Designing postgraduate study to support professionalisation in policing

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CEPOL CONFERENCE, October 2016, Budapest

Professionalisation in policing? A contested process

“One the one hand...the police can be viewed like other professionals in fields such as law and medicine, who routinely deal with issues of risk and risk assessment and use expert knowledge to help people deal with uncertainty...

On the other hand, measured against definitions of professions which emphasise the importance of a period spent in higher or further education, [UK] policing, as Neyroud (2011) acknowledges, does not fit this model” (Fyfe 2013)

Research question

What impact does study of the OU’s PG Cert in Evidence Based Practice have on the practice of individual officers and staff, and on the forces who sponsor them?

This paper sets out the conceptual basis on which the PG Cert was designed, our intended research methodology and some initial findings
Conceptualization of evidence based practice

Barends, Rousseau and Briner (2015) argue that evidence based practice involves the use of the best available evidence from four major sources – academically validated research, stakeholder perceptions, contextual data and professional expertise – to inform and improve professional decision-making.

- Based on multi-disciplinary research on professional practice – relevance of evidence from any discipline depends on context
- Explicit link to individual (and collaborative) decision-making in everyday professional practice
- Existing academic research is one of four sources of evidence – so is individual professional expertise.

Research rationale and planned methodology

- Critical reflection and meaning making
- Impact of learning on personal practice
- Action inquiry and organisational impact
- Cultural impact of evidence based practice on policing

- Primarily qualitative methods with some student performance analytics
  - Tutor-led ethnographic observation
  - Online focus group discussion
  - Telephone interviews – students and sponsors
Initial first phase findings:

- **Familiarity with reflective practitioner model of professional conduct – comparative data**

Many police students had experienced reflection before in terms of single and double loop learning, in quite a practical format - the more abstract academic articles and style of the module required a real stretch in their perceived view of reflection. In contrast the clinical students seemed far more comfortable with the academic articles.

- **Activist focus of learning behaviour**

Students seemed comfortable to work through the online activities, "ticking them off", but far less comfortable when using the learning from those activities to focus on reflection as evidenced by low forum contribution and "clunky" application of the theory in their assignments.

Despite the weekly activities, students still seem to tackle to assignments as stand alone "crack through it in a weekend" type tasks. This "get it done" attitude enables the submission to take place, but often impacts on the depth and thoughtful nature of the reflection presented in the assignment - theory was seen as scaffolding for a discussion, with a bit of name checking, rather than used more deeply in reflection.

- **Surface'/instrumental approach to prior CPD**

CPD in the police appears to be focused on either skills required for a specific role, or preparation for promotion. There is therefore considerable challenge in enabling the police cohort to identify appropriate "episodes" of CPD to reflect on through their module studies - in contrast, NHS staff have access to a wide range of mandatory, skills/role based and personal development training which allows for a much more rounded view on the variety and purpose of CPD.

- **Role of sponsoring employer in supporting study**

Some forces are providing opportunities for informal "communities of practice", allowing students to discuss their progress and fears openly and honestly, which is enabling them to find sufficient motivation to continue with their studies despite feeling like it is challenging.

The motivation of knowing that a funding strapped force is investing in this training on their behalf was a massive motivator in terms of student commitment to complete.

Reluctance to criticise the force in their assignments

Conscious of the need to pass the module
References