THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTRIBUTION TO POLICE AND PROBATION TRAINING: ESSENTIAL, DESIRABLE OR AN INDULGENCE?

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Abstract

This article explores the higher education contribution to the qualifying training of police officers and probation officers and asks whether university study is an essential, desirable or indulgent ingredient in the education of people entering these careers. Claims for the benefits of higher education in vocational training for criminal justice work are examined, as is the extent to which possible benefits are delivered in practice. The importance of a graduate workforce, the potential for the experience of higher education to lead to organisational culture change, practice in the area of diversity and the exercise of professional discretion are all investigated. The article concludes that, in order to make an essential contribution to the training of these criminal justice workers, universities must deliver programmes that offer real academic challenge and opportunity. The article draws on research and policy as well as the authors’ experience as teachers and trainers in practice settings and in higher education.
In the past, there were significant differences in the arrangements for and expectations of the training and education of those intending to become probation officers and police officers. Over the past decade, the training for both occupations has moved closer together, with the use of national vocational qualifications and the creation of a range of awards based in higher education. Probation officer training has been located in higher education for much of its history. By contrast, police officer training in the United Kingdom has been provided on-the-job and by police personnel. In recent years, the probation service has made much greater use of work-based training and some police services have worked with universities to develop foundation degrees for the training of new officer recruits.

The article begins with a brief recent history of the development of probation officer and police officer training. It then considers a number of arguments that have been advanced in favour of a higher education contribution to training: the importance of having a graduate workforce and the potential for experience of higher education to lead to culture change; improved practice in the areas of diversity and the exercise of professional discretion. The article examines the extent to which these benefits can be achieved by a particular model of training and identifies some obstacles to achieving best practice in the real world.

The training and qualification frameworks for both police officers and probation officers are currently the subject of debate and development. From 1998, the qualification for probation officers was the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS), an award that combined an honours degree with a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 4 and was achieved in 24 months work and study as a probation service employee (a Trainee Probation Officer (TPO)). However, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has called time on the DipPS and no TPOs have been appointed since 2008. A new qualification framework for the probation service is in the process of development and will begin in 2010. For the first time, this framework includes the probation service officer (PSO) grade. PSOs are the staff who undertake much work with offenders assessed as posing a low or medium risk of harm. Under the new arrangements, the qualification for this grade will be a vocational qualification (VQ) at Level 3, an award which sits one step below the first year of a degree in the national qualifications framework. Qualifying as a probation officer will still require the completion of an award combining academic study at degree level with the assessment of supervised practice.

Police officers are no longer trained on a residential basis at regional training centres. These centres closed in the summer of 2006. This brought an end to the Centrex (Central Police Training and Development Agency) led Probationer Training Programme (PTP) and all 43 police forces across England and Wales were required to develop their own strategy for delivering recruit training. Since that time, student police officers have completed a national programme: the Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP). The IPLDP is underpinned by seven core learning goals set down in the ‘Learning Requirement for Police Probationer Training in England and Wales’ (Elliot and Kushner, 2003). Like
probation officers, police officers are also assessed against national occupational standards, being originally required to complete 22 units at levels 3 and 4. With effect from January 2010 this requirement is reduced to the 10 units which form part of the Skills for Justice ‘Diploma in Policing’ qualification (Skills for Justice, 2009).

This change to police training, bringing it from the regional training centre into the community, came in response to a number of drivers, including criticisms of the police service made following the Brixton riots (Scarman, 1981), in the report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson, 1999), by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) in the reports ‘Training Matters’ (HMIC, 2002a), ‘Diversity Matters’ (HMIC, 2002b) and in response to the Panorama documentary ‘The Secret Policeman’ (BBC, 2003) amongst others. Police forces are not required to train officers at degree level and a number deliver the IPLDP in-house. Others, though, have chosen to work in a wide range of partnerships with further education and higher education institutions.

In higher education, this has led to the development of foundation degrees and honours degrees in policing and a debate about whether student police officers should undertake these programmes before or after their appointment as new police officers. In the pre-employment model, students are not employed by the police and enrol on a degree course which is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Students on these programmes often gather practical experience by becoming attested special constables and, on graduation, can apply to become police officers but have no guarantee of employment. Student officers who have completed the foundation degree will be required to complete the Police Action Checklist and be assessed as operationally competent before being allowed to work independently. In the post-employment model, new recruits are appointed and complete a foundation degree which incorporates the IPLDP and the national occupational standards. Post-employment training is funded by the police force who contract with higher education to deliver and assess the foundation degree.

The new framework for probation training is a post-employment model. However, the framework does include an accelerated route to qualification as a probation officer for recruits who have already achieved an honours degree deemed relevant. It remains to be seen whether this option will encourage universities to develop and amend courses in criminal justice or community justice so that their students are well placed to take this new route.

Funding of qualifying training for probation and police services will be a key issue over the next few years as these organisations, as well as universities, face budget cuts. The Treasury is demanding a £500m saving from the police budgets over the next five years (Home Office, 2009) and the probation budget will fall by 4% in the year 2010/11 (Napo, 2010). HEFCE funded programmes are becoming more attractive to police forces across England and Wales who value the higher education contribution to the training and education of student police officers.
So why are universities seen as the right place for police officer and probation officer training? Locating vocational training in higher education is argued to bring a number of benefits to a practitioner’s ability to work in a complex and unpredictable world. It is suggested that graduates are better able to use professional discretion, that the skill of reflective thinking is important for good practice, and that well-educated probation and police officers will respond better to the needs of diverse communities. Elliot and Kushner (2003) highlighted the absolute requirement that reflective and critical thinking be a core element in student police officer training. Similarly, making changes to training is seen as a key way of changing the culture of an organisation.

Nellis (2001: 384) writes ‘a good degree – ‘graduateness’ – should broaden horizons, stimulate curiosity and imagination, foster intellectual confidence and a capacity for self-directed learning, facilitate spoken and verbal expression, and inspire a reasonable love of reading and a strong ethical sense.’

Approaching the question from a contrasting and more bureaucratic perspective, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) outlines the skills and ability expected of those who have attained various levels of qualification. It explains that, amongst other things, the holder of a bachelor’s degree with honours ‘will be able to:

• apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;
• critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;
• communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.’

The higher education experience should, therefore, be producing students who have the motivation, capacity and enthusiasm to develop their knowledge beyond the end of their training. Students should emerge from training with an ethical and informed approach to the making of judgments and the use of discretion. They should have above average communication skills, both spoken and in writing.

From the perspective of the probation service, there are two important points to be made. The first is to acknowledge the various commentators (Treadwell, 2006; McGowan, 2002) who have argued that, given its compressed nature and its incorporation of the NVQ, the DipPS was not capable of producing graduates with the attributes outlined above. Nellis (2000) outlined the positive aspects of the DipPS, but set out the risks that the qualification could cease to deliver the outcomes required of a degree. These points are countered, in part, by contributions to the debate by Jarvis (2002) and Knight and White (2001), who highlight the strengths of the DipPS as a vehicle for enabling students to integrate theory to
practice and learn how to use the skills of reflective practice.

Separate from the debate about whether the DipPS (and its successor qualification, which is certainly no more generous in the time it allows students to read, reflect and be curious) is really able to produce ‘graduateness’ in its students, is the shift in importance in probation service staffing from the probation officer grade to the probation service officer grade. Oldfield and Grimshaw (2008) highlight the steep rise in PSO numbers from 1,919 in 1997 to 7,247 in 2006. Increasingly, PSOs undertake much front-line assessment and supervision work with offenders. PSOs hold caseloads, produce reports for courts and enforce orders. The job title ‘offender manager’ can refer to a PSO as much as to a probation officer. Historically, the training needs of this grade of staff were neglected. In some parts of England and Wales, PSOs have had access to NVQs at Level 3 and to Certificate of Higher Education programmes run jointly by higher education institutions and probation employers, but the position is far from consistent across the country. As a result of this change in staffing, much probation work ‘on the ground’ is not carried out by probation officers and, hence, not by staff who achieve a graduate level of professional vocational training. This will continue to be the case after the implementation of the new qualification framework, as PSOs will be qualified at NVQ Level 3.

The police do not have a tradition as a graduate profession and, therefore, the new foundation degrees represent the highest level of external accreditation attained by newly qualified police officers. Some commentators (e.g. Stone, 2009) do argue that all qualified police officers should have achieved an honours degree. The probation debate is yet to take place within policing. Through the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) and Skills for Justice, the organisation that develops national occupational standards in the justice sector, there appears to be a growing desire for some form of common foundation degree curriculum for all police officers. The discussion as to the effectiveness or validity of such a programme of study is still in its infancy. At the time of writing, the Diploma in Policing (Skills for Justice, 2009) is being developed by Skills for Justice and this is expected to inform any future discussions regarding student police officer curriculum.

Crisp and Ward (2008: 65), writing from their experience of developing a foundation degree programme for police officers, offer ‘anecdotal evidence’ for the emergence of a ‘new more critical and culturally aware and sensitive police professionalism’. This is an encouraging start. Further evaluation of the impact of new training regimes on the attitudes and behaviour of constables as they move on into their careers will be needed to produce credible evidence that hoped-for changes are being delivered in practice.

Heslop (2010) questions the benefits and advantages of training student police officers in higher education. He suggests that student police officers who have no background of academic study prior to commencing a foundation degree at university are in some way disadvantaged and that this disadvantage extends beyond the ability to write academically.
He considers the style and approach to delivery by academic staff to be highly influential in the experience of student officers being trained at university. Even in 2010 there remains no minimum educational requirement to become a police officer in England and Wales (Home Office, 2010). Heslop (2010) also argues that the traditional delivery of police recruit training within the PTP was a ‘great leveller’ for those new officers with and without a degree level qualification. It can, though, also be argued that a foundation degree can act as a leveller, enabling all recruits to the police service the opportunity to gain knowledge, look critically at practice and benefit from the experience of higher education.

The police foundation degrees and the DipPS are examples of higher education seeking to adapt to the needs of employers and construct programmes with specific and prescriptive curriculums. Programmes such as these play a part in raising the proportion of adults who have access to higher education. The government target that 50% of young adults have access to higher education may be both unrealised and controversial, but would seem to require police and probation officers to be in the ‘higher education half’. Maintaining the concept of ‘graduateness’ whilst responding to the demands of employers and funders is a challenge.

To what extent does the qualification pathway for an occupation influence the organisational culture? There are many pressures that shape the culture of organisations like the police and probation service. The nature of training is one of these, but it would be unrealistic to expect a reform in training arrangements alone to lead to a significant change in culture. There is a wide recognition that previous attempts at culture changes within the police service have been short-lived. Calvert-Smith (2005), in his report for the Commission for Racial Equality, stated that ‘the police service is like a permafrost - thawing on the top, but still frozen solid at the core’. By taking the training of new police officers away from regional residential centres and placing them in the heart of their communities together with the exposure to higher education, it could be argued that the thaw suggested by Calvert-Smith (ibid) might begin from within and not just from the top. Moving student police officers onto a university campus is arguably not enough; engagement with suitably qualified and experienced academic staff and police trainers is required.

Making changes to police training and increasing the input from outside the organisation, and higher education in particular, is often recommended as a way of achieving cultural change. See, for example, the government reply to the Home Affairs Committee which stated ‘we acknowledge the benefits which a more academic approach could bring to the delivery of police learning and training...We agree that such an approach would expose officers to a wider cross-section of the community and weaken the negative elements of the occupational culture’ (Home Office, 1999: para.79).

The concept of police ‘canteen culture’ is a powerful one, conveying the notion of a strong supportive bond that affirms traditional ways of working, unites officers who conform and perpetuates undesirable attitudes, including sexism, racism and homophobia. More
considered writing about police culture (Foster, 2003; Waddington, 1999) argues that the picture is more complicated than this. For example, it may be more accurate to think of a variety of police cultures. It is also appropriate to consider the positive and beneficial aspects of a strong organisational ethos.

Rowe (2007) recognises that however good and well-intentioned the educators of new police officers are, the impact of becoming operational and the associated socialisation that takes place in the early weeks and months after initial training has historically resulted in the police recruit becoming subsumed within the dominant culture and often unwilling or unable to challenge the status quo. This challenge was recognised and acknowledged by Elliot and Kushner (2003) and they very specifically made the recognition of dominant occupational culture a theme of their report (Ibid: 9).

Whilst police ‘canteen culture’ is a familiar concept, the informal culture of the probation service is a less considered and discussed notion. Traditionally, the probation service has not provided its staff with canteens, so it is in tea rooms that workers set the tone and display the attitudes which transmit values and understanding of practice to new colleagues.

Significant change in the conduct and practice of probation work over the past decade has been attributed to a number of factors: the arrival of centrally imposed targets linked to funding; the creation of national standards for the management of orders reducing practitioner discretion in enforcement; and the creation of the National Offender Management Service bringing the possibility of contestability and privatisation. This is also the period during which a significant proportion of direct work with offenders has passed from PO grade staff to PSO grade staff. If probation officers do not comprise a significant majority within the organisation, then the training they receive can only have a minor influence on the way that the probation service as an organisation understands its job and its relationship with offenders and with wider society.

Can input from higher education improve professional practice in areas such as diversity, discrimination, and community and race relations? It is attitudes such as racism and sexism which are identified as being sustained by the undesirable aspects of police canteen culture. In a similar vein, commentators on probation training have argued that an understanding of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice must be central to the higher education curriculum for probation training (Knight, 2002; McGowan, 2002).

The process by which the higher education experience might make for more sensitive and culturally aware professional practice is, perhaps, not obvious. A university degree is clearly neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure that people bring fairness, justice and respect to their work. It is not a guarantee that the holder will be without inappropriate prejudice. Police and probation officers undertaking higher education can, however, be exposed to the ideas, experiences and values of people from a wider range of social and political backgrounds than would be the case if they trained exclusively within their own agencies.
Learning outcomes, reading lists and assessment tasks can be planned to ensure that students consider the complexities of working in criminal justice in a complex society.

Institutions delivering programmes for probation officers and police officers should be encouraged to play to this strength and ensure that students are benefiting from the best of higher education. The DipPS, and its successor qualification, already have a packed curriculum, with much of the input delivered using distance learning methods. As a result, opportunities to use visiting speakers who could provide students with a distinctive voice or perspective are hard to arrange.

Central to the IPLDP is an understanding of community and of human and social diversity. The police service, and others, has been the subject of much justifiable criticism about discriminatory practice over the past 30 years (Scarman, 1981; Macpherson, 1999). In these and many more recent reviews, investigations and reports, accusations of poor community relations and the absence of community awareness and engagement is cited as a contributory factor to police failings. The embedding of the Police Race and Diversity Learning Development Programme (PRDLDP) developed by the NPIA (2004) must be central to any police training. Engagement with diverse communities should equally be at the core of any such programme. University campuses are often richly diverse micro-communities and the training of police officers within a campus setting offers the opportunity for engagement with a wide range of members of the public in a way that was not possible at police regional training centres.

Key to good practice in the area of diversity is the ability to exercise appropriate professional discretion. Canton and Eadie (2008: 101) write about the ‘dilemma of discretion – the need for both the impartiality and predictability of the rules, and the flexibility to take account of the very many ways in which circumstances and individuals may differ.’ Despite moves to impose consistency and standardise practice, police and probation work is a constant exercise of discretion. Police officers must decide who to stop, whether to arrest and which questions to put. Probation officers make decisions about the enforcement of orders, the assessment of risk, and the allocation of resources and opportunities.

It is argued that training in higher education enables criminal justice practitioners to be more effective users of the discretion with which they are entrusted. Perhaps this is because academic study encourages the challenging of assumptions, the questioning of texts and the recognition that there may be a range of solutions to a problem. For example, on probation training programmes students write case study based assignments in which they are explicitly asked to write about other options that they may have taken in their work, noting both the constraints and the discretion at play. Similarly, student police officers engage in role-play exercises with members of the public who are all volunteers from local communities. Student officers are required to write reflectively and critically regarding their performance in the role-plays. They are additionally assessed in the way they apply discretion and exercise their powers.
Finally, in addition to considering the arguments advanced in favour of a higher education input into training, it is important to consider the extent to which potential benefits are delivered in practice. One potential benefit is the possibility of inter-professional education and learning (IPE and IPL). Higher education institutions that offer courses across a range of occupations can run joint sessions in areas such as mental health, child protection, domestic violence and youth work. In this way, student professionals have the opportunity to learn more about the roles and responsibilities of other agencies and find their stereotypes and assumptions of other workers challenged whilst training (Anderson and Thorpe, 2008). This has the potential to leave them better equipped for multi-agency work and the management of complex cases in the future. Such learning opportunities can, though, be easier to propose than to deliver against a background of crammed curriculums and incompatible timetables.

The location and accommodation within the university of students and staff working on these programmes can also be an important. Some universities have provided purpose-built or specially designed facilities for police programmes. However, Heslop (2007) studied the development of a post-entry foundation degree programme for police officers in the north of England. He wrote:

"The recently formed university Police Studies Department is housed in what can not too inaccurately be described as a large ‘Portakabin’ type building, located right on the very periphery of the campus. Whilst there may be perfectly sound administrative reasons for this, the location and structure became symbolically significant. (Heslop, 2007)"

Work-based programmes such as post-employment police foundation degrees and the new probation degree have timescales and assessment requirements that are set by the needs of the employer. These often fall outside traditional academic routines and timetables, and require universities to be flexible with processes and procedures. Where failure of academic work risks the termination of employment, neither students nor their employing agencies can wait months for the next university exam board. This point is made by Banim and McGrath (2008) who also identify that university facilities may not be geared up to meet the needs of students who are on campus for the whole of a working day and attending programmes without traditional holidays.

From the perspective of the university, involvement in police and probation education could, perhaps even should, bring benefits to the quality and relevance of research and scholarship. Future practitioners, managers and chief officers studying at university are given the opportunity to learn from and challenge the ideas of academics whose research and writing can influence policy developments. Equally importantly, academics have regular opportunities to talk to those involved on the frontline and who are familiar with current practices, priorities and pressures. The number of universities directly involved in probation
officer training has declined considerably over the past 20 years and now stands at three. As a consequence, the number of academics whose teaching responsibilities bring them into regular contact with probation staff has declined. Weaker links between academia and the profession mean less opportunity for collaborative research and evaluation, as well as fewer ways for research findings to influence the development of practice.

Locating training in higher education should ensure that curriculum development takes account of perspectives from both inside and outside the agency. However, a partnership with higher education offers the police and probation service benefits other than those of course content and learning environment. Universities have robust and credible structures for assessing students and regulating awards. Those who achieve a foundation degree in policing or a Certificate in Higher Education in community justice have attained an award that is understood and recognised beyond their immediate employment. The quality and status of the training linked with a particular occupation will be a factor that can help the recruitment and retention of staff.

Looking into the future, police and probation services will be assessing the financial cost of their training arrangements and making decisions that are about cost effectiveness just as much as about learning outcomes. In the police context it is clear that pre-entry foundation degrees are cheaper than post-entry ones. In the probation context, PSOs are both cheaper to train and cheaper to employ than probation officers.

In conclusion, this paper does suggest that the contribution that higher education, through training, makes to the shape and nature of police and probation work can be overstated. Training is only one of a number of factors that dictate how workers perceive their job, how they interact with and judge the public, and how values and work practices are transmitted from one generation of workers to the next. How organisations are funded and how performance is monitored, as well as the balance of power between different groups and grades of staff, all play a key part in shaping organisational culture.

Working in partnership with higher education does bring clear benefits to police and probation services. Some of these benefits are organisational and administrative. Employers are effectively 'contracting out' the tasks of training, assessment and certification to specialist providers. Universities provide qualifications which have credibility and status beyond the immediate requirements of the job. However, making a genuine contribution to the education of police officers or probation officers requires universities to do more than agree to administer and deliver a programme that the agencies could have run in-house.

Programmes need to incorporate sufficient time, despite their busy timetables and need to combine academic work with assessed practice, to allow students to explore ideas, concepts and perspectives which extend their thinking beyond current policy and orthodox practice. Academics need to find ways to convince trainee professionals of the importance and value of
theoretical perspectives on their operational tasks. Teaching contributions should be made by lecturer and speakers from a pool that extends beyond current and recent practitioners. Student police officers and probation officers need to have the opportunity for both informal meetings and formal inter-professional education experiences with students embarking on other careers and courses of study. Trainee employees need time to be students.

In difficult financial times, sending trainee probation and police officers to university may be seen as an indulgence which cannot be afforded. However, this article has sought to outline the clear and desirable benefits that higher education can bring to training for these workers. To be able to argue that higher education is making an essential contribution to the development of these staff, universities need to ensure that their professional programmes offer real academic challenge and opportunity whilst being relevant to the reality of practice. To do less than this is to sell the higher education experience short.

References


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