Police education: Enhancing the profession and the professionals - learning for practitioners and organisations

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Project Description:

This project aims to explore the experiences of learning within a policing context. The training and education requirements of police officers and staff are continuously under scrutiny. Since 2016, new reform was introduced to embed formal education as a core aspect of the College of Policing's professionalisation agenda (College of Policing, 2016). The reform mandated that all new officers would be educated to degree standard (L6) (Neyroud, 2011). The broader aims of this reform were to provide transformative learning for police officers as they enter the profession to equip them with the knowledge that represents the complexities of society and contemporary problems (Ramshaw and Soppitt, 2018). Other skills deemed valuable from university learning were creating a learning space enabling critical thinking and reflective practice (Wood, 2018). Research suggests that police practitioners who engage in police-specific degree-level studies feel more confident, and professional as they feel their decision-making is more objective and informed with knowledge, theory, and critical reflection (Norman and Fleming, 2022).

The training and learning environment in policing is in constant flux. Since the implementation of the degree routes into policing in 2016, there has been further non-degree, Level 5, route developed, undermining the role of formal education as part of professionalising the police. Alongside the learning provision for recruits, the need for continuous professional development is heightened, specifically for those in specialist roles (Williams et al., 2023). Serving officers feel overlooked by training and development (Norman and Fleming, 2022, Williams et al., 2023) and yet harnessing their skills and knowledge is vital given the broader context in which policing is operating.

Organisationally, policing is under strain with the impact of long-term sustained cuts to policing budgets and a significant issue around police retention (Charman and Tyson, 2023) resulting in younger officers with less experience forming a growing proportion of the service (Williams and Sondhi, 2022). This context is important given the links between investing to professional development, feeling confident and competent to perform the role, and valuing the knowledge that officers bring from formal learning experiences as well as their experience.

There is a growing need for new theoretical research related to learning with the policing context: be that in terms of learning to work within policing; learning to be a more effective practitioner within policing; or learning to move on to another role within policing.

Learning within policing presently follows a work-based learning pedagogical approach. The Quality Assurance Agency (2008, p. 1) define work-based learning as involving 'learning through work, learning for work and/or learning at work. It consists of authentic structured opportunities for

learning which are achieved in a workplace setting or are designed to meet an identified workplace need. This type of learning typically has a dual function of being designed to meet the learning needs of the employees, developing their knowledge, skills and professional behaviours, and also meeting the workforce development needs of the organisation. Work-based learning is, therefore, learning which is distinguished from work-related or simulated learning activity that has not been formulated or commissioned by, or in partnership with, employers to address a current workforce need.'

Work-based learning approaches are firmly rooted in practice which contrasts with traditional university education curricula, where there can be a disconnect between formal knowledge and analytical techniques and the ambiguities and messiness of professional practice (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2006; Mintzberg, 2004). Students on work-based learning programmes are expected to apply ideas from academic learning into their own professional practice, and use their own journey as a case study for learning.

It is likely that the PhD project will employ a qualitative research methodology – potentially involving creative research methods - and take an interpretivist approach, helping to uncover multiple stakeholders' perceptions and subjective experiences. The research could focus at the individual, group, or institutional level, but is likely to recognise that these are intertwined.

We invite proposals for PhD research relevant to a policing context. Applicants might choose to take a theoretical approach to focus on (but are not limited to), one of the topic ideas below:

- The candidate may choose to undertake a study that focuses on understanding the types of knowledge, skills and behaviours that are employed in different routes into policing to explore the value of learning in police organisations and the role of work-based learning (QAA, 2018).
- The study may focus on pedagogy and consider the benefits and challenges of, and how to enhance, work-based (QAA, 2018) and/or practice-based learning (e.g. Eraut, 1994; Cheetham and Chivers, 2005) within policing. It may consider the impact the pedagogical approach has on learning, development, value and/or retention at the individual and/or organisational level within a professional policing context.
- The candidate may choose to employ a values (Kraatz et al., 2020; Vince, 2019), emotions (Voronov and Vince, 2012) and/or institutional logics (Vedi et al., 2024; Zietsma and Toubiana, 2018; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Reay and Hinings, 2009) lens to consider the experience of learning and development within professional policing.
- The study make take a tensions-based perspective to uncover the lived experience of learning and development within policing. This might include the employment of a paradox lens (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011) to highlight the experience of unresolvable interdependent contradictions within the context.
- Contemporary studies in leadership development have highlighted a move away from a leadership development approach focusing on the development of individuals, to one focusing on the development of the organisation, alongside an approach focused on leadership development programs to one that is integrated within the day job (Fabisch et al., 2024). The study may follow a similar approach to consider learning and development within policing.
- The study may instead consider unknowingness (Bloomfield et al., 2024) in the context of professional policing and the impact that has on what is learnt and how.
- The study may consider professional development in policing / specialist learning and the role of formal education. Given the education reform in England and Wales and the recruitment of younger police officers in age and in service (Williams and Sondhi, 2022), this may lend itself to considering the role of knowledge, value (individual and organisational) and links to retention.

About the Supervisors:

Sarah Bloomfield: is a Lecturer in work-based learning in the Department of People and Organisations at the Open University. Sarah works across management degree apprenticeships programs – including the Qualification Lead for the Open University's CMDA programme - and her research and practice focus on how individual and collective effectiveness can be improved in the workplace, recognising that each work situation is unique.

Jennifer Norman: is a Senior Lecturer in the Department for Policing at the Open University. Jennifer's research interests include police professionalisation. She is a predominantly a qualitative researcher and is passionate about representing the voices of police officers and staff within her research.

Paul Walley:

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