

# Police Education Past and Present: Perceptions of Australian Police Managers and Academics

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In an effort to modernise police organisations and professionalise policing, it is becoming increasingly common for police today to obtain formal university qualifications. Within the Australian context, the National Police Professionalism Implementation Advisory Committee (NPPIAC) recommended in 1990 that police pursue full professional status reflecting national education standards underpinned by university qualifications. This paper explores, from a national perspective, key stakeholders' perceptions about police university education and professionalism. Forty in-depth interviews were carried out with police managers and academics occupying pivotal positions in police education from across Australia. Both police managers and academics had generally favourable views towards university education for police and working together in the delivery of policing courses. However, in contrast to the NPPIAC recommendations, perspectives about the professional status of police and the actual role of university education in police organisations, differed. In addition, there were a variety of views about imposing mandatory requirements on police to complete university courses. This paper is part of a larger study into university education for police managers and presents the preliminary findings of one phase of the study.

## Introduction

The objective of this paper is to highlight the complexity of the relationship between Australian police organisations and university education. For over 20 years, leaders in policing, including police ministers and commissioners, have discussed and debated the need to professionalise police through university education. The debate remains ongoing to this day and various steps have been taken by Australian police organisations to reach the goal of police professionalism. Within Australia there is a dearth of research in this area and the perceptions of current key stakeholders in the area remain unclear. This paper begins by providing a brief overview of the impact of university education on police. It then moves on to discuss the perceptions of key stakeholders working in the field. The findings on perceptions of key stakeholders have been consolidated into major themes, including the notion of 'experts' in police education, university education overall and police professionalism. The findings

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from the interviews with key stakeholders are discussed with reference to key literature in the field.

## **The Impact of University Education on Police**

The suggestion that police should obtain university qualifications is not a new one. August Vollmer, the police chief in Berkeley, California, initially encouraged police to undertake formal university education at the beginning of the twentieth century (Carte 1973). However, it was not until the late 1960s that significant numbers of police leaders and administrators in the United States began to debate the benefits of university education for police and the role of university education in police professionalism started to become accepted (Roberg and Bonn 2004). Since this time, there have been a number of reviews carried out, mainly in the United States, on the impact of university education on police attitudes and performance. The large body of literature suggests that university education has both positive and negative impacts upon police, although the majority of reviews found more positive impacts of university education.

Key researchers in the area have found the *positive impacts* of university education include lower cynicism for senior officers (Niederhoffer 1967), less authoritarian behaviour (Smith, Locke and Fenster 1979; Dalley 1975), fewer citizen complaints (Cohen and Chaiken 1972; Lersch and Kunzman 2001), lower dogmatism and higher self esteem (Guller 1972), fewer incidents of arrest in discretionary situations (Finkenauer 1975), more open mindedness (Parker 1976), higher performance ratings (Cascio 1977; Roberg 1978), higher administrative abilities (Wycoff and Susmilch 1979), higher performance in police academy training (Lester 1983), better informed practice and use of critical thinking in carrying out duties (Carter, Sapp and Stevens 1989) better decision making and flexibility in problem solving (Carter and Sapp 1990), higher value for ethical conduct (Shernock 1992) increased initiative and the taking on of leadership roles (Kakar 1998) and decreased levels of use of force (Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). The research into the impact of university education focuses more on police attitudes, as individual performance is often difficult to measure (Reiner 1998). Also, police organisations are diverse, change over time and may have contested goals. Therefore, performance measures are not absolute and may vary between organisations (Reiner 1998; Roberg and Bonn 2004).

However, not all research findings into the impact of university education on police have been positive. A small number of *negative impacts* of university education have been found, including higher cynicism scores for junior officer (Niederhoffer 1967; Regoli 1976), greater attrition rates for police with higher degrees (Trojanowicz and Nicholson 1976; Weirman 1978) and less respect for citizens (Shernock 1992). So, while the majority of findings about the impact of university education are favourable, there do remain some negative findings from key researchers.

The first national level research pertaining to university education for police began in Australia in 1986 when a formal review into police education for upper level police managers was conducted at the request of the Australian Police Ministers Council (APMC) (Rohl and Barnsley 1995). The review, 'Characteristics and Educational Needs of Upper-Level Managers in the Australian Police Forces', surveyed 529 police managers from across Australia. The most significant finding of the review revealed that 86 per cent of respondents were in favour of police oriented university courses for senior police. However, the respondents also expressed some scepticism towards university education and felt that it would not necessarily help police managers perform better. A key view was illustrated by the following statement, 'You can make an academic out of a policeman, but you cannot make a policeman out of an academic' (Rawson 1986, p. 140). The review recommended that police managers undertake university education and that a national police education course be implemented.

Subsequent to the review, the Australian Police Ministers' Council agreed to establish the National Police Professionalism Implementation Advisory Committee (NPPIAC) in 1990 (Rohl and Barnsley 1995). In formulating the national statement of strategic direction for the police to achieve professional status, the NPPIAC sought advice from Australian police jurisdictions, universities and police unions. All police jurisdictions, through their commissioners, agreed on the national strategy of professionalisation of the occupation of policing, which stated that there should be:

1. Establishment of agreed core standards for recruits entering community based policing.
2. Development of a national common core component for community based police recruit training and education purposes, supplemented according to jurisdictional needs.

3. Review and enhancement, followed by publication and promotion, of the Australian National Police Code of Ethics.
4. Appropriate police training courses of national (rather than jurisdictional) relevance and significance to the profession to be monitored and accredited.
5. Tertiary and other courses to be undertaken by police as part of their ongoing professional development to be endorsed and accredited where appropriate
6. Development of a national rating system for educational activities undertaken by police as part of their ongoing professional development, to enhance objective comparison of courses, qualifications and standards achieved.
7. Conduct of a national needs and demand analysis of requirements for police tertiary education requirements, recognising the various and changing positions in and between jurisdictions, for the purpose of providing governments and tertiary institutions with possible indicators for the police profession's future higher education needs.
8. Development of national accreditation in service courses to meet the needs of jurisdictions and for specific professional development of members of the profession.
9. The Education Advisory Board to the Australian Police Staff college, in its capacity as a national police education standards council, to monitor, accredit as necessary and endorse courses and to work closely with providers of tertiary education to maximise the credits towards general tertiary qualifications gained by those successfully completing national police professional development courses.
10. The Australian Police Staff College to pursue recognition and status as a tertiary institution, with formal postgraduate courses for its executive development programs (Rohl and Barnsley 1995).

Seventeen years later the aims of the national strategy have yet to be realised, although some steps have been taken towards them. After the strategy was introduced, the National Police Education Standard Council (now called the Australasian Police Professional Standard Council (APPSC)) was established, with responsibility for advancing police professionalisation. In addition, in 2000, a number of operationally based and task focussed competency standards was developed for police (Public Safety Industry Training Advisory Body 2000). These

competencies had taken nearly 10 years to complete and were more vocationally focussed, highlighting the emergency service functions of police work rather than the overall role of police.

Nevertheless, the Australian Police Ministers' Council is still very committed to university education for police. In its Directions in Australasian Policing 2005 -2008, it stated that it has an 'Ongoing commitment to educational and career development framework for the continuing development of police employees' (Australian Police Ministers' Council 2005).

Australian research into police education has been located within the discussions and research into police professionalisation. Most research to date has focussed on entry level police and the notion of promoting the professional status of police through the completion of university education as an entry requirement (Lewis 1992; Chan 1997; Rushbrook et al. 2001). As with the key American research, there is far less Australian research pertaining to university education for police managers. The attitudes of university educators in police studies have, however, been researched and were found to be in agreement about the provision of university education for police. However, they also revealed a dichotomy between attitudes towards university education and police academy training (Mahony and Prenzler 1996). It was thought this may be because police were undertaking university education too early. While the notion of police undertaking university education is no longer new, Australian police jurisdictions still face many uncertainties about police education and professionalism. The current study addresses gaps in the existing Australian literature by exploring key stakeholders' perceptions about police university education and professionalism.

## Sample

Forty participants from across Australia were interviewed for this research. All of the participants were working or had recently worked in the area of police education. Of the 40 participants, a total of 24 police managers from the eight Australian police jurisdictions and 16 academics from both police organisations and universities were interviewed. Participants were approached directly by the researcher and all but one potential research participant agreed to take part in the research. In eight interviews, respondents provided additional names of potential research participants who held pivotal positions in police education and were identified as experts in police education. These recommended individuals were also

approached by the researcher and all consented to be interviewed. The sample was considered complete when representatives from each Australian police organisation had been interviewed and when saturation was reached and no new information was reported by participants (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

To meet the objectives of this research and determine the current views about police education and professionalism in Australia, research participants were deliberately recruited and included both senior police managers and academics with experience in police education. This allowed the researcher to select participants who were particularly knowledgeable about and informed in the field of police education (Neuman 2003). Work history details provided by participants during the interview process revealed they held senior positions and were typically very experienced in working in this area. The ranks of police managers ranged from inspector to deputy commissioner and academics were typically at or above the level of associate professor or director.

## **Procedure**

The in-depth interviews were all conducted by the researcher herself and ranged from 40 minutes to two hours and 20 minutes in length. Prior to the interviews taking place, the research objectives were discussed with the participants and each participant was invited to take part. All of the interviews were conducted at a location that was chosen by the participant to facilitate them feeling at ease. Typically, interviews were conducted at the participant's workplace or the researcher's workplace and in a few cases, interviews took place over the phone. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted in order to generate a variety of current and emerging themes about police education and professionalism (Moser and Kalton 1992). With the exception of introductory comments and background questions about participants' work history and experience in police education, no interview schedule was used. The interviews were fluid in nature and took on the format of everyday conversations (Minichiello et al. 2005). However, the interviews were guided by the researcher and were, in fact, recursive (Minichiello et al. 2005) as participants were encouraged to talk broadly about police education. The aim was to ensure their perceptions and relevant organisational experiences in police education were revealed. Open ended questions were asked and as the interviews progressed a number of dominant themes began to emerge.

## **Data Management and Analysis**

From the initiation of the data collection through to the completion of the research, data analysis was a continuous and ongoing process. The goal of the in-depth interviews was to identify current themes in the area of police education. This was achieved by thematic analysis utilising a process of identifying, coding and categorising patterns within the data (Boyatzis 1998). All interviews were audio taped and, immediately following each interview, the researcher's initial views about the key ideas raised in the interview were recorded in a reflective journal. This allowed comprehension of the data to begin immediately. As data were analysed, similar patterns or themes soon began to emerge from both the audio-taped interviews and the reflective journal.

## **Results**

All participants in the research appeared to speak freely and openly about their perceptions of university education for police. Furthermore, many interviews ran significantly longer than anticipated. This may have been because of the conversational nature of the interviews and the ease with which they tended to progress. Many of the participants also knew the researcher professionally or were aware of her work. Although a range of issues pertaining to police education were discussed, a number of key themes emerged early in the interview process. The first was that many of the key stakeholders who were interviewed did not consider themselves to be experts in police education although they held pivotal positions in management and research within this area. All participants believed, in principle, that university education was beneficial for police officers across all organisational ranks. There were different perspectives about the professional status of police and if, in fact, police could ever be considered true professionals. The role of university education in police organisations was also viewed from a variety of perspectives in the areas of police culture, competencies and promotions. Finally, there were different views on how police education and professionalism would manifest themselves in the future.

## The Notion of 'Experts' in Police Education

Consistent with past research into the continuously evolving and changing nature of policing (Kelling and Moore 1988) and the political influence exerted upon police organisations (Reiner 2000), many police managers in this study perceived they were not experts and were not always aware of what was happening with respect to police education. There were two main reasons for this.

Firstly, they felt the relative importance of police education in their organisations was constantly changing and secondly, in some cases, that there was a lack of organisational continuity within the area of police education. Perhaps the most telling quote came from an Inspector who stated, 'There is a very short memory when it comes to police education. We are constantly reinventing the wheel and today we are much less committed to formal university education for our members than we were only a few years ago.' However, this varied between police jurisdictions, with certain jurisdictions placing much more emphasis and importance upon university education. In several instances police managers working in police academies and liaising with universities indicated they worked in the academy due to serendipity and that their work at the academy was not planned but rather, it just happened. One Superintendent stated, 'I came into the academy as a promotion and had very little knowledge about police education and training. Today I am responsible for overseeing a number of courses at the academy and often liaise with universities about credit arrangements and the like'. In addition, police managers indicated that they sometimes ended up working in education because they themselves held university qualifications but did not possess qualifications in education.

Secondly, police managers felt there was pressure from external political sources forcing the hand of police education. In the current context, resources in some police organisations are often being taken out of education and responsibilities are being devolved onto the field. The effect has been to overload education officers and senior constables in the field. Whether this is philosophically driven or resource driven remains unclear. Surprisingly, academics in police education also tended to feel they were not experts in the area, as they sometimes worked across a number of research fields (such as criminology, law and emergency management) or, in some instances, had not published recently in the area of police education.



## University Education Overall

Without exception, all participants agreed, in principle, that university education is good for police. However, it was revealed that Australian police organisations do not share a national perspective regarding the most appropriate design, curriculum and delivery of education courses for police. Due to the varying requirements of each Australian police organisation, there are differences between organisations in their approach to curriculum development and the delivery of education courses for managers. Both police managers and academics indicated that there is active collaboration between their police organisations and universities. In addition, numerous articulation arrangements are now in place, with each police organisation having different articulation agreements in place and collaborating with universities to varying degrees. Although, in 1990, the NPPIAC indicated there was some consensus among police commissioners pertaining to police education, there are now many differences between Australian police jurisdictions. While all police managers indicated their organisations encourage their members to undertake both internal education courses and university courses that are relevant to their needs, each police jurisdiction goes about this in a unique manner and places a different level of importance on it.

Clearly, educational requirements for police are varied and often specialised as police undertake many more roles and specialised functions than previously. Although most Australian police organisations do not necessarily require a university degree for police seeking promotion, and whilst the completion of university is still voluntary, it is viewed favourably. In some jurisdictions it is only the new recruits who are required to undertake various education and training courses when they join the police. This is perhaps counter intuitive as when police become more senior and move into management positions, they require a number of essential skills including planning, organising, leading, controlling, communicating, decision making, budgeting and labour relations skills (Wilson and McLaren 1972) that are enhanced through the completion of university studies. University education encourages reflective attributes that become more relevant to the job functions of police managers who are no longer performing strictly operational duties and are required to be more strategic in their thinking (Roberg, Crank and Kuykendall 2000).

While academics were very clear in distinguishing education and training, some police managers used the terms interchangeably. In this research, *police education* referred to formal study that takes place at an accredited university or

institution and *police training* was viewed as the operationally focussed techniques that were taught in police academies and required by police in order to carry out their duties. According to Massey (1993), it is police education that is significant as it promotes autonomy and deliberate judgement, unlike police training which encourages police to conform to prevailing cultures. Where police are encouraged to undertake further study, key stakeholders indicated a number of courses were appropriate, including law, management, communications and criminology. While it is acknowledged that both education and training are beneficial when working in changing environments and as a means to promoting change (Rusaw 2000), it is university education that is necessary if police are to be considered professionals with the ability to reflect upon and evaluate their actions.

The defined body of knowledge that is part of a profession is still being developed in policing. In order that they meet the goals of policing, both in technical terms and ethical ones, police managers have been called upon to be fully reflective and reflexive (Massey 1993; Bradley and Ciocciarielli 1994). The notion of the reflective practitioner (Schon 1983) highlights the idea of a situational understanding of actions, thoughts and assumptions within professional practice as situations happen or after they have taken place. Research has found that a reflective approach is not easily achieved by police managers (Adlam 1999). However, the Graduate Student Survey (2001) conducted by the Australian Graduate School of Police Management, which assessed the perspectives of police managers who had successfully completed university courses, revealed that police managers perceived that their ability to reflect upon and solve problems and make decisions had improved after the completion of a university course.

## **Police Professionalism**

While the changing police environment has been superimposed with calls for police to professionalise there is still no clear definition of police professionalism among key stakeholders in the field. Respondents had numerous interpretations and definitions of police professionalism and what it entails. More surprisingly, some police managers (but not academics) actually wondered if, in fact, police should be considered professional. For example, one participant asked, "Do police really need university degrees to lock up crooks on the street?" Another participant stated, "If police were going to achieve professional status it should have happened by now. We have been talking about this for years and nothing has happened." The view of

some police managers was that if police were, in fact, professionals they should have already been accorded professional status in Australia after so many years of debate.

Respondents' varied views about police professionalism were surprising given the considerable research into police professionalisation and past support for the professional status of police from police leaders both within Australia and overseas (Skolnick 1966; Price 1977; Carter and Sapp 1989; Weinberger 1991; Rohl and Barnsley 1995; Police Commissioners' Conference 2005; and Australasian Police Ministers' Council 2005). According to Klockars,

If police are to get to be true professionals – that is, professionals in more than name only – our society allows one and only one path to that status. It must begin with a long period of education in an accredited, academic professional school at the college or postgraduate level, include or continue through a period of supervised internship, and conclude with the granting of a license without which one cannot practice that profession. No true profession – neither medicine nor law, engineering, accounting, teaching, social work, nursing or clinical psychology – has ever achieved genuine professional status in any other way. (Klockars 1985, p. 114)

Although university education is not the only component required for police to obtain professional status, it is an essential part of the professionalisation process, without which police will never obtain professional status. The discussions pertaining to police professionalisation and the application of professional status to police remain ongoing in Australia (Police Commissioners' Conference 2005; Australasian Police Ministers' Council 2005) and this was very much reflected in the participants' views in this study.

Notwithstanding the Australian debates pertaining to police professionalisation, in 1985 in the case of *Davis v City of Dallas*, the US Court of Appeals (Fifth Circuit) concluded that police officers hold 'professional type' positions rather than skilled occupations. According to the view of the court in this case, the professional standing of police was based on a number of factors:

1. officers must be able to diagnose problems in confusing and variable situations;
2. based on their diagnosis, officers must make timely discretionary decisions;
3. their responsibilities and authority are broad and performed under minimal direct supervision;

4. officers must be highly adaptable to handle heated emotions and interpersonal sensitivity in close proximity;
5. they must be able to make critical decisions in circumstances of great stress; and
6. they must be able to apply the law fairly and equitably, as do other criminal justice professionals.

The 'professional type' positions held by police largely focus on police problem solving and decision making. Carter and Sapp (1989, p. 157) go on to describe professional police as those with the ability 'to diagnose problems in confusing and variable situations, using their own diagnosis to make timely discretionary decisions in circumstances of great stress.' While Australian debates concerning police professionalisation remain ongoing, at the very least police can be seen to hold 'professional type' positions which require skills in problem solving and decision making.

## **Conclusion**

While the idea of university education for police and police professionalism was first proposed by August Vollmer over 100 years ago, there is still no consensus about what police professionalism actually means. While the idea of university education for police is supported by both police managers and academics, in principle, the body of knowledge in policing is still being developed. Not all key stakeholders working in police education accept that police can obtain full professional status and some think that trying to obtain professional status for police is doomed to failure. Whether police will ever attain full professional status and whether this is desirable remains unclear. This study found research participants working in pivotal positions in police education were not in agreement on a number of issues. If police are to ever attain professional status in Australia there needs to be a common vision and implementation plan which originates from the top of each organisation and is then championed and embraced by those working in key management and education roles. There is still a long way to go.

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