

Education and research for 21st century policing: Collaboration, competition and collusion

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Abstract

In many countries around the world, there is a drive to develop formal educational qualifications for the police in support of a policing profession and identity based on an explicit body of knowledge, as well as tacit craft. This shift also includes a greater emphasis on continuing professional development and capability enhancement for existing officers and staff. This paper analyses the establishment and growth of a national, inter-organizational learning network across the nations of the UK, taking account of the different policy contexts and based on a close collaboration and co-design of education between academics and practitioners. It includes a variety of geographical, demographic and organisational circumstances in policing. The paper provides a first hand, but critical and reflective account of the planning, funding and resourcing of a policing collaboration between police and academics working with a national UK university. It examines the academic and practitioner considerations that education providers and police forces throughout Europe and globally need to be mindful of when undertaking such ventures. It proposes a model of collaboration that avoids either the police or the academics taking over the venture (competition) or alternatively failing to challenge each other's ideas (collusion). Given the complex and dynamic context for law enforcement throughout Europe, this model, it is argued, deserves further examination and testing in other contexts.

Keywords: collaboration; coproduction; network; police-academic partnership; Mode 2 research.

1. Introduction

Policing in the UK, across all four nations, has reached a watershed moment in its development (Hamlin, 2015). A similar point has been reached in many police forces in Europe and around the world as they police societies in turbulent times (van Dijk, Hoogewoning and Punch, 2015). There has been considerable change in the demand for policing, and in policing responses. The profession is almost unrecognisable compared with as

little as ten years ago, with technology playing a major role in that transformation. The advent and widespread accessibility of online social media has led to a paradigm shift for policing services, taking it from a service concerned with protecting physical public spaces to an interconnected web of complexity in transnational virtual and real public and private spaces. A substantial increase in vulnerability has emerged from the world of cyber, and the modern-day officer is now faced with a very different world to that of their predecessors.

Furthermore, society is changing as a result of globalisation and other factors, leading to changing expectations of the police, declining deference to authority, greater social and economic polarisation within societies, and other factors which place greater demand on all public services, including police forces and their individual officers and staff. Policing demand is a reflection of the society that the police serve, so these fundamental political, economic, social and technological shifts are fundamental to the tasks and roles of police. These have consequences for the education and training of police. These changes require stronger research-based practice underpinned by professional education.

2. A shift in focus for policing education and training

The greater range and complexity of problems facing the police have caused a change in strategy about how to develop and enhance competence and capability in the policing workforce. These are called 'wicked' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) problems (where the problem itself may be novel and where views about problem diagnosis and solution are not agreed). Grint (2005) notes that wicked problems are not well served by 'command and control' leadership or unthinking adherence to existing procedures and practices. The novelty and emergent nature of problems and demand requires a workforce that is able to problem-solve, not just carry out orders; and to critically appraise novel situations. Furthermore, the increasing scrutiny of policing actions and budgetary constraints has led to the greater interest in evidence-based policing and practice (Greene, 2014; Sparrow, 2011). Evidence-based practice, in any field, requires a research base for practice (Briner, Denyer and Rousseau, 2009), and an ability on the part of practitioners to critically reflect on the quality of that evidence. This has led a number of police forces, encouraged in the UK by the College of Policing, to engage more closely with academic (university) institutions, both to create an evidence base through research, and also to develop university-level qualifications to strengthen the professional foundations of policing.

Behind the controversies about qualifications and the spread of evidence-based practice, two debates can be discerned. The first, familiar for some time now, is how far policing is a craft or a science (a debate which

exists in a number of professions in various forms), and therefore how far formal education (such as university education) can equip a police officer for the practical world of policing. The second debate is about the type of collaboration between academics and police that will best suit both parties.

On the latter, what makes a collaboration between police forces and universities effective? There have been many calls for closer collaboration between police and universities (e.g. Fyfe, 2015; Fyfe and Wilson, 2012; Weisburd and Neyroud, 2011; Stanko and Dawson, 2015), but also there have been signs of frustration on both sides. The difficulties of collaboration between academics and practitioners are relatively well documented in a number of fields, including health, local government and the private sector (e.g. Barley, Meyer and Gash, 1988; Bartunek and Louis, 1996). There have been concerns on both sides. Practitioners report difficulties in understanding and applying academic work, with complaints about academic jargon and abstraction, and research reports being too long, too late or too retrospective for practical application. For their part, academics often complain that practitioners ignore, or do not even wait for, the evidence from research they have commissioned, but move into action opportunistically, and treat research findings as more robust than the academics claim.

How, then, to establish a collaboration between academics and practitioners which overcomes these difficulties and enables a feasible and productive working relationship which is effective in policing professionalization and education? This cannot be taken for granted. 'Partnership working' is very fashionable and widely advocated in western policy circles, but research shows that it is more complex and more uncertain in outcomes than the glib policy phrase suggests. An overview from Vangen (2016) notes that 'research... concludes... that collaborations are complex, slow to produce outputs, and by no means guaranteed to deliver synergies and advantage.' In part that lack of collaborative advantage may be because of unrealistic views of collaboration, that it is self-evidently 'win-win' for all parties and involves complete consensus (Straus, 2002). Alternatively, among practitioners, some cynicism about the value of collaboration is frequent, being seen as largely politically driven or pragmatically simply a way to save money.

However, Gray (1989) offers a more clear-sighted view of collaboration: as the process through which two or more actors engage in a constructive management of differences in order to define common problems and develop joint solutions based on provisional agreements that may co-exist with disagreement and dissent (Gray, 1989). This definition permits the appreciation of the productive role of difference and tension in creative processes (Thomas, 1992) and the avoidance of 'groupthink' in collaboration. The following sections outline such a collaboration in the UK, and then presents a model (Figure 2) of the features of the collaboration which, we suggest, contribute to its effectiveness.

3. Collaborative purpose of The Open University Centre for Policing Research and Learning

The Centre for Policing Research and Learning (CPRL) is a collaboration between The Open University (as a university with a presence across the whole of the UK) and, currently, 18 UK police forces. The collaboration has been growing rapidly, with the number of

collaborating forces going from 10 to 18 within the last year (2016). Those forces form the network that steers the work of the Centre. Work is undertaken jointly in the fields of Education, Research and Knowledge Exchange (as illustrated in Figure 1). Some outputs from the Centre are freely available to all police forces. The advantages of being a member of CPRL is shaping and steering the strategy, piloting and experimenting with the research and education, and having first sight of new findings and insights from the work. Some activities are only available to members of the CPRL.

The collaboration aims to achieve outcomes for police organizations and their workforces in three main streams of work, each of which overlaps and helps inform the other streams in a synergistic way. The three streams are concerned with education, including continuing professional development; practice-informed problem-solving research; and knowledge exchange. With The Open University's technological as well as face-to-face reach across the UK, the activities can be online, audio, video, or face-to-face, depending on the activity. The streams in overlap are shown in Figure 1.

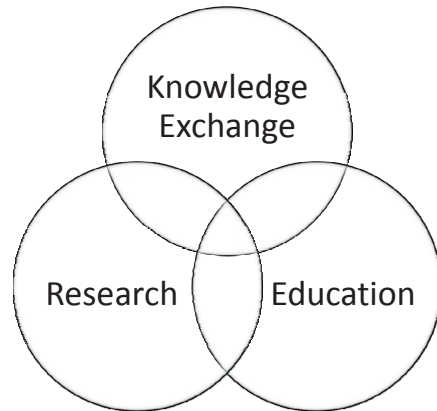


Figure 1: The CPRL core focus of work

The Police and University partnership together mapped out and developed five entry points into education, both informal and formal. Police officers and staff can experience end-to-end learning, from informal free learning in bite-sized pieces right through to the highest university qualification of PhD, and with substantial learning resources in between to suit a variety of ranks, grades, jobs and personal circumstances.

The informal educational materials, called Open Educational Resources (OER's), are available to anyone anywhere in electronic format and vary in topic, treatment and length of study. Many forces are seeing this informal, unaccredited learning as valuable in promoting continuous professional development (CPD), and some forces have put links to these materials on their intranets. At the higher academic level of qualifications there are part-time PhDs, where supervision is by academics, and in some cases includes suitably qualified

police. The other entry points into education include accredited programmes such as undergraduate modules in a range of subjects relevant to policing (from across the University and not restricted to criminology), to undertaking a full degree part-time (which will become more important for serving police officers given the policy context), and a Postgraduate Certificate in Evidence-based Practice, also part-time and based on blended learning. These qualifications map to the College of Policing landscape for CPD.

In research, the Centre police and academics jointly decide on particular research themes and questions to pursue and there is debate about how to frame interesting questions which are both high-quality academically and also contribute to policy and practice in policing. Academics come from a range of disciplines across the University and so research reflects a wide variety of issues, from forensics and witness identification procedures; through cybercrime and analysis of social media use by the public and the police, through to demand management, public value, leadership and ethics. Most research projects have an element of co-research (Hartley and Benington, 2000); or participatory action research (Whyte, 1991; McIntyre, 2007), which together can be summarised as concerned with Mode 2 research (Gibbons et al., 1994), whereby the expertise of both academics and relevant stakeholders is deployed in framing, carrying out and/or evaluating research. In this sense, the research is practice-informed research as well as research-informed practice.

An innovative element of the research programme is to include seconded police officers and staff as full-time Senior Practitioner Fellows in some research projects for periods of between three and six months. The aim is that the police get closer and more informed insights into how research is undertaken, and they also contribute insights into the design and carrying out of the research to ensure it is relevant and productive for the police.

In the stream of work on knowledge exchange, academics work with police to explore the value and use of research evidence, given the commitment of the Centre for Policing Research and Learning (CPRL) not only to creating research evidence but also using it in practice, because the knowing-doing gap is often a problematic area for many organizations (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999). Here, the craft of policing meets the research knowledge of the university in a way in which

each can debate with the other and can explore different sources of evidence to use in practice. Briner et al. (2009: 19) argue that evidence-based practice needs to be based on the *'conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence'* from four major sources: academically validated research; professional expertise, contextual data (e.g. the organization or local situation) and stakeholder perceptions. These sources of data come together in the Centre's pioneering of evidence cafés (Clough et al., 2017), which take place in police stations with opportunities for plenary and small group discussion of whether and how evidence works in practice (or not). Additionally, conferences, webinars and podcasts add to knowledge exchange. Evidence-based champions are supported by materials on the Centre's website to mentor and guide others to engage in evidence-based change.

A fuller account of the activities and the outputs of CPRL are available on the Centre's website (<http://centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk>).

4. Collaborative design and structure of The Open University Centre for Policing Research and Learning

How are these three streams, the programme of work (education, research and knowledge exchange), designed and structured to ensure high value collaboration? The Centre for Policing Research and Learning (CPRL) is based on a close collaboration as a legally constituted membership network, between the Open University (as a local, regional, national and international UK university with a presence in all parts of the UK) and, currently, 18 police forces.

CPRL is genuinely collaborative and the police and academics jointly steer the ambitious programme of education, research and knowledge exchange, with meetings chaired by the police who works closely with the academic director. Each force has at least one representative at each Membership Group meeting, held quarterly. Collaboration is woven into the design of the partnership, so, as noted earlier, the police, as well as the academics, shape the research focus, the research questions and the undertaking of the research through discussion and debate about strategic priorities within the funding. Voting is discouraged so that any differences in views are explored and resolution is achieved through debate.

Police partner forces vary in size, geographical location, performance as measured by inspection, and policing challenges. This provides a rich variety of contexts in which to design education, conduct research, test out findings and share innovative practices. The Consortium also engages with the College of Policing and with CEPOL.

5. A working model of academic-practitioner collaboration

In this section, we reflect on ‘what works’ in the CPRL collaboration and propose a model (illustrated in Figure 2), yet to be tested, about collaboration between police and academics.

The CPRL collaboration between The Open University and UK police forces seems to be successful on a number of counts, for example, rapid increase in number of police force members; police satisfaction in recent evaluation analysis; growing number of academics getting involved; contact analytics about the Centre website; publications from the Centre; use of informal and formal learning resources attendance at evidence cafés. However, it would be foolish to be complacent about success, given the salutary reminder from Vangen (2016) that collaboration is neither easy nor necessarily productive. We reflect in a theory-driven way on what seems to be working and invite others to extend this to other collaborations.

From research evidence, it is known that some collaborations create advantage to the partners while others can either get bogged down in process and/or fail to ensure that actions happen not just talk (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Yet, network-based collaborations can be both innovative and productive (Hartley and Benington, 2006). What makes the difference? Here we draw on two theoretical frameworks to propose that collaborations require a recognition of difference and the management of that difference, in the way that Barbara Gray (1989) suggests.

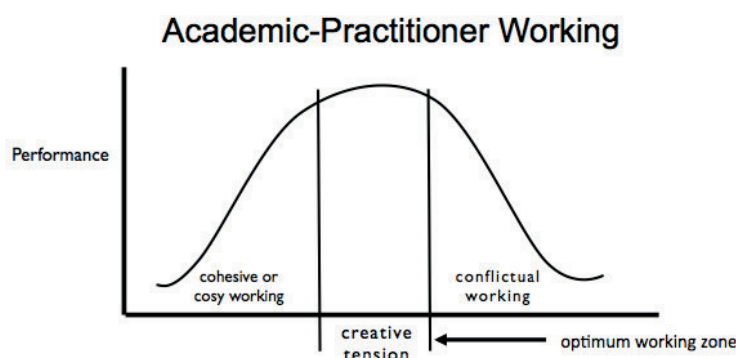
First, collaborations can become unproductive where competition arises within the collaboration (Ansell and Gash, 2008) with each partner aiming to maximise its gain at the expense of, or without regard for the interests of, the partner. One partner may be more powerful than the other and seek to impose its views and goals on the other without sufficiently understanding the

differences which can either mar or support the collaboration (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). Or one partner may believe so strongly in its own organizational goals, values and perspectives that they are unable to listen to, understand or accept alternative perspectives. Such a competitive situation, existing alongside a collaboration can lead to unproductive tension, conflict and continual attempts to get the upper hand.

On the other hand, perhaps surprisingly, collaborations can have too little conflict. This may not sound a problem if the collaboration is aiming to achieve ‘win-win’ outcomes, but there is a rich history of research which shows that too little tension or productive conflict within teams, organizations and partnerships leads to less innovation and lower productivity (Eisenhardt et al., 1997). Too little conflict can mean there is apathy in the collaboration or that the group holds very similar views and so may not be prepared for change. It may suggest collusion rather than healthy challenge and the energetic outlining of alternatives (see also Ansell and Gash, 2008; Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Eisenhardt et al. (1997: 43) suggest that teams and organizations require a degree of issue based (but not interpersonal) conflict, constructively managed, to avoid group think. Such conflict can provide leaders and managers *‘with a more inclusive range of information, a deeper understanding of the issues, and a richer set of possible solutions’*. They and other authors, however, note that the disagreements need to be about issues not people in order to achieve this variety and depth of thought and ideas. In other words, conflict is about ideas and possible actions but is not the damaging undermining or attack on people or roles that is sometimes considered to be conflict. This is not always easy, as scholars acknowledge (e.g. Whetten and Cameron, 2005). Some organizations try to use this insight of constructive challenge very deliberately, such as in the British Army, or the UK health service’s use of tempered radicals to effect change at work (Meyerson, 2008).

The awareness of either too much or too little conflict in a collaboration leads us to propose the need to propose a model which we suggest applies to the CPRL collaboration and which is likely to be relevant to a wide range of other collaborations. This is shown in Figure 2. We suggest that performance is affected by the degree of conflict with both too much conflict but also too little conflict leading to lowered performance.

Figure 2. Relationship between academics and practitioners



In the CPRL the design of the collaboration, and its climate of cooperation means that there are strong attempts to ensure that differences in interests, goals and values are surfaced, in Membership Group meetings, and through the use of Mode 2 research and education. This provides the degree of disagreement and exploration of alternatives which is constructive for the activities of CPRL. The differences may come between police and academics, though interestingly they may also come from among police from different forces and from among academics with different disciplinary backgrounds. The Centre works hard in meetings and in all virtual interactions to support a climate of trust and respect, and listening to someone else's views so that alternative perspectives are not suppressed but are explored. Decisions are through discussion not through voting. Debate and discussion are encouraged through regular research seminars and events and through reflection prior to decision-making. In these ways, the collaboration fosters the acceptance and exploration of difference works with those differences constructively. At the same time, there is a strong focus on outputs and ensuring that the collaboration does not end up being a talking shop. The collaboration is aided by having a number of 'boundary-spanners' who are active in the collaboration. These are either police who have experience of academic work (e.g. through having a PhD or being senior practitioner fellows) or academics that have

experience of organizational and police life (e.g. former police or academics who have undertaken extensive action research). Boundary-spanners, we suggest, can facilitate greater cooperation and enable translation between theory and practice.

6. Conclusions

Both police and academics are living through a time of turbulent change, both in their own organizations, and in their service to society. Collaboration between them can support innovative, radical and robust approaches to the professionalization and improvement of policing. While collaboration can be freighted with difficulties, and sometimes does not produce meaningful or productive outcomes, the opportunities for academics to collaborate with police have never been better, as the police grapple with complex and 'wicked' problems. This paper has outlined a particular UK collaboration between The Open University and 18 police forces in three interlocking streams of work on informal and formal education, research and knowledge exchange. The paper then proposes some elements of collaboration that avoid either competition or collusion between partners in order to hit a 'sweet spot' to maximise the quality and effect of education and research for 21st century policing.

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