

“Mind the Gap” – evaluating the integration of police degree and evidence-based policing

Dr Ricky Li - Principal Lecturer, Cardiff Metropolitan University

Mark Thomas - Chief Inspector, Former Head of Learning & Development, Gwent Police

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Background

The College of Policing in the UK introduced the Policing Educational Qualifications Framework (PEQF) in 2016. With the collaboration of the Higher Education sector, the framework aims to bring consistent and evidence-based policing practice into professional police training and development. The police qualification is, therefore, aligned with national higher educational standards like other professions (College of Policing, 2016). In 2019, new police constable recruits will have three entry routes for entering policing role: *Apprenticeship*, *Pre-join Degree* and *Degree-holder Entry*.

Typically, new recruits without formal higher education qualification will join as a police constable under the *Apprenticeship* scheme. They will receive on and off-the-job learning for three years. Upon successful completion of the programme, the police constables will complete their probation and achieve a Professional Policing Practice undergraduate degree. The Degree Holder programme is a two-year academic and practice-based programme for those who already hold a degree in any discipline. The successful candidates will be awarded an undergraduate diploma in Professional Policing Practice.

Research gaps and objectives

Studies in policing education conducted in the US and Australia recognise a range of perceived benefits in improving operational policing and public confidence, increasing professionalism among police officers, and achieving a positive reform of police organisations and police culture (Wimshurst & Ransley, 2007; Hilal, Densley & Zhao, 2013).

Policing education literature also highlights a number of areas that require further investigation, such as the gap between academic curriculum and police craft-based knowledge training (Rogers & Gravelle, 2019); the lack of acquisition of evidence-based policing (EBP) principles (Brown et al. 2018a) and the potential complexity in police knowledge building and syllabus development in High Education providers (Stanko, 2018; Brown et al., 2018b).

Despite abundant theoretical review and discussions on the topic (Lee, 2004; Paterson, 2011; Fleming & Rhodes, 2018), there is a dearth of research to offer fresh evidence. Most recently, Hough & Stanko (2019) call for more empirical studies are urgently needed to examine the police learners experience, issues of degree-level courses for police recruits.

This empirical study aims to examine issues of the integration of academic teaching, evidence-based policing and initial feedback from police learners (Williams et al., 2019). It also provides some insights into the relationship between the prior learning experience and the development of professionalism (Paoline et al., 2015).

Research methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach involving nine first-year police students of the Apprenticeship and Degree-holder route from a University in the south Wales area. The research comprised of semi-structured focus group discussion and individual interviews. The interview questions were developed to address the research objectives of this study. The sample consisted of two female and seven police constables at Gwent Police for frontline operation roles. The researchers explored participants' reflections of their own personal study experience and how they could apply their learning in performing police duties. All of the data collected was transcribed independently and thematically analysed using Nivio (version 12).

Preliminary findings and implications

Analysis of the qualitative data identifies a number of thematic findings. There is a noticeable gap between academic theories and performing frontline duties, and policing craft skill training. The delivery of policing knowledge and building academic learning remains complex. Although academic study alongside police craft training enhances policing practice, policing students experience some unique challenges in studying the academic policing programme. The finding also indicates a certain correlation between the prior learning experience and the development of police professionalism. Through this empirical investigation, this study highlights some complexities in delivering police degree programmes and explores the causes of segregation between professionalism development and craft knowledge training and areas for future studies.

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