



Professionalisation through Higher Education? Graduate Outcomes and Student Development within the Police Education Qualifications Framework: An Exploratory Study of Early Professional Policing Cohorts in England and Wales and How it has Evolved

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Opinion

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Abstract

The professionalisation of policing in England and Wales has been one of the most significant areas of police reform during the past two decades. Central to this agenda was the introduction of the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF), which sought to enhance professional standards through the integration of higher education, operational competence and evidence-informed practice. This study examines the experiences, perceived development and employment outcomes of one of the earliest cohorts of students completing a Degree in Professional Policing between 2019 and 2022. Adopting an exploratory qualitative design, data were collected from 34 final-year undergraduate students through structured discussions and observational field notes. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes relating to personal development, professional preparedness and employability. Four principal themes emerged: the development of professional confidence, enhanced critical thinking and reflective practice, employability through experiential learning, and increased understanding of diversity, vulnerability and community engagement. Graduate destination data demonstrated strong progression into policing and wider public protection professions, with more than half of participants securing, or progressing towards, police officer roles. Whilst the author never intended to use this research data subsequent revolutions of police recruitment initiated a way this data could be used to make assumptions and comparisons to the modern landscape. The findings suggest that Professional Policing degree programmes can contribute positively to the development of analytical capability, professional identity and career readiness. Participants reported that opportunities to combine academic study with practical experiences, including Special Constabulary and police staff roles, enhanced their understanding of contemporary policing and strengthened employability prospects. However, subsequent developments in police recruitment policy, including the introduction of the Police Constable Entry Programme (PCEP) in 2024, indicate that the professionalisation agenda has evolved towards a model incorporating multiple entry pathways into policing. This article argues that the value of higher education in policing should not be viewed solely through the achievement of a degree qualification but through its contribution to reflective practice, ethical decision-making, evidence-based policing and professional competence. Whilst the findings provide preliminary support for the aims of the PEQF, further longitudinal research is required to determine whether degree-based police education contributes to improved operational effectiveness, workforce retention, organisational legitimacy and public confidence. The study contributes to the emerging evidence base surrounding police professionalisation and represents one of the earliest evaluations of graduate outcomes associated with the pre-join Degree in Professional Policing pathway during the formative implementation period of the PEQF.

Keywords: Police Education; Professionalisation; Practice; Evidence Based; Uk Police Education

Abbreviations

PEQF: Police Education Qualifications Framework; PCEP: Police Constable Entry Programme; PCDA: Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship; DHEP: Degree Holder Entry Programme; DPP: Degree in Professional Policing; IPLDP: Initial Police Learning and Development Programme.

Introduction

The relationship between policing and higher education has been a subject of debate for several decades. Historically, police training within England and Wales emphasised occupational competence and practical experience rather than formal academic study [1,2]. The police constable was traditionally viewed as a practitioner whose skills were acquired through operational exposure and workplace socialisation rather than through scholarly learning. However, the role of the police officer has changed significantly since the establishment of the Metropolitan Police Service in 1829. Contemporary policing requires officers to address increasingly complex social issues, including vulnerability, safeguarding, cybercrime, organised crime, public protection and community engagement [3,4]. Consequently, there has been growing recognition that modern policing requires advanced cognitive skills, critical analysis and evidence-informed decision making in addition to traditional occupational competence [5]. Contemporary policing requires officers to engage with increasingly complex areas of practice including vulnerability, safeguarding, cyber-enabled crime, organised criminality and evidence-based decision-making. Such developments have prompted growing support for the professionalisation of policing through higher education and the adoption of research-informed practice [6,7]. Furthermore, professionalisation has become a central strategic objective of the College of Policing, reflected in the introduction of the Police Education Qualifications Framework [8,9].

The establishment of the PEQF was intended to address these challenges by introducing nationally consistent educational standards across police recruitment pathways [8]. Through the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP), and Degree in Professional Policing (DPP), the framework places higher education at the centre of police professional development. Despite substantial policy interest in the PEQF, relatively little empirical evidence exists concerning student experiences of the Professional Policing degree route. This article contributes to that emerging evidence base by exploring student development and graduate outcomes amongst one of the earliest cohorts completing the programme.

Literature Review

The Development of Police Education

The educational preparation of police officers has evolved gradually over the last century. During much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries recruitment emphasised character, discipline and physical capability rather than educational attainment [10]. Early attempts to introduce higher education into policing emerged during the 1960s when Essex Constabulary funded officers to undertake university studies as part of an experimental development programme [11]. While researchers highlighted potential benefits associated with critical thinking and broader intellectual development, resistance persisted because policing continued to be viewed primarily as an occupational craft. Subsequent reviews highlighted deficiencies within police training and leadership development. Reports by HMIC and inquiries such as the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry reinforced calls for enhanced training and professional development [12].

Professionalisation and Higher Education
Professionalisation theory suggests that occupations acquire authority and legitimacy through specialised knowledge, formal qualifications, ethical standards and professional autonomy [13,14]. Within policing, educational reform has increasingly been viewed as a mechanism through which professional competence, public trust and organisational legitimacy can be strengthened [8,15]. Advocates of police professionalisation argue that higher education develops analytical thinking, evidence-informed decision-making and reflective practice, all of which are increasingly necessary in contemporary policing environments [6,7].

Educational partnerships between universities and police organisations have therefore been viewed as essential mechanisms through which occupational competence can be combined with academic knowledge [16]. The PEQF represents the culmination of these developments. Designed following recommendations arising from the Home Office Police Innovation Fund project, the framework sought to integrate workplace competence and academic learning whilst aligning policing with other recognised professions that require accredited educational entry standards [9,17].

Critiques of Police Professionalisation

Despite broad support for police professionalisation, concerns remain regarding the effectiveness of degree-based entry routes. Critics have questioned whether higher education adequately prepares officers for operational policing and whether graduate entry pathways risk creating

divisions between graduate and non-graduate officers [9,18]. More recent debate has also focused on accessibility and recruitment, particularly concerning whether degree-entry requirements may reduce the attractiveness of policing to some applicants [19]. Public attitudes towards police education appear to be complex, with evidence suggesting that while mandatory degree requirements may be contested, there remains substantial support for officers possessing specialised policing-related education and expertise.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by professionalisation theory [13,14], which proposes that occupations develop professional status through specialist knowledge, educational accreditation, ethical standards and recognised systems of regulation. The PEQF may therefore be interpreted as part of a broader attempt to reposition policing as a knowledge-based profession capable of integrating evidence-informed practice with operational competence [8,9]. Within policing, professionalisation has increasingly focused upon the integration of higher education into recruitment and development systems. The PEQF can therefore be understood as an institutional attempt to strengthen policing's status as a knowledge-based profession [8,9]. Professionalisation theory provides a useful analytical lens through which student experiences may be interpreted because it highlights the relationship between educational attainment, professional identity and occupational legitimacy.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative research design was adopted to examine student perceptions of development, employability and professional readiness. The study involved 34 final-year students enrolled on a Professional Policing degree programme, representing 75 per cent of the graduating cohort. Data was collected through structured discussions conducted during a cohort event. Participants responded to three questions concerning personal development, experiential learning opportunities and future employment intentions. Observational field notes were recorded and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns across participant responses and facilitated the development of conceptual themes reflecting common experiences and perceptions.

Findings

Theme One: Professional Confidence

The most frequently reported outcome concerned increased confidence. Participants described improvements

in communication, presentation skills and professional interaction. These findings support previous research suggesting that higher education contributes positively to professional identity formation and self-efficacy [11]. Students also reported increased personal maturity and resilience, indicating that educational experiences extended beyond the acquisition of policing knowledge and contributed to broader personal development.

Theme Two: Critical Thinking and Reflective Practice

Participants consistently emphasised enhanced analytical and critical thinking capabilities. They reported increased confidence in evaluating evidence, questioning assumptions and applying theoretical concepts to practical policing issues. These findings are consistent with the aspirations of educational reform identified by Kushner, et al. [5] who argued that critical reflection should form a core component of police learning.

Theme Three: Employability Through Experiential Learning

Experiential opportunities such as Special Constable roles and emergency call handler positions were perceived as highly beneficial. Students reported that these experiences enabled them to contextualise theoretical learning and provided insight into operational policing environments. Participants frequently associated these opportunities with increased employability, enhanced recruitment prospects and greater professional confidence.

Theme Four: Understanding Communities and Diversity

Students reported improved understanding of diversity, vulnerability and community engagement. They described a greater appreciation of the challenges associated with policing increasingly diverse communities and recognised the importance of inclusive and ethical policing practice. This finding supports broader professionalisation objectives which emphasise public trust, legitimacy and community-focused policing.

Graduate Employment Outcomes

Employment destination data indicated strong progression into policing professions. Amongst participants, 53 per cent had secured, or were close to securing, police officer positions following graduation. A further 14 per cent had obtained employment as emergency call handlers, whilst others entered intelligence, prison and emergency service professions. The largest proportion entered Nottinghamshire

Police, accounting for 38 per cent of respondents, whilst others secured employment with forces across England and Wales. These findings suggest that the Professional Policing degree may function as an effective pipeline into both policing and broader public protection careers.

Discussion

The findings provide preliminary evidence supporting the educational objectives underpinning the PEQF. Participants consistently described growth in confidence, critical thinking and professional awareness, all of which are central to contemporary models of police professionalisation [8,9]. The development of critical thinking reported by participants aligns with wider evidence-based policing literature. Sherman (2013) [6] argues that contemporary policing increasingly requires officers capable of utilising research evidence to inform professional judgment, whilst Lum, et al. [7] emphasise the importance of analytical capability in effective policing. The findings of this study suggest that students perceived degree-level education as contributing positively towards these competencies. Particularly significant was the role of experiential learning. The opportunity to engage directly with policing practice appeared to strengthen employability and reinforce theoretical understanding. This finding supports arguments that police education should integrate academic learning with practical experience rather than treating the two domains as separate forms of development [16]. The significance attached to practical learning opportunities is also consistent with recent research emphasising reflective practice, authentic assessment and work-integrated learning as critical components of professional police education. Such approaches are increasingly regarded as necessary mechanisms through which academic learning can be translated into operational competence. However, the data do not establish whether educational attainment improves operational effectiveness. Questions concerning performance, retention, misconduct, promotion and community trust remain unanswered. Consequently, while the findings support aspects of the professionalisation agenda, they cannot provide definitive evidence of PEQF effectiveness.

Contemporary Developments in Police Education and Recruitment Since 2022 Study

The policing landscape in England and Wales has evolved significantly since the data presented in this study were collected in 2022. At the time of data collection, the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) represented the principal reform agenda for police recruitment and professionalisation. The framework sought to establish

higher education as a central component of police entry and development through the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP), and Degree in Professional Policing (DPP) routes [8]. Since then, concerns have emerged across several police forces regarding recruitment challenges, abstraction rates associated with academic study, workforce capacity and the practical demands placed upon student officers. These concerns contributed to a review of police entry pathways and, in 2024, the introduction of the Police Constable Entry Programme (PCEP), a non-degree route into policing. The introduction of the PCEP represented a significant policy adjustment, creating a fourth national entry route alongside the existing PEQF pathways. Simultaneously, the Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) was formally closed. Importantly, the introduction of the PCEP does not represent a rejection of the professionalisation agenda. Rather, the College of Policing has stated that all entry routes remain aligned to the national policing curriculum and continue to emphasise critical thinking, ethical decision-making and evidence-informed practice. The policy change reflects an attempt to increase flexibility and accessibility within police recruitment whilst maintaining educational standards.

Alongside these structural changes, wider academic debate has emerged regarding the value of degree-level policing qualifications. Recent research suggests that although public support for a mandatory degree requirement remains mixed, there is substantial support for police officers possessing police-specific higher education qualifications and specialist knowledge. Public confidence appears to be associated less with possession of a generic degree and more with demonstrable competence and professional expertise [19]. Furthermore, contemporary research continues to support the educational principles underpinning PEQF. Recent literature has highlighted the importance of reflective practice, authentic assessment, experiential learning and work-integrated learning in developing professional competence amongst police recruits. These educational approaches remain central to many Professional Policing programmes and continue to underpin broader professionalisation objectives [20].

Taken together, these developments suggest that the debate has shifted from whether education should play a role in police preparation to determining the most effective balance between academic study, practical training and organisational flexibility. Rather than a simple binary choice between graduate and non-graduate entry, contemporary policy appears to favour multiple pathways that can accommodate diverse learner backgrounds whilst maintaining consistent professional standards [21-23].

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single university and therefore findings may not be representative of Professional Policing students nationally. Second, the study relied upon participant perceptions rather than objective measures of professional competence or operational effectiveness. Third, the celebratory nature of the event may have influenced responses towards more positive accounts of student experience. Finally, the author's position as programme leader created the possibility of researcher bias despite the use of anonymised observations and thematic coding procedures.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences and employment outcomes of one of the earliest cohorts of students undertaking a Degree in Professional Policing during the implementation phase of the Police Education Qualifications Framework. The findings indicate that participants perceived significant gains in confidence, communication skills, critical thinking, professional awareness and employability. Graduate destination data further demonstrated strong progression into policing and associated public protection professions.

These findings provide support for the proposition that higher education can make a positive contribution to police preparation and professional identity development. The study further supports the argument that experiential learning opportunities, including Special Constabulary service and operational police staff roles, play an important role in bridging the gap between academic theory and professional practice.

However, developments in police recruitment policy since 2022 suggest that the professionalisation debate has become more nuanced than originally envisaged. The introduction of the Police Constable Entry Programme in 2024 has demonstrated that policymakers increasingly favour a flexible model of entry that accommodates both graduate and non-graduate routes while maintaining nationally consistent professional standards.

Consequently, the findings of this study should not be interpreted as evidence that degree-entry policing should be the sole pathway into the profession. Rather, they indicate that Professional Policing degrees can represent a valuable route into policing and can contribute positively to preparedness, employability and professional development. The broader question is no longer whether higher education has a role within policing but how higher education,

workplace learning and professional training can be integrated most effectively to develop competent and ethical police practitioners [20]. The article therefore reaches a more balanced conclusion than might have been possible in 2022. While the Professional Policing degree appears successful in developing graduate capabilities and supporting recruitment outcomes, the subsequent evolution of police entry routes suggests that professionalisation should be viewed as a broader process rather than one dependent exclusively upon degree-level entry. Longitudinal studies examining retention, promotion, operational performance, public confidence and organisational legitimacy are now required to determine the long-term impact of the various police entry programmes operating across England and Wales [20].

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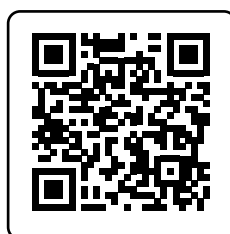
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