 2021. Thirty-nine SPOs and PTAs were known to be involved in the pilot at the time of data collection and they were sampled purposively according to the number of learners they managed or supported, and the region and delivery unit in which they were based. In total, 16 probation stakeholders participated in this phase of data collection. Two focus groups were conducted, one in Region A and one in Region B (both comprising five participants who were a mixture of SPOs and PTAs) and four interviews (comprising one or two participants in each).

## Phase three

The third and final phase of the evaluation took place between February and April 2022, with the final interim report delivered in June 2022:

- **Grades for the Level 6 academic modules** – the HEIs provided grades for the individual modules for all learners, apart from two (one in each pilot region) who opted out of the data share. The HEIs also provided information on the number of extensions or resubmissions and how many learners required them.

- **Final learner survey** – all 45 learners were invited to complete an online survey which focused on the second half of the pilot. This survey was open for seven weeks between February and April 2022. In total, 31 learners submitted their responses, a response rate of 69%.
- **Probation stakeholder survey** – to better understand the prevalence of views captured during the stakeholder focus groups and interviews, 22 SPOs and 20 PTAs were invited to complete an online survey on their overall experiences of managing or assessing pilot learners.<sup>16</sup> The survey was open for five weeks between March and April 2022 and received 23 responses (from 10 SPOs and 13 PTAs), a 55% response rate. Twelve respondents said they managed or assessed more than two learners. All reported having at least six months' experience in managing or assessing pilot learners, with 17 being involved for the entirety of the pilot.
- **Semi-structured learner interviews** – to collect qualitative data on the beginning-to-end learner journey, learners were invited to participate in an interview over video call with the researcher. Interviews took place in March and April 2022. Learners were originally sampled purposively; however, due to a low response rate, invites later went out to all 45 learners still involved in the pilot.<sup>17</sup> In total, 14 interviews were conducted with 11 learners from Region A and three learners from Region B. Three participants had not completed the final learner survey and one had not completed any of the surveys for the evaluation.

All surveys contained a mixture of multiple-choice and Likert scale items, as well as open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed by Microsoft's AI transcription service.

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<sup>16</sup> Due to staffing changes throughout the pilot, it is possible that this does not represent all SPOs and PTAs involved. The survey was primarily targeted at stakeholders who had at least six months' experience in managing or assessing learners and focused on the experiences of PQiP SPOs (rather than operational or team SPOs).

<sup>17</sup> The researcher was made aware of a separate external research project being conducted with learners from one region at a similar time to data collection for the evaluation. This may have affected response rates.

Management information (MI) was recorded by the pilot team throughout the study, including the legacy organisation applicants were employed by (either a CRC or the NPS), the region in which they were based, and any withdrawals from the selection process and pilot. Non-completers were invited to provide written feedback on their experience of the pilot or, where there was potential sensitivity, through a discussion with the researcher.

### **Research Principles**

Participation in the research was voluntary and informed consent was gained prior to data collection. Participants were able to withdraw consent at any time prior to analysis and were assured of their confidentiality. Privacy notices were attached to the applicant questionnaire and all surveys and were circulated to learners before the HEIs shared their grades with the research team. The information sheets and privacy notices included the purpose of the evaluation, how respondents' data would be used, and how it would be linked to other data held about them.

To link the data from the surveys with the demographic information in the applicant questionnaires, the applicant and learner surveys were not anonymous. This may have affected the honesty of the responses. This was mitigated as far as possible by making it clear to respondents their data would be used for research purposes only and would be kept confidential.

Due to the small population and sample sizes for the surveys, values below five have been suppressed to reduce the risk of identification. Qualitative summaries of responses have been provided instead.

### **Timing of research phases**

It should also be noted that, when responding to the final learner survey, some learners would still have been completing assessments and awaiting their grades for the Level 6 modules. This is different to the midway survey which learners completed when they already knew their Level 5 module grades. The fact that learners knew (or did not know) their grades may have influenced how they felt about their experience of participating in the academic components and thus impacted their survey responses.

## Appendix D

### Sampling tables

**Table D.1: Characteristics of applicant and learner samples**

		Survey ( <i>n</i> )			Interview ( <i>n</i> )
		Applicant	Midway	Final	
<b>Region</b>	Region A	40	23	18	11
	Region B	36	13	13	3
<b>Legacy organisation</b>	CRC	41	16	14	3
	NPS	35	20	17	11
<b>Age group (years)</b>	Below 40	38	17	18	7
	40 and over	33	16	12	5
<b>Gender identity</b>	Female	57	-	-	-
	Male	17	-	-	-
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	65	-	-	-
	Other ethnic groups	8	-	-	-
<b>PSO experience (years)</b>	5 or less	41	16	16	3
	6 or more	34	20	15	11
<b>OM experience (years)</b>	5 or less	48	19	19	5
	6 or more	27	17	12	9
<b>Education</b>	Graduate	39	20	16	9
	Non-graduate	37	16	15	5

Notes: data taken from the applicant questionnaires and pilot MI. This table excludes data from applicants and learners with unknown characteristics. The population for the midway and final surveys and the interviews can be found in Table E.1 in the 'Part one completers' column. Characteristics are not known for one respondent to the applicant survey. Categories have been combined where possible, but to reduce risk of identification, data are not reported where the population size is below five for any characteristic in a given category.

**Table D.2: Characteristics of probation stakeholder samples**

	Survey		Midway interviews and focus groups	
	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i>
<b>Region A</b>	28	14	26	7
<b>Region B</b>	14	9	13	6
<b>SPO</b>	22	10	18	6
<b>PTA</b>	20	13	21	7

Notes: data taken from the pilot MI. Due to staffing changes throughout the pilot, it is possible that these data do not represent all SPOs and PTAs involved. Survey respondents reported their region and role. Three regional probation learning managers and learning leads also took part in the midway interviews, one in region A and two in region B.

## Appendix E

### Applicant and learner characteristics

Table E.1: Applicant and learner characteristics broken down by pilot stage

		All applicants		Successful applicants		Part one completers	Known pilot completers
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
<b>Total population</b>		<b>122</b>		<b>50</b>		<b>45</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Questionnaires returned</b>		118	97	50	100	45	41
<b>Region</b>	Region A	67	55	30	60	28	26
	Region B	55	45	20	40	17	15
<b>Legacy organisation</b>	CRC	77	63	25	50	22	21
	NPS	45	37	25	50	23	20
<b>Categorised age (years)</b>	Below 30	20	16	7	14	7	6
	30 to 39	43	35	20	40	18	17
	40 to 49	35	29	15	30	13	12
	50 or over	10	8	4	8	3	3
	Unknown	14	11	4	8	4	3
<b>Gender identity</b>	Female	92	75	44	88	41	37
	Male	24	20	5	10	3	3
	Unknown	6	5	1	2	1	1
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Asian	2	2	0	0	0	0
	Black	11	9	6	12	5	3
	Mixed	4	3	2	4	2	2
	White	98	80	41	82	37	35
	Unknown	7	6	1	2	1	1
<b>Disability</b>	No	100	82	44	88	41	37
	Yes	10	8	3	6	2	2
	Unknown	12	10	3	6	2	2
<b>Religion</b>	No religion	60	49	28	56	25	23
	Christian	45	37	17	34	16	14
	Muslim	3	2	0	0	0	0
	Other religion	2	2	2	4	1	1
	Unknown	7	6	1	2	1	1

		All applicants		Successful applicants		Part one completers	Known pilot completers
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
<b>Total population</b>		<b>122</b>		<b>50</b>		<b>45</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>PSO experience (full years)</b>	5 or less	66	54	25	50	22	20
	6 to 10	11	9	1	2	1	1
	11 to 15	29	24	17	34	16	15
	16 to 20	12	10	7	14	6	5
	Unknown	4	3	0	0	0	0
<b>OM experience (full years)</b>	5 or less	75	61	30	60	27	25
	6 to 10	23	19	10	20	9	7
	11 to 15	18	15	9	18	8	8
	16 to 20	2	2	1	2	1	1
	Unknown	4	3	0	0	0	0
<b>Education</b>	Graduate	64*	52	26*	52	24	23
	Non-graduate	55	45	24	48	21	18
	Unknown	3	2	0	0	0	0
<b>Highest qualification (level)</b>	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
	3	35	29	15	30	13	11
	4	20	16	11	22	8	7
	5	23	19	9	18	9	8
	6	29	24	12	24	12	12
	7	8	7	3	6	3	3
	Unknown	6	5	0	0	0	0

Notes: data taken from the applicant questionnaire and pilot MI. Some applicants preferred not to disclose their characteristics, and some returned incomplete questionnaires. These are labelled 'Unknown'.

\*Two learners were completing a Level 5 qualification upon application, so their education status changed from non-graduate at application to graduate by the time of starting the pilot and are included within 'Graduate applicants'. Percentage figures will differ to those reported in section 4.2 as non-responses and non-disclosures have been included in calculations for this table. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.



**Table E.2: Mean and median age in years, and months of PSO and OM experience of applicants**

	All applicants ( <i>n</i> =122)		Successful applicants ( <i>n</i> =50)	
	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Median	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Median
<b>Age (years)</b>	38 (8.5)	38	39 (8.6)	38
<b>PSO experience (months)</b>	91 (66.7)	62	104 (70)	76
<b>OM experience (months)</b>	70 (51.4)	46	76 (51.9)	47

Notes: data taken from the applicant questionnaire. *SD* = standard deviation. Some applicants preferred not to disclose their characteristics, and some returned incomplete questionnaires. Due to skew in some data, the median has been reported to give a more rounded description of the central tendency.

## Appendix F

### Findings on the pilot selection process

#### F.1 Background

The pilot was advertised across regional communication channels and also in 'Probation News', an online HMPPS newsletter. The selection process for the PSO Progression pilot was conducted separately to the recruitment process for the PQiP programme. There were three stages:

1. **Application form** – applicants were asked to complete an application form which involved a statement of suitability alongside three behaviour and strengths-based questions based on the Civil Service Success Profiles.<sup>18</sup> Applications had to be endorsed by the applicant's SPO, who were asked to confirm their eligibility and suitability for the pilot, after which applications were sifted. Feedback was not provided at this stage.
2. **Interview** – if applicants passed the sift, they were invited to an interview which lasted around 40 minutes. Due to COVID-19 restrictions all interviews were conducted remotely, with SPOs and the pilot team forming the panels. As with the EOI, the interview questions were behaviour- and strengths-based and focused on issues related to the delivery of probation services. Feedback was available to unsuccessful applicants.
3. **Written assessment** – once they passed the interview, applicants were asked to complete a 1,500-word Level 4 essay in their own time over a period of two weeks. The assessment was designed and managed by the HEIs who held online study sessions to help applicants prepare. The pass mark was 40% and feedback was available to all applicants.

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<sup>18</sup> See the following webpage for more information on Success Profiles:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/success-profiles> (correct at time of publication)

Applicants who passed all stages were put onto a merit list, which was ordered by combining scores for interview performance and marks from the written assessment.

Interviews at stage two would likely have been conducted face-to-face if COVID-19 restrictions were not in place. However, the impact of this on applicants was not explored within this evaluation. Future research could seek to evaluate the application process in more detail including barriers and facilitators to applying initially, and to successful applications.

## F.2 Research aims

The selection process used was unique to the pilot and not intended to be used for future cohorts. However, the evaluation sought to collect feedback from applicants to address the following aims:

- To understand applicant and probation stakeholder experiences of the selection process and pilot programme and explore whether this experience varied amongst subgroups of applicants and learners (particularly by region and non-graduate status)
- To determine potential ways to improve the selection process and capture lessons learnt.

## F.3 Findings

The findings presented in this appendix are from MI, applicant questionnaire data, the 77 applicant survey responses, and data from the four interviews with SPOs.

### **Previous applications to the PQiP programme**

Out of the 40 graduate applicants who responded to the survey, just over half had previously applied to the PQiP programme with around a quarter having applied more than once. The most common reason for not having previously applied was a lack of desire, for example, because they were happy in their current role.

### **Views on the overall selection process**

Respondents to the applicant survey were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statement: 'Overall, I was satisfied with the selection process'. The majority agreed. Several respondents expressed the view that the selection process was fair and that they were grateful for the opportunity as a non-graduate. A couple of respondents made comparisons with the PQiP programme, saying they felt the pilot selection process was more transparent.

Other respondents felt the process did not give enough weight to previous experience or the opinions of line managers. Similarly, one of the SPOs interviewed said having access to applicants' work products would have provided helpful complimentary information when assessing their suitability.

### **The application form and sifting process**

The overall success rate at the sift stage was 73% ( $n=89$ ). The attrition rate at sift was 22 percentage points higher for applicants from a CRC. It was suggested that the format of the application form disadvantaged CRC staff as they were less likely to be familiar with Success Profiles, the current recruitment framework used within the Civil Service.

Most respondents reported that they felt able to express their suitability for the pilot when filling in the application form. On the other hand, all but one of the interviewed SPOs suggested the form did not allow applicants to effectively communicate their suitability. Nearly half of all respondents who provided comments on the sifting process criticised the lack of feedback on their applications.

### **The interview process**

The overall success rate at the interview stage was 65% ( $n=58$ ). Experiences of the interview appeared to be positive overall, with most respondents feeling able to communicate their suitability and previous experience. Some of the respondents who were unsuccessful at interview expressed dissatisfaction with the feedback they received.

Just over half of respondents found the interview difficult. Several respondents said they found that the guidance given to applicants before the interview did not accurately reflect its content or structure, and a few respondents and SPOs commented that the questions

were too specific or complex. Furthermore, a number of respondents commented on their discomfort with remote interviews.

SPOs were asked to comment on the quality of the candidates they interviewed. Whilst a number of positive comments were made, including that applicants were 'refreshing', all but one expressed disappointment with how well applicants performed overall at interview. There was the general consensus that the interviews were not necessarily a good indicator of someone's ability to undertake the pilot, with the format suiting some personalities more than others.

### **Written assessment**

Nearly all of the 55 applicants who submitted the assessment met the pass mark of 40%. Most respondents to the applicant survey reported that they did not find the assessment difficult. A number who found it more challenging said they were out of practice in writing essays or had limited experience writing academically.

### **Would unsuccessful applicants apply again?**

Out of the 44 respondents who were unsuccessful or withdrew from the selection process, the majority said they would apply to the progression pathway again. Where respondents explained why they would not reapply, nearly half said it was because they had a poor experience. Comments included that the process affected their confidence in their abilities, that due to the lack of feedback they did not know what they could do differently next time, and that the selection criteria did not take into account their experience and skills.

## Appendix G

### Tables on academic modules

**Table G.1: Number of Level 5 academic modules learners completed**

Number of modules	Graduate	Non-graduate
5	-	11
4	8	10
3	1	-
2	3	-
1	4	-
0	8	-

Notes: data provided by the HEIs. Excludes data for learners who withdrew prior to completing part one of the pilot.

**Table G.2: Descriptive statistics on the academic module grades achieved by learners**

		<i>n</i> of learners	Frequency of module grades awarded (%)				Mean (SD)	Median
			40–49	50–59	60–69	70 +		
<b>Level 5</b>								
<b>Total</b>		37	5 (4%)	61 (44%)	60 (43%)	14 (10%)	61 (6.4)	60
<b>Region A</b>	All	23	3 (3%)	38 (43%)	37 (42%)	11 (12%)	61 (6.8)	60
	Graduate	9	-	8 (36%)	9 (41%)	5 (23%)	63 (6.5)	63
	Non-graduate	14	3 (4%)	30 (45%)	28 (42%)	6 (9%)	60 (6.7)	60
<b>Region B</b>	All	14	2 (4%)	23 (45%)	23 (45%)	3 (6%)	60 (5.7)	60
	Graduate	7	2 (9%)	8 (35%)	12 (52%)	1 (4%)	61 (5.9)	60
	Non-graduate	7	-	15 (54%)	11 (39%)	2 (7%)	60 (5.5)	59
<b>Age (years)</b>	Below 40	21	2 (3%)	32 (44%)	33 (46%)	5 (7%)	60 (6.1)	60
	40 and over	14	3 (5%)	26 (43%)	24 (39%)	8 (13%)	61 (6.8)	60
<b>PSO Experience (years)</b>	5 or less	21	-	37 (46%)	35 (43%)	9 (11%)	61 (5.8)	60
	6 or more	16	5 (8%)	24 (41%)	25 (42%)	5 (8%)	60 (7.1)	60
<b>Level 6</b>								
<b>Total</b>		43	7 (4%)	37 (22%)	62 (36%)	64 (38%)	65 (9.2)	66
<b>Region A</b>	All	27	7 (7%)	25 (23%)	27 (25%)	48 (45%)	66 (10.3)	68
	Graduate	14	6 (11%)	14 (25%)	14 (25%)	22 (39%)	64 (11.2)	66
	Non-graduate	13	1 (2%)	11 (22%)	13 (25%)	26 (51%)	68 (8.8)	70
<b>Region B</b>	All	16	-	12 (19%)	35 (56%)	16 (25%)	64 (6.6)	64
	Graduate	9	-	2 (6%)	23 (64%)	11 (31%)	66 (4.7)	66
	Non-graduate	7	-	10 (37%)	12 (44%)	5 (19%)	62 (7.9)	60

		<i>n</i> of learners	Frequency of module grades awarded (%)				Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Median
			40–49	50–59	60–69	70 +		
<b>Age (years)</b>	Below 40	25	4 (4%)	23 (23%)	41 (42%)	30 (31%)	64 (8.4)	65
	40 and over	15	2 (3%)	8 (13%)	19 (32%)	31 (52%)	68 (9.4)	70
<b>PSO Experience (years)</b>	5 or less	22	-	17 (20%)	37 (43%)	32 (37%)	66 (7.8)	66
	6 or more	21	7 (8%)	20 (24%)	25 (30%)	32 (38%)	65 (10.4)	66

Notes: module data provided by the HEIs. *SD* = standard deviation. Cells were suppressed where there was a risk of identification, so frequency figures will differ to those in section 4.4. Suppressed data was excluded from percentage calculations. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding. A small number of learners preferred not to disclose their academic grades. Where assessments were resubmitted, only the final grade is included. The table excludes grades below the pass mark of 40%. To allow for the reporting of grade brackets, half (0.5) marks have been rounded up. The mean presented is a simple average (it does not factor in module weightings). Due to skew in some data, the median has been reported to give a more rounded description of the central tendency.