

# The re-emergence of police education

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## Abstract

In the past 25 years growing complexities of the policing landscape and emerging challenges, like technology, increased vulnerability and new crimes, mean that police officers require different skills and knowledge than previously. One way to enable this has been the increasing professionalisation of the police service including the academisation of police learning and an emphasis of developing better police knowledge informed by evidence. Increased professionalisation is viewed as one of the solutions to resolving some of the problems often associated with policing like the negative effects of police culture. The process of embedding higher education into policing has been slow, fragmented and challenging at times, and influenced by a broader set of political and external dynamics. Critics argue that policing is a more practical occupation in which the best way to develop is to learn on the job or develop craft knowledge. The intention of this article is to discuss the relationship between police and education particularly in the recent past. It will explore why higher education has become increasingly important, explore why resistance to the academisation process continues and look at the developing relationship between academia and the police. Finally, the future of higher education and policing is discussed.

## Keywords

'craft' knowledge, academic/police partnerships, academisation, Evidence-based policing, Police Education

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## Introduction

In the past 25 years growing complexities of the policing landscape and emerging challenges, like technology, increased vulnerability and new crimes, mean that police officers require different skills and knowledge than previously. One way to enable this has been the increasing professionalisation of the police service including the academisation of police learning and an emphasis on developing better police knowledge informed by evidence (Martin, 2022). Increased professionalisation is viewed as one of the solutions to resolving some of the problems often associated with policing like the negative effects of police culture (Bacon et al., 2023). The process of embedding higher education into policing has been slow, fragmented and challenging at times, and influenced by a broader set of political and external dynamics (Englemann and Tatnell, 2023; Martin, 2022; Terpstra and Schapp, 2021; Tong and Hallenberg, 2018). The reason for slow progress could be

partly due to the lack of evidence about the impact that higher education makes to improving the capabilities and skills of police officers (Brown, 2020; Paterson, 2011). Critics argue that policing is a more practical occupation in which the best way to develop is to learn on the job or develop craft knowledge. The intention of this article is to discuss the relationship between police and education particularly in the recent past. It explores why higher education has become increasingly important, explores why resistance to the academisation process continues and looks at the developing relationship between academia and the police. Finally, the future of higher education and policing is discussed.

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## The purpose of police education

### *Professionalising the police*

One of the primary reasons for the push towards embedding education into policing has been to improve the professional status of the police (Martin, 2022; Tatnell, 2022). While not suggesting the police are not professional in their approach to their job, certain characteristics are regarded as essential before an occupation can declare itself as a profession (Green and Gates, 2014). These traits include a code of ethics, specialist knowledge and expertise, higher education, autonomy and discretionary authority, self-regulation and the pursuit of lifelong learning. In relation to education, Jaschke and Neidhardt (2007) assert that if you examine other professions like, medicine, law, engineering and teaching, they require their personnel to obtain higher level qualifications otherwise they would not be viewed favourably or be trusted by their clients or service users. They further argue that advanced education enhances the flexibility and competence of practitioners in a more complex world, and finally they state that progress as driven by science brings important knowledge to enhance practice and suggest that policing, like other professions, should also be striving to incorporate knowledge generation through research and establishing police as an academic discipline. Although it is debatable whether adopting characteristics automatically turns an occupation into a 'profession' (Holdaway, 2017; Martin, 2022), the need to adopt higher education and develop knowledge-based practice has been a critical part of recent policy to develop police professionalism in several countries for the past 25 years.

In the United Kingdom (UK) context, the relationships between the police and education have continued to grow and seen a resurrection due to numerous reviews of policing, including the HMIC (2002) Training Matters report, Neyroud (2011) and Windsor reviews (2011, 2012). The HMIC Training Matters report (2002) was particularly critical of probationer training and suggested that this needed an overhaul. The justification for this was that all police training was taking place at training college and this was potentially reinforcing the socialisation of negative attributes in police recruits, particularly those associated with the police culture. At this time, it was suggested that the police needed to improve the police relationship with higher education and look to accredit some of the learning that recruits did. This report was followed by a number of government policies to then further 'professionalise the police' and introduce enhanced learning and accreditation into policing. This initially came with the introduction of the Initial Police Learning and Development Programme in 2010 that was intended to move police training away from the traditional approach to a more in-depth programme preparing recruits not just in legal knowledge,

but also in community relations (Charman, 2017). Although forces could choose how to deliver the programme, they were encouraged to develop partnerships with universities so as they could undertake some of the classroom delivery. The key goal of this new programme was to also deliver cultural change (Heslop, 2011).

Neyroud (2011), who strongly believed that the police required a national regulatory body that was responsible for overseeing the development of a learning culture into policing, recommended the creation of the College of Policing who would be responsible for developing a framework of accredited qualifications across the organisation, adopting a code of ethics, and developing a strong knowledge base dictated by scientific evidence. Established in 2012, the College of Policing have proceeded to oversee changes to the delivery of training within policing, including adopting graduate entry through the introduction of the Police Qualifications Education Framework (PEQF), developing of a code of ethics, and a strong emphasis on the need to adopt evidence-based policing (Sherman, 2013) and the strengthening of police/academic partnerships.

The original intention of the PEQF was to establish a framework for higher education from the initial point of entry to the service up to more senior and executive levels who were encouraged to undertake postgraduate qualifications. At first, the primary focus was on the development of initial police training and a burgeoning number of police academic partnerships between higher education institutions (HEIs) and police services. HEIs were contracted to provide the academic element of the newly developed police degree apprenticeship programmes with a national curriculum produced and overseen by the College. This has led to a growing number of police and academic research collaborations across the country. In the UK, one of the earliest of these partnerships was the Scottish Institute of Police Research (SIPR) established because of a perceived lack of police research available to support evidence-informed policing (Martin and Wooff, 2020). SIPR enhanced the link between a consortium of HEIs and police services across the country to develop a better relationship between academics and police, and to provide opportunities for knowledge exchange, learning and innovation, and enhance research capability and capacity. These types of academic partnerships have become repeated across the UK in the past few years and have strengthened relationships between academia and policing as well as supporting the development of knowledge generation.

### *Reduce the impact of police culture*

The academisation of policing claims to be one of the ways to overcome some of the problems that have emerged from the negative outcomes of police occupational culture

(Bacon et al., 2023; Charman, 2017). Manning (1977) describes the more 'tradition form of police professionalism', which is based on core traits of the occupational culture that prioritise the crime-fighting role, where police officers have an elevated level of autonomy and discretion to make decisions, a strong sense of self and shared solidarity with colleagues. Knowledge is gained from experience on the street and from more experienced officers.

However, this form of 'old professionalism' (Fyfe, 2013; Sklansky, 2011) and high levels of discretion were seen to be connected to many of the problems emerging from police practice. Examples include the poor relationships between the police and minority groups in a number of jurisdictions (Chan, 1997; Fyfe, 2013; Sklansky, 2011). Although the idea of one monolithic culture is much disputed (Chan, 1997; Cockcroft, 2013) and the traditional characteristics are viewed as disappearing (Charman, 2017), some recent evidence suggests that some characteristics are enduring (Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010; Waddington, 1999) and continue to function as resistance to attempts to professionalise policing. There is also evidence that despite attempts at reform, some of the more negative aspects of police culture like racism and misogyny have endured (Casey, 2023). Higher education in which officers might engage with subjects such as psychology, sociology and criminology are deemed as one way to resolve challenges by making officers more reflective and creating more understanding of social issues that might impact on populations. One recent example here has been the shift in focus away from crime-fighting to a new priority of vulnerability in which external organisations are reframing the police role to acknowledge the need to manage new risks and trauma, like domestic violence, missing people, mental health, trafficking and other potentially damaging life events. Dealing with vulnerability is now an essential role for front-line officers (Bacon et al., 2023) and demands more softer skills and a more communicative approach.

Drawing on the evidence from different international contexts, Paterson (2011) suggests that the introduction of police education can have some positive effects. He reviews evidence from the United States (US) that suggests that police education can be beneficial in reducing authoritarian attitudes and increasing flexibility in values systems. However, other research is not as convincing and suggests that evidence of the potential of higher education in improving policing is often mixed and inconclusive (Belur et al., 2020; Paoline et al., 2015).

### **The challenges of embedding police education**

The adoption of higher education has not necessarily gained widespread acceptance. One of the reasons for this is the

perceived value of higher education qualifications internally (Cockcroft and Hallenberg, 2022). In their research on emerging police studies programmes situated in HEIs, Heslop and White (2011) observed resistance from student officers to engage fully with their course because they perceived it as irrelevant to professional development. This is explained by the disconnect between theory and practice, where students find it difficult to see the relevance of social and police science to their role. In addition, police recruits in some university settings did not necessarily feel that academic staff viewed them as real students because they had not necessarily come in through traditional routes, creating further tensions between lecturing staff and police students (Heslop, 2011). Several commentators have also found the challenges officers who undertake qualifications already in service faced from colleagues and supervisors (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Norman and Williams, 2017). Norman and Williams argue that personal achievement and the ability to be reflective on the police role was enabled through university experience for individuals but returning to the organisation or field, inhibited ones' ability to put knowledge into practice. Cockcroft and Hallenberg also said that one of the issues officers have faced was the inability to try out new knowledge and skills. This could be explained by structural barriers in policing where hierarchical tradition affects how higher education achievement is perceived. More senior officers are more likely to be seen positively when they hold academic qualifications. Indeed, there has been a substantial growth in the number of senior and executive level officers pursuing academic careers both during and following their retirement from the police. However, front-line officers may not be viewed as requiring the higher status that police education could realise. It could also be determined by the position of the individual officer and the perceived benefit of the learning to their role. Tatnall's (2022) work comparing initial police learning in Sweden, Finland and Scotland found that the need for police officers in Finland to be generalists and offer an end-to-end service meant that they were seen as requiring higher levels of knowledge and skills achieved only through higher education learning. In Scotland, the routine and narrow response role of front-line officers was viewed as not requiring the same level of qualifications. The bid to implement higher education pathways into Police Scotland has been challenging (Martin and Wooff, 2020). Partly related to the continued belief that academisation of the police could mean a loss of attraction to those who had in the past made up the majority of those entering the profession, traditionally the working class (Tatnell, 2022). There are concerns that policing as a graduate profession could make police elitist leading to a disconnect with communities, which could damage legitimacy of policing.

## Police and academia: A challenging partnership

One of the apparent barriers to establishing and maintaining police education has been the difficult relationship between police and academia. Bradley and Nixon (2009) once characterised police and academic partnerships as a 'dialogue of the deaf'. Hallenberg (2012) referred to this as 'two-worlds' thinking in which the two worlds of academia and policing are often at odds, policing can be 'anti-intellectual' (Lee and Punch, 2004), whereas the theoretical knowledge provided in academia is irrelevant to the practical world of the police officer. One of the ongoing debates about the academisation of police learning has been ensuring the correct balance between 'craft' knowledge or the experiential learning that occurs through practice and theoretical knowledge that is associated with academic or book learning. These two forms of knowledge are often seen as being at odds with each other. Hagen et al. (2023) discuss the notion of thin versus thick forms of knowledge, where thin knowledge is based on more formalised scientific analyses and thick knowledge is developed through gut feeling and intuition. Gundhus (2013) argues that police academisation is viewed as a threat to these 'thick' forms of professional knowledge. Hough and Stanko (2019) argue that the PEQF still needs to strike the right balance between developing the correct skills in new officers and grounding this theoretical knowledge.

Evidence from previous assessments of police and higher education partnerships suggests that the route towards developing police degrees has not always been affective in removing the barriers between academics and police recruits and the 'them versus us' mentality that has been identified as being part of street-level culture remains (MacVean and Cox, 2012; Martin and Wooff, 2020; Norman and Williams, 2017). Heslop (2011) argues that this is driven not only by police culture, but also the culture that can exist in universities. Huey and Mitchell (2018) claim that academics sometimes tend to take a standpoint of superiority over knowledge and lecture rather than listen to police partners. Much like policing, academia has become more managerialised with more emphasis on producing impact and generating income (Goode and Lumsden, 2018). There is a danger that new forms of entrepreneurial university looking to generate income through new partnerships could see police education partnerships as a money-making exercise rather than 'ensuring enriched with critical, enquiring and challenging minds' (Lee and Punch, 2004: 248).

Honess and Clarke (2023) provide an example of innovative practice where within one police education consortium, working collectively to deliver the PEQF is resolving challenges related to the theory/practice divide. They

argue the integration of 'uni' work versus 'craft' knowledge is being slowly resolved through better communication mechanisms; for example, student feedback and regular meetings between partners. The Police Now initiative to support graduates into policing has also had some success (Tong and Hallenberg, 2018; Wood, 2019). Those going through the role of district ward officer in the Metropolitan Police felt more connected to communities than other police officers not on the programme and more attuned to procedural justice and ensuring everyone they came across was treated with the same approach (Yesberg and Dawson, 2017). Wood (2019) argues that by building partnerships with HEIs where there is a genuine collaboration struck between developing knowledge and theory can create socially reflective practice leading to the creation of better officers. Striking the balance between police and academia can occur when genuine collaboration takes place and where boundaries are broken down between police and academics.

## Generating knowledge

The application of evidence-based practice to support policy change or justify the use of resources and choice of specific routes of practice is not new and has been a core aspect of professions such as medicine, education and social work for some time. Likewise, the use of research in the field of policing has a long history (Martin and Tong, 2023; Reiner, 2010). In recent years there has been emphasis on a more 'scientific model' of research with a drive to ensure that knowledge generated has a role in improving or propelling forward changes in police practice (Neyroud, 2011; Sherman, 2013). Proponents of this approach suggest that at times of growing uncertainty about the police's role and their limited resources and increasing demand, evidence-based policing (EPB) allows the police to implement known strategies and apply 'what works' to key crime dilemmas and problems increasing police legitimacy (Sherman, 2013). In addition, drawing from the field of medicine, EBP is seen as a critical characteristic of the professionalisation of the police, particularly considering the redrawing of police autonomy, where rather than be directed from above, police can rely on 'scientific research' to make decisions about the best programmes to be implemented in their localities. Applying a set of core research methods (particularly randomised controlled trials viewed as the gold standard) is seen as an essential ingredient of producing accurate and applicable evidence.

Implementing EBP has proved to be a challenge in two key ways. First, the receptivity to EBP has mixed results (Telep and Somers, 2019). Telep and Somers study of receptivity to EBP in the US found great variability in

how the term evidence-based policing was interpreted. Selby-Fell and Newton (2024) identify several barriers to implementing EBP, including occupational culture, time limitations, acknowledgement by police leadership of the benefits of EPB, an understanding of what EPB means, and issues over how to access it and organisational constraints where 'swift action' and performance demands limited time to be more reflective and investigate evidence to find solutions.

Second, policing scholars have been concerned about the emphasis on a very narrow conception of what EBP is (Greene, 2014; Martin and Tong, 2023; Wood et al., 2018). Many would argue that embedding understanding of social sciences and the police role in society is useful knowledge beyond a focus simply on rational, technical and narrowly defined what works agendas (Christopher, 2015; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Greene (2014: 203) argues that,

The orthodoxy of experimentation has now become the assumed 'holy grail' for police research and for police problem-solving. And, while there are clearly benefits to experimentation about what impacts the police have in their crime fighting and order maintenance activities, such approaches cannot speak to the wider range of issues, units of analysis, and possible methodologies that can be used to study the complexities of the police.

Although applying a range of methods is important, Faull (2023) in analysing his journey in embedding police research into South African policing reminds us that police might not favour these as producing valid knowledge. As a result, a better way around receptivity and methodological issues is to build strong relationships and to collaborate and listen to partners to generate useful knowledge.

### **The future of police education**

Although challenges and barriers remain, we have seen the gradual expansion and improved relationship between police and academia. Something more towards a dialogue of listening (Johnston and Shearing, 2009). In the US, Canada, UK, Australia, South Africa and across Europe, evidenced-based police societies have been formed and actively pursue the development of knowledge to support police activity (Goode and Lumsden, 2018). These partnerships provide a pathway for widening new and different forms of knowledge generation to support a more rigorous and scientific process when making decisions over operational judgements and policy choices in dealing with crime (Lum and Koper, 2017). Although there is still a strong pull towards favouring certain forms of knowledge

generated by scientific and rational imperatives, the rise in police-academic partnerships and a move towards a dialogue of the listening has meant greater acceptance of academically produced knowledge as potentially useful in supporting and making decisions about what practice or approach is more likely to have an impact on crime and victims (Goode and Lumsden, 2018, Huey and Mitchell, 2018). There is increasing acceptance that academic education and an emphasis on lifelong learning are critical to ensure the police are equipped to deal with the changing dynamics of complex societies (Blakemore and Simpson, 2010). There is also increasing awareness of the impacts of higher education on policing across different jurisdictions.

Comparative work has also captured how the given context, culture and history can affect the progress of police academisation (Bjorjo and Damen, 2020). Tatnell (2022) expanding Hallenberg's concept of two-worlds into three-worlds thinking including police, academia and politics argues that the political dynamic and relational power between these constituent parts is important to understand the way in which the academisation of police education has progressed or not. This is reiterated by Terpstra and Schapp (2021: 2416/7) whose examination of the implementation of higher education into policing in Norway, Finland, and North Rhine-Westphalia led them to conclude 'that the politics of higher police education are at work in times when systems of higher police education are introduced, as well as much later, when these systems develop'. Different actors are involved, each with their own views and interests, and they apply certain strategies, power relations, policy symbols and processes such as agenda-building. Bacon et al. (2023) discuss the way in which professionalism has been imposed from above in the England and Welsh context. They argue that inflicted from above, the professionalisation agenda is driven by organisational and managerial priorities rather than focusing on the needs and requirements of the front line. Imposing specific agendas can be dangerous and return police education to a model described above that is didactic and not developing the reflexive practitioners the service argues that it wants.

Drawing on the work of Noordegraaf (2016), Martin (2022) argues that although these political influences and managerial frameworks are important and have shaped the development of police professionalisation, there is a need to move beyond dichotomous perspectives and consider the broader picture. Noordegraaf discusses how the 'professional world' is not just shaped by direct organisational logics but is being reorganised, re-stratified and relocated in numerous ways by both internal and external pressures. This includes, but is not limited to, the increasing need to work across different professional boundaries with

multiple agencies, new working conditions and expectations, including a desire for increased flexibility, continued centralisation, growing heterogeneity and a shift from physical to digital spaces. All these dynamic processes will have an impact on how we conceptualise and deliver police education in the future.

## Conclusion

More than ever there is an increasing number of police practitioners engaging in research and developing a desire to enhance their knowledge to embed this into the organisation in a bid to improve practice. This is a positive shift and contributes to the growth in strong police academic partnerships that have collectively grown and developed knowledge for the betterment of policing. Being involved in police education as an academic and collaborating closely with police for several years, I have recognised a growing appreciation of the value that education can offer to policing. The goal of education is to improve the skills, knowledge and confidence of practitioners and provide them with the ability to do their job well. Sustaining this relationship will continue to be a challenge where there is political interference and limited resources, meaning resources are tight and learning and development are not viewed as a priority. Scepticism about the benefits of higher education still exist. Bacon et al. (2021) remind us that despite progress in relation to police and academic partnerships, these remain fragile. Cultivating partnerships through collaborative approaches needs to continue if these partnerships are to be sustained.


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### Author biography

**Denise Martin** is a professor of criminology and policing at the University of Northumbria. She has been engaged in police research for more than 20 years and has worked with a range of organisations including the Home Office, Police Scotland, the College of Policing and the Scottish Prison Service. Her main research interests are police professionalisation, police learning and development, organisational culture and change. She is currently examining police misconduct and the role of organisational blame. Professor Martin has published several articles and books and is currently writing a book on police professionalisation due for completion 2025.