01/06/2026

A study of the use of problem-based learning (PBL) in police education to establish whether police officers benefit through the improvement of skills, behaviours and ethical decision making

A study of the use of problem-based learning (PBL) in police education to establish whether police officers benefit through the improvement of skills, behaviours and ethical decision making

Exploring the effectiveness of problem-based learning in a police higher education context through the use of immersive films and virtual reality scenarios.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Portsmouth
Principal researcher(s)	David Knowles david.knowles@myport.ac.uk
Police region	South East
Collaboration and partnership	Research funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in partnership with South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	October 2024
Date due for completion	April 2028

Research context

This research examines the use of problem-based learning (PBL) within police education through the creation and delivery of innovative learning resources to UK police officers. The anticipated outcomes include the assessment of PBL as an effective method of linking academic learning with

01/06/2026

A study of the use of problem-based learning (PBL) in police education to establish whether police officers benefit through the improvement of skills, behaviours and ethical decision making

improved skills and behaviour and the positive impacts on ethical decision-making.

Successive reports have criticised police officers for racist, misogynistic and homophobic behaviour alongside unethical and unjustifiable decision making (Scarman 1981, McPherson 1999, Casey 2023), demonstrating clear methodological failures in police education.

Neyroud (2011) initiated police professionalisation through mandated university qualifications, yet despite recent examples of horrific officer misconduct (for example, Wayne Couzens and David Carrick), some chief constables perceive higher education as too academic for policing (Hamilton 2023). With indications that traditional police education delivers a problematic organisational culture including a 'blue code of silence' (Westmarland and Conway 2020, Charman, 2017), police education which raises standards and performance is required. PBL, which has its roots in 'experiential learning' (Dewey 1938), is proposed as a useful method of linking theory with ethical behaviour, practice and skills and is particularly relevant to policing.

PBL is embedded within education for comparable professions such as nursing (Higgins and others 2010), while relatively few studies have researched PBL within police education, with limited UK research conducted. Yet theory indicates that PBL is likely to favour policing (Hmelo-Silver 2004), while a small number of studies outside the UK do not yet provide solid evidence (Manaf and Mustaji 2022).

With falling public trust in policing, improvements in the education of ethical decision-making within policing is an important area for research.

Research methodology

A series of PBL scenarios will be developed and created in collaboration with partner police forces and the College of Policing. These will be aligned with policing topics such as crime investigation and PACE (Police and Criminal Evidence Act) searches using innovative technology including immersive films and virtual reality. These resources will be delivered to UK student police officers and experienced officers while quantitative and qualitative data will be collected to demonstrate their utility. Datasets will include:

- pre- and post-delivery surveys
- pre- and post-delivery semi-structured interviews
- observation data collected during delivery of immersive films and VR scenarios

01/06/2026

A study of the use of problem-based learning (PBL) in police education to establish whether police officers benefit through the improvement of skills, behaviours and ethical decision making

Examination of the data will allow commentary on the usefulness of immersive films and virtual reality scenarios in the development of ethical, practical and academic policing skills which will inform subsequent recommendations on the use of PBL within police education.

References

Casey, Baroness. 2023. 'An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service' [internet].

Charman, S. 2017. 'Being a police officer: Policing cultures'. In: 'Police socialisation, identity and culture'. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 127–167.

Dewey J. 1938. 'Experience and education'. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Hamilton F. 2023, March 27. 'Hampshire police recruits to drop degrees for on-the-job training.' The Times [internet]

Higgins G, Spencer RL and Kane R. 2010. 'A systematic review of the experiences and perceptions of the newly qualified nurse in the United Kingdom'. Nurse Education Today, 30(6), pp 499–508.

Hmelo-Silver CE. 2004. 'Problem-based learning: What and how do students learn?' Educational Psychology Review, 16, pp 235–266.

Manaf A and Mustaji FA. 2022, June. 'The impact of problem-based learning model on critical thinking ability in the education of police officers'. Worldwide Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development, 8(6), pp 44–48.

McPherson W. 1999. 'The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry' GOV.UK. [internet].

Neyroud P. 2011. 'Review of police leadership and training'. GOV.UK. [internet].

Scarman, Lord. 1981. 'The Brixton Disorders'.

Westmarland L and Conway S. 2020. 'Police ethics and integrity: Keeping the 'blue code' of silence'. International Journal of Police Science & Management, 22(4), pp 378–392.