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A question of degree? An academic future for firearms officers

By Chris Beighton (Canterbury Christ Church University) and Gary Doody (British Transport Police Firearms Unit)

Colleagues in firearms will be aware of hotly debated plans to promote degree level study among police officers, and we have certainly heard a lot of talk about it on the ground. According to the College of Policing, the job is now of “degree level complexity” because it involves dealing with complex crimes and multi-agency communications. It’s also felt that, since other professions require a degree, policing can only call itself a profession if it adopts this policy too. Without it, the legitimacy of policing might be called into question, and so the College is currently consulting on plans and a pilot scheme to be rolled out by 2019. Under these plans, a degree in “practical policing” or some sort of conversion or apprenticeship course would be a minimum entry requirement.

There has been some hostility to the idea of all police officers having to have a degree, though. The Police Federation for one has argued that the requirement will mean that many are excluded from making a career of policing, a view echoed by some officers too. Many successful, front line officers simply feel that degree-level qualifications are at best unnecessary and at worst actually harmful in keeping people out of policing in the first place. Many would argue that what most officers need is a good dose of common sense, not a long programme in higher education whose relevance to the job might be shaky: if, as some believe, policing is a vocation, not a profession, then university qualifications would do more harm than good.

There are good cultural and financial reasons why this point of view makes sense. Culturally, the requirement to have a degree before joining up seems likely to affect precisely those groups that policing wants to attract. This is because it might discourage anyone from a background in which university education, even any non-compulsory education, has not traditionally been an option. People who work in education and training are familiar with the idea of

of “cultural capital”, by which we mean know-how about how things work – where to go for information, who to ask, *how* to ask and when. It’s this know-how that allows certain people to get on and keeps others out of a given area because what is needed is often taken for granted or never really spelled out by those who rely on it. In a nutshell, if you know the ropes, you’ve a much better chance of succeeding, the theory goes. Of course, the trouble is, you only know the ropes if you are already in the system, so if you’re unlucky enough to come from outside – say from a family background where schooling was a perceived as problem and academic success as an irrelevance- it’s probable that you don’t even know what barriers are there, never mind how to begin overcoming them. Can policing afford to be excluding people because they don’t have the “cultural capital” needed to get through a degree?

On top of this, there’s the sheer cost of university study. Currently standing at around £9000 per year, depending on what and where you study, the idea of racking up a £27000 debt is enough to put plenty of people off. And it’s is likely to discourage many potential candidates who might otherwise have made a real contribution.

That said, there is more to the story than meets the eye. While the problems above are real, they haven’t stopped some officers from graduating ahead of the curve. Gary Doody, an Instructor from British Transport Police Firearms Unit, recently graduated from Canterbury Christ Church university with a BA Hons degree, and I asked him a few questions about what he did...and why.

CB: Gary, you’re an experienced AFO and a successful instructor. What’s the point of a degree for someone like you?

GD: From a personal point of view I feel that gaining my degree has improved my performance as a firearms instructor by giving me a greater insight into the different sorts of learning styles that I come across. This has enabled me to develop new approaches to training which have ultimately improved the level of service I deliver.

CB: OK, so it has been useful as a trainer, but that's only part of the job. What about your operational ability?

GD: The question whether it has improved my performance as an operational police officer is in the balance: we need to be careful about the implications of what's being said. For example, it is interesting to note that the College of Policing feel the multi-skilled officers of today need qualities that only a degree can bring. The notion that an officer needs a degree to deal with complex crimes might come across as insulting to those that have dealt with such crimes to high levels of competence in the past. At a time when police officers genuinely feel undervalued due to pension reforms and decreasing numbers on patrol, the College should perhaps tread more carefully.

CB: So you think that the College should back down over the minimum requirement then?

GD: Well, I just think that degrees shouldn't be compulsory. When a new recruit comes into the force with a degree in policing this extra knowledge should be welcomed and the dedication to the job should be rewarded at the interview stage, but I feel this should not be mandatory.

CB: What do you think of the view that this new requirement might cause problems in the longer run for recruitment?

GD: Police officers should be a representation of the community they serve, but by making degrees mandatory this would exclude a great deal of officers from ever applying. It has to be recognised that many people cannot afford the time to study, or the expense, but instead are collecting life skills which can be just as valuable an asset to the police. One of the greatest skills a police officer can show when dealing with the public is empathy, which is a difficult thing to teach, more something that can be learnt through life experience.

CB: So you think there needs to be balance between experience and qualifications then?

GD: Yes, well my personal view is that all qualifications brought to the police should be rewarded and identified at initial stages of employment. But regard should also be given to the other qualities that individuals bring and how this benefits the police. The opportunity to study once in the police is down to the individual and can be chosen dependent on their role, i.e. training and /or promotion, but this should be the individual's choice rather than forced on any officer as there is more than enough pressure on the thin blue line.

Gary's views echo those of many colleagues who are not anti-qualifications per se. They know that there are advantages to the idea of degree level entry to policing, for example the potential cost savings in training that would be made if officers come to the job already qualified.

But this does assume that the degrees in question are relevant and will remain so over time, a problem that universities will have to grapple with just as they have done with programmes for "new professionals" in areas such as social work, training or nursing with which policing, rightly or wrongly, is compared. If, as the College says, degree level qualifications would be required for constables, and a master's for superintendents, we need to make sure that these qualifications are more than just bits of paper for keeping up with the Joneses.