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Views from the frontline: Graduate police recruits on the status of evidence-based practice

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from in-depth interviews with 30 police recruits participating in a national two-year graduate training programme. *Police Now* comprises a six-week training course followed by a neighbourhood policing post where operational skills are developed, and recruits are encouraged to apply problem-solving and evidence-based approaches to police work. This research was undertaken as part of a project to inform the development and implementation of the Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP) into policing. We explore interviewees' perceptions about the value placed by police colleagues on evidence-based practice and how different responses to EBP were 'managed' by interviewees. Findings show a largely disengaged attitude towards research, creating disconnect between 'classroom' emphasis and practice experience. Interviewees' accounts of their first months in force show potential for rejection of training ideals but also willingness to challenge the perceived *status quo* regarding evidence-based practice. We reflect on the implications of findings for introducing the DHEP.

Introduction

The current process of professionalisation of policing in the UK has created the impetus for the overhaul of educational requirements for policing and the move from vocational training to higher-level education across the service (Flanagan, 2008; College of Policing, 2016). From 2020, policing in England and Wales will require new police constables (PCs) to be educated to degree-level. The Police Educational Qualifications Framework (PEQF) sets out three routes into the service for the PC: The Degree Apprenticeship available from September 2018, which involves three years of study in parallel with operational work; the pre-join degree in professional policing, from 2020, where prospective recruits acquire their degree in policing in advance of recruitment, and the Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP), also from 2020 – and the subject of this special issue - where recruits have a degree in another subject and undertake a graduate conversion course to gain their policing qualification.

The College of Policing cites the PEQF as 'the final element' of professionalisation, accompanying the Code of Ethics and the development of the specialist knowledge base for policing (College of Policing, 2016). Evidence-based practice (EBP) and the integration of academic theory and practice skills is noted as an essential part of the revised PEQF, bringing police education into closer alignment with that of existing professions (Brown et al., 2018; Knutsson and Thompson, 2017). It is considered important for developing the critical and analytical skills of future police officers, establishing the range and relevance of different types of research for policy and practice (Brown et al., 2018; Hough and Stanko., 2019) and providing the educational uplift needed to address the increasing complexity of policing (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Neyroud, 2010; College of Policing, 2015; Tilley and Laycock, 2017).

Holdaway (2017) describes this current drive for professionalisation as one of several over the last 40 or so years that have been used to bolster police reform. He argues that ambitions regarding professional status reflect the wider social and political context of their time and have been enacted variously to tackle police corruption and increase public confidence in the police, to promote further education of senior officers, and presently as a means to establish a new regulatory system for policing in England and Wales, that is distant from government and establishes the College of Policing at its centre (Holdaway, 2017). Lumsden (2017) has highlighted different understandings of *professional* for senior officers versus 'rank and file' and the ways in which emphasis on police professionalisation can be viewed by officers as undermining of their already established profession. This is perhaps best illustrated in the development of the knowledge base for a 'policing profession', where *evidence-based practice* is often perceived to privilege certain kinds of academic research - typically the randomised control trial - as valid evidence while de-valuing other research methods and professional or 'craft' knowledge (Hough, 2010; Fleming and Rhodes, 2017).

Current levels of support for EBP vary both across the service and within individual police forces. At a national, senior level, the rhetoric is supportive. For example, the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) in their report on the future of policing, talks of embedding research evidence into the day-to-day (NPCC, 2016). An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WWCCR) showed positive shifts over time in chief officers' accounts of the value placed on research, how regularly research evidence (of varying types) was being promoted and used within their force, and the involvement in research partnerships with universities. However, survey data from more junior officers and staff suggested they were less convinced by the relevance of EBP or the organisational support for it (Hunter, May and

Hough, 2019). Fleming and colleagues (Fleming, Fyfe and Wingrove, 2016 a-c; Fleming and Wingrove, 2017) reported similar concerns expressed by staff and officers across three police forces participating in pilot training about EBP. They contrasted the participants' initial enthusiasm for the training, and how it might add value to their role, to declining optimism after better understanding about what would be required from their organisation to institutionalise EBP. The authors concluded that there were significant internal barriers to embedding evidence-based practice in police organisations (Fleming and Wingrove, 2017). Lumsden and Goode (2016) explored understandings of EBP among police officers and staff. They found variance between the kinds of research - and research questions - that police officers valued and what gets approved as valid evidence and inquiry. For them, EBP is a largely top-down approach, with frontline officers far removed from discussions, receiving their information about EBP in "the most fragmented and undigested form" (Lumsden and Goode, 2016; p.825). This last point underlines an important source of debate - and tension - about how *research evidence* in policing can be perceived to compete with or seek to replace or ignore the crucial role of professional experience in building the evidence base (Sparrow, 2016; Fleming and Rhodes, 2017; Tilley and Laycock, 2017). It is within this context that the PEQF is being introduced and new police recruits received into the service.

The revised PEQF will be delivered by higher education institutes (HEIs) and police forces in partnership, requiring consensus about the detail of the curriculum content and how best to coordinate the academic components of the programme with the development of practical policing skills and competencies. The privileging of evidence-based approaches in the PEQF poses an immediate challenge in terms of the organisational readiness of forces in England and Wales to promote or support EBP during recruit training. It is a somewhat "chicken and egg" situation, where the ideal training environment for the PEQF would have a positive orientation towards research and EBP, but the revised PEQF is a crucial part of the process for establishing such organisational change.

The literature on the conditions that facilitate or impede EBP extends beyond policing but essentially this posits a mix of approaches to encourage the use of research evidence within organisations. Strategies include: raising awareness about evidence and building positive attitudes to it; agreement between users and providers of evidence about priorities; creating access to evidence, including time, opportunity and skills in using it; and regular interaction between research users and researchers (Sharples, 2013; Lorenc et al., 2014; Langer et al, 2016; Breckon and Dodson, 2016; Rosseau and Gunia, 2016; Griffiths et al, 2016). The extent and nature of progress towards achieving all or any of these conditions in policing remains contentious.

There are a growing number of police and academic partnerships and these offer opportunities for knowledge transfer between universities and police forces and more regular interaction between researchers and police officers about EBP and research needs (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Crawford, 2017). These partnerships are also seen as helping to diffuse some of the historic tensions and barriers to research use by allowing for better mutual understanding of different professional realities. For example, the complexity and length of academic research, its irrelevance, untimeliness and academics' failure to translate findings for practice, may be addressed more effectively in the context of partnership (Bradley and Nixon, 2009; Sharples, 2013; Crawford, 2017).

The aims of the paper

The focus of this paper is evidence-based practice in its broadest sense, and the ways in which this was encouraged or hindered during the initial placement on the *Police Now* graduate training programme. Police Now is a two-year leadership development scheme

which began in July 2015 for a cohort of 67 officers joining the Metropolitan Police but now extends to 28 forces in England and Wales.

This is not the proposed model for the DHEP nor is its curriculum currently aligned with that for the DHEP – it is modelled on the *Teach First* graduate[i] scheme and seeks to attract 'high calibre graduates' for 'leadership development' and placement on the '*policing frontline'* in challenging and deprived neighbourhoods (http:/policenow.org.uk/the-programme). There is no degree-level award for completing the programme; however, there are similarities which we think are sufficiently strong to justify using this as a proxy and extrapolating from these findings, some lessons relevant for implementing the DHEP.

The graduates attracted to Police Now will have experiences and aspirations which are likely to be similar to those enrolling in the DHEP in the future. The Police Now programme comprises a six-week period of 'classroom' training[ii] followed by assignment to a policing post where skills are further developed. It involves recipient forces in field-training and mentoring recruits to ensure operational competence. Recruits are regularly abstracted from duties to attend further training, including on EBP and 'impact days' where they have to showcase how they have tackled a neighbourhood policing issue. These 'impact projects' are assessed and are intended as opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and to allow recruits to apply EBP in the course of their neighbourhood police work. The training on EBP was delivered by a range of people, including academics involved in the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WWCCR) at the College of Policing, College staff and serving police officers who had experience of conducting and applying research to practice. In line with the College's recently published definition of research evidence (www.whatworks.college.police.uk)[iii], the training emphasised multi-method research approaches rather than the privileging of quantitative, experimental research. It show-cased examples of the impact of research on policing in the UK and raised awareness of data sources, including the WWCCR Crime Reduction Toolkit (Thornton et al, 2019).

The Police Now graduates' experiences of EBP is of interest for three main reasons: EBP is a key driver of current professionalisation and is intended to underpin much of the revised curriculum for the PEQF, thus how new recruits understand it and perceive its relevance and benefit for policing is vitally important and a gauge of the future success of the educational reforms. Second, the delivery of the PEQF is a collaborative endeavour between HEIs and police forces in order to create a curriculum that combines craft skills and professional knowledge with academic research evidence, and therefore our analysis can operate as a case-study for how well the 'theoretical' aspects of training are currently melding with the practical experience. Thirdly, this paper adds to the small body of qualitative research which has explored receptivity to evidence-based practice at different levels of the police service in the UK and affords some insights into organisational readiness for delivering the PEQF.

Specifically, the paper aims to document interviewees' understanding of EBP and its value for policing, and their experiences of discussing or applying research-based evidence in the course of their neighbourhood placement. Interviewees' accounts of the receptiveness of their police colleagues to EBP are explored, including how these different responses were 'managed' by interviewees. Findings show a largely disengaged attitude towards EBP from the policing teams in which they were placed, creating a disconnect between the 'classroom' and practice emphasis on using research evidence. Interviewees' accounts of their first months in force showed both the potential for the rejection of classroom training but also a willingness to challenge the perceived *status quo* regarding EBP.

Methods

The research was conducted between March 2017 and January 2018 as part of a Home Office Innovation Fund project documented in this Special Issue. Qualitative interviews were undertaken with 30 graduates who began the programme in August 2017 and went on to work in six police forces in England. The interview sample is described in Table 1.

Table 1: The interviewees

Demographic and background characteristics	N = 30
Female	15
Male	15
Ethnicity*	
BAME	8
White	21
Age**	Mean age = 23 years
	Range: 21 - 32 years
Degree**	
Law	9
Criminology	4
Social Science (other)	4
Politics, Philosophy and Economics	2
Music	2
Natural Science	1
Modern Languages	1
Engineering	1
Media Studies	1
Geography	1
Management	1
Masters' degree	3

*Missing data =1; ** Missing data = 2; *** Missing data = 3

First interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by phone, depending on interviewee preference. These were done after they had spent between three and six months in their policing teams. Interview topics examined included: understanding of EBP and its relevance for policing, perceptions about the importance placed on EBP by policing colleagues,

including the extent to which research evidence was ever discussed or used as part of operational-planning. Fifteen[iv] of the 30 graduates were interviewed again towards the end of their first year of the programme.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Our primary or first level coding frame was based on the topic areas described above. These codes were then further refined in an iterative process. Coding of interviews was conducted initially by the first author then checked by the second author with discussion of the further refinement to codes.

Findings

Defining evidence-based practice

As a basic measure of recruits' understanding about EBP, interviewees at first interview were asked what the concept meant to them. The majority (21) tended to describe it in terms of the questioning of routine or taken-for-granted methods or tactics that have been used historically in policing and the need to show *evidence* of effectiveness to underpin police work. However, there was less detail offered about what this *evidence* included:

> Essentially, ways of policing that aren't, "This is the way we've always done it, and this is the way we'll always do it, because that's what we do." It's more looking at results of things that actually do work, and structuring the way you police around that. [GR,13]

> Using something that is evidence-based rather than just thinking, we have done foot patrol for 100 years, so that is the answer. [GR,11]

> It's stuff that is known to work and where there is evidence showing that it works and trying to use what works... So, if you have a certain problem you can go to your evidence base, actually it's been proven that this works, it's been proven that that doesn't work, and that can make us more efficient and a better police service. [GR,02]

Some of the comments made by interviewees about their lectures or classroom discussions about EBP versus their experience in neighbourhood teams, highlighted the divide between the theoretical and practice realities:

> I hadn't heard the term [EBP] before but it didn't take a rocket scientist to work out what it meant, which was obviously doing Police work because it actually works not just because there's a general idea in policing that it would work….I think theoretically very important and practically much more difficult. [GR,19]

> I've got an idea of evidence, qualitative and quantitative measures, design and that kind of thing… I was quite interested in how it was reflected in policing. I think the challenge is that evidence-based policing is sold on a theoretical basis but not explained in terms of what to do and how to do it. [GR,25]

> No one – which amazes me – is particularly strongly subscribed to evidence-based policing, which when I was at the [Police Now academy] and we were talking about evidence-based policing I was like, "Why are we spending so much time on this? It's such an obvious concept. Obviously, we should be doing things that are proved to have worked. Why would we be doing anything else?" But when you come into [force], it's not like that. [GR,18]

Five interviewees considered that EBP was much more of a national or senior police priority than an issue that was relevant to local policing:

> I think it is nationally important. I think it becomes important for different levels of the police. So, I think it becomes more important as you get higher, because obviously they're going to influence the tactical part for the normal officers on the ground. [GR,28]

> It's not something that's really, from what I can see, it's not used at a local level. And actually, trying to do it locally involves a sort of time and resourcing commitment that's not easy to do. [GR, 08]

The status of evidence-based practice in neighbourhood teams

We identified three *broad* types of practice experience in relation to EBP, which we have called: neutral, positive and negative. While there was more nuance across interview accounts, the 'categories' helped to draw out some key features of the neighbourhood training experience and we expand on these different features below. However, there were also commonalities across categories. For example, barriers to use of EBP were regularly

mentioned; replicating the various organisational impediments that are well-documented in the research literature. These included lack of awareness of the evidence base for policing and limitations of its content, the impact of restricted time and resources for any detailed focus on EBP or an interest in exploring anything beyond the routine police response:

> I don't do it [EBP] as much as I'd probably like to. Because we don't have the time, and because I have to focus on the here and now. As in "This is my investigation, this is how I've got to do it." Investigations, or things like that, tend to be formulaic. Like, "This is how you do this, this is how you do that". [GR, 25]

> Not every bit of research is going to be contextually applicable to where you are and the problem you have [and] there might not be the research there at all, in the first place. [GR,07]

> It [EBP] just doesn't really enter the consciousness, I suppose, of the way things are done...Definitely time constraints. It's kind of a problem will come in and then we'll deal with it and deal with it in a way that they know is tried and tested and works. So, I suppose in a sense it's their own experience that guides what response is done rather than time to research stuff. [GR,14]

> I think it's not something that's massively advertised to people outside of [graduate programme]. I don't think that it's really something that people think of straight away when they come across a problem. I think there are a lot of people here that wouldn't even know about things like *'What Works'*. [GR,22]

A small minority of interviewees highlighted cuts to staffing and being regularly drawn away from neighbourhood work to help other departments which were also understaffed.

> What tends to happen is that supervisors from other departments will expect neighbourhood to pick up the slack when other departments are struggling, whether that's because of short staffing or demand. [GR,30]

> We are so low with resources on the moment on neighbourhoods that I am juggling a lot of stuff. [GR,02]

The often-mundane and repetitive nature of the job was noted as limiting both the opportunity or indeed the necessity for being innovative or searching out research evidence to test out or determine a course of action. And there was an acceptance that some of the routine and long-standing approaches used in neighbourhood policing were "effective":

I think the struggle with the Police Now mission is they want us to be innovative, but the nature of neighbourhood policing is 'if it aint broke don't try and fix it'. Things work in neighbourhood policing, they're effective and that's why they've been continued for years and years and years. I know they are wanting us to be innovative and we should use evidence-based policing to do it but it's repeating a cycle isn't it? [GR,02]

[We] need sort of realistic expectations of the sort of bubble that is [the graduate programme], and then going [into force]. And [officers] in neighbourhood can be a bit miserable, because lots of the time it is where people don't want to be. And then sort of the reality of, you know, you will be doing some exciting stuff, but you will also have the sort of really annoying crime reports of a neighbour who has called another neighbour a bitch and that sort of thing. [GR, 24]

The majority (19) of interviewees reported few opportunities to discuss or reflect on practice and certainly no dedicated time set aside for this. When discussions about practice did occur, these tended to be ad hoc or in response to a problem or complaint rather than as a routine part of their police work:

That's one thing that we don't do that much. I don't know why that is… You might have a discussion about it, but it won't be… It's quite informal, but you could say that you are reflective, I suppose. [GR,07]

I think the police are actually really bad at debriefs, reflections and feedback. It's just not something we really do unless someone's going to get told off because it's gone seriously wrong and there's a complaint coming. [GR,10]

I think it's more you do it and then you move on to the next. Obviously, there's so much to get through there's not really too much reflective time. [GR,14]

My line manager is a sergeant who is part-time, so her time when she is in the office is very limited… That does make life difficult for having opportunities to really spend a lot of time reflecting on things. [GR,11]

The importance of professional experience

The separation of EBP from policing 'craft' has been a significant issue in the research literature and is charged with frustrating more effective incorporation of the academic into policing practice. The mutual distrust between academics and police practitioners that has existed historically may be changing with the spread of police and academic partnerships

across the UK (such as the N8 Research Partnership,) and there is some optimism that these collaborations will better reflect and assimilate the range of research and professional expertise for the benefit of policing.

Our interviewees discussed colleagues' professional knowledge and its importance for developing their own policing skills. While this seems an obvious response to their lack of operational proficiency, it may also be a strategy to downplay any emphasis on the more 'academic' aspects of their background and training. The explicit and respectful acknowledgment of professional expertise – and reproach for the lack of acknowledgement given to this in classroom training – can aid their integration into the policing team. But the ways in which this was discussed demonstrated how recruits were trying to combine and make sense of their classroom learning with the practical skills-building, underlining the important contribution of professional experience in building the policing knowledge base:

> They've got the experience of trying it in the field so if I read something and I'm having a think about something and then I chat to them about it, it's given me much more knowledge and understanding of how that could possibly work in practice. [GR,17]

> It's one of those interesting reality versus what's on paper dynamics…Obviously I'm very new to my job, and my colleagues have got a lot more experience than me. In my opinion, they are the best source of learning, for me. …I think, some of the [training] didn't place as much value as I thought should be placed on previous experience. Just because it isn't necessarily codified or in an article [GR,04]

> The way we were taught on the Police Now programme, is like, "You've got these ideas. Go and do it," but, equally, I think it's important to reflect the fact that our colleagues have probably done that before or have experiences of that problem or people. Therefore, I think it's really important to go and speak to them. [GR, 25]

Different experiences of evidence-based practice

The most commonly described practice experience regarding EBP (18 of 22[v] interviewees) was what we have called 'neutral'. We use this term to denote an orientation where EBP was rarely discussed but nor was it actively disparaged. A few of the interviewees understood

their colleagues' attitude to EBP as being a product of their time and style of training or

because they had become more cynical about their job over time:

> I think, increasingly, they might be a bit more aware about [EBP], but I don't think they see it as the primary thing to be doing when they come across a problem. I suppose that's just the way they've been trained. [GR,07]

Interviewees in this grouping, sometimes expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack

of interest in research or the view that EBP continues to be a 'niche' or specialist topic rather

than having 'every-day' relevance across the service:

> I think we spend so much time doing things because we've always done it like that, it's infuriating. I think we have to get it properly embedded.... It seems to me like a bit of a niche, some people are really interested in evidence-based policing…but it should be something that we just do for everything all the time. We're an organisation that base everything we do around evidence and proving the facts, it just seems really weird that we don't apply that to our own work. [GR, 26]

> The feeling I got was that most people in policing don't know what it is. That it is difficult in a day-to-day policing world to use it, because sometimes when we have our Police Now events, they are so far removed from everyday work. [GR,09]

However, in these various descriptions there was a degree of optimism about possibilities for

change, and several accounts of attempts to challenge decisions about what action should

be taken in response to a neighbourhood policing issue or simply a willingness to question

things. This had reportedly led to 'interesting debates' with colleagues, and highlights the

potential effect of the recruits for transforming or developing practice:

> I think there are probably a lot of people that poo-poo it. Quite a few that would say, "It's more about experience than it is about academic research." I think there is a wave of change coming in, where people have realised that experience is great, but you can't get [everything] from experience. [GR,22]

> It [EBP] doesn't really cross their minds most of the time. I think we're fed a lot of statistics from our intelligence teams on [force] and we're told, "Right. we're taking this strategy," but we're never told why. Whereas, [I'm] a bit more like,

"Why are we doing that? Why do I have to do that?". Then you can get into a bit of trouble *or* you can have some really interesting debates with people. [GR,10]

[EBP] is a scary term because when you hear it, you sort of feel like it's putting a massive pressure on you, like you need to do policing really, really differently to everyone else. But just when you read about it more and when [you actually start in your role and see little things that you can do towards evidence-based policing, it sounds less onerous. And it should be more, sort of, a way of thinking [GR,28].

A positive experience, described by only two interviewees and illustrated in the accounts below, arguably suggests a more ideal training environment, where what is being prioritised in the classroom about the importance of research evidence base, continues - to some extent - to be re-enforced through practice. This involved a manager or senior colleague actively promoting EBP and encouraging discussion of different ideas or taking a more systematic approach to decisions about how to respond to different neighbourhood problems:

The chief inspector, in particular, has come to us and encouraged us to start thinking outside the box and looking at research to try to come up with new ways... new ideas, or even old ideas that might work... If … you've come up with something or you've seen something – and you've got evidence that it might work – if you go to him and he likes the way it sounds – and you can evidence that it is working, or it could work – then he's happy for you to put it into practice. [GR,16]

I know it's something [EBP] that the force has moved a lot more in the direction of using... We've had training from the force around using SARA problem analysis, and actually using an evidence-based approach to solve problems… It's certainly used a lot more than I had perhaps expected. [GR,11]

We categorised two interviewees as having a negative training experience in relation to EBP. The two extracts below are from initial and follow-up interviews with these recruits. The first illustrates how one of the interviewees had become increasingly cynical about the relevance of research for policing. He had reported in his first interview that he thought EBP "was quite important". However, perhaps in response to failed attempts to promote his own ideas in the early months in force, he expresses exasperation with the more 'academic'

aspects of his training, highlighting job pressures as rebuke against an interest in 'academic'

research evidence; something that he separates from professional knowledge, of which he is

less critical:

> I've had an idea about something and how to deal with someone, my idea has been shut down by someone else. I have challenged [that] and I have been called argumentative for challenging. [GR,05]

> If you're talking about research, discussing problems within your team and coming up with solutions with what in their experience works, that could be a form of research. We do that all the time. …The world of policing… This world isn't sitting in an ivory tower having lovely well-made presentations put together from someone with a middle upper-class accent. Policing now is the scumbag on the street who speaks with slang who you must understand. [GR,05]

The second interviewee was similarly cynical, but he continued to support the *idea* of EBP

while suggesting intractable barriers within policing to its application. This included a lack of

interest or knowledge among police colleagues about how to access the somewhat limited

evidence base:

> There is a real lack of an evidence base. Not only is there a lack of an evidence base, there is a real lack of direction for officers on the ground as to where this evidence base might be or where to find it. I'm on Police Now and I should know and I still don't really know where to find it… they don't directly - in any way, ever - look at what evidence might support what they do. Zero per cent ... [GR,19]

> People are terrified of things they don't know, so people end up doing the stuff they know and not doing stuff they don't. It goes on and on and on, and you become a self-perpetuating person who just uses the same techniques. [GR,19]

In summary, only two of our interviewees reported an initial practice experience that chimed

with the educational emphasis on EBP of their graduate programme. In one case this did

appear to reflect some force-wide training about EBP but in the other, it was as a result of an

enthusiastic chief inspector and thus potentially fragile and subject to change.

Discussion

We have described the perceptions of a small sample of graduate police recruits of the interest in, or value placed on, evidence-based practice by policing colleagues and managers in their first training placement. While the Police Now programme is not the agreed model for the DHEP, it offers a good 'test bed' for exploring how the academic or educational aspects of the course might align with field training. It is an important issue for the DHEP. A rapid evidence assessment of the research on the mechanisms for effective graduate conversion courses found the integration of the theory or concepts that underpin the practice skills to be an essential element of successful programmes (Belur, Agnew-Pauley and Thompson, 2018). This is similarly emphasised in a systematic review of police training (Belur at al., 2018) where consistency of the academic learning and field training helps knowledge transfer and a deeper understanding of the theory behind police actions. In contrast, a lack of coherence can reduce the validity of the academic components of the training in the eyes of the recruit or may cause them to reject it altogether.

The most commonly reported experience for the interviewees here was one where EBP rarely featured. This is not surprising given what we know about commitment to EBP across the service: That it is patchy, with support for it much more likely to be found among senior staff than operational officers (Hunter, May and Hough, 2019; Lumsden and Goode, 2016). There is continuing police resistance to knowledge that is often seen as elitist, externally imposed and lacking in relevance for practice priorities but equally no solid consensus about what counts as evidence. For example, the professional body for policing has only recently confirmed a definition of EBP that promotes multi-method research and professional judgement [iii]. Further, there are well-documented and continuing organisational impediments to the assimilation of research into policing (e.g. Lumsden and Goode, 2016; Fleming and Wingrove 2017; Hunter, May and Hough, 2019) and some cynicism from officers about the

likely longevity of evidence-based practice in the litany of police reforms (Hunter, May and Hough, 2019).

Embedding EBP is a long-term project, not least because of the significant gaps in the knowledge base. However, there are sound reasons to want to create the right kind of practice environment for the DHEP. The 'theory of change' that is implicit in the graduate programme, and the wider PEQF, involves recruits being trained in EBP methods, who can then go on to apply this learning in everyday policing contexts, which in turn helps to uplift or embed such practice more widely (Hough and Stanko, 2018).

Our findings illustrate the *potential* for these recruits to initiate changes to practice in that despite a lack of interest in EBP from their fellow officers, they expressed some confidence in questioning and challenging the perceived status quo and were often critical of their colleagues' apparent indifference to research. However, they were also respectful of colleagues' craft knowledge and practice experience and showed a good awareness of how professional expertise can provide essential detail and context when considering research evidence and its applicability; this is in keeping with a much broader conception of EBP which seeks to incorporate critically important practitioner knowledge and experience into the research process – and to place it on an equal footing with the more 'scientific data' on what works (Bradley and Nixon, 2009; Buerger, 2010; Fleming and Rhodes, 2017).

We identified in a minority of accounts a growing cynicism about the training environment of the neighbourhood team that made the remit to consider EBP seem impossible. This included limited or stretched resources but also scepticism about the place for academic research in 'routine' local policing practice. This provides a stark example of where an occupational culture – but also practice realities - may cause rejection of the more academic

aspects of the recruit training. Constable and Smith (2015) have documented how important the initial training environment is as a site where cultural traits can originate. And similarly, Cox and Kirby, (2018) report the strength of police cultural socialisation and its potential to eclipse other influences, finding that students studying for a police foundation degree in a UK university very quickly became defensive of 'police culture' (Cox and Kirby, 2018; Constable and Smith, 2015). Such examples demonstrate how the practice environment could serve to undermine the adoption of EBP and the wider aims of professionalisation.

Our interviews covered the first year or so in their policing teams, and a longer examination would be necessary to ascertain the stability of different attitudes towards EBP and their experiences of promoting research or questioning established practices. Charman (2018), for example, found perceptions about policing role changed significantly over time – in her research a period of four years was examined - emphasising how cynicism about the job increases when expectations are vastly different from reality.

These findings also highlighted the potential fragility of training experience, where a change of manager could alter in both positive and negatives ways perceptions about team support for EBP and the interest in their development of practice skills. This underlines the need for national oversight from the College of Policing to set standards and expectations about initial training environment. This would also help guide expectations for monitoring the implementation of the PEQF at the local level, by Policing and Crime Commissioners.

There are serious challenges to address in preparation for the introduction of the DHEP – challenges which apply equally to the other parts of the PEQF - not least the delivery of an ambitious educational reform programme in the context of large reductions in police finances. The groundwork for closer working relationships between police and HEIs exists

but much more clarity is needed about how responsibilities for the academic and practical will be coordinated to strengthen and reinforce links between these two essential components of training. Akin to the wider debates about introducing EBP into policing, there is movement required on both sides to develop and promote engagement with research evidence while also ensuring that research can take account of professional needs and experience and practice realities. Our research shows some scope for optimism in how graduate recruits could contribute to this 'project in the right kind of training environment.

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i https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/our-programme

ii The six weeks training comprised lectures and classroom-based activities delivered by guest speakers and serving police officers, covering topics including: stop and search; roads and breath testing; values, legitimacy and ethics; female genital mutilation; fraud and cybercrime; communication; evidence-based policing; mental health; sex offences and domestic abuse.

iii Official College of Policing Definition supports methodological pluralism, stating that research methods should be dictated by the nature of the research question, and that research should be combined with professional experience and judgment. EBP is a way of working that 'creates, reviews and uses the best available evidence to inform and challenge polices, practices and decisions.'

iv A 50% follow-up rate (15/30) was agreed as the research team was tasked with recruiting interviewees from the next cohort of graduate recruits, limiting the time available to re-interview recruits from this cohort.

v We were able to categorise 22 of the 30 interviewees based on their accounts of practice experience regarding EBP. 8 interviewees were difficult to categorise mainly because of lack of data on the questions we were using to determine practice experience re EBP but also in 2 cases because of operational issues that had taken interviewees temporarily away from neighbourhood teams thus limiting their actual practical experience at time of interview.