

Degree apprenticeship case study

The integration of on and off the job learning for professional policing

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The introduction of the Police Education Qualification Framework by the College of Policing (CoP) recognises that policing is now a graduate profession. This is due to the highly complex and challenging nature of the job in contemporary society. The Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), introduced by police forces across the country, is one of three routes to becoming a police officer. The Police Education Consortium, consisting of Middlesex, Canterbury Christ Church, Cumbria and Portsmouth universities, was established to deliver the PCDA and is currently doing so in partnership with Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire police force employers.

HE providers with degree awarding powers need to validate the PCDA and the CoP licence for a HE provider to deliver the apprenticeship requires approval through the partner police force. The CoP also require that the PCDA is co-designed and co-delivered by partnering police forces and the HE provider. One other key factor in the development and approval of PCDA programmes, was that the police force employer and not the HE provider assess operational competence. Specifically, this related to Independent Patrol Status (IPS), which is usually achieved after 30 weeks, and Full Operational Competence (FOC) achieved in the final year at EPA Gateway. Nationally, forces and HE providers have agreed varying arrangements regarding which organisation will deliver which aspect of training. This ranges from forces delivering all initial training in advance of IPS through to a fully collaborative model where both forces and HE providers deliver initial training. In the latter example the only exclusively force-delivered aspects are restricted to specialist inputs such as officer safety training.

The Police Education Consortium model is fully collaborative and predicated on work-integrated learning, where the operational environment (the workplace) is not only seen as the place where professional learning is applied, but also as a uniquely rich source of professional learning. The model means that learning that occurs on-the-job, in the operational environment, must be recognised, captured and effectively integrated with learning that takes place off-the-job. However, the separation of the assessment of evidence of professional learning from the operational environment (that is assessed solely by the police force) risked multiplying the assessment burden for student officers in what is already an intensive learning experience. This separation has also led to the perception that learning associated with operational competence is less directly integrated with off-the-job learning provided by the HE providers. This runs counter to the work-integrated model intended.

Through close collaboration with police force partners and established processes of ongoing quality improvement, this issue has been addressed by initiating minor amendments to the validated PCDA programme. The amendments include integrating the operational competence assessment requirements (IPS and FOC) within validated PCDA modules, thereby reducing the assessment burden on student officers and hard-wiring the integration of on and off-the-job learning into the programme design. The Police Education Consortium, working with partner police force employers, are also reviewing all assessment requirements with a view to maximising the degree to which evidence of professional learning from the operational environment can be assessed towards the achievement of PCDA programme modules. This change will help to realise the vision of integrated professional learning for policing, shared by forces and the Police Education Consortium, and celebrate the value of learning that comes from work, on-the-job, in developing the officers of the future.

Reflective questions

1. How can the authenticity of higher education assessment practice be enhanced by more fully integrating the professional learning that occurs in the on-the-job environment?
2. How can a work-integrated model inform the curriculum design of the apprenticeship?
3. How can collaboration between employers and HE providers support more effective integration of on and off-the-job professional learning?