

Competent coppers: an analysis of the standards and practices of adult education within the Australian Federal Police

Michelle Berzins
Doctoral candidate
University of Canberra

The paper examines how the educational environment within the Australian Federal Police (AFP) has changed over their 25 year history. The case study was used as a methodological framework through which content analysis and interviews were conducted. It was found that due to the changing nature of their profession, the involvement of police personnel in ongoing personal and professional development is essential. Further, the educational environment fostered within the AFP was found to be one that keeps abreast of general advances in education, encourages further education of their personnel and delivers quality adult education through its accreditation as a Registered Training Organisation and a provider of nationally approved VET courses.

Introduction

In 1829, Australian police were recruited specifically from the working class because it was crucial for them to possess similar attributes and social backgrounds to those they policed in order to gain credibility, acceptance and support (Corns, 1988). Recent developments regarding the education and recruitment of police are of interest given that the 'educated' (who were once deemed so inappropriate and undesirable) are now keenly sought after to the point of being actively recruited. These developments provide the impetus to examine how educational standards and practices within the AFP have changed over time.

The article examines the ways in which the education and training of Australian Federal Police (AFP) have changed since the inception of the AFP in 1979. First, an overview is provided of the relevant literature regarding the education and training of law enforcement personnel. By exploring this literature, the context of the study is established and a foundation laid for the use of the case study as a methodological framework through which content analysis and interviews are conducted. The use of these two research methods facilitates the identification and analysis of the historical evolution of education and training within the AFP. The research demonstrates how the AFP has moved from providing internal, exam-based courses to being a provider of nationally accredited VET courses whilst also allowing suggestions for future research to be made.

Literature Review

Over time, the methods of policing have changed considerably, and one of the most significant areas affected by this is education (Palmer, 1995). Police operate in a dynamic and at times unpredictable environment, and all law enforcement agencies need to constantly update and expand the skills of their personnel in order to keep abreast of the emerging environment. In short, as the output of

policing has changed then so too has the input had to change. This means that the content and delivery of educational programs within police organisations has had to change to ensure that the curriculum covered by both new recruits and those engaging in ongoing professional development is relevant to the environment in which police operate.

As a result of changes within Australian workplaces and the increasing effects of globalisation, technological advancement and our nation's social and economic position, there is a changing role and place for adult education, and an increasing need for the skills and knowledge of employees to be efficiently updated on a regular basis (Tennant & Morris, 2001). These factors add to the dynamic environment that police are said to work in, and in order to effectively and adequately perform their duties, police officers must now possess education and skills in areas not previously considered (Edwards, 1999). Given this, it is fortunate that since the early 1960s, much has been done to raise the standard of police education and training (Reiner, 1992). Murray (2000) notes that over the past three decades, the education and training of police have improved immeasurably, and the public perception police strive to attain is now one based more on 'brain' than 'brawn'.

This shift in perception means that the emphasis is now on the *service* provided by police, including the intellectual component of their role which requires them to be professionals with a strong work ethic. Gone are the days where police officers were merely regarded as passive actors who carried out the orders given to them by their superiors. Instead, police have actively tried to replace this perception with one of being thinking professionals (Murray, 2000). Professional practice (and thus thinking professionals) are typically characterised by the use of judgment and informed action in unique, complex and/or uncertain situations (Schön, 1987). To be a thinking professional, the modern police officer must be multi-skilled, and

enrolment in higher education and/or participation in vocational education and training (VET) are two ways of attaining this status.

Further to multi-skilling and the acquirement of a professional practice, there is a need for both accountability and professionalism to be *“integral to the selection, recruitment, training, development, deployment, reward and promotion”* of police personnel (Australasian Police Ministers’ Council, 2003).

To a certain extent, professionalism can be demonstrated through the attainment of formal tertiary qualifications (Edwards, 1999), and a failure to attain such educational standards may endanger the profession. This issue has already been explored by Bayley (1991, cited in Etter, 1993) who found that sub-professional educational levels were closely linked to the failure of police to be effective. This finding provides credence to the suggestion by Reiner (1992) that police standards regarding education have not kept pace with general advances in education thus causing the legitimacy of the profession to be undermined. Palmer (1995) takes a more optimistic approach by noting that whilst the methods of skill development within police organisations have always been relatively traditional, they have also begun emerging from the ‘twilight zone’.

This emergence is evidenced by the many changes that have been incorporated into educational practices utilised by police services throughout the world. Some of these changes have been documented by Edwards (1999) who makes two points about education and training within Australian police services. First, towards the end of the 20th century, policing became more professionalised, and this trend will only continue to increase as we move further into the 21st century. Second, the requirement for professional qualifications has accompanied this professionalisation, and embedded within this has also been a need for police officers to increase their level of education.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2004), the term 'lifelong learning' no longer merely refers to recurrent or adult education, but instead encompasses all learning endeavours undertaken by an individual throughout their life. Impacting on this has been the need for individuals to continually upgrade their work and/or life skills as a result of the increased pace of technological change, globalisation and the changing nature of work. To ensure that lifelong learning can flourish within police organisations, it is essential that there are adequate means by which ongoing education, training and career development can occur so that the level of service and professionalism that policing embodies can be maintained (Nixon & Reynolds, 1996). Further, it is essential that organisations ensure that the education being provided remains relevant to the workplace, whilst simultaneously responding to a variety of needs and fostering students' aptitude for lifelong learning (Tennant & Morris, 2001).

Methodology

The aim of this research is to compare and contrast the educational practices and standards used within the AFP upon its inception in 1979 with those used within the organisation today. The research question underpinning the paper is "In what ways has the education and training of Australian Federal Police changed since the inception of the AFP in 1979?"

It has been suggested that researchers who use only one research method severely limit their ability to understand the phenomenon of interest, and the use of multiple research methods is the best way to conduct an examination into a particular social phenomenon (Babbie, 1995). Given this, multiple methods are used in this study which enables a clear and accurate picture to emerge as to the reality of educational change within the AFP.

Triangulation is defined as the use of several different research methods in order to test the same finding (Babbie, 2004). More specifically, data triangulation is defined as the use of a variety of data sources (Janesick, 1994). In this paper, data triangulation is achieved through the use of the case study as a methodological framework in combination with the data-gathering techniques of content analysis and structured interviews – a research design specifically identified by Berg (2001) as being ‘useful’.

The case study as a methodological framework

Intrinsic case studies are carried out when a researcher wants to gain a better understanding about a particular case (in this instance, the AFP). The intrinsic case study is not undertaken in order to represent other cases, but rather because its uniqueness makes the task interesting (Berg, 2001). Similarly, Stake (1994) notes that the case study “...*is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because...this case itself is of interest*” (p.237).

Content analysis

To identify and analyse the educational changes that have occurred within the AFP, extensive content analysis was conducted using training manuals, recruitment standards and gazettes. The first step in conducting content analysis was the identification of those texts which were relevant and which would facilitate the answering of the research question. This identification process generated a selection of documents including AFP Annual Reports, Agency Budget Statements, Police Gazettes and *Platypus* (the official journal of the AFP). Through reviewing these documents across the 25 year history of the AFP, common themes, trends and major transformations in education practices and standards became apparent.

Interviews

To supplement the content analysis process, interviews were conducted with current members of the AFP. The selection of participants was based on the criterion that they must have been employed with the AFP since its inception (or as near as possible). Explanation for this criterion lies in the anticipated depth of knowledge and experience that would come through interviewing personnel who had been with the AFP since inception, as well as the diversity of change that would have been experienced over the course of their employment. Understandably, natural attrition affected the number of individuals who met this criterion.

The identification of relevant personnel was done with the assistance of the AFP. In total, seven AFP members were identified as meeting the above criterion, however only six interviews were conducted due to the unavailability of one member. Each recorded interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted at either the AFP Training College or the AFP National Headquarters. Immediately following the completion of each interview, the information was transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. In total, respondents were asked six questions, of which one specifically addressed the concept of educational change within the organisation: “In your view and experience, how have education, training and recruitment practices changed within the AFP?”

Results

Content analysis

Annual reports from each of the 25 years of the AFP were scrutinised and the systematic examination of training manuals, recruitment standards, gazettes and internal documents was undertaken. It was found that the active recruitment of suitable personnel was closely linked to the quality of training and education provided to AFP

personnel throughout their employment. Upon inception, it was noted that *“manpower is the most essential and valued resource of the AFP”* (1981 Annual Report:12), and as the then-Commissioner Major General Ron Grey noted in the 1984–85 Annual Report, *“if the training system is not properly based, the force has no future”* (p.vii).

Historical analysis of education and training practices within the AFP

In the early 1980s, promotional examinations were held prior to an individual’s advancement within the organisation. These examinations included modules such as law (theory, practical and research), supervision, administration and emergency management. During 1984–85, the AFP introduced qualifying courses for staff seeking promotions, and these courses replaced the examination system which had been used up until then by the AFP.

During 1988–89, new curricula for AFP training programs were implemented, and by 1991–92, core competency standards for positions and training were established. Also during this time, a significant amount of member training was outsourced and conducted in tertiary institutions throughout Australia. The use of core competency standards resulted in the eventual change to competency-based assessment of units – a move which was highlighted in 1993 during the launch by the AFP (in conjunction with the Canberra Institute of Technology) of the Associate Diploma in Applied Science (Fingerprint Investigation). When explaining the newly-adopted competency-based assessment process to AFP personnel, it was noted that *“students attending the course will be assessed on their competency in completing tasks which are taught rather than just being graded on their knowledge”* (AFP News, 1993:4).

In January 1997, the National Education, Training and Development team was created to oversee the development and delivery of all education, training and development within the AFP. As a result, new courses were designed to meet the standards set by the National

Police Education Standards Committee. Further to continuing the shift away from examination-based learning, these courses were also able to be counted towards post-graduate qualifications through the Australian Qualification Framework. In contrast to the tailored nature of these courses, the courses offered by the AFP in 1979–80 could not be used towards post-graduate qualifications, nor were they necessarily transferable between jurisdictions.

From 1 February 1998, the AFP acquired status as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), and thus became authorised to deliver the Diploma of Policing as well as numerous Certificate courses, an Associate Diploma in Investigations and an Advanced Certificate in Investigations. Around this time, the AFP also introduced the flexible delivery of their education programs in order to ensure that “...*participation in programs does not unduly impact on the workplace*” (1999–00 Annual Report:63). The methods of delivery then diversified to incorporate attendance within a formal classroom or workplace, on-line learning and distance education. Also during 1998, the AFP used what they described as a “*recent innovation*” on their Management of Serious Crime course by requiring participants to write a 2,000 word paper and demonstrate an ability to think critically, participate in simulations and orally present information to the class rather than sit formal exams.

Following on from the RTO accreditation and the changing modes of delivery, the Learning and Development section of the AFP underwent a significant overhaul in 1999–2000 so that a university-style system of education could be provided. By 2001–02 (and in line with its end-goal of providing a university-style system of education) the AFP had established three faculties (the Faculty of Professional Development, the Faculty of Policing and the Faculty of Security and Public Order) that were designed to meet the specific training needs of the organisation.

Tertiary qualifications

The content analysis process revealed that a major shift regarding the tertiary qualifications of new recruits occurred during the 1988–89 reporting period. At this time, 11% of applicants held tertiary qualifications, yet the Annual Report identifies the intention to “...recruit more tertiary trained new members” and that “*much recruiting effort will be directed towards encouraging applications from undergraduates and graduates*” (p.64). This intention became more tangible in 1989–90 when the objective was set to have “...a 50 percent graduate workforce by the year 2001 rising to 70 percent by the year 2010” (p.58).

In recent times, the number of AFP employees holding tertiary qualifications has increased. For example, demographic data relating to the first recruitment campaign of 2001 shows that more than 70% of new members held tertiary qualifications whilst 30% possessed the ability to speak a second language. It was also found that the tertiary qualifications of existing AFP personnel have changed over time, with more employees completing university degrees and undertaking post-graduate studies. By August 2001, over 50 AFP employees held Masters Degrees and 20 employees had attained (or were about to attain) their Doctor of Philosophy.

Interview results

Demographics

Interviews were conducted with current sworn members of the AFP (n=6). Respondents were not randomly selected, but were instead identified by the AFP based on their years of service. The years of service of those interviewed ranged from 20 years to 34 years, with an average of 25.25 years. This average is substantially higher than the average length of service for sworn AFP members of 11.11 years (as reported in the AFP’s 2002–03 Annual Report:139), and this was due

to the prerequisite for interview participants to have been employed with the AFP for the majority of the period being studied.

Entry standards

Several respondents discussed the changes that have occurred over time regarding entry standards. Upon inception of the organisation, “the standards were not significant in any way – they were more physical as opposed to intellectual” and the people the AFP tended to look for were “6 foot tall, big [and] brawny with life experience”. Now, the AFP tends to “focus on different people” including looking “primarily at employing graduates”. The AFP now also “looks for someone who has a bit more life experience and who has good academic qualifications. They need analytical skills to manage a diversity of complex material, [and this] has changed quite fundamentally the type of people that we are bringing in”. This change is also reflected in the role of unsworn employees within the organisation. “We used to traditionally ‘grow’ our technical teams from inside and we would give them a whole heap of vocational training. Now, we are recruiting people with specialist technical skills”.

Tertiary qualifications

Several respondents discussed the changes associated with tertiary qualifications with one specifically noting that previously, the AFP “had a rather rigid tertiary requirement, but we have shifted from that now. We always had a policy of 70–30, which was a minimum of 70 percent graduates. All of a sudden that became nearly 100 percent, and it became nearly impossible from the late 80s to the mid 90s to get into this job if you didn’t have tertiary qualifications. That was never the intention. The intention was that the other 30 [percent] would draw from life experience and workplace experience that would be equivalent to the tertiary qualifications that people had”. As a result of this, “today, the average recruit profile is a person 29.5 years of age, with significant life experience. The vast majority

have tertiary qualifications – in excess of 75 percent come in with tertiary qualifications completed, and most of the rest have partially completed them. Of those 75 percent, 30 percent have post-graduate qualifications [and] 70 percent have a second language. The profile is very diverse”.

Style of training

In the late 1980s, Peter Dawson of the AFP College “introduced the concept of people [within the organisation] going to a tertiary institution and gaining higher qualifications... I think that was the start of putting the AFP on to a more professional footing in terms of its training”. Dawson was so influential within the AFP that one respondent noted that the changes relating to training were “all pretty much a direct result of his influence”. One change attributed directly to Dawson was the removal of qualifying courses which was brought about by his declaration that “promotion should be based on merit, and as a result, he cancelled the whole notion of having qualifying courses”. The move subsequently brought the AFP in line with government policies operational throughout the Australian Public Service.

Despite the enthusiasm and support from several respondents regarding changes associated with training, one respondent felt that “there is still some work that needs to be done in improving what we have on the courses”. Other comments regarding education and training were that “we have got some work to do” and that “we could do a little bit better on the education side”. Further to these comments was the suggestion that the AFP has “not yet designed our programs well enough to ensure that we have that fundamental capability of starting from the beginning and training to be able to give us the ability of moving people around from business area to business area”.

Examinations and qualifying courses

Respondents also provided some insight into their own views and experiences with examinations and qualifying courses within the AFP. In the early days of the AFP, “examinations and qualifying courses took you through the ranks and you were not able to apply for positions unless you had those qualifications behind you”. In essence, “you had to pass exams in order to move on”. Since then, there has been “a fairly big move to competencies”. This was recognised by one respondent who felt that “the internal police training regime has changed dramatically. It has gone from the days where there used to be a big stick and ‘You will have an exam Monday morning’, and has moved to this much more professional base where it is an adult learning environment. I think it is much more conducive to people actually learning skills”. When discussing examinations, one respondent noted that “we have certainly moved away from those to a more adult education process”.

Discussion

From interviews, it became apparent that the mid to late 1980s were the most notable and memorable times of change within the AFP for its education and training. This finding is consistent with Etter’s (1995) assertion that organisational development of ‘landmark proportions’ occurred under the leadership of Commissioner McAuley during the late 1980s. Such change is evident when comparing the educational and training courses conducted upon inception with those conducted now. At inception, the courses were oriented towards practical activities, and they mainly focused on the attainment of key skills. These courses required specific levels of skill attainment and physical mastery, and differ significantly from the more cognitive-based courses (presented in a manner consistent with adult education principles) that are conducted within the AFP today.

Four respondents commented on the AFP's use of adult education principles during its education and training of personnel.

Four respondents spoke specifically about examination processes within the AFP, including the fact that upon inception, successful achievement on examinations was needed in order to complete courses. This requirement was noted by three respondents who recalled the 'three strikes and you are out' policy regarding a 'fail' mark on an examination. Such standards differ greatly to the competency-based assessments utilised throughout the AFP today.

It is possible that there is an implied 'tension' between university-style education and the provision of competency-based education and training. However, through conducting content analysis and interviews it is evident that the AFP has adopted a system which has 'the best of both worlds'. That is, a balance has been found where personnel can acquire skills and be assessed on their competency (such as the attainment of skills relating to weapon handling or urgent duty driving) whilst also extending themselves and furthering their careers through undertaking higher degrees and/or attaining formal qualifications. An example is found in the large number of AFP staff undertaking the Masters of Educational Leadership program at the University of Canberra, as well those undertaking other courses relating to topics such as risk management and innovation.

A key finding of this study relates to the tertiary qualifications gained by AFP personnel. The identification (and attainment) of a 50% graduate workforce is in stark contrast to the 5% of AFP employees who had studied beyond their leaving certificate when the 1980 annual report was compiled. The change in tertiary qualifications and post-graduate education of both new and existing staff is evident, and it is obvious that further education beyond the attainment of a university degree has become more pronounced within the organisation.

This case study provides insight into how organisations (in particular, law enforcement agencies) can foster an educational environment and encourage a workplace committed to the lifelong learning of its personnel. Edwards (1999) noted how the attainment of tertiary qualifications has accompanied the increased professionalisation of police, and the increasing number of AFP employees combining further studies with their work is just one example of the increased professionalisation being promoted by the AFP. At interview, three respondents referred to the increasingly professional image of the AFP and noted that this has been one example of positive change within the organisation.

The literature suggests that police standards regarding education and recruitment have not kept pace with general advances in education (see Reiner, 1992), however the findings presented here differ somewhat with the literature. For example, the development of new curricula, core competency standards and the introduction of the flexible delivery of programs in conjunction with registration as an RTO have all seen the AFP stay abreast of general advances in education. At interview, this was noted by three respondents, and it became evident that educational changes have been made at both a micro- and macro-level within the AFP through the incorporation of quality controls and assurances, the consideration of multiple intelligences and the use of evaluation processes, information technology and adult learning principles within AFP-delivered programs.

Conclusion

Once accepted into their profession of choice, it would be easy for individuals to stagnate and merely continue meeting the daily demands of their job without necessarily concerning themselves with ongoing personal or professional development. By analysing the changes that have occurred within the areas of education and training

since the inception of the AFP, it is possible to see how the standards of AFP officers have changed (and indeed improved) enormously since the inception of the organisation in 1979. This finding is in line with Reiner's (1992) assertion that the passing of time has enabled the education and training of police to undergo a drastic transformation.

By researching the question "In what ways has the education and training of Australian Federal Police changed since the inception of the AFP in 1979?" it has become evident that the practices of education and training within the AFP since its inception 25 years ago have changed significantly. In summary, it can be noted that: the mid to late 1980s were the most notable and memorable times of change; the AFP has stayed abreast of general advances in education; adult learning principles have been adopted and subsequently utilised within the organisation, and that the AFP has successfully moved from examination-based assessments to competency-based assessments, and become a nationally accredited provider of VET courses.

These educational changes have demonstrated that the AFP is a dynamic organisation. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated how the AFP have been able to refocus its own system of educational transformation by adopting modern and emerging best practices regarding adult learning promoted by other experts and professional bodies. Given the significant changes to education and training made during the life of the AFP, it is unlikely that its personnel will stagnate in terms of its educational environment. Opportunities therefore exist for future research to be conducted that compares the educational environment of the AFP with that of other law enforcement agencies, or alternatively, for further research to be conducted within the AFP that encompasses the experiences of more recent recruits.

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About the author

Michelle Berzins is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra and recipient of an Australian Postgraduate Award researching leniency policies, illegal cartel behaviour and competition law. Tutor and occasional lecturer in the Bachelor of Community Education course at the University of Canberra.

Contact details

Room 5C16, School of Education and Community Studies, University of Canberra, ACT 2601

Tel: (02) 6201 5269

Fax: (02) 6201 2263

Email: Michelle.Berzins@canberra.edu.au