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Citation: Williams, Emma, Norman, Jenny and Rowe, Michael (2019) The Police Education Qualification Framework: A Professional Agenda or Building Professionals? *Police Practice and Research*, 20 (3). pp. 259-272. ISSN 1561-4263

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2019.1598070>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2019.1598070>>

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The Police Education Qualification Framework: A Professional Agenda or Building Professionals?

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Abstract

Given the growing complexity in policing in England and Wales, the College of Policing (CoP) are implementing a Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) to standardise entry to the police and allow serving officers to gain accreditation for their previous training and experience. This provides occasion to revisit and reconsider longer term international debates about the role and value of tertiary education for policing. Part of this process, in relation to the PEQF, involves the development of a national police curriculum for higher education institutions (HEIs) to deliver to new recruits in the field. This forms part of a wider professionalisation agenda which seeks to align policing with other professions, and enable officers to think more critically about the situations they deal with as part of their role. Sklansky (2014) describes how different definitions of what constitutes professionalism can impact on officers' interpretations of this concept and how they subsequently engage with the proposed reforms. This paper, which is based on in depth qualitative interviews with serving officers who have undertaken an academic qualification in policing, suggests that the relationship between police education and the development of professionalism is complex. Officers need to be trusted and encouraged to use their learning in a way that develops their own personal sense of professionalism. However, this paper will also argue that current perceptions amongst officers are sceptical of the wider agenda and what it really aims to achieve. Rather than being viewed as an enabler to becoming a trusted professional, officers report that standardised prescriptive processes limit the value of 'traditional' forms of police knowledge, restricts critical thinking in the field, and stifles their ability to apply their knowledge in work-based decisions and problem-solving. This paper brings into question the development of a standardised curriculum which may ultimately be viewed as further governance over officer behaviour.

Keywords: police, education, knowledge, PEQF

Introduction

There has been much debate about the relationship between police practitioners and the academic community, and the changing nature of this relationship (Brown, 1996; Dawson and Williams, 2009; Reiner, 2010; Lumsden and Goode, 2016). Some of this debate has developed

internationally (see Wimshurst and Ransley, 2007; and Vodde (2009) for an overview). However, most of it has focused on the role of academic research in policing and the barriers to implementation. Despite the drive to professionalise and legitimise the police through academic qualifications not being new (Greenhill, 1981; Bryant et al., 2014; Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017), there is limited understanding about the application of police education in practice. Similarly, there is limited understanding of how this knowledge is interpreted by the organisation, and how officers who have undertaken an academic programme feel that the organisation receives that knowledge. Norman and Williams (2017) note that organisational infrastructures can be seen as limiting the application of particular types of taught, codified knowledge in practice despite it having a positive impact on officers' own professional identity and sense of credibility. In this sense the development of a foundational canon of evidence –a key hallmark of professionalism– is regarded as an over-prescriptive restriction on the appropriate exercise of police discretion, and so a form of governance (Rowe, 2019).

The College of Policing (COP) are driving forward a professionalisation agenda for officers in England and Wales through the implementation of a Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF). This is very closely linked to the drive for officers to understand research, the evidence-based policing (EBP) agenda, and the application of an evidence base in decision making. It also reflects changes in the university sector that promotes greater engagement with practical application and resource-driven attempts to identify new cohorts of students. However, further reasons for the PEQF relate to changes in demand for police resources, the role of policing and the need to understand complex problems. A crucial element of the PEQF is grounded in notions of the development of the police as a learning organisation and the role of critical reflection in this process (Christopher, 2015). Whilst a standardised CoP curriculum has been developed in collaboration with the academic community, the authors here argue that on implementation, academia has a responsibility to develop police education in ways that it

can achieve this critical feature of the PEQF. How it will evolve in reality is currently unknown, but there have been concerns voiced that such a prescriptive curriculum may result in a narrow version of what counts as evidence in police learning (Goode and Lumsden, 2016; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018; Brown et al., 2018).

The authors argue that for officers who have previously studied policing at a degree-level, the PEQF as articulated by the CoP, has seemingly become synonymous with a narrow EBP mantra which categorises types of knowledge and methodology hierarchically (Williams and Cockcroft, 2018). This impacts on how officers perceive the relevance of their contribution of knowledge in the work place as an asset and consequently the aim of them investing in furthering their professional development through undertaking a degree. Such perceptions are opposed to the role education has in the enhancement of critical thinking and reflexivity in the work place. Whilst the authors recognise the limitations of this study, they suggest that the findings highlight a risk of limiting the opportunities provided by the PEQF to deliver a real change to current police training unless the curriculum includes wider forms of knowledge, from the historic research on policing to the evaluative research tantamount to the ‘what works’ agenda. Juxtaposed with these factors are the barriers within the organisation itself which inhibit the ability to think more holistically about EBP and continue to promote the provision of a narrow version of EBP, to fulfil the performance needs of policing as it currently stands.

The Importance of History

The debate about what counts as evidence in policing is not new. Whilst the political drive for efficiency and effectiveness in policing advocated by the New Public Management (NPM) regime of the 1980s raised the profile of research in understanding ‘what works’, the history of research within the field of policing started long before then (Reiner, 2000; Dawson and Williams, 2009). Arguably, the early ethnographic studies into policing (Muir, 1977; Bittner,

1978; Punch, 1979; Holdaway, 1979) provided an invaluable insight into the reality of police work and the social world in which it operates. Given the current climate and debates about changing demand and the role of policing when dealing with wicked problems (Grint, 2010), such insights remain essential in the constitution of police knowledge. Qualitative awareness about the use of discretion, the role of the police in the community, policing and mental health, non-crime related demand and race relations remains a key conversation in policing in many countries and the learning from the seminal work should feature in any police learning function and dissemination of knowledge. As Brown et al., (2018) argue, such theoretical, contextual knowledge should form a core part of the learning landscape for officers as part of the PEQF. Fleming and Rhodes (2018) also state that officers present different types of knowledge within their working practice. This might include political, experience-based or craft knowledge, all of which are important and should be recognised as a collective contribution to police decision-making, as ‘evidence’ within the EBP agenda. Ironically, some of the international research findings show that such craft and experiential knowledge are used frequently by practitioners in medical and related fields (Fein and Corrado, 2008; Rosenthal and Tsuyuki, 2010), which are often regarded as the model professions that police ought to mirror. The importance of these forms of knowledge underpin Fleming and Rhodes’ (2018) argument for extending the current position of EBP. It is the platform provided by the PEQF that has the opportunity to deliver wider contextual knowledge to officers. Policing is both a social institution that deals with developing legitimacy and public trust, and an organisation that deals with processes such as deployment, operational practice and staffing issues (Brown et al., 2018: 45). A wider definition of EBP, which takes into account a range of disciplines, methodologies and theoretical perspectives would allow officers to reflect and consider theory and context in a number of diverse operational settings. Conversely, not moving beyond the narrow remit of a pure crime science approach may ultimately restrict the type of thinking and reflection outlined

in the aims of the PEQF (Wood and Williams, 2016). Furthermore, when research in policing is aligned to experimental, randomised control trials, the role of research in problem definition can be undermined. Unless problems are well defined, the impact of and applied operational responses are likely to be limited (Williams and Hesketh, forthcoming)

What Counts as Legitimate Evidence, Knowledge and Information?

Heslop (2011) describes how certain processes in policing have led to what he refers to as the McDonaldization of policing. He argues that increased rationalisation within British policing, largely as a result of the drive for accountability and the implementation of the NPM, has reduced discretion and resulted in the de-skilling of officers. Paradoxically, whilst this is much to do with the drive for professionalisation, such top down processes can constrain an individual officer's sense of professionalism as their own personal expertise and professional knowledge is curtailed (Sklansky, 2008). Limited understanding of what knowledge counts in EBP and the hierarchy of methodologies promoted to glean such information may risk promoting similar issues (Brown et al., 2018). Such issues are perhaps well evidenced in the potential limitations of the CoPs What Works Centre for Crime Reduction. Whilst aiming to assist practitioners by outlining best practice and evidence based interventions, the Centre has been perceived as providing off the shelf practice with restricted understanding of localised contextual factors, which might impact on implementation and effectiveness, and restrict an understanding of qualitative issues that affect police performance (Lumsden and Goode, 2016; Williams and Hesketh, forthcoming).

De Maillard and Savage (2018) suggest that police performance should move from the traditional quantitative performance frameworks to become more 'advanced', placing more emphasis on qualitative and 'reflective' measures to inform practice for police action. However, the EBP mantra is arguably dominated by the developments of Sherman's (1998)

seminal work. There is an assumption that a randomized control trial, quantifiable, ‘experimental approach’ is the most robust – even the only – method for delivering police research. This may further compound the problems discussed by De Maillard and Savage (2018) and notions of what constitutes ‘good policing’. As Hope (2009) argues the claim that such experiential methods are objective and neutral in their approach can deny the core role of politics, of the public, and of the role of the police within that environment. Such core factors will impact on the implementation, process and influence any operational option applied to solving a problem.

Additionally, delivering evidence-based policing via the promotion of a ‘hierarchy of evidence’ risks creating a dominant discourse which excludes other forms of qualitative social research required by officers to understand issues such as, victim care, vulnerability, mental health and officer well-being (Brown et al., 2018). Moreover, the crime science agenda has little to say about the plethora of non-crime related policing activities on which a majority of police resources are expended. As Heslop (2011) argues, McDonaldization of policing, in this context as an outcome of education, narrowly defines what good policing is, and how it might be achieved and evaluated. He argues that what is articulated as professionalism can impose mechanisms of control and methods to control certain actions and behaviours. Indeed, unintended consequences have created an “increase in bureaucracy, a reduction in police discretion and deskilling” (p: 318).

Sklansky argues that there is a need in policing to capitalise on the ‘diffused and seminal intelligence of the rank and file’ (p. 11). In his classic US study, Egon Bittner had originally indicated that ‘every individual officer has...substantive factual information about crime, people, social areas, conditions, etc., which are of use in getting the work of policing done’ (cited in Sklansky, 2005: 11). EBP needs to encapsulate the mass of differing types of knowledge within the policing sphere, as the role of higher education has been attributed to a

skill set that should be more critical in nature (Wood and Tong, 2008). A standardised approach to learning defines certain measurable experiences for the purpose of managing the organisation and its staff (Holdaway, 2017). With this comes a risk of maintaining the status quo and embedded theories of action (Sackmann, 1991), as opposed to fundamentally changing the way policing is done and, critically, notions of what constitutes good policing. The article offers some exploration into the complex factors that may impact on accomplishing real change.

Methodology

The paper is based on a small scale piece of qualitative research involving police students from a University in the UK. The research comprised of semi-structured interviews with ten participants. The sample consisted of three female and seven male officers from constable to chief inspector rank working in various operational and support roles. They had between six and twenty-two years working in the police and had all graduated on or before July 2015, having successfully completed the BSc in Policing (Hons) In-Service Programme. The recipients had all completed the programme as part-time students whilst working as full-time officers. Consequently, they were able to reflect on their experiences and the knowledge gained from the degree, and consider how this worked in practice whilst they were studying. The authors must note that the degree these students completed is not a CoP curriculum approved degree (which will not be implemented in any university until 2019). The programme has been running for over twenty-five years. The course evolves and adapts its content to ensure operational and contextual relevance for police officer students. It is also specifically designed to include significant input on reflective practice, the sociology of policing and a wide range of differing types of police research methodologies.

The researchers explored participants' reflections of their own personal study experience and how they were able to apply their learning in practice. The sample of participants came from different forces in England and Wales and from ranks from Police Constables through to Superintendents which allowed for an understanding from different perspectives and working contexts. All of the data collected was transcribed and thematically analysed using Nvivo.

Findings

This section of the article presents the key themes arising from the analysis of the interview transcripts. The first theme relates to participants' perceptions of how they valued the knowledge gained from undertaking their degree, and how they felt it contributed to their individual professionalism. The second theme illustrates how the majority of participants perceived an inability to use their learning in the workplace for decision making and problem-solving. Consequently, they felt their contribution was overlooked in place of the usual routine practice and a form of governance around police action and behaviour. The final theme presents some of the factors that emerged when participants were able to utilise their knowledge and integrate into police decision-making.

'Knowledge contributors': perceptions of taught knowledge and the value of education

What constitutes police knowledge has been debated within the police literature (Williams and Cockcroft, 2018). In its current form, EBP can be limited and often perceived as politically driven, and focused on a narrow, experimental definition of what constitutes 'evidence' (Brown et al., 2018). As well as recognising experiential knowledge gained from officers, Fleming and Rhodes (2018) emphasise the importance of social science theory as being a critical ingredient within such collective evidence.

The work found that participants recognised the importance of the wider knowledge gained from studying social science theory and the seminal police studies taught within the degree

programme. The relevance the course had on their role within their organisation was also noted. For example, the following participants specifically mentioned how policing theory taught on the programme contributed to their understanding of the role of policing in society, questioning what informs police decision-making and their place in the organisation:

“The academic theory I found quite fascinating.... It makes me understand the organisation a lot more and the structure of it...it’s political basically.” (Participant 4, male)

“It’s [the theory] that’s given me a greater understanding and that’s the big thing for me. It’s given me an even bigger understanding of why I do what I do, what’s gone on in the past, what’s happened, why policing does what it does, and why we can look at reviewing it and doing it better. And I think the more reading into something you do, the more confidence you gain and the more knowledge you gain.”

Christopher (2015) further emphasises the importance of police officers having an informed understanding of contemporary issues in society, as well as the changing nature of police demand. He highlights the need for these areas to be ‘taught’ on police degree programmes to ensure this knowledge informs professional practice. The following quote from one of the participants illustrates how they have utilised their learning from the programme to influence their professional decision-making:

“I had specific knowledge about that specific topic at that specific time...people didn't have the depth of knowledge that I had so I could direct them... with the job there is a lot of rumour and the rumour tends to run quite wild. You could say actually that's not happening, what's happening is this, this and this.” (Participant 6, male)

Further to the wider understanding of the sociology of policing, critical thinking skills are also seen to be a key aspect of the skills learnt from education. Participants within this research

often referred to the benefits of undertaking the degree programme and how it benefitted their ability to be critical within their decision making:

“I think what it taught me is to look into things a little bit more, if you can read around a subject rather than just saying right, Bill Smith says X so that's got to be true, because Bill Smith might say X but Fred Smith might say Y and they might totally conflict. So you need to look at why they conflict and then make a decision which you think is the best way. And it is a decision - it's not black and white. I think probably that's what I learned the most.”
(Participant 7, female)

Arguably, the PEQF is attempting to develop policing to become a more informed and learning profession. In order to achieve this, conscious critical reflection is essential as it assists in a better understanding of how policing can respond to their own local environment. These factors underpin professional development (Christopher, 2015).

“One of the issues I did find with doing a degree is that you stop just thinking about your job and start thinking about much wider issues. That sort of thing does come up in conversation. Because you're constantly scanning all the time.....that horizon scan....you're looking at other material which is coming in the future. It makes you much more sensitive and aware of other things that can affect policing even if they've got nothing to do with policing. So I think that's only helped and that was demonstrated in conversations I'd have.” (Participant 2, male)

This quote highlights the import role the PEQF could have in widening notions of what police knowledge is. Indeed, the research suggests that the wider context of social science theory is important to the individual student for two reasons. It can empower them in their decision-making and subsequently contributes to their own sense of professionalism (Norman and Williams, 2017). However, it is also critical for the strategic drive around the PEQF. Higher education institutions must be able to consistently develop the approved CoP curriculum to

include theory and critical reflection as core elements. This is the purpose of education at this level. Excluding this jeopardises the purpose of the PEQF, and leaves it at risk of becoming a substitute training tool, rather than an educational enhancement of knowledge.

The inability for police students to use their knowledge

Officers interviewed for the research all noted a genuine aspiration to use the knowledge gained from their degree in their working role. They recognised the relevance of the learning they had engaged in during the course but had varying experiences of being able to apply this at work. Overall, the application of knowledge within police decisions was unsystematic and relied on individual student officers challenging their management and supervisors. Such issues suggest a lack of willingness for the occupational culture to accept this type of ‘evidence base’ knowledge, which mirrors the work of Fleming and Wingrove (2017: 210) who describe the organisational culture as reluctant to change and to embrace new forms of knowledge.

There were instances when the utilisation of learning was successful and where evidence influenced policing. This resulted from the individual characteristics and circumstances of the student officer, such as: the role and rank the student officer held, his/her levels of confidence and the influence he/she had within the department and their ability to influence decision-making as a result of their rank. However, the majority of officers interviewed felt unable to channel the knowledge gained from their degree. The participants often referred to the reaction they received when they discussed their academic achievements or new knowledge at work. It related to either a response from their peers or the lack of receptivity from their immediate or middle management.

Reactions to academic knowledge was either non-existent or perceived as defensive

Participants commented on a lack of interest from their peers in relation to them studying for a police degree, for example:

“Not one person asked me how I was getting on or what I was doing.” (Participant 9, male)

The quote below exemplifies how a sense of personal achievement from the completion of the degree was not recognised from peers. She described the response as defensive.

“Generally I have used my BSc in my email and that’s attached to my emails at work so everything I send, deliberately I don’t know if it’s to provoke a response, but because I think I’ve worked so hard and it’s not just a degree in any of the subjects in history or maths something like that, it is in policing, I am police officer and it’s what I do. Generally there’s a bit of a defensive - they don’t like it, they don’t understand it. Some people they want to know a little bit more about what you’ve done but they’re reluctant to ask, they don’t want the answer because it might be threatening to what they already know or if it’s going to impact their job. It’s a strange unusual environment it really is and that’s being honest, it really is strange and it’s hard to broach the subject and it’s hard for them to ask. But there’s a big defence there all the time.” (Participant 1, female)

The lack of peer support was compounded by the reaction from participants’ management team, who were either unreceptive to an evidence-based approach or simply did not accept academia. The reasons for this defensiveness are multi-faceted and are grounded in notions of knowledge hierarchy within policing (Williams and Cockcroft, 2018; Goode and Lumsden, 2016). Indeed, what constitutes cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990) to many practitioners and the organisational culture itself might conflict with how an academic education can provide legitimacy to those individual officers who have undertaken a degree programme (Jaschke & Klaus Neidharte, 2007).

Looking down: A lack of receptiveness of evidence and knowledge from the bottom-up

Police officer students recalled negative experiences when attempting to apply the knowledge gained from their degree programme to inform decisions made by their management team.

There was a perception that officers who held more senior positions than the students were unwilling to accept or even listen to insights around how evidence might assist police practice.

“A lot of what I’d been studying went in direct conflict with that and you’d bring it up at the meetings and you kind of got stamped down.” (Participant 7, female)

“I think specifically it was the fact that the change that we’ve just gone through was top down led. It was the management telling us what we’re going to do. Nobody asked the bottom levels how they think it should be run and then run it back and it had always been suggested through the literature that the best way to manage change was to start at the bottom, see what needs changing and then work it up. So it was in direct conflict with that and even though I said, you know, there are writers, there are academics, there are people that manage change professionally that say you’re doing this wrong, it kind of got ignored.” (Participant 7, female)

This led to feelings of frustration and perceptions that they were not being empowered or encouraged by their supervisors to be heard. The discretion and independence afforded to professionals in other domains is not extended to police officers. For example, one participant said:

“It felt quite discouraging because you were saying I know, not so much I know better than you, but I know another aspect of this and they were going yes, well we’re not really interested. This is what we’ve been told to tell you, this is the way it will go. I tried to feed it back in. Again, not from the ‘I know better’ but there are other people that they could speak to that know how to do this properly.” (Participant 7)

Feelings of frustration about knowledge being dismissed in a 'dictatorial and top-down' approach were further compounded at an individual level. Police officer students had a high sense of personal legitimacy, with aspirations to influence organisational legitimacy around decision-making and subsequent practice. These students were investing in themselves, to

better their own decision-making, to apply knowledge internally by undertaking a relevant policing degree programme. However, they found themselves disarmed and unable to do this, as a result of top-down rank and file, despite the apparent drive for an evidence-based approach.

For example:

“I think it’s really, really, really difficult for people who go back in after doing a degree and I think a lot of it is about that hierarchal framework because people of a certain level think they have the knowledge anyway so therefore why would they ask the lowly level PC or PS or whatever. I don’t agree with that obviously but of course I completely understand what you’re saying. But I just think it’s interesting that at a time when they’re supposed to be encouraging more engagement from the troops and bottom-up engagement and all that kind of thing that you still feel that you’re almost looked down upon for the fact that you’ve tried to.” (Participant 1, female)

A subsequent outcome related to feelings of defeat, when trying to challenge upwards with knowledge. The lack of value from the senior and middle management and unwillingness to embed evidence in decisions, compromises internal legitimacy and the premise of evidence-based policing. Furthermore, the ‘top-down’ nature is prescriptive, can block reflective practice and disempower staff and their input (Sklansky, 2008; Wood and Williams, 2016). Without these components, it could be argued that the premise of EBP is being utilised as a form of governance over police actions and behaviour. In this sense, the mantra of EBP might actively constrain the development and application of scientific knowledge and practice if opportunities to experiment and evaluate are thwarted by a risk-averse organisation. Partly this conundrum might also stem from established processes of governance, such that Police and Crime Commissioners, HMIC, the Home Office (and the media) might demand styles and forms of police practice, regardless of their status in terms of research and evidence. One officer reflected this feeling of powerlessness:

“I think a lot of it is that you're viewed as a number and I know it's callous, but you're a number, you're an officer, you're a small wheel in a big machine and therefore what you can do, what your skills are, don't matter. As long as you're out there and you're counted as being number 4652 on the street. The feedback I've got is that yes, I've gained this qualification but, I won't say nobody's really interested, but nobody's really interested. Yes, thanks very much, you've gained a qualification, that's marvellous but, you know.” (Participant 7, female)

The above quote is important when considered alongside the concerns voiced about the type of academic knowledge the PEQF might result in prioritising, which is also perceived as potentially prescriptive and lacking in contextual understanding. The challenges to developing critical thought and active learning are restricted by the type of learning potentially being pushed by the curriculum (Brown et al., 2018) and by the unreceptive organisational culture itself (Norman and Williams, 2017).

The research identifies the challenges for individual officers who have invested in their own professional development through academic study. The participants did not feel an asset to the organisation they work in, and viewed themselves as a number rather than a key contributor to the internal evidence base. Findings present the challenges participants have faced in relation to a lack of receptivity to the role of academia and the lack of internal infrastructures to embed knowledge and research (Norman and Williams, 2017). Bartkowiak-Théron and Herrington (2015) highlight the importance of academic engagement and how this can facilitate critical thinking and a more reflexive profession. This is further compounded by silo-thinking (Fleming, 2010) within police organisations which is driven by performance targets and competing resources which may result in a dominance of quantitative measures and decision-making tools within police organisations (De Maillard and Savage, 2018).

Business as usual: Reinstating the usual

In addition to officers' perceptions of line managers' willingness to utilise their newly acquired knowledge, examples were given where prescriptive approaches to policing further restricted the application of evidence and research. The following quote illustrates this:

"We've got the liaison officers and yet we are giving out prescriptive cards to officers where we think it's a very sensitive type of demonstration, we're giving out cards to people to read from around powers and so they don't get anything wrong. Well that's not empowering people, that's just forces covering their backs so they don't get complaints and litigation, well that's not right either.... What we need to be doing is making sure the officers are better prepared and then their knowledge is kept up to date. Giving them flash cards won't achieve anything in the long term, that's not going to break down barriers." (Participant 8, male)

In the context of the PEQF, the above quote is important. It demonstrates the continued 'business as usual approach' in relation to police tactical options with the use of score cards to address a problem. This results in police action being prescriptive, performance driven and mechanical. Moving from quantitative performance frameworks to include qualitative and reflective measures (De Maillard and Savage, 2018), could be a useful approach to consider as the PEQF develops over time. The potential implications of such prescriptive approaches to policing may restrict officers' ability to think critically or trial innovative practice, and so restrict their professional discretion.

The PEQF has an opportunity to develop the individual professionalism of employees and allow them to use their own experiential knowledge alongside taught learning (Hesketh and Williams, 2016). Integrating the knowledge gained through a degree programme and applying the approaches of a wide range of police research methodologies would facilitate a real learning environment.

A middle ground: potential enablers of applying different forms of knowledge in policing

There were occasions when police students had some scope to apply research within operational practice and present evidence to more senior officers. Understanding these factors, along with the challenging aspects outlined above in this paper, may help as an evidence-base as the PEQF is developed. This is particularly important as any reform that impacts on trying to shift a behavioural change in the organisational culture needs to be acutely aware of the experiences from those who are directly impacted as a result of the change (Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Sklansky, 2008).

The findings outlined below suggest some conditions that contribute to the integration of academic knowledge in work based decisions or problem-solving. The authors do not consider these conditions to be exhaustive. However, they offer insights into how police organisations can use knowledge from those who have invested in undertaking degree level education. The conditions identified were three-fold. The first was on an individual level, where participants felt empowered, credible and confident to feed the knowledge upwards. The second was where they had a willing manager to listen to them and acknowledge their knowledge as a contribution of evidence and finally, having direct access to the senior decision-makers was key in being able to influence decisions at a more strategic level.

Confidence to channel evidence upwards

As stated above, participants' involvement in the degree programme equipped them with a sense of professionalism, through the gaining of knowledge. This in turn enabled increased levels of credibility (Norman and Williams, 2017). Such credibility provided police officer students with the confidence to argue for the use of police knowledge/research and to feed this upwards.

“I think the more reading into something you do, the more confidence you gain and the more knowledge you gain and from a personal perspective I would be quite happy to go in now and

have done with far senior ranking officers to me and actually put down some of those challenges to say some of the concerns we've got around why you're doing it in a certain way when actually the research and the analysis that's come out in other areas said that this has worked and some of the figures and data has backed it up and it might just be little tweaks in certain aspects. I'm confident to do that because I feel I've got the knowledge behind it to take it forward." (Participant 8, male)

However, as explored in the previous section, senior and middle management were often perceived as unreceptive to integrating evidence and knowledge from their subordinates. Putting the onus on the character and professional confidence of a more junior-ranked officer will limit the capacity to enhance the use of research and education in policing.

A willing manager to hear the evidence/knowledge

The perceptions of a cultural shift to reject the more prescriptive demands from the top-level and to accept evidence and knowledge within policing from the bottom-up, often related to a more 'modern' approach in policing, which could be enabled with new generations of officers entering into the service:

"I think a generation needs to pass before we see that [knowledge as part of professionalism within the police] to be honest." (Participant 1, female)

Another respondent had experienced a manager they perceived to be more 'modern' and noted they were more receptive to listen and engage with the research presented.

"I think depending who you get and you get some of the more modern managers that are coming in, they will sit and listen to you, if you can provide ...not just going in and spouting off, but providing some facts behind what you're saying and a variety of different authors, for want of a better term, say that they've done work in the background." (Participant 3, male)

Some participants had the opportunity to present and engage with decision-makers. However, not all officers had the access to influence senior managers, as is outlined below.

Accessing the senior hierarchy to influence through evidence and knowledge is not always possible

The notion of evidence-based policing approaches is that it permeates through all levels of policing, regardless of rank or role. However, due to the hierarchical structure of the organisation, not all ranks are exposed to senior management. Consequently, their opportunity to inform decisions by channelling the evidence upwards is not always possible.

“If you’re somebody who doesn’t really get access to some of the senior hierarchy then you might be struggling to get those points of view across. I would imagine certain people, for example that are on just normal response team ...I would doubt very much that their opinions would be asked for and it won’t be something they’d be asked to concentrate on but I think if you’re involved in other assets or other aspects of policing that you get the opportunity.”

(Participant 8)

Similarly, the opportunity to undertake research as a police officer and utilise it in their role is more defined by the rank held by the officer rather than role. Evidence is gathered and utilised for more senior levels rather than integrated in the Constable role.

“Depends on the role, but your standard PC on response, not a massive amount of skills I would have said. In preparation for the next rank then yeah but I think for their day to day job, they’re probably limited in how those skills will make them a better police officer. I think as you become a sergeant it’s a slightly different kettle of fish, I think you have more opportunity there to start to think. I think the idea is that if you’re good at your job you’re starting to think about where the next role or next rank is leading. So you’re almost doing that job for them...I think as a PC - again as in the day job, your normal response is driving the police car from

call to call probably doesn't give them much opportunity to use those skills they would get.”

(Participant 2, male)

Whilst the quote illustrates that the application of knowledge exists to some degree in the organisation with a potential appetite for a more strategic understanding through research, it also highlights that ‘undertaking research’ is mainly driven by seniority and rank. By implication, the perception of EBP as being politically driven is reinforced, as is the notion of EBP not being relevant for the ground floor level. Such factors further risk students coming in at degree level entry, but unable to utilise what they have learnt which strengthens the dominance of the top-down view of EBP that it does not permeate and engage all layers of the organisation. Considering this in the context of discretion and individual decision making at this level (Muir, 1977; Manning, 1979) and the real implications for the development of a learning culture at all levels of policing is crucial.

Moving forward

Despite the positive intentions of the PEQF in the context of the professionalisation of policing, this research found that it was perceived to be delivered from the ‘top down’, that current organisational structures restrict the opportunities it should provide, and that elements of it serve to govern officers as opposed to enable their thinking. The current promotion of randomised control trials and their associated quantitative outputs in the current drive for EBP risk embedding an ongoing perception of research as something that is ‘done’ to the police, rather than something done ‘by’ or ‘with’ them (Bartkowiak-Théron & Herrington, 2015). The chances of the PEQF being an enabler to the co-production of research between the police and HEIs and the vital incorporation of the voice of the rank and file in the development of policy and any implied change (Wood and Williams, 2016; Sparrow, 2016) are threatened by the findings of this research. Creating a climate in which it becomes normal for police officers, as

part of their daily work, to be reflecting on their day to day role and then considering what needs researching to enhance the knowledge base and problem-solving around a particular police problem is key (Christopher, 2015). There should be a middle ground where research includes the practitioner voice, is made meaningful through analysis from the role of the academy and is translated into practice to promote enhanced practice. Indeed, any subsequent evaluations should include the perceptions of the officers involved. As Pease and Roach (2017) argue, evaluations should include a consideration of the choices that officers have to routinely make as part of their daily business.

As Sparrow (2016) claims, a pure police science form of research can appeal to senior leadership as it generally relates to efficiency, deployments, cost effectiveness, performance measures and management decisions. It can be the favoured method in terms of what research is funded, which is also problematic for the academic community. However, many officers believe that this negates experience and can impair the real understanding of problems that might have arisen or, conversely, the facilitating factors that might have driven a successful outcome (Williams and Hesketh, forthcoming). The dominant finding within the research reported here is that individuals who engage in higher level education feel that they lack the ability to do anything productive with the new-found knowledge as a result of the current structure of police organisations. This structure is compounded by an occupational culture, shared in many jurisdictions, that also inhibits the application of knowledge. As the PEQF is implemented, these experiences are key to informing how the framework is embedded. Given that many practitioners perceive academics as situated in ivory towers with an inability to apply theory practically (Dawson and Williams, 2009; Gundus, 2012; Stanko and Dawson, 2016), the restrictions these findings could have on changing this perception are clear. This is particularly evident in the participants' reflections about the usefulness of their learning and wider theory on their ability to understand the social world in which they operate. Allowing for

its use alongside reflective practice could influence their peers in recognising the positive aspects of this element of academic knowledge.

The ‘knowledge contribution’ from officers who study a degree needs to be fully understood and valued as an asset to both the policing institution and HEIs. The research suggests that the knowledge contribution should include the value placed on sociological and criminological theories to assist in considering a fuller understanding of the complexities that officers face and the full array of methodologies and knowledge available (Brown et al., 2018). Conversely, the findings from this study suggest that police organisations are not receptive to such forms of ‘evidence’ and instead there remains a tendency for police action to be driven by off the shelf knowledge and toolkits, rather than to foster useful and effective reflective practice and the consideration of local context. Consequently, there a risk that the PEQF may become prescriptive if it does not harness the value of knowledge gained from a wide range of educational aspects in the enhancement of professional practice.

Concluding remarks

The current police knowledge landscape is complex. Fleming and Rhodes (2018, 20) argue that often different kinds of knowledge are set up as opposed to each other –research-based versus craft knowledge– and considered as distinct from each other. However, they conclude from their research that police officers “draw on political knowledge and craft knowledge as well as research-based knowledge in their everyday lives”. Similarly, to Brown et al. (2018), they argue that EBP should not be accorded certain priorities for inclusion.

The findings from this research suggest the need for a wider definition of what contributes ‘police knowledge’, emphasising the importance of including the theoretical background from traditional police studies and the sociology of policing when delivering knowledge about EBP.

Such knowledge would encourage officers to draw on wider notions of police research to inform police problems. In addition, the participants here emphasised the benefits of their studying in relation to critical thinking and applying reflective skills in their own professional practice. These elements gained from their degree-level education related to their own sense of professionalism. However, the majority of the participants described an inability to utilise the knowledge gained from their degree due to a lack of peer support and a perception of irrelevance from more senior members of staff. There is a need here to understand what defines individual professionalism and how that relates to or conflicts with organisational professionalism and good policing. The infrastructure to embed education within police organisations was perceived to be inadequate, and consequently the reaction from the occupational culture inhibits the ability for criticality and reflexivity, inciting participants to feel deskilled and governed by ‘usual (prescriptive) practice’.

The PEQF has a real opportunity to impart contextual types of knowledge. HEIs involved in this policing educational field must take responsibility to be inclusive of many different types of knowledge and research methodologies. Both are critical for avoiding the notion of McDonaldization of policing (Heslop, 2011). There is potential for the framework to consider the different types of police knowledge contributors and their different elements and the requirement “to weave them together” (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018: 20). In this weaving, local knowledge, or experience, is one source of evidence, and is essential given the limits to social science knowledge. Moreover, the different forms of knowledge are evaluated “through the lens of an officer’s own experience” (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018, 20).

Often the reasoning for increasing the inclusion of academic knowledge and education in demanding professions relates to the growing demands experienced by professions and the subsequent desire to provide relevant qualifications to enable professionals to respond effectively to these challenging demands. This is certainly reflected in the PEQF. However,

qualifications are not in place to deliver an army of “narrow-minded “experts” or “scientific freaks’” (Jaschke and Neidhardt, 2007: 306). Given the findings of the research there is a risk that the PEQF, if not developed to deliver a wider range of thinking and the application of wider notions of research, will not meet the potential that the authors believe it could achieve. This is exacerbated by the organisational environment and the hierarchy of what counts as knowledge in the police culture itself and paradoxically, in some HEIs themselves. For these reasons, it is clear that wider international debates about the impact of education on policing need to pay more attention to the environment in which it is applied, as well as to the nature and quality of programmes themselves. It is important that as the PEQF develops in England and Wales, more research is undertaken to seek to understand and further contextualise the application of police education in practice and how officers who have undertaken an academic programme feel that the organisation receives that knowledge. This ‘evidence’ needs to be fed into the development of the PEQF to ensure that it delivers as intended. If it gets lost in translation and becomes perceived as a prescriptive tool to govern the officers that operate in the policing profession, the authors believe that a ‘critical moment’ to influence policing will be lost.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that the participants interviewed for this study had all completed an academic programme which does not adopt the CoP standardised curriculum. They graduated at the same time and were interviewed by members of the teaching team from the university. However, the research did not aim to gain feedback on the course content itself, rather the participants’ ability to utilise the learnt knowledge in practice. The authors recognise that the findings from this small study offer some preliminary thoughts on the issues surrounding the PEQF. Following implementation of the process further research will be required to consider,

more vigorously, the relevance of the findings and officers' perceptions of the approved CoP curriculum once established.

Author bios

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Michael Rowe is a Professor of Criminology in the Department of Social Sciences at Northumbria University. He has an international reputation for his research and publications in the field of policing in broad terms but paying particular attention to policing, race and racism, police culture, and the policing of domestic violence. He has completed a series of studies exploring the motivation and engagement of offenders in desistance programmes. He has published widely on these and other topics – he’s published seven books on policing, crime, race and related issues and is the (co)author of more than 30 articles in scholarly journals.

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