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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Norman, Jenny and Fleming, Jenny (2022). Utilising police knowledge and skills: Experiences from police practitioners studying a police specific degree. *International Journal of Police Science & Management* (Early access).

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/14613557211064051>

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# Utilising police knowledge and skills - experiences from police practitioners studying a police specific degree

## Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings from a longitudinal study contributing to the current debate about police education and professionalising the police in England and Wales. The findings in this paper are taken from a survey administered to third year students in 2016 enrolled in a policing degree. Surveys were distributed to police officer students in the last year of their degree programme asking for their perceptions of the degree; their organisation's support for their learning and how they felt that learning was utilised in their workplace. Supplementary to the survey, interviews were conducted with the students after their graduation in 2018. The research findings suggest that students perceived the benefits of obtaining a degree level qualification as fundamentally important to their professional development and personal decision-making at work. Early support initially received for study leave purposes, rarely extended beyond this practical provision. The extent to which police organisations valued the learning from the degree was perceived to be lacking. Senior ranked students were more likely to be able to use and promote their newly acquired skills and knowledge in the workplace. Such findings may inform scholars' and practitioners' continued evaluation of police education reforms in England and Wales.

Key words: Police education, police, professionalisation, organisational value

## Introduction

In December 2011, the Home Secretary, Teresa May announced that she intended to establish a Professional Police Body<sup>1</sup>. Its function would be to develop a body of knowledge, standards of conduct, ethical values, skills and leadership, and professional standards for police officers and police staff in England and Wales to, 'provide those working in policing with the skills and knowledge necessary to prevent crime, protect the public and secure public trust'. The long-term vision was to enrol police officers and staff as members of a professional body. The 'College of Policing' (the College) would overtime provide a system of continuous professional development and training for all ranks and positions with authorised professional standards at the core of professional practice. Its

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<sup>1</sup> The following paragraph is based on information provided by the Home Affairs Committee (2013) <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/home-affairs/HC-67-I-Leadership-Report-FINAL.pdf> and the College of Policing website - <https://www.college.police.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

remit would be 'to set educational requirements to assure the public of the quality and consistency of policing skills and facilitate the academic accreditation and recognition of policing expertise' and advance ideals commensurate with the move to professionalisation, emphasising improved training, education and standards. The move to professionalising police forces, not just in England and Wales but also in other English-speaking nations has been a regular feature of police reform for several decades (Bryant et al. 2014; Rowe 2009). Its common thread is a belief that improved education is fundamental to enhancing professionalism and 'plays a key role in developing the professional status of policing' (Bryant et al. 2014, p. 382).

Despite the fact that police degrees have been a feature of University courses for some years, few studies in the UK explore how the knowledge from a degree level qualification is utilised and embedded into police organisational practice. Where studies do exist, they suggest that transferring knowledge to practice is problematic (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Jones, 2016; Norman and Williams, 2017) and dependent on organisational structures and senior officer buy in (Fleming and Wingrove, 2017). There 'remains widespread uncertainty' in the literature about whether or not higher education makes for better policing (Wimshurst and Ransley, 2007, p. 107). This paper represents findings from the first of three cohorts from a section of longitudinal research that captures the experiences of police practitioners engaged in part time degree-level study. All of the participants in the study were police officers or members of police staff from various forces in pursuit of career development. The students from cohort one, began their degree programme in September 2014, completed their studies in July 2017 and graduated six months later in January 2018. These students were self-motivated and at the time of their university enrolment, were influenced in part by the rhetoric and increasingly high profile of education and training in policing, but were primarily driven by their own desire for self-development. The following section contextualises and outlines the broader methodological study and details the specific methods applied to cohort one.

## Methodology

### *The original study – longitudinal and mixed methods approach*

This paper's findings are drawn from a longitudinal research project (over 4 years) that aims to explore the motivations and expectations from police practitioners undertaking a police related degree; their perceptions of their organisation's support for their learning from their degree and how this is utilised and valued in the workplace. The methodology applied in this study is complex. It involves surveys and interviews conducted with students enrolled an undergraduate policing programme at one University in England and Wales. All of the students across the cohorts worked in several forces. The majority worked in a large urban force; however, there were participants working in Home Counties and a national police force. The fieldwork (surveys and interviews) is managed across different time points, *whilst the students were studying* and in follow up and *after they had graduated*. This design allows nuances to be captured overtime in relation to experiences and attitudes of learning.

The University where these students studied has a long-standing relationship with the profession having delivered degree programmes to police students for over 20 years. The BSc (Hons) in Policing degree studied by the participants is not part of the current programme for new recruits endorsed by the College but is aimed at serving police practitioners. The curriculum provides students with an in-depth understanding of policing from different sociological, psychological, political and criminological perspectives, with an emphasis on police research and social research methods.

### *The paper – snapshot findings from cohort one*

This paper presents snapshot findings of the first cohort of students from the longitudinal study outlined above, capturing serving officers and staff experiences of their degree-level programme undertaken between 2014-2017. Fieldwork was conducted at two different periods to capture experiences of learning over time. Time point one was '*whilst the students were studying*'. As the

students began their final year of their programme, they were surveyed. The second time point was *'following graduation'* which took place six-months after they had concluded their studies, as graduates.

#### *The survey and respondents (students)*

The literature reviewed to inform this study, both in terms of the development of the aims and the subsequent research design (Fielding, 1988; Fielding, 2018; Heslop, 2011; Southgate, 1988,), demonstrates a growing emphasis on educational standards from more recent reform (Bryant et al. 2014; Flanagan, 2008; Neyroud, 2011; Wood and Tong, 2009). Whilst there are a few studies that explore the role of education in policing (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Jones, 2016; Lee and Punch, 2004, Norman and Williams, 2017), research is limited. Consequently, little is known about how formal learning is translated into practice in a policing context. This longitudinal research contributes to the police education narrative by understanding the benefits of learning, as well as the challenges associated with using that learning in the workplace.

Informed by this literature, the survey questions were designed to capture basic demographic data, student motivations (Jones, 2016; Lee and Punch, 2004; Norman and Williams, 2017), perceptions of their learning, and their views on how their learning is valued within their organisation (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Fleming and Wingrove, 2017). Previous students who had concluded their study on the same programme piloted the survey and provided their feedback via email. The survey was disseminated to all final year students (2016/2017) on the programme, to capture their learning experiences as existing students at the start of the academic year in 2016. This group of students are identified as the first cohort within this study, that is, 27 students; and they all completed the survey in their first session of the academic year.

#### *The interviews and interviewees (graduates)*

The timing of this first follow-up interview was important to ensure the students had sufficient time to reflect on their experiences in terms of using the degree knowledge and learning in the workplace. All 27 of the students surveyed agreed to be contacted for the follow-up stages of the research following their graduation from the programme in 2018. However, given the broader scope of the longitudinal research, interviews were conducted with 11 students from this cohort, in order to replicate a manageable number of interviews in all of the follow up stages of the research for all cohorts. So that a variety of responses in different policing contexts, the 11 students were selected using purposive sampling to ensure interviews were undertaken with graduates working in different roles, ranks, forces and that both male and female voices were represented.

The questions in the interview revisited some of the survey questions and provided an opportunity to explore in more depth, participant motivations for studying their degree and their experiences of taking their learning back to the workplace. All of the survey responses were analysed descriptively. Inferential statistics were not deemed necessary given the small population size. NVivo was used to transcribe and analyse the interviews. Observations were made of the data inductively though applying a systematic coding approach. The codes informed themes and interconnections were made through the analysis of the data. NVivo provides opportunities to perform analysis automatically and manually (Dhuria and Chetty, 2017). The latter was appropriate given the small sample of interviews undertaken. The software functionality assists with establishing validity within the manual coding and analytical process as it minimises error and maximises accuracy (Dhuria and Chetty, 2017). Systematically coding, establishing themes and recording memos allowed for triangulation to take place between the quantitative and qualitative elements to confirm findings, establishing reliability within the analysis (Golafshani, 2003). The codes informed a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012) which identified the major themes that shaped the findings of this paper.

## **Findings**

This section of the paper presents two aspects of the research. First, there is a description of the first cohort involved in longitudinal study. Second, themes are presented from the analysis of both the survey and interview data. The section maps officers' perceptions from the survey and extends the narrative with an analysis of the follow up interviews. The main themes identified relate to why participants embarked on degree level education, their perceived benefits of undertaking a police specific degree, the skills they acquired, and their experiences of embedding knowledge in practice. The final part of this section discusses prospects and aspirations of participants 18 months on from completing their degree. For the purposes of clarity, the term *student/s* will indicate the participant responses from the survey, and the term *graduate/s* will indicate responses from the follow-up interviews.

### **Student police officers involved in this snapshot of the longitudinal study**

Most of the surveyed students identified themselves as white British, male (23 male/4 female) and police officers aged between 24-44 years old<sup>2</sup>. Five officers were aged over 45 years old. The majority were police constables, but sergeants, inspectors and chief inspectors were also represented. Two students identified as police staff. Of those students who held police officer positions, the majority were uniformed officers; three officers had strategic rather than operational roles and there were four police detectives.

All the students were experienced police officers and staff with a minimum of five years' experience. There was an equal split of officers who had been in post between 5-10 years (10) and 10-14 years (10); the remaining seven had over 15 years' service. Many students had funded their own tuition although six had half of their fees paid by their force.

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<sup>2</sup> Most students described themselves as white (22), two described themselves as being from another ethnic group, one described themselves as Black /African / Caribbean / Black British, one as Mixed / Multiple ethnic group, and one participant preferred not to say.

## Motivations for taking on a degree – bolstering professional development to aid promotion

The students surveyed all started their degree in 2014. This was prior to any indications from the College about policing becoming a graduate profession and notions of professional education frameworks.

The survey disseminated at the start of the students’ final year captured their motivations for completing the degree. Table 1 shows why students wanted to study their degree by rank. The motivations are similar to those found in previous studies (Jones, 2016; Norman and Williams, 2017). Most students wanted a challenge. Most of the participants demonstrated that they wanted to feel more confident about the knowledge they brought to their role. This was replicated later in the interviews where participants felt that their confidence had improved because of the skills they had acquired from their degree.

Professional development, promotion prospects, and more specialised knowledge all featured as motivating factors as students reflected on the reasons for embarking on a degree programme. However, most participants, when interviewed, acknowledged that the promotion process would not necessarily recognise their degree as a competitive element of the process.

**Table: 1 Question 12 – motivations by rank (Cohort one: Sept 2016 - third year survey)**

Rank / Staff	I wanted to challenge myself	I wanted to feel more confident about the knowledge I bring to my role	I wanted to evidence professional development	I wanted a qualification to assist in promotion	I wanted to obtain a degree level qualification	I wanted to acquire more specialised knowledge in the area of policing	Other
Constable	10	4	4	1	8	4	2
Sergeant	7	2	6	5	8	4	2
Inspector	2	1	1	2	5	2	0
Chief Inspector	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Police Staff	2	1	2	1	2	1	0

The study found that whilst the majority of students intended to continue policing in the short-term, there were indications that by 2016, some students were motivated to complete the degree level



qualification to enable them to leave 'the job', a theme that Jones (2016) had identified in his research.

For example, one student mentioned:

*"...I wanted to acquire knowledge/critical thinking skills that were not specific to policing which could be used in other employment..."* (Sergeant).

Two students said they would not be working in the police in two years' time, and when asked to reflect at the same time on where they saw themselves occupationally in five years' time, this increased to five students. These students felt the degree had enhanced their transferrable skills (via knowledge and critical thinking) to enable them to think beyond policing.

### **Perceived benefits for undertaking a police specific degree level programme**

The 2016 survey asked students about specific skills they had acquired during their degree.

Responses identified a range of skills that they perceived to enhance their role in the workplace – including, 'writing skills (25); critical thinking skills (21) and developing my research skills' (20).

In the interviews post-graduation, the graduates confirmed that they still rated the skills they had learned in their degree as important and transferable to their practice. The following quotes reflect this:

*"...I think definitely the process of writing and critical analysis and just even the simple part of kind of the intro, the body and the conclusion and how to put those together, as I do write a lot of reports in my job. I can kind of use these skills to structure those points to make them accessible. I'm doing a mini project at the moment, we are looking at risk indicators for gun dealers in [force omitted] and I've got to write a report for that, so these skills are certainly going to be useful. I'm gonna lay it out like a mini essay, breaking it down with the different themes within the body and the conclusion. So I think the writing skills, will keep on coming in useful..."* (Chief Inspector)

*“...the degree equips me to do that, to sort of critically analyse stuff and ask those questions with a bit of confidence knowing that I can back up my statement with research or theory or whatever it is. Rather than just giving an opinion and relying on my credibility, it gives what I am saying a bit of weight as there is something to back that up...”* (Inspector)

Police practitioners who engage in academic work develop criticality and contribute positively to reflexivity in practice (Bartkowiak-Theron and Herrington, 2015). Participants in this study felt they acquired in-depth knowledge in relation to policing and an improved ability to evaluate research. Research skills and understanding broader issues in policing were perceived to be key.

Sklansky (2014) emphasises the importance of expertise in professional policing. He suggests that the application of expertise means that practice is informed by ‘reflection and a knowledge base’ (p 345). There is little understanding in the research base around the benefits for officers achieving degree qualifications in relation to their acquired learning, analytical skills and criticality (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017). The findings from this study indicate that participants’ felt the programme content and delivery design of the degree was important in maximising their learning. The acquired knowledge assisted their understanding in informing the wider context of not just what they do, but also *why* they do it and *how* this affects the role of policing in society. They found this enlightening and encouraged self-reflection in their own practice:

*“...I sort of just went to work and did my job and I didn’t see myself as racist, I didn’t see myself as unapproachable or unhelpful and those things – and then going into stuff about legitimacy and that, you think well . . . yeah, there is a truth to it and some of the work that Tyler & Sunshine done around people’s expectations of the police and procedural justice”* (Inspector)

This student said that a more in-depth understanding delivered interactively was something they did not get from online police training (see Honess, 2020). Responses indicated that students appreciated the interactive nature of the study and how it made them feel more positively about their job. For example:

*“...I’ve learned new things and I think that sometimes in the job, especially in the way it’s gone with online packages and that sort of thing, you don’t really get that face-to-face interaction. You’re not really challenged around what you think of policing or what others think of policing, it’s just ‘do that package’, tick the box and that’s it – job done. So for me, it did invigorate things because it gave me a different perspective. It actually made me do something rather than just clicking, clicking, clicking – I actually had to read about something and learn...”* (Inspector)

In their final year, students were asked to indicate the reasons they had chosen their specific dissertation<sup>3</sup> topic. These reasons largely related to the fact that it was of interest to them personally (24) or they felt the subject area was relevant to their current role (13). Whilst students recognised the relevance of the degree programme they were studying in the context of their role, they perceived the organisation/force they worked for as being less receptive in valuing the contribution they could make as a result of their learning. This was disappointing for the students given that they were almost finished their degree and already their expectations of their workplace were low.

### **Feeling valued: Outcomes of learning and embedding knowledge in practice**

The organisational justice literature demonstrates the importance of the relationship between leaders/managers in cultivating an environment that values employees’ contribution in the workplace. Where employees perceive this environment to be fair and respectful, employees are more motivated and more committed to their role (Colquitt et al. 2001; Colquitt 2008; Greenberg 2011). Nonaka et al. (2001) stress the importance of assigning value to knowledge. Thompson and Heron (2005) considered the idea of ‘knowledge work’ in the context of organisational justice and the concept of psychological contracts. They demonstrated that strong organisational relationships facilitate the effective sharing of knowledge work. Williams and Cockcroft (2018) extended these

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<sup>3</sup> The dissertation is a substantial piece of secondary research, undertaken in the final year of the programme consisting of 10000 words. The third year dissertation is a feature of most UK undergraduate programmes.

ideas and posited the importance of organisational justice for effective knowledge sharing in police organisations. In order to maximise the knowledge work in police organisations, effective sharing of information is necessary and employees need to feel their contribution is valued. However, this study's findings indicate that the value of participants' knowledge from their degree in the workplace was largely absent.

#### *Support for learning varied across organisations*

Participants reported inconsistent levels of support at work while they were actively studying at university. There were several questions asked in the interviews to capture students' perceptions in relation to feeling supported and valued in their workplace. These questions ranged from practical issues in terms of assistance with funding or time off for study, to whether the learning from the course was acknowledged and/or integrated in the workplace by their organisation and line management.

A supportive line manager who acknowledges and values the learning gleaned from officers engaged in degree level education is key (Norman and Williams, 2017). When asked whether students felt their line manager would encourage them to use their course learning in their role, the split in responses was even. Ten students felt their line manager would encourage them (11 felt their line manager would not, and six were undecided). However, only seven of the students felt their line manager formally valued their education.

The majority of the students had some organisational support for their learning on a practical level, but this support varied depending on the force policy and individual line management. Whilst 20 students indicated that their force formally gave them leave to attend lectures, the interviews revealed that in practice this was inconsistent and was dependent on support from their line manager. In terms of study leave, one force allowed a maximum of ten days per year, although most organisations did not offer study leave and no force policy was in place to support external studying. Where there was more discretion and flexibility from line managers to offer extra time beyond the

ten days, the support was appreciated, particularly as students were largely funding the course themselves. A lack of practical support led to frustration, one participant said he had not received any support:

*"...It would give me the hump. I'd probably gone home and told my wife and give her the hump as well because obviously I'm putting a lot of my own time in to doing some things to better the job..."*

(Inspector)

When interviewed, graduates indicated that the practical support provided by the organisation in terms of study time contributed to their sense of value. Without this support, they questioned the extent to which their organisation invested in their professional development and their degree. The ability to transfer their knowledge into the workplace was considered a sign of 'value'. However, encouragement to utilise learned knowledge and practice was inconsistent and dependent to a significant degree on the influence an officer already had in the organisation.

*Experiences of transferring knowledge from the degree to the workplace depends on rank and influence*

As we have seen, graduates identified the skills they felt had been useful to their working practice. However, when asked about their organisation's response to these skills and the way in these skills were utilised (for example, policy discussion, decision-making, operational decision-making, supervisory decisions) the response was mixed:

**Table 2 Perceptions on organisational value**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I will be able to use the skills I have gained to inform policy	5	11	1	6	4
I will be able to use the skills I have gained from the course to inform senior decision-makers	5	7	2	9	4
I am able to use the skills I have gained from the course to inform operational decision-making	7	16	1	3	0
I am able to use the skills I have gained from the course to inform my supervisor when making decisions	6	13	0	8	0
I am able to use the skills I have gained from the course to inform my peers when making decisions	9	17	0	1	0

The survey data indicated most students felt that they would use the learning from the course in the context of their role. However, only seven felt the organisation would actively encourage them to do so. Only three students felt their organisation valued their educational qualification. Table 2 presents students' perceptions about their ability to utilise their knowledge gained from the course in practice. At the time of the survey, students agreed they were able to use their skills from their course at an operational level or to inform their supervisor when decisions were made; there was less agreement as to whether they could inform policy and senior decision-making. However, 18 months on, when interviewed, graduates were asked whether they had an opportunity to embed their learning in their practice. Those who held less senior ranks such as police staff members (equivalent to constables and sergeants) and warranted constables and sergeants had less opportunity (despite an obvious willingness) to integrate the learning specifically in their role at work:

*"...I've really enjoyed doing the degree, enjoyed the people I met, I enjoyed being exposed to that environment again. But I do feel that it's wasted in the context of supporting the organisation I work for. It's good for me, but the organisation don't really give a toss. What I've done, how I've done it, or how anybody in the, I know some of the dissertations there will be, because people are in certain positions that will be able to develop that and force that. But you need to be so..." (Sergeant)*

*“...What I found very disappointing from a work perspective, despite the fact that work has given me study time, but after that there’s been no outcome. From what they know I have never been to [place of study]. This feeds back into my organisation, it’s not a meritocracy, it’s about nepotism which is partly tragic...” (Sergeant)*

Such comments suggest a perceived resistance at management level to enable knowledge into practice. This preliminary study suggests that the ability to transfer and utilise the knowledge from the course may be role and rank specific. For example, those students who were inspectors / chief inspectors, clearly had more autonomy to reflect their learning in practice. Indeed, the interviews revealed they were able to direct and influence their own work and provided examples of utilising their knowledge to support their decision-making. Exercising critical reflection in practice is key to informing decision-making in the workplace (Christopher 2015):

*“...I get so much more latitude being, currently an Inspector. No one’s looking for me when I’m not doing certain things. I don’t have anybody to answer to, there is an expectation that whatever I am doing is, obviously correct. Whereas if I was a PC, I would be on shift and answering calls all the time; and that may be just where I sit within the organisation, but I do think as well it’s very much a rank thing. I think it would be harder to do this as a PC cos you’re just beholden to everybody up the food chain as to what time you can and can’t do. If you’re running a team you can say this is what we are doing, and this is what I am doing, and whether we like it or not in our culture, it seems when you get to Inspector rank you are an adult and until then you are a child, being told what to do. Whereas an Inspector, if you’re reading that on police leadership it must be work related, we will leave him be. Rank does give privileges as well as responsibilities.” (Inspector)*

A Chief Inspector relayed his experiences of how he had used the learning from the course directly in his role in developing an attachment scheme with a private sector organisation:

*“...I would say it [the skills from the programme] have added to my perspective and viewpoint and context to certain solutions, innovation issues, you know, around how we deal with things. For*

*example, one of the articles I read for my degree, it was about mentoring in America. I decided that would be a really good idea and I launched an external cross sector programme. We've got eight people from the police working at [name of provider], senior leaders, mentoring each other and now we have an attachment programme where four people where work for [name of provider] as an attachment for two months. And that's all been inspired from my reading, because I would have never, it's taken a hell of a lot of work..." (Chief Inspector)*

Another graduate (Inspector) was so passionate about the subject area he studied for his dissertation that he applied for a Master's degree course so he could undertake empirical research to fill the research gaps he had identified. He wanted to make a difference by developing his undergraduate research and capture new insights into the area to enhance his organisation's learning:

*"...So, I am hoping that what this will do, I can share it with the [own force], I can show it value and what it will allow the [own force] to demonstrate how we treat vulnerable people that we deal with on a day to day basis. And give them [the organisation] areas that they need to look at around the recording of for instance use of force with vulnerable people and its some quick fixes that will offer quick wins really for the police service as a whole. I am hoping that by sharing it with the [own force] in the initial stages and the College, that I'll be able influence the recording of the way that we can rebut or prove how we treat vulnerable people in these sorts of critical situations..." (Inspector)*

The examples above demonstrate both the motivation and proactivity taken individually to consider innovative problem-solving approaches at work. This activity illustrates the opportunities and benefits that can be utilised if they have the power to influence the organisation. As these graduates held senior positions, they had autonomy in their role and therefore more ability to feed their learning from the course to drive action and decision making at work.

Knowledge within police organisations is hierarchical (Williams and Cockcroft, 2018) and informed by the cultural and social norms set by the rank structure (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Sklansky,



2014,). This research indicates that senior officers feel they have more agency to influence their work, and therefore feel more comfortable using their skills at work; however, seemingly the reverse is true for those who hold less senior positions. Consequently, where there is power and influence, the rank structure enables learning into practice, but it also inhibits those at lower ranks to use their knowledge. The lack of consistency to embed learning at all levels compromises the consistent development of policing as learning organisations.

As established by the organisational justice literature it is important that organisations value those investing in their professional development. However, this research suggests that value is wider than the practical support. Opportunities for participants, regardless of rank or role, to feedback their learning in practice is important. While participants were keen to make a difference by embedding their knowledge, the ability to do this was defined by the position they held in the organisation. Therefore, innovation and creativity informed by the skills they had acquired from their degree were inhibited and graduates felt devalued. Creating an inclusive environment to allow for knowledge from research in operational daily practice is important and should not be perceived by officers as rank orientated (Fleming and Wingrove, 2017).

By 2018, the College's professionalisation agenda and its pursuit of professionalism through education and university degrees had become more overt. Degree related recruitment established by the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) with its emphasis on a curriculum of dynamic operational training and underpinned by sound theoretical education had become more explicit (College of Policing, 2020). Student expectations of their degree and how it might be valued in their organisation at the time of graduation in 2018 would have been higher than they might have expected in 2014. For many this was not the case and most graduates questioned the College's professionalization process more generally in the context of the response they had had from their forces.

Despite the emphasis on professional skills, the importance of an evidence base and professional knowledge emanating from the College, graduates perceived the internal processes did not support such learning. One graduate felt frustrated that police action and decision-making was increasingly being defined by automated smart phone applications with very little knowledge of the 'learning processes or evidence. An example was the use of 'Copperfile', which provides police officers with automated 'knowledge' to check legislation. This 'automated knowledge' was perceived by students as learning the legislation by rote rather than considering a problem and solving it using critical thinking skills based on the evidence base.

*"...You are learning legislation but in a specific way, you're learning the keywords, you're not learning the legislation. That's not learning the legislation that's learning an image of what the legislation looks like..."* (Constable).

The dissertation study that the participants undertook in their third year required them to undertake an in-depth understanding of a particular aspect of policing. A strong theme from the interviews after graduation was the lack of organisational interest in their research findings from their dissertation. The quote below demonstrates that rather than harness the knowledge gained from self-motivated research, graduates said their organisations largely ignored their work and continued reinventing the wheel without taking into account the new evidence or knowledge they had to offer:

*"...I would say there is a bit of a gap in capturing what I've done. For example: there is a sergeant leadership programme, which they are developing and obviously my dissertation was on sergeant leadership training and developing, the whole lot. I approached the learning and development team and they obviously paid it [the dissertation] a little bit of lip service, but there wasn't any desire to learn from it, or to use it to inform the programme. It was all very kinda high level, without really taking any account of how people learn and the kinds of resistance that sergeants have ... that was a bit disappointing, that I had spent a good year learning and understanding and I didn't really get any form of buy-in. I took the initiative to contact them to tell them what I had done and left them the*

*dissertation and unfortunately, they've just cracked on with their sergeant leadership programme and just done the same thing that they always do, which is just reinvent the wheel without some of the context, or some of the research that's out there...which is disappointing, but it's not something I am particularly surprised by..."* (Inspector).

The extent to which this apparent lack of interest fosters a 'professional' approach to policing conflicts with the premise of professional learning fostered by the College. This is particularly notable in forces where although they had invested in part-funding courses for students they had asked for no return on their money. There is an unused 'dictionary of knowledge' that could be formulated and produced by undergraduates in policing or serving members of staff that could be used to problem solve. If the organisation valued the individual and their learning and supported them through their course, they might be more interested in identifying research projects that are mutually beneficial – thus enforcing a more professional approach in formulating and understanding the problem. The PEQF as the current strategic framework could usefully provide more clarity and guidance for police organisations to support their workforce who engage in learning and capture this as part of an evidence-base at an operational level.

#### *Sceptical perceptions of the overarching PEQF*

Despite the overwhelming positivity students had in relation to their experience on the degree personally, as Lumsden (2017) found, only scepticism was apparent when asked in the interviews about the College's professionalisation process more broadly. The interviews revealed experiences of feeling devalued were linked to question this wider agenda. This was further compounded by their perceptions that internal training undertaken throughout their career was not accredited and held no value internally or externally. In their 2018 interviews, graduates perceived the PEQF as inadequate to support existing officers' professional development. Based on their own experience, in order for the PEQF to support learning and embed a research base at an operational level, there

would need to be infrastructure at a strategic level. Without this framework, the PEQF was seen as 'lip-service and meaningless'. For example:

*"...I very much feel it's 'do this, do that' – we are told what to do; it's very, very much like that so there is very little that I can actually apply to the job that I do at the minute..."* (Constable)

*"...If in the next few years, I can get to a position I will be pushing that [the PEQF], but obviously it comes down to the strategic level and the College of Policing. They need to be really clear about exactly what and why people who are doing these degrees and exactly what the benefits are for the forces and how it needs to be applied. It needs to be very specific and go into the detail. For example: these officers will now be able to look at policy and review decisions and act as a proper sounding board. But there needs to be an actual framework in place otherwise it will only be lip service..."*

(Inspector)

The interview responses indicated the layers that may inform a framework for the College to consider as it continues to implement its PEQF. Graduates felt it was important that the learning undertaken by them was recognised at an organisational level in order to assist in the practicalities of undertaking a degree level qualification (such as study leave and or funding). Whilst the participants accepted that operational requirements might inhibit this at times, it meant their ability to manage their time for study was impacted. Paradoxically, the College is promoting a learning organisation, but the opportunities to embed learning are seemingly lost at an operational level. The implications of this were that participants felt less valued, which had a knock-on effect on how studying was viewed by their peers:

*"...I think I would really hope that this would happen because I think it has a massive amount of potential to sort of...it's not just the improving the policies...actually involving people's appreciation of the academic work, which will in turn make people want to do academic work and research and get involved in research because they will see the operational use in the different, and people will be listened to...whereas this is different to this is my degree and no one is listening to me, that then puts*

*off your bulk of officers from actually wanting to do it. And I think that's where the college, it's quite a paradox in that the college are not promoting it in my opinion particularly well in terms of the specifics and what the implementation is when I think is one of the things around the leadership review and the metropolitan forces and county forces as far in my opinion are not doing really using the research that has been done..." (Chief Inspector)*

If the College wants to shift the culture to become a learning organisation, those members of staff studying need to be supported and this should be facilitated from the top to provide adequate abstraction from duties to allow for study. To encourage learning at grass root level, the academic work that is being undertaken by existing staff needs to be valued and showcased to demonstrate that an organisation is willing to embrace the learning from its police students. In the majority of cases, graduates experienced support to some extent from their line manager, but not beyond a certain level of seniority. The line management is a critical role as they can either support a student or be the first line of resistance.

## **18 months on...aspirations and opportunities**

Data from the surveys and the interviews completed in 2018 identified changes had taken place in terms of graduates' aspirations for promotion (see Table 3). An open question about how students saw their working future sought to capture career intentions.

Of all the interviewed graduates, there was an even split between those hoping for promotion and those who wanted to stay at their current rank/banding. The five graduates who were not seeking a promotion (constables and sergeants) spoke of their degrees as both personal and professional achievements but did not see how it benefit them in the promotion process. Those seeking promotion were all inspectors or members of police staff. Graduating inspectors were encouraged by the skills they had acquired and developed. Coupled with the autonomy they had in their role to utilise their skills, they felt they had the opportunity to display their skills as evidence for their

promotion and interview board. They were positive that the promotion process would allow them the opportunity to demonstrate their learning. Conversely, graduate interviewees who were members of police staff raised issues relating to the challenges they found, and what they perceived as a lack of recognition of their competency from their organisation. They felt the promotion process for police staff was under-developed and felt ignored by the emerging professionalization reform agenda despite investing in their professional development.

On a personal level, many of the responses referred to how the course had positively affected them and their appetite to learn. One participant referred to opening 'Pandora's Box'.

*"...I have really seen the value with keeping up to date with the current developments in research to making policing better – so it's opened my eyes to the- right, now I've seen all that, now I've opened Pandora's box, I can't close it..."* (Inspector)

Even though their undergraduate journey was complete, some graduates revealed that they had already started studying at master's level. Reasons for this were related to their desire to continue to develop their knowledge as an essential component of their professional development. It may be possible that in 2018, the high profile PEQF discourse was now influencing their views about their career development. However, Lee and Punch (2004) identified from their study of police officer students studying at degree level, students gradually shift to enjoy academic work and go through a process of personal transformation. Similarly, the students in this study redefined their future that included further academic study through the process of recognising and valuing the new perspectives they had developed. One participant initially explained he was intent on retiring and becoming a postman in the survey. However, in the follow up interview, he described the degree as 'life changing' and enrolled on a Master's degree programme with the intention to study at PhD level with the intention to move into a future within academia. Others in the study who were not planning postgraduate study still felt an alliance to their education. They felt that while their journey

had formally ended with graduation, they felt strongly about maintaining the skills gained and utilising them in the workplace.

*“...It’s not the end of the journey when I finish; it’s just probably the end of the formal part of the journey where I am assessed on it then I can keep using those skills going forward...”* (Inspector)

This suggests that graduates valued their education and the skills they acquired at an individual level, but generally felt their education attainment was not valued in the organisation. Such responses appear to indicate the students’ value of the education itself as an intrinsic part of their professional identity. Other aspirations about the future were based on leaving the organisation.

One graduate revealed his intention to leave the police following a number of negative experiences with the promotion process. His engagement in his studies identified that he had dyslexia, which affected his ability to perform in formal assessments. He failed to get his sergeant’s promotion. The positive experiences born from his engagement with academia, which he perceived to be enriching and fulfilling has redefined what he intends to do going forward in his career. This same officer claimed that whilst the PEQF may drive individuals to embed their knowledge in practice, there is nothing in between to support officers engaged in academic learning and for this learning to become consistently meaningful to the organisation. Another officer experienced a difficult time in the organisation he worked. The day of his graduate interview was three days before his last day in the job and retirement. He had decided to leave his long-life career despite just graduating from his degree. He had gone through the promotion process and had been unsuccessful. He recalled there was no point, when his academic attainments were not an essential part of or formally recognised in the process.

Currently, the emphasis on the tick-box promotion processes in police organisations and professional development reviews are the only way of acknowledging and rewarding staff experience and achievements. Education qualifications do not yet feature within this framework, nor

is the evidence base topped up through students' own study experiences at either an operational or a strategic level.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This research contributes to an evolving narrative in relation to police education and the professionalization of policing in England and Wales. This paper draws on findings from longitudinal research still in progress to track the experiences of those engaged in police education over time.

These early findings explore the experiences of police officers and members of police staff undertaking a degree in 2014, finishing in 2017 and graduating in 2018. The findings demonstrate the perceived benefits from graduates about the skills and knowledge gained from undertaking their degree, their willingness to utilise their learning in practice and some of the perceived organisational barriers that hindered their ability to embed their learning, which in turn compromised the extent to which they felt valued by their organisation.

Police students in this study took on the degree for the challenge and as a way of bolstering their personal professional development, either inside of the police, or externally. Some students indicated in their survey responses that they were undertaking this qualification to prepare them for an alternative career. Those who viewed the degree as enhancing their professional development recognised the benefits of the transferrable skills they developed. Importantly, they valued what they saw as the in-depth knowledge they gained from doing the degree and how this enabled more criticality in their professional thinking. Students appreciated the practical support where provided by their organisation.

Post-graduation, all participants confirmed their willingness to put their theory into practice. Recognition of their contribution to knowledge and learning from line managers was key to this process but was often not forthcoming. These early findings further contextualise the indifference of organisations found in Hallenberg and Cockcroft's (2017) study. Rather than indifference



experienced by police students, there was a lack of interest from line managers for the majority of students who were in lower ranking roles and unable to contribute their newly found knowledge in their area of work even after graduation. This created a sense of frustration amongst the graduates and they felt devalued. Conversely, higher-ranking graduates had more independence to influence their work.

These findings support the growing debates about the role of organisational justice in policing.

According to the organisational justice literature, employees who feel supported by their organisation demonstrate more commitment to the overarching vision of the organisation. This highlights the importance of valuing their contribution, their knowledge and experience in order to enhance the both the PEQF and evidence based agenda. The role of the line manager is important here (Norman and Williams, 2017) and productive relationships need to be developed to facilitate knowledge-work (Thompson and Heron, 2005) between line managers and employees.

The negative experiences of the lower ranked graduates and police staff attempting to embed learning into their practice generated a general feeling that the wider professionalization agenda was futile. They felt there was an opportunity missed by forces to highlight their skills in the organisation, which in some cases had at least partially invested in their professional development. However, they felt overlooked which compounded their perceptions of the credibility of the PEQF and more disappointingly in some cases changed their aspirations about their future careers.

The findings from this research serve as key learning points for those seeking to embed education and evidence based learning into police organisations in England and Wales. In 2020, the College reflected on its 'early-adoption' progress with the PEQF:

The Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship is now live in 19 forces, while the Degree-Holder Entry Programme is live in seven. We have three forces live with the new Police Community Support Officer Apprenticeship, and 25 higher education providers have started delivering the pre-join Degree in Professional Policing. This year has also seen the development of a new, modern

educational provision for the Special Constabulary. Encouragingly, student officer feedback on the new routes has suggested a positive overall experience, with benefits including a deeper knowledge and understanding of policing (College of Policing 2020a p 4).

While acknowledging there are 'challenges' to address, it is not clear that the importance of allowing students/graduates to bring their newly acquired skills, knowledge and enthusiasm for learning into the workplace. Nor is there evidence yet to demonstrate that the value of education is recognised by a police organisation either in terms of allowing officers to contribute to problem solving and decision-making or in acknowledging the degree and other forms of education to be an integral part of the promotion process. Such issues may take time to embed. As this longitudinal study moves through the next phases, there may be useful findings for the College to consider about police officers' education and the use of such education in the workplace, as important points of evaluation.

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