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Embedding learning and assessment within police practice: the opportunities and challenges arising from the introduction of the PEQF in England and Wales

Abstract

This paper reflects upon the development of the Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) in England and Wales and considers the implications it will have for policing degrees. Given the topic, the paper is primarily forward looking but it draws upon the experiences of having worked closely with police for over 20 years in designing bespoke policing degree programmes. It is offered as an opinion piece. The PEQF represents a significant step change in the development of police training and education. In particular, it places tertiary education at the centre of all aspects of learning within the police organisation. The paper welcomes the PEQF as a significant opportunity to develop our understanding of police practice. In particular, it provides an impetus to explore ways of embedding learning and assessment within operational police practice. However, this will require both investment and a substantial change programme to ensure that police services have the appropriate infrastructure to support tertiary levels of learning and assessment. It will also require a cultural shift within both universities and police organisations. Most importantly, if the PEQF is to fulfil its potential, police services will need to embrace, promote and enable reflective practitioners, and become reflective practices in the fullest sense. If this is achieved, I argue, the policing degrees of tomorrow will be radically transformed for the better.

Key words: PEQF; policing degrees; reflective practitioners; university police stations

Introduction: the PEQF in context

The Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) in England and Wales has been developed by the College of Policing (CoP) with the explicit aim of professionalising the police role in the UK (Home Office, 2012). Bolstered by the recommendations of Neyroud (2011) and Winsor (2012), both of which promoted closer collaboration between policing and academia, the CoP was given a clear mandate by the Coalition Government to radically transform the organisation of police learning and development in the UK. As Rogers and Frevel (2018, p.2) note, these developments in the UK are in line with similar collaborations across “most Western-style police agencies”. This paper considers the possibilities the PEQF provides in reshaping how we approach police learning and development in the UK, but I see the PEQF as a significant and bold move by the CoP that could also lead the way internationally. It clearly establishes tertiary level learning as the norm within police education and training and needs to be understood as such.

The paper offers a critical commentary at the early stages of developments, with the explicit aim of influencing how the PEQF is shaped going forward. Whilst supportive of the PEQF initiative, I argue that it will only have meaning if it is underpinned by a socially reflexive model of policing that has learning and assessment embedded within police practice. I propose the idea of a University Police Station (UPS), along the lines of a University Hospital, as a mechanism for advancing such a socially reflexive model of policing.

A concern I have is that currently there is little evidence to suggest that the PEQF is being embraced as an opportunity to transform the way we think about what makes a good reflexive police officer. Instead, I suggest that the dominant approach to understanding the PEQF is in fiscal terms. This is perhaps a natural response given the backdrop of continuous cuts in policing in the UK over recent years. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows, police numbers in the UK peaked in 2009 but have been in decline under the austerity programme of the Conservative led Coalition Government 2010-

2015 and subsequent Conservative Governments following the 2015 and 2017 General Elections¹ (Disney and Simpson, 2017). It is reasonable, given the austerity context, that chief officers exploit every opportunity to reduce costs. Reducing training budgets, and minimising abstraction costs represent, understandably, low lying fruit on the tree of budget reduction. Austerity can thus act as an impetus for chief officers to embrace the PEQF, especially when underpinned by evidence based policing (EBP), which aims to ensure more effective and efficient use of resources. Undoubtedly, austerity and EBP have been presented by government as mutually supporting initiatives: diminishing police numbers incentivise police services to find ways of getting more out of each unit of resource. Whilst undeniably a tantalising temptation for beleaguered chief officers as they grapple with budget challenges, I suggest that it is short sighted and a mistake to think of the PEQF as a budget saving opportunity. If the PEQF is to make a positive and sustainable impact on policing it needs to be understood as an investment opportunity to change how officers learn and develop in their various roles.

A further challenge the CoP faces is that many officers see the PEQF as part of a wider government attack on the police. The context here is not simply the decline in police numbers in recent years but also the way in which cuts have been implemented. Prior to becoming Prime Minister in 2016, Theresa May was the Home Secretary 2010-2016 directing police cuts. Her approach, and especially speeches delivered to the Police Federation Conferences, was emphatically forceful in challenging arguments against the cuts. She used data showing that recorded and reported crime had coincided with the police cuts (Disney and Simpson, 2017) to argue that police numbers under the previous Labour Governments had been unnecessarily high and financially irresponsible. She was able to say to the Police Federation, “spending cuts have not ended policing as we know it . . . and most important of all . . . crime is down” (May, 2014). She imposed her authority on the police by reducing not only police numbers, but also diminishing the police voice, particularly in light of a more general critique of police leadership and a perceived lack of police accountability.

To some extent, the Government’s moral authority over the police has diminished somewhat more recently as the austerity agenda appears to be losing support. During the 2017 British General Election police numbers became a surprise focus of campaigning following the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London (Jones, 2017). May came under scrutiny and was subjected to criticism for cutting police numbers (Eaton, 2017), and police numbers remain a contested issue in the UK (Simons, 2018). However, increasing police resources alone does not diminish the importance of the PEQF initiative. I see the PEQF as an opportunity for the police to regain professional authority by developing a robust epistemic understanding of its role within society, and a knowledgeable workforce that is able to respond to the changing societal demands in thoughtful, meaningful and appropriate ways. It would be a mistake to see its need only within the context of austerity. Put conversely, the PEQF does not become less urgent if and when police numbers are allowed to grow again. The emphasis needs to be on seeing the PEQF as a means of enhancing the professional voice of the police in society, and this requires a different approach to understanding professional development within policing.

Why do police officers need a degree?

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of the PEQF is that it goes considerably further than both Neyroud (2011) and Winsor (2012) in stating that all warranted officers will need to be educated to degree level through one of three routes, in order to justify employment at constable level. Entrants into the police at the constable level will be required to complete a recognised Pre-join Professional Policing Degree (PjPP) or a Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP). Alternatively, they will be

¹ The decline in police numbers since 2010 is roughly equal to their growth under New Labour following their election success in 1997 (Disney and Simpson, 2017). As Ewing (2010) notes, more police and more policing characterised the Labour Governments between 1997-2010.

permitted to join the police without either of these qualifications if they are accepted onto a Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) programme, which entrants will need to successfully complete in order to remain within the police service. This is a marked step change for an organisation, which as Neyroud (2011) noted, had traditionally eschewed the necessity of educational attainment as a prerequisite for joining a police service.

The academic level at which police knowledge is being set, and the extent to which tertiary level institutions external to the police are being given greater responsibility in determining what constitutes police knowledge, will be scary, appear foolhardy and perhaps even reckless to many within and outside of police services. Those expressing concerns here should not be ignored and it is important that due consideration is given not only to the changes to police learning, but also to how these changes can be managed and embedded in meaningful ways. This will take time and, in the following months as the policing and academic worlds become even more intimately entwined, this needs to be at the forefront of our minds. As Bryant, Cockcroft, Tong & Wood (2013) note, we need the kind of vision and sense of purpose that guided the reforms to policing in Northern Ireland over a 10 year period following the Patten Report (1999). We need to be sensitive to, and understanding of, critical voices, without losing sight of the aspirational goals before us. Most importantly, we need to balance the political *will* to bring about fundamental changes, with the political *skill* to ensure the changes are realised. We should remember that time and again police training reforms have fallen short of delivering intended outcomes (Chan 2003; Constable 2017). In the UK, seasoned officers are well rehearsed in the theatre of transformational change (Cockcroft 2012) and as Heslop (2013) documents, there has been a series of major changes to police training occurring in the UK with regularity every five or so years.

To understand why previous reforms have fallen short of their intended targets we need look no further than the canons of police sociology in the UK and USA, who have each in different ways demonstrated the inherently conflictual nature of police work (Skolnick, 1966, Westley, 1970; Bittner, 1967, 1970; Manning, 1997; Reiner, 2010; Waddington, 1999). No amount of political will and/or skill can overcome the essential tensions and contradictions found within the police's societal role. If the PEQF is to succeed where other reforms have failed, it needs to have at its heart a recognition that policing is primarily engaged in conflict: the police not only protect and serve, they also coerce and restrict. Indeed they protect and serve some by coercing and restricting others (Waddington, 1999). The more we accept this as a starting point, the more we understand that good policing is built upon good reasoning and judgement (Muir, 1977; Kleinig, 1996). It is the ability of officers to reason intelligently and produce sound judgements in the heat of operational policing that is crucial here. This has to be central to the PEQF and I suggest that this entails a high degree of reflexivity within policing (Wood and Williams, 2016).

The reflective practitioner is first and foremost someone who is engaged in a professional practice, they are not contemplative observers. Moreover, integral to the understanding of the police officer as a reflective practitioner is the idea that he or she has what Simmons (1979) defines as moral obligations, beyond the legal obligations and positional duties they hold. A reflective practitioner needs to demonstrate what MacIntyre (2004) refers to as moral agency, and needs to be able to question what is going on around them. She needs to be aware of the consequences arising from the fulfilment of these duties with a view to ensuring that there are not unintended inhumanities resulting from benign activities. This ability to step back, or to step outside of the immediacy of the legal obligations and positional duties of the police role, distinguishes the moral agent from a subordinate subject. If we take seriously the idea of the 'office of constable' (Police Federation 2008), and the idea of original authority residing with the warranted officer (Lustgarten 1986), it follows that the police officer needs to be understood as a moral agent. This understanding is expressed by MacIntyre (2004, p.39), when he discusses the moral agent's need to develop through reason, a "justifiable confidence . . . in their own moral judgements".

However, reflective practices need to provide a working environment that allows for meaningful reflections to take place in a practical way. Pearson, Rowe and Turner (2018, p.282) illustrate what happens when this is not achieved. They argue that the amendments to s.24 of PACE within the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 have failed to achieve their intended objective, resulting in “unlawful and non-human-rights-compliant arrests” being made regularly. They note confusion amongst officers regarding the necessity criteria within the legislation and the extent to which it is seen as a trivial consideration when set within operational contexts. Pearson, Rowe and Turner (2018, p.283) focus here not on the failings of individual officers, but rather on the lack of institutional and societal understanding:

requiring frontline officers to both understand and apply such complex legal assessments reveals a lack of understanding from policy makers about the pressures of modern police work and the ability of the law to drive police reform.

The PEQF provides an opportunity to develop policing as a socially reflexive practice with opportunities for learning and assessment embedded within it. This will place great demands not only on police organisations but also academic institutions. It will require us to think differently about what a police degree looks like, and in particular, it will require us to move away from an applied model of police knowledge towards an approach that embeds learning and assessment within police practice. There is a long educational tradition that emphasises the importance of learning through practice (Dewey, 1916), and especially within professional organisations (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978). Schön (1983) has been particularly influential in establishing the concept of the reflective practitioner. The understanding developed through this educational tradition will be insightful as and when the PCDA is introduced.

The significance of the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA)

Whilst the PCDA forms only one part of the PEQF, it is nonetheless of great significance in shaping other components. This is partly because police officers at the rank of constable are by far the largest group of employees within police organisations. They account for 78% of all police officers across the 43 police services in England and Wales, or to just under half of all police employees (Hargreaves, Cooper, Woods and McKee, 2016, table 3.1, p.7). There are more than three times as many constables in the police in England and Wales than there are officers across all of the other eight or more ranks. There are also 50% more constables in the police than there are police staff across a diverse array of support functions with different and bespoke learning needs. Getting the constable role right is integral to good policing.

The PCDAs are also important because they are likely to be the most oversubscribed entry route into the police at the constable level. They will therefore play a significant role in shaping pre-join police degrees and the DHEP. The PCDA, like all apprenticeship degree programmes, are designed to be employer led with clearly defined work based learning elements. A challenge for universities is responding not only to the demands of embedding learning and assessment within police practice on PCDA programmes, in a way that minimises abstraction from operational policing, but also in terms of replicating as much as possible the experiences of learning on a PCDA programme, on the pre-join policing degree programmes and the DHEP.

Police learning and development, whether in police training terms or on academic policing degrees, has tended to be based upon an applied knowledge model. A problem in police training is that often this is manifested in the form of detailed instruction on the law as it relates to a specific aspect of policing, delivered in the classroom and abstracted from operational practice. The curriculum for initial police training has been highly prescriptive and detailed on what needs to be covered (Wood & Tong, 2009). Such a scripted curriculum does not reflect andragogic principles (Knowles, 1970). It focuses much more on what needs to be taught from the perspective of future issues of liability, and

not enough on what is being learnt, or indeed what needs to be learnt in order to develop the ability and understanding of the officer.

I am not suggesting here that academia has readymade solutions to this problem. Indeed, I ~~suggest~~ [there is a danger](#) that academic policing programmes ~~are currently~~ [focused](#) far too much on familiarising students with the academic literature on policing and academic protocols, such as referencing, and not enough on how officers can make sense of such learning in operational terms. ~~There is a danger here that~~ [Where this happens](#), such programmes are [arguably](#) better equipped to produce policing academics rather than police practitioners.

My comments here are not intended to criticise existing practices, [indeed there are programmes that have focused much more on understanding operational policing contexts](#), ~~but rather to~~ [However, I](#) suggest that prior to the PEQF there has not existed an authoritative infrastructure to allow for a more systematically embedded and integrated model for learning and development in policing. As such, any examples of good practice have much less impact than they should have, and there remains overall a gap between the processes of learning about policing and the practice of policing. It is well-documented that new recruits see the lessons of the street as being so much more valuable, and often at odds, with what they are taught in the classroom, [and this enduring challenge pre-dates the emergence of academic policing programmes](#) (Chan, 2003; Heslop, 2011, 2013; Constable, 2017). Likewise, officers completing a degree programme at a university are often frustrated by the extent to which there is no means of making use of the learning gleaned on an academic programme within operational contexts (Wood and Williams 2016). Perhaps most poignantly, the gap between learning and practice is expressed in policing through the language of ‘abstraction’, to denote that when officers are learning, they are *necessarily* abstracted from the operational context. I understand that learning about the job and doing the job are separate things. However, this is only to the extent that learning about the job is abstract and unconnected to operational practice.

To illustrate what I mean here imagine the following scenario. Officer P is allocated to community α . She familiarises herself with its geographical layout, its history and culture, demographic features, and the particular crime and disorder issues that have been consistently voiced within the community. There are particular aspects arising from this familiarisation process that she finds especially challenging. There is a dominant religious group in the community that officer P was unaware of, and there is a crime issue beyond her experience or knowledge. She therefore puts in extra effort to read about these things and to discuss with colleagues, local people and experts about such issues. All of this familiarisation will undoubtedly improve the way officer P operates within community α , and the familiarisation itself will involve her interacting with the community in meaningful ways. She will, in other words be learning as part of her operational duties. The learning will not be abstracted from the operational context, but rather embedded within it. In such a scenario, it becomes difficult to separate one from the other. Officer Q on the other hand, who is also allocated to community α at the same time as officer P, does none of the above. He relies rather on the criminology course he has undertaken alongside officer P to deal with the specific crime issue prevalent in community α , even though this specific crime did not feature prominently on the criminology curriculum, and he relies upon his diversity training when dealing with the dominant religious group in community α , even though this group was not mentioned in any of the training he had received. Whereas officer P is learning and developing in the specific contexts within which she is operating, officer Q is not. He is rather applying knowledge developed in the abstract, within a particular context, one not covered specifically or explicitly within the learning environment.

I appreciate that this is a selective illustration and that there are many police roles that are more generic and more easily covered within training and/or academic programmes. Likewise there are police roles that do not allow for the kind of preparatory learning experienced by officer P. However, I maintain that in all aspects of policing, learning will be better the more it is contextualised within

operational settings. The challenge for educators within the police and within academia is to work together in finding ways of embedding learning and assessment within operational practice, such that abstraction is minimalised to the extent that it ceases to be a significant issue. There will still need to be protected time to allow learning to take place, but as much as possible this should occur within a broad definition of operational duty and be seen as directly improving operational performance.

There are examples of good professional practice that could offer insights here. One example comes from *Police Now* (Tong and Hallenberg, 2018). Police Now recruit graduates into the police with the specific aim of establishing a cadre of police constables as community leaders, with the stated mission “to transform communities, reduce crime and increase the public’s confidence in policing” (Police Now, 2017, p.4). In particular, the use of a 100 day impact event, where the graduate entrants on the Police Now programme are required to present on how they have made a telling contribution in the community in which they operate, provides rich data on police knowledge in action and demonstrates how embedded learning and assessment blurs the distinction between knowledge and practice (see [Hough and Stanko, 2018](#)). Another example comes from the CoP pilot studies into developing the notion of Advanced Practitioners (Price and Kodz, 2018). Advanced Practitioners are intended to be the ‘go to’ police constables, who can offer advice and give direction to others. They are not specialists, and they are not conceived as a half rank between PC and sergeant, but rather they are experienced officers with knowledge and practical wisdom (Wood and Tong, 2009). We will gain great insights into what police knowledge looks like in practice if we can capture the detail of how, when and why officers approach an Advanced Practitioner, and correspondingly how the Advanced Practitioner responds to such approaches. The insights from Pearson, Rowe and Turner (2018) on such a fundamental and routine aspect of police work also demonstrates how police practice could be improved by understanding better how arrests are made in pressurised contexts and developing policy from this perspective, as opposed to trying to apply a legally abstract conception of arrest.

The PEQF above all else promotes the kind of practical knowledge that is evidenced by these examples and this is most evident in the thinking underpinning the idea of the PCDA. The challenge is to compose a policing curriculum that meets the needs of the police service in a way that dissolves the abstraction concern. It also needs to retain a critical, not subservient, tone (Lumsden and Goode, 2017). It requires academics to work closely with police to reconfigure what is of most importance in constructing a valid curriculum. This needs to be embedded within operational practice in innovative ways that maximise learning and assessment opportunities within practice. Where it is not possible, because of operational requirements to embed learning and assessment in practice, observation, simulation and other such techniques can be utilised.

To ensure there is support for such embedded learning and assessment we need something akin to university hospitals. We need, I suggest, the University Police Station (UPS), in which the operational services of the police are combined with the educational needs of officers. Such a UPS will be staffed by officers and academics who are committed to both the operational service and educational needs, and there will be an expectation of learning to be taking place alongside operational duties as much as possible. The UPS will also provide opportunities for research into policing to improve upon the evidence base underpinning police knowledge. The UPS could help develop a knowledge culture within the police and the number of UPS would grow as the idea of such reflective practice took hold.

Concluding remarks

There are reasons to be positive. As Lumsden and Goode (2017) note, police institutions have become much less secretive and more open to researchers, and Tong and Hallenberg (2018) refer to the growing normalisation of police / academic relationships, in terms of being more routine and less rare, involving institutions and not just individuals, and perhaps most significantly, in terms of engaging a wider selection of police officers, not simply a select few. Moreover, as Rogers and Smith (2018) note, the CoP has been established as a key stakeholder in the development of police / academic

relationships. However, I have argued that Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner provides a basis for developing policing as a socially reflexive practice and this needs to be central to the PEQF and the policing degrees of the future. Whilst it is necessary for the PEQF to address issues of professional competence and to clarify legal obligations and positional duties, this alone is not sufficient. But for the PEQF to be successful it also requires an adequate infrastructure to provide appropriate opportunities for learning and assessment to be embedded within police practice. UPS would provide this kind of institutional setting to advance a policing curriculum that fosters reflective practice. Establishing UPS will also make it clear publically that the police services are learning organisations, and that learning takes place in a more open, operational environment. This requires social acceptance that the police, as public institutions, and police officers, as the practitioners of these public institutions, require such an environment in order to develop and remain responsive to societal policing needs. This, in short, requires policing to become a socially reflexive practice: policing needs to be seen as a reflective practice within society and police officers need to become reflective practitioners, if the aims of the PEQF are to be realised.

The PEQF offers an opportunity for us to rethink what constitutes police knowledge and to reshape policing degrees accordingly. The PCDA in particular requires such change and these programmes will only achieve their intended aims if we move from an applied model of police learning, to one that embeds learning and assessment within police practice. This means putting the officer at the heart of the curriculum, understanding his or her capacity as a reflective practitioner, and ultimately as a moral agent.

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