



Professional Knowledge in Transition

Police Education Reform and the Reconfiguration of Knowledge in Icelandic Policing

Ólafur Örn Bragason

Thesis towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2026

School of Education

UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

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Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor

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Fagþekking á krossgötum

Umbætur í lögreglumenntun og endurmótun þekkingar
íslenskrar lögreglu

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Ritgerð til doktorsgráðu

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Ágúst 2026

Menntavísindasvið

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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ISBN 978-9935-575-02-9

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Reykjavík, Iceland 2026

Ágrip

Doktorsritgerð þessi fjallar um hvernig menntaumbætur í grunnnámi lögreglumanna á Íslandi árið 2016 breyttu formi, gildi og lögmæti fagþekkingar þegar námið færðist frá starfsnámi hjá Lögregluskóla ríkisins yfir á háskólastig hjá Háskólanum á Akureyri. Umbæturnar voru hluti af víðtækara ferli fagvæðingar lögreglunnar sem miðar að því að efla fræðilega, siðferðilega og samskiptalega hæfni lögreglumanna. Byggt er á fræðilegum sjónarhornum Shulmans, Erauts og Chan og skoðað hvernig þekking verður til, er metin og öðlast lögmæti í stefnu, námi og starfsvettvangi.

Rannsóknin samanstendur af fjórum samtengdum rannsóknum þar sem beitt er fjölþættri og fjölþrepa hönnun sem sameinar eigindlegar og megindlegar aðferðir: (I) söguleg orðræðugreining á stefnuskjöllum og löggjöf sem mótaði umbæturnar, (II) greining á því hvernig sveigjanlegt nám og háskólasamstarf voru nýtt til að mæta mannaflapörf og réttlæta umbæturnar innan lögreglunnar, (III) langtímarannsókn á mati nemenda á faglegri hæfni fyrir og eftir yfirfærslu námsins á háskólastig, og (IV) eigindleg viðtöl við nýútskrifaða lögreglumenn þar sem skoðað er hvernig fagþekking birtist og öðlast lögmæti í starfi.

Niðurstöðurnar gefa til kynna að menntaumbæturnar hafi náð fram stofnanalegu samræmi við háskólastig en að menningarleg og fræðileg umbreyting taki lengri tíma. Á stefnumótunarstigi byggðist lögmæti bæði á tæknilegum og faglegum rökum; á menntunarstigi veittu lögreglunemar á háskólastigi fræðilegri- og samskiptahæfni meira vægi en áður; en á vettvangi reyndust fræðileg og reynslubundin þekking aðeins að hluta samþætt. Í ritgerðinni eru þessar breytingar kynntar sem hluti af fjölþætту þekkingarferli lögreglunnar og stuðst við hugtakið víðtæk hæfni til að lýsa samspili fræðilegra, siðferðilegra og tengslabundinna þátta fagmennsku. Rannsóknin veitir ný sjónarhorn á fagmenntun með því að sýna hvernig umbætur í smáríki varpa ljósi á flókið samspil stofnanabreytinga, námsmenningar og þróunar á lögmæti fagþekkingar.

Lykilorð: Menntaumbætur í lögreglunni; fagþekking; háskólavæðing; fagvæðing; lögmæti þekkingar; lögreglumening; fjölþætt hæfni

Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines how Iceland's 2016 police education reform reconfigured the forms, value, and legitimacy of professional knowledge as basic police education was shifted from a vocational model to a university-based programme. The reform formed part of a wider professionalisation process with the intention to strengthen the police's analytical, ethical and communicative competence so that officers are better equipped to respond to an increasingly complex policing environment. Using the analytical perspectives of Shulman, Eraut and Chan, the thesis examines how different forms of knowledge are produced, valued and rendered legitimate across policy, educational and workplace settings.

The research comprises four interrelated studies using a multi-method, multi-level design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches: (I) a historical discourse analysis of the policy and legislative texts that framed the reform; (II) an institutional analysis of the implementation of flexible learning and its relationship to workforce needs, access to education, and the system-level legitimisation of the reform; (III) a longitudinal study of students' valuations of professional competence before and after police education reform; and (IV) qualitative interviews with newly graduated officers examining how professional knowledge is enacted and legitimised in practice.

The findings suggest that the reform achieved institutional alignment with higher education, but that epistemic and cultural change unfolded more slowly. At the policy level, legitimacy was built on both technocratic and professionalising logics; at the educational level, police students in the university-based programme placed greater value on analytical and relational competence than students in the earlier vocational model; and at the workplace level, academic and experiential knowledge remained only partially integrated. The thesis conceptualises these processes as part of a multi-level knowledge formation in policing and uses the concept of comprehensive competence to describe the cognitive, ethical, and relational dimensions of professional practice. The study contributes to international debates on professional education by portraying how reforms in a small state illuminate the complex interplay between institutional change, learning cultures, and the evolving legitimacy of professional knowledge.

Keywords: Police education reform; professional knowledge; academisation; professionalisation; knowledge legitimacy; police culture; comprehensive competence

Acknowledgements

This doctoral thesis concludes four years of focused and rewarding work. Although the responsibility for the study is mine, its completion rests on the support, guidance, and trust of many individuals and institutions. I am sincerely grateful to all who have contributed to this process.

First and foremost, I wish to thank my supervisors, Guðrún Geirsdóttir and Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson. Guðrún's supportive nature, deep understanding of higher education, and careful reading of my work have strengthened this thesis at every stage. Ingólfur's analytical rigour, academic precision, and insistence on conceptual coherence have continually challenged and refined my arguments. Their complementary expertise has shaped both the substance and the quality of this work. I am deeply thankful for their steady guidance and trust throughout the doctoral process. I also extend my sincere thanks to the members of my doctoral committee, Marie-Louise Damen and Guðmundur Oddsson, whose thoughtful feedback and encouragement were invaluable.

This research was carried out at the School of Education, University of Iceland. I thank the faculty, doctoral colleagues, and staff for creating a constructive academic environment in which this work could develop. The opportunity to participate in seminars and scholarly dialogue has been important for sharpening both the theoretical and methodological foundations of the thesis. Study visits to the Norwegian Police University College in Oslo and the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences broadened my perspectives and helped refine the direction of my work. I am grateful for the generous reception and intellectually stimulating discussions with colleagues at both institutions.

The project was conducted in close connection and supported by my employer, the Office of the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police, and the Centre for Police Training and Professional Development. I am grateful to the institution for its financial and organisational support and for recognising the importance of developing police education as an academic field of inquiry. In particular, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Sigríður Björk Guðjónsdóttir, former National Police Commissioner. Her encouragement, confidence, and steadfast support enabled me to undertake and complete this doctoral journey while balancing my professional responsibilities. Her trust in the value of academic development within policing has meant more than I can fully express. Without her belief in this work and her willingness to create the necessary space for it, I would not stand here today. I also wish to thank my colleagues Rannveig Þórisdóttir and Þórunn Óðinsdóttir for their encouragement, strategic guidance, and ability to bring clarity and structure to complex challenges.

My thanks also go to the University of Akureyri, where police education is delivered, and to my colleagues who have engaged in critical and forward-looking discussions about reform, competence, and professional development during this transformative period.

I am especially grateful to the police students and officers who participated in this study. They generously shared their experiences and reflections on knowledge, learning, and practice. Their openness, honesty, and willingness to reflect critically on their profession made this research possible.

Finally, I thank my wonderful and supportive wife, Ingibjörg, and our children, Tinna Katrín and Darri Steinn. Your patience, encouragement, and steady presence have been the foundation that has allowed me to sustain this work. You have carried more than your share so that I could complete this thesis. I am deeply grateful for your love and support.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
EBP	Evidence-Based Policing
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MESC	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Iceland)
MHE	Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (Iceland)
NPA	National Police Academy of Iceland (closed in 2016)
NCIP	National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PTPD	Police Training and Professional Development (Centre under NCIP)
RECPOL	Recruitment, Education and Careers in the Police (Nordic comparative project)
UNAK	University of Akureyri
UK	United Kingdom

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List of Original Papers

This thesis is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals (I, II, III, IV):

- I. Bragason, Ó. Ö., Jóhannesson, I. Á., & Geirsdóttir, G. (2025). Police education reform in Iceland: Examining the legitimating principles, contradictions, and tensions in policy discourse. *Education Inquiry*, 16(4), 727–742. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2023.2299504>
- II. Oddsson, G. Á., Bragason, Ó. Ö., & Þórisdóttir, R. (2024). Flexible education reform and Iceland's police staffing crisis. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 18, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paae009>
- III. Bragason, Ó. Ö., & Damen, M. L. (2025). Reforming police education in Iceland: a comparative analysis of students' competence valuations before and after the transition to university education. *Policing and Society*, 35(8), 1084–1099. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2024.2448704>
- IV. Bragason, Ó. Ö., Geirsdóttir, G., & Jóhannesson, I. Á. (submitted). Legitimising Police Knowledge: Professional Knowledge, Culture and Practice in Icelandic Policing. Manuscript accepted for publication in *Criminology & Criminal Justice* subject to minor revisions.

Papers I–III are reproduced in accordance with the respective publishers' licence agreements. Paper IV is included in the version submitted for publication.

Declaration of Contribution

This PhD project is based upon findings presented in the four publications listed below. Articles I–III have been published. Article IV has been accepted for publication subject to minor revisions.

Article I: Police Education Reform in Iceland: Examining the legitimating principles, contradictions, and tensions in policy discourse

I planned the research and conducted the policy and document analysis. I analysed the data and wrote the article with my supervisors, Dr. Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson and Dr. Guðrún Geirsdóttir, who both contributed to the framing and interpretation. They are members of my doctoral committee.

Article II: Flexible education reform and Iceland's police staffing crisis

I took part in planning the research and collected the empirical material, such as cohort data and police staffing data. I analysed the student cohort data and co-wrote the article. The article writing was led by Dr. Guðmundur Oddsson, who is a member of my doctoral committee, and co-authored by my colleague at the NCIP, Rannveig Þórisdóttir.

Article III: Reforming police education in Iceland: A comparative analysis of students' competence valuations before and after the transition to university education

I combined data from two student datasets, one from UNAK and one from the NPA, cleaned the merged dataset, and conducted the statistical analysis and interpretation. I wrote and revised the manuscript with Dr. Marie-Louise Damen, who is a member of my doctoral committee.

Article IV: Legitimising Police Knowledge: Professional Knowledge, Culture and Practice in Icelandic Policing

I planned and conducted the research, carried out the interviews with newly graduated police officers, and performed the reflexive thematic analysis. I wrote the article and discussed the interpretation and revisions with my supervisors, Dr. Guðrún Geirsdóttir and Dr. Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson.

1 Introduction

In 2016, a significant reform was made to the education process for police officers in Iceland. The National Police Academy was closed, and police education was transferred to the University of Akureyri. Prior to this reform, Iceland had a vocational approach to police education, with a one-year training period, which differed from the more academically rigorous Nordic model (Bjørge & Damen, 2020). However, with the implementation of the new system, Iceland now aligns more closely with the Nordic model, requiring prospective police officers to complete a two-year university diploma, with the option to complete the third year to earn a bachelor's degree. This development follows similar trends in many other countries, as in recent decades, police education has shifted from training schools run directly by the police to university-level, albeit rationalised in very different ways and executed in a diverse manner (Cordner, 2019; Paterson, 2011, 2015; Rogers & Frevel, 2018; Williams & Paterson, 2021).

A large body of research has examined police education in Europe at university level following the Bologna process (Jaschke & Neidhardt, 2007; Paterson, 2015). Studies, however, have not been unanimous in their assessment of this development's success. In an extensive review article, Brown (2020) concluded that the evidence base is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions about the benefits university education may have conferred on the police. Thus, many unanswered questions remain regarding the objectives and implementation of police education at the university level, especially given the significant variation in its implementation.

Despite multiple examples of police education reform from the vocational to the university level, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of police science or a discipline as such. Although there is no universally agreed definition of police science, efforts to conceptualise it as an applied, interdisciplinary field reflect broader attempts to clarify what counts as legitimate knowledge in policing (Jaschke et al., 2007). This definition points to the field's twofold nature, bringing together knowledge drawn from practice and knowledge developed through academic research. The establishment of police science as a university discipline in Iceland can be seen as part of a wider European effort to clarify what counts as legitimate knowledge in policing.

The Icelandic case also has distinctive features. The reform coincided with broader restructuring of the police organisation and created an opportunity to examine how professional knowledge was reshaped across policy, education, and practice within a small and centralised system. Previous Icelandic studies have focused primarily on representativeness among recruits (Oddsson, Hill, et al., 2020), while other

contributions have largely taken the form of instrumental policy reports rather than critical academic analyses (Oddsson, Bragason, et al., 2020). As a result, little is known about how the reform influenced understandings of professional competence, legitimacy, and identity within the police profession. This gap is particularly important because the reform formed part of a broader process of institutionalising police-academic relations in Iceland, as police knowledge became increasingly tied to higher education, research capacity, and formal collaboration between police and universities (Oddsson, Bragason, & Þórisdóttir, in press).

My interest in this research stems from two decades of professional experience within Icelandic policing, including roles in research, teaching, curriculum development, and student selection. Working at the Office of the National Commissioner and as a part-time lecturer at both the former Police Academy and the University of Akureyri, I observed first-hand the opportunities and tensions associated with the 2016 reform. These experiences raised questions about how knowledge comes to be regarded as legitimate within the police organisation and how educational reform shapes professional identity and learning. This doctoral project provided an opportunity to step back from my professional role and critically examine the broader processes through which expertise, competence, and legitimacy are constructed in policing.

This study approaches the 2016 reform as a lens through which to examine how professional knowledge, competence, and legitimacy are negotiated when vocational education becomes part of higher education. The Icelandic case provides an opportunity to analyse these processes within a small, centralised police system while contributing to wider debates on the academisation and professionalisation of policing.

1.1 The aim of the research project

This thesis examines how the 2016 reform of police education in Iceland influenced the way professional knowledge and competence are defined, valued, and seen as legitimate at the levels of policy, education, and practice. Instead of treating the reform as merely an administrative shift, the study explores how knowledge and competence are shaped, questioned, and reinforced within the new educational and professional setting. This broader interpretation is also supported by recent work showing that the reform was accompanied by a reconfiguration of the educational purposes and knowledge priorities of initial police education, with greater emphasis on ethical, relational, and reflective dimensions of professional competence alongside operational preparation (Bragason & Oddsson, in press).

The research is guided by three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Shulman's (1986, 1987) framework of professional knowledge, Eraut's (1994, 2004) typology of workplace learning, and Chan's (1999, 2003) analysis of police culture. Taken together, these perspectives make it possible to explore how academic, experiential, and relational forms of knowledge interact in practice; how students and graduates

interpret and prioritise different forms of competence; and how authority is negotiated within organisational and cultural settings. They provide a way of following how knowledge moves from curriculum design into everyday work and professional recognition.

To pursue this aim, the thesis employs a multi-method, multi-level design encompassing four interrelated studies: (I) a historical discourse analysis of the policy and legislative texts that framed the 2016 reform; (II) an institutional analysis of the implementation of flexible learning and its relationship to workforce needs, access, and the system-level legitimisation of the reform; (III) analysis of longitudinal RECPOL survey data comparing students' valuations of enduring and emerging competence before and after the transition to university education; and (IV) qualitative interviews with newly graduated officers exploring how professional knowledge is legitimised and integrated into everyday police practice. In this thesis, the term multilevel does not refer to hierarchical or nested data structures in the statistical sense (e.g. multilevel or mixed-effects modelling). Rather, it is used analytically to examine police education reform across three interrelated but non-hierarchical domains: policy, education, and professional practice. These domains are treated as analytically distinct dimensions through which reform is articulated, enacted, and negotiated. The term level is therefore used to denote analytical vantage points rather than data hierarchies.

Together, these four studies provide complementary perspectives that connect policy discourse, institutional design, student experience, and workplace learning. Overall, the thesis contributes in several ways. It offers the first integrated analysis of Iceland's 2016 police education reform, bringing together policy development, organisational implementation, student perspectives, and workplace practice. It also develops a conceptual model that links Shulman's, Eraut's, and Chan's frameworks to show how legitimacy is negotiated through processes such as translation, gatekeeping, and peer learning. Finally, it draws out implications for professional education more broadly by identifying design features that appear to support knowledge transfer and sustained reflection, including structured reflection sessions, peer mentoring, and dialogue across ranks.

1.2 Main research question and sub-questions

This thesis explores how the 2016 reform of police education in Iceland reshaped the meaning, status, and legitimacy of professional knowledge as the system moved from a vocational model to a university-based programme. To address this, the study is organised around one main research question and three related sub-questions, reflecting its focus on policy, education, and practice as well as the perspectives of Shulman, Eraut, and Chan.

Main research question

How is professional knowledge created, valued and legitimised in Icelandic policing following the transition of basic police education to the university level?

Sub-questions

Policy level: How was the reform of police education legitimised in official discourse, and what assumptions about professional knowledge and competence were embedded in these narratives?

Educational level: How did the structural and pedagogical features of the university-based model shape students' access to and understanding of professional competence?

Workplace level: How do newly graduated officers experience, translate and legitimise different forms of knowledge—academic, experiential and relational—in everyday police practice?

Taken as a whole, these questions frame professionalisation not simply as a single institutional reform, but as an ongoing process in which knowledge and competence are shaped and renegotiated across policy arenas, educational settings, and everyday police work.

Table 1 outlines how the overall research questions connect to the four empirical studies.

Table 1. *Relationship between thesis-level research questions and the four studies*

Thesis Research Questions	Study I (Policy discourse)	Study II (System-level implementation)	Study III (Competence valuations)	Study IV (Workplace enactment)
Policy level question: How was the reform legitimised in official discourse, and what assumptions about professional knowledge and competence were embedded in these narratives?	Explores policy narratives and legitimating assumptions	Indications of organisational translation of policy	—	—
Educational level question: How did the structure and pedagogy of the university-based model shape students' access to and understanding of professional competence?	—	Examines institutional design and learning conditions	Analyses competence valuations pre/post reform	—
Workplace level question: How do newly graduated officers experience, translate and legitimise academic, experiential and relational knowledge in everyday police practice?	—	—	Suggests which competences are valued in practice	In-depth accounts of knowledge use and legitimacy negotiation
Main research question: How is professional knowledge created, valued and legitimised across policy, educational and workplace contexts in Icelandic policing after the 2016 reform?	Policy knowledge & legitimacy	Institutional affordances & constraints	Valued knowledge forms	Knowledge-in-practice & cultural legitimacy

1.3 Originality of the research project

This thesis makes an original contribution to research on police education and professionalisation by offering the first integrated analysis of the 2016 reform of police education in Iceland across policy, education, and workplace practice. While previous work has examined particular aspects of police reform, this thesis brings together the policy process that framed the reform, the structural changes it introduced, the changing competence valuations of police students, and the ways newly graduated officers construct and legitimise professional knowledge in everyday work. In doing so, it shows how educational reform can be understood not only as an institutional change, but also as a reconfiguration of what counts as legitimate professional knowledge in policing. Across the four studies, the thesis captures reform as a connected process unfolding through discourse, institutional design, student orientations, and workplace practice.

The originality of the thesis also lies in its analytical focus on professional knowledge as a multi-level and contested phenomenon. Rather than treating police education reform as a question of curriculum design or organisational restructuring alone, the thesis examines how knowledge is defined in policy discourse, organised in formal education, and negotiated in workplace settings shaped by hierarchy, practice, and occupational culture. By bringing together Shulman's framework of professional knowledge, Eraut's account of workplace learning, and Chan's analysis of police culture and epistemic authority, the thesis develops an integrated perspective for analysing how different forms of knowledge are produced, valued, and legitimised across contexts.

A further contribution lies in the empirical case itself, as Iceland provides a distinctive setting for examining police professionalisation because the reform involved a shift from a state-run vocational model to a university-led, flexible educational structure within a small, closely connected policing system. This context enables tracing reform across institutional levels and over time, while also offering insight into how broader international pressures towards academisation and professionalisation are mediated within a small-state setting. The Icelandic case, therefore, contributes not only national insight but also a contextually grounded perspective of relevance to wider debates on police education, professional learning, and the relationship between academic and practice-based knowledge.

Taken together, the thesis contributes original empirical, analytical, and contextual insight into how police education reform reshapes the foundations of professional knowledge. It shows that reform is not exhausted by changes in access, structure, or curriculum. Its deeper significance lies in how it redefines the forms of knowledge that are recognised as legitimate in the making of police professionalism.

1.4 Police education: Developments in Iceland and the international context

This section reviews the development of police education in Iceland and places it in an international perspective. It first outlines how police training gradually became more formalised, leading to the establishment of the National Police Academy (section 1.4.1), before turning to the later development of police science within the university sector (section 1.4.2). The final part of the section broadens the focus to consider international developments in police education (section 1.4.3), allowing the Icelandic case to be discussed in relation to ongoing debates about academisation, professionalisation, and shifting expectations regarding police knowledge and expertise.

1.4.1 Early initiatives and the establishment of the Police Academy

The early developments of police education in Iceland were fragmented and incremental, shaped by the concerns of individual police chiefs and the limited resources of a small public sector, without a holistic policy or governmental support. In 1919, Erlingur Pálsson, the newly appointed chief police officer in Reykjavík, pursued police studies in Denmark, laying the groundwork for later reforms (Jónsson & Guðjónsson, 1997). He introduced physical training and specialised exercises in 1923, emphasising fitness and discipline as key attributes of policing. In 1936, Jónatan Hallvarðsson, then chief of the Reykjavík police, voiced concern about the neglect of officer training, linking poor education to low pay and weak professional motivation. His recommendations led to the first introductory course for newly recruited officers in 1937, marking the beginning of more structured training (Jónsson & Guðjónsson, 1997).

A major milestone was the 1963 Police Act, which for the first time laid down provisions for a National Police Academy. When it began operating in 1965, the Academy provided both entry-level training for recruits and in-service courses for serving officers. The curriculum included legal instruction, practical exercises, and police camps designed to enhance operational readiness (Jónsson & Guðjónsson, 1997). In 1988, the Academy became an independent institution, expanding its remit to include management training and specialised courses.

The 1990s brought new expectations for all state institutions. The government's New Public Management policy of 1996 introduced performance management (*árangursstjórnun*), requiring public bodies to demonstrate efficiency, accountability, and long-term planning (Fjármálaráðuneytið, 1996; Matthíasson, 2008). The police were no exception. The 1997 regulation on the National Police Academy (no. 490/1997) not only specified curriculum and intake criteria but also, for the first time, tasked the Academy with conducting scientific research of practical relevance. This mandate reflected the wider reform agenda promoting measurable outputs and

evidence-informed practice. However, the Academy produced no peer-reviewed research publications or internal reports, a pattern consistent with the broader difficulties of implementing performance management in Icelandic public administration. As Matthíasson (2008) observes, despite government ambitions, the policy was unevenly applied across ministries, hindered by the small size and limited capacity of many state agencies, including the police.

Thus, while the Academy's establishment in the 1960s marked a turning point in Icelandic police training, its development remained constrained by limited institutional capacity. Unlike the larger Nordic countries, which during the 1990s and 2000s consolidated districts and modernised police education within university frameworks, Iceland lagged behind. The National Police Academy remained primarily a vocational school until its closure in 2016, when responsibility for basic police education was transferred to the university level, a reform that altered the institutional structure of police education and prompted new debates about what should count as legitimate knowledge in Icelandic policing.

1.4.2 Establishment of police science as a university discipline

The transfer of basic police education to the university level in 2016 represented a major institutional change in Icelandic policing. It was part of a broader police reform that had previously seen a reduction in the number of police districts from 15 to 9. The same regulatory framework called for working groups to prepare for educational reform, and two ministerial working groups subsequently laid the groundwork (Icelandic Parliament, 2016). The first working group compared Icelandic police education with developments in the Nordic countries (Ministry of Interior, 2014), while the second addressed whether, and how, education needed to change (Ministry of Interior, 2015). The reports were largely administrative in tone and made only limited use of academic research, suggesting that scholars played a relatively minor role in shaping the policy discourse (Bragason et al., 2025).

Following Parliament's approval, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture invited four universities to submit competitive bids. The University of Akureyri (UNAK) was selected and, from September 2016, began offering a two-year undergraduate police diploma programme (120 ECTS) that grants eligibility for appointment as a police officer (including police practical training). Graduates can subsequently complete a one-year top-up leading to a BA degree in Police Science (180 ECTS) (University of Akureyri, n.d.). Responsibility for practical skills training, internships, and continuing professional development remained within the police, under the auspices of the newly established Police Training and Professional Development Centre (PTPD) at the National Commissioner of Police (Icelandic Parliament, 2016). UNAK and PTPD operate collaboratively, but under separate ministries (the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the Ministry of Justice), reflecting a formal separation between

academic governance and police authority (Oddsson, Bragason & Þórisdóttir, 2024). Seen in a longer historical perspective, this arrangement did not emerge from the 2016 reform alone but from a broader expansion of police-academic relations in Iceland since the 1990s, including increased research capacity within policing, more formalised collaboration with universities, and a gradual strengthening of science-informed approaches to police development (Oddsson, Bragason & Þórisdóttir, in press).

Despite a two-year lead-in period, the reform was implemented abruptly. The bill was passed on 31 May 2016, UNAK won the contract on 23 August, and the first students were enrolled less than three weeks later, on 10 September. The initial curriculum contained little police-specific content and was largely taught in common with other social science students. The speed of implementation illustrates how new the university setting was for police education at the time, and how little specialised teaching material had yet been developed. Over time, however, the curriculum has been revised. A comparison between the final programme of the National Police Academy (2015–2016) and the UNAK curriculum for 2025–2027 outlines a significant shift towards theory-based courses, including criminology, research methods, and professional ethics, while maintaining core operational training (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Broad outlines of the curriculum of NPA and UNAK*

Curriculum area	National Police Academy (2015–2016)	University of Akureyri (2025–2026)	Analytical shift
Legal and social sciences	Law, psychology, and ethics. No sociology, criminology, or research methods.	54 ECTS in law, psychology, criminology, ethics, and research methods.	From narrow legal–psychological focus to broader social science orientation and research literacy.
Police-specific training	7 months of police-specific courses (criminal investigations, traffic control, driving, physical training, practical exercises).	66 ECTS (7,6 to 9,2 months) of police-specific courses, including police skills and internship.	Maintains operational skills but integrates them within an academic framework and blended learning model.
Internship / operational learning	Approx. 640 hours (4 months) full-time placement in a police department.	280 hours distributed alongside studies, complemented by part-time employment as temporary police officers.	From block-practice model to integrated workplace learning, aligning practice with academic study.
Educational setting	Stand alone vocational school, strongly practice-based.	University setting with blended learning (online, campus, and field). Students interact with peers in other disciplines.	From insular training culture to academic–professional hybrid with cross-disciplinary exposure.
Knowledge paradigm	Emphasis on experience-based, operational competence.	Balance between enduring (operational) and emerging (theoretical, reflective, ethical) competence.	From vocational model to professionalisation through epistemic diversification.

Prior to the reform, Iceland's one-year vocational training differed substantially from the longer and more academically oriented Nordic programmes (Bjørge & Damen, 2020). After 2016, prospective officers were required to complete a university-level diploma comparable to a UK foundation degree (Rogers & Gravelle, 2020). The intention was to broaden the knowledge base of policing by introducing subject areas such as community policing, cybercrime, diversity and ethics, alongside established operational components including use of force, report writing and legal studies. Studying within a university environment also brought students into contact with peers from other disciplines, with the expectation that this would strengthen analytical skills and encourage more critical reflection.

The reform involved more than simply moving training to a different institution. It signalled a gradual reorientation of police education, expanding a previously experience-based model to include stronger academic and research-informed elements. The National Police Academy had only limited capacity for research and scholarly development. Under the 2016 legislation, however, the university was formally recognised as responsible for both teaching and research in police studies (Icelandic Parliament, 2016). This placed Iceland within a broader international movement in which vocational programmes have increasingly been incorporated into higher education as part of efforts to professionalise policing (Paterson, 2011; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022).

Even so, the practical implications of this shift remain uncertain. It is still unclear how newly graduated officers draw on academic learning once they enter everyday police work, or how different forms of knowledge are received within established organisational cultures.

1.4.3 Developments in police education internationally

In many countries, particularly in the Global North, police education has shifted from police-run training schools to higher education institutions, although the pace and rationale for this shift vary widely (Cordner, 2019; Paterson, 2011, 2015; Rogers & Frevel, 2018; Williams & Paterson, 2021). Similar trends were visible in other professions earlier, such as nursing and teaching, where vocational training has been replaced by university programmes, a process often described as academic drift (Brint et al., 2005; Jóhannesdóttir, 2008; Tight, 2015). The Icelandic case differs in that the move to university education was a deliberate policy decision rather than a gradual evolution, signalling a deliberate act of academisation rather than incremental institutional change.

Internationally, higher education has frequently been associated with aspirations to strengthen professionalism, enhance accountability and align policing with broader democratic values (Paterson, 2011; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). Yet research evaluating the effects of academisation remains mixed: some studies point to positive links between higher education and policing outcomes, while others highlight more ambiguous or limited impacts (Cox & Kirby, 2018; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017; Norman & Williams, 2017). Recent reviews emphasise that the evidence base remains too inconsistent to draw firm conclusions about the long-term benefits of university-level training (Brown, 2020).

These varied international developments indicate that academisation is shaped not only by educational design but also by political, historical and cultural factors (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). In the Icelandic context, however, little was known, until now, about the motivations behind the 2016 reform or how legitimacy for the transition was constructed. Addressing this gap provides a starting point for understanding how professional knowledge and competence are negotiated in a small-state policing environment.

1.5 Overview of the thesis

This article-based thesis consists of four original papers and this kappa (kápa), an integrative text that frames the overall research project and situates the individual studies within a shared theoretical, methodological, and analytical perspective. Together, the kappa and the articles examine how the 2016 reform of police education in Iceland reshaped the knowledge base, educational structure, and professional culture of policing. The thesis analyses these developments across policy, education, and workplace practice.

Chapter 1 introduces the study, its aims, rationale, and research questions. It situates the Icelandic reform within broader debates on police professionalisation, academisation, and changing expectations regarding police knowledge and competence. The chapter also outlines the originality of the project and provides historical and international background on police education.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. It draws on Shulman's conceptualisation of professional knowledge, Eraut's account of workplace learning, and Chan's analysis of police culture and epistemic authority. Together, these perspectives provide an integrated lens for examining how knowledge is defined, learned, enacted, and legitimised across different contexts.

Chapter 3 reviews previous research relevant to the thesis. It discusses international developments in police education, scholarship on police professionalisation and academisation, research on evidence-based policing and the limits of scientific knowledge in practice, and studies of police professional knowledge, workplace learning, and police culture.

Chapter 4 describes the materials and methods used in the project. The thesis adopts a multi-method and multi-level design, combining historical discourse analysis of policy documents, quantitative analysis of programme and staffing data, longitudinal survey analysis of police students' competence valuations, and qualitative interviews with newly graduated officers analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The chapter also addresses ethics, reflexivity, and the overall methodological design.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the thesis. It begins with an overview of the four studies and then identifies common threads across them. The chapter shows how the reform can be understood as a multi-level process in which policy discourse, institutional arrangements, student valuations, and workplace experiences together shape the development and legitimacy of professional knowledge in policing.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the broader aims of the thesis and the existing literature. It examines how reform and professional learning are connected across policy, education, and practice; how academic and experiential knowledge are translated and negotiated; and how competence can be reconsidered through the

concept of comprehensive competence. The chapter also considers implications for theory and practice, as well as gaps and tensions in the findings.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising its main insights and contributions. It identifies the theoretical contributions of the study, discusses implications for police education and professional development, and outlines directions for future research. The chapter closes with reflections on the Icelandic reform as both an institutional and cultural shift in the making of police professionalism.

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis brings together perspectives from education, professional learning, and the sociology of police culture to make sense of the complex and contested process of police professionalisation from a knowledge perspective. The reform of police education in Iceland is treated not merely as an administrative reorganisation, but as a reorientation of what counts as professional knowledge, how such knowledge is acquired, and how the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge is negotiated.

To examine these issues, the thesis draws on three complementary perspectives. Shulman's theory of professional knowledge is used to conceptualise what professionals are expected to know and how different forms of knowledge are used in practice. Eraut's model of workplace learning provides a lens for understanding how knowledge is developed and adapted through everyday work. Chan's cultural analysis of policing foregrounds questions of power, hierarchy, and occupational culture, highlighting how epistemic authority is negotiated within police organisational hierarchies.

Taken together, these perspectives allow the analysis to move across educational, organisational, and cultural levels, offering an integrated account of how professional knowledge in policing is produced, recognised, and used in practice.

2.1 Professional knowledge and judgement

Lee Shulman is a leading scholar of professional knowledge and learning, whose work—developed primarily in the context of teacher education—has shaped contemporary understandings of how practitioners acquire and apply knowledge in professional practice (1986, 1987). Shulman's distinction between different forms of professional knowledge and his emphasis on judgment as a moral and cognitive act provide a foundation for analysing how learners integrate theory and practice. Although he focuses primarily on teacher education, Shulman's framework is particularly relevant in this thesis because it foregrounds the role of reasoning, ethical responsibility and situated decision-making that are important competences of police officers.

Shulman's (1986, 1987) account of professional knowledge in teacher education distinguishes between content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), curricular knowledge, and contextual or ethical knowledge. This theory applies directly to policing as a knowledge-based practice requiring legal—procedural expertise, communication, and situational and moral judgement, as Shipton (2009) has previously argued.

Content knowledge refers to the theoretical and factual foundations of a profession, its core concepts, principles, and methods (Shulman, 1987). In policing, this includes legal codes, procedural guidelines, and criminological or psychological insights that inform decision-making.

Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) describes the ability to represent and communicate formal knowledge effectively in practice, that is, how professionals transform theory into usable strategies, heuristics, and explanations (Shulman, 1986). In policing, this relates to how officers interpret and apply formal knowledge in practice and can be described as translating formal knowledge into action under complex, uncertain conditions.

Curricular knowledge refers to how learning is organised and sequenced so that professional competence develops over time, for example, through the progressive integration of theory-based subjects, practical training, and workplace experience (Shulman, 1986). It involves understanding how different topics, learning experiences, and stages of training are aligned and reinforce one another across educational and workplace contexts. In police education, curricular knowledge could include how theoretical and practical components, such as law, communication, and tactics, are organised to support cumulative and integrated learning. As Shipton (2009) emphasises, effective police curricula must illustrate to students how these subjects interrelate in real-world contexts rather than presenting them as separate modules. His model of problem-based learning illustrates that integration and sequencing are essential for developing professional understanding, as fragmented teaching risks leaving students with procedural skills but little capacity to apply them critically and adaptively in practice (Shipton, 2009).

Contextual or ethical knowledge involves awareness of the social, moral, and institutional settings in which professional action takes place and of how professional judgement is shaped by legal frameworks, organisational norms, and situational demands (Shulman, 1987). In policing, this could be exemplified in situations where legal authority interacts with values such as fairness, communication, and respect for human rights. As Shipton (2023) observes, there is “significant potential in guiding how policing students can act with integrity ... it allows students to consider not just *what* they are going to do but *why* and *how* they should act” (p. 65; original italics). This underlines that ethical competence in policing is not a separate area of training but something that needs to be integrated to shape officers’ reasoning and decision-making in everyday professional situations.

Shulman’s framework highlights that professional action depends not only on what is known but on the ability to represent and apply knowledge under conditions of uncertainty. An example of how diverse forms of knowledge need to be integrated into professional judgement is during an investigative interview, an officer must combine legal awareness, psychological understanding, communication skills, rapport building

and ethical sensitivity to elicit reliable information without coercion (Fahsing, 2016; Mendez & Ilsley, 2023; Vaughan et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2025).

This thesis draws on Shulman's framework to clarify two aspects of professional knowledge that are important for understanding comprehensive competence in policing. First, Shulman's distinction between different forms of professional knowledge helps show that competent police practice depends on more than one kind of knowledge. Cognitive, technical, and ethical dimensions all matter, but they do not necessarily form a single, fully integrated whole. Rather, they function as different resources that officers draw upon in different ways depending on the situation.

Second, Shulman's emphasis on the transformation of abstract knowledge into practical judgment helps explain how academic knowledge becomes usable in police work. Concepts such as legal interpretation, cultural sensitivity, situational assessment, and ethical reasoning do not guide practice automatically. They must be interpreted, adapted, and enacted in context. In this thesis, Shulman's framework is therefore used not as a fixed model of competence, but as an analytic tool for examining how knowledge, judgment, and moral purpose shape professional action.

2.2 Workplace learning and informal knowledge

Michael Eraut's (1994, 2000) contributions to workplace learning research and theory provide a framework for understanding how professional knowledge is developed and used in the course of everyday work. Rather than focusing on formal instruction alone, Eraut draws attention to informal, often tacit learning processes, as well as to the organisational conditions that shape whether learning is supported or constrained. Eraut's framework provides a lens for understanding how newly graduated officers navigate the transition from formal education to competent practice in the workplace. This transition is particularly important when examining the shift from vocational to university-level police education, as university programmes are typically more distant from everyday police work than vocational training.

Eraut's (1994, 2000, 2004a) typology distinguishes implicit, reactive, and deliberative learning at work, while analysing the socio-cultural conditions that support or inhibit learning, such as time pressure, feedback, trust, and access to dialogue. When referring to implicit learning, Eraut (2004a) describes the gradual acquisition of skills and understanding through everyday experience, without conscious intent or reflection. In policing, examples include how de-escalating conflicts is learned through observing a partner's calm verbal tone during a demanding call and picking up local knowledge about the community via conversation with more experienced colleagues (Taylor et al., 2013; Wallin et al., 2019).

Reactive learning occurs in immediate response to problems or feedback, adjusting behaviour "in the moment" in a conscious way but not planned in advance (Eraut,

2004a). An example of reactive learning in a police context is when a new body-worn camera malfunctions during a call, an officer quickly figures out how to reset the device under pressure. The learning is immediate, purposeful, but unplanned.

Deliberative learning involves conscious, planned reflection and discussion, often triggered by reviewing complex or critical incidents (Eraut, 2000, 2004b). An example in the policing context is sitting down as a team to discuss what went well, what could have been done differently, and how future responses could be improved after a difficult domestic violence call. This is a planned reflective practice aimed at learning from experience.

Eraut's framework outlines that, in addition to formal learning that forms the knowledge base of the professions, professional learning is largely informal and embedded in practice. This is especially relevant for policing, where officers continuously adapt to unpredictable situations and learn through observation, mentoring, and collective sense-making (Charman, 2017; Holmberg & Hallonsten, 2015; Holmgren & Sjöberg, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022).

In this thesis, Eraut's framework helps explain how police officers acquire and use professional knowledge in everyday work (Eraut, 2000, 2004a). It helps clarify the distinction between what can be learned through formal education and what depends on workplace affordances such as time, feedback and opportunities for reflection (Eraut, 2004a). Eraut's perspective also helps explain why officers with the same formal training may apply their knowledge differently depending on local norms, supervisory practices and organisational culture (Eraut, 2000). In this sense, his model supports the thesis's conceptualisation of comprehensive competence as developing through repeated, situated engagements with practice rather than through education alone.

Eraut's typology further highlights that the transformation of academic knowledge into practical judgment depends on how organisations structure learning opportunities (Eraut, 2004a). Whether an operational event leads to routine adjustment or to deeper deliberation is shaped less by the event itself than by whether the workplace encourages reflective dialogue and professional inquiry (Eraut, 2000, 2004a). This insight outlines that the outcomes of reform hinge not only on curriculum design but on the micro-contexts of everyday work in which knowledge is interpreted, applied and sometimes contested.

2.3 Police culture and epistemic authority

Janet Chan is a policing scholar whose cultural perspective has significantly influenced analyses of police knowledge and practice (Chan, 1999, 2001, 2004; Chan et al., 2003). Her theoretical framework of occupational epistemology explains how particular forms of knowledge gain authority within police organisations and how cultural norms shape what is recognised as legitimate competence. Chan's work is essential for this

thesis because it illuminates the cultural filters through which academic, experiential and relational knowledge are interpreted and valued by police officers.

Chan's cultural analysis, drawing on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, conceptualises police organisations as fields of practice structured by capital, habitus, and field dynamics (Chan, 1999, 2001, 2004; Chan et al., 2003). Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical constructs of capital, habitus, and field (Bourdieu, 1990), capital is defined as the array of resources that confer status and authority within a given profession, encompassing elements such as practical experience, academic qualifications, or connections to influential networks. Habitus denotes the internalised dispositions through which professionals perceive situations, exercise judgement, and act in ways that are perceived to be natural within their specific occupational culture. The field can be understood as the social space in which different forms of capital gain meaning and value, and where their relative worth is worked out through everyday practice (Bourdieu, 1990).

Within this framework, knowledge is not neutral but hierarchically valued, with certain forms of knowing carrying authority, while others are marginalised. This helps explain persistent tensions within policing, the prestige of operational experience, ambivalence toward academic knowledge, and the subtle gatekeeping of rank and peer recognition (Bowling et al., 2019; Cockcroft & Hallenberg, 2022). As Williams and Cockcroft (2019) observed, evidence-based policing often faces resistance not because officers reject research outright, but because it challenges deeply ingrained notions of expertise and professional autonomy. They argue that officers are often sceptical of academic knowledge because research findings can appear disconnected from the lived realities of street-level policing. This illustrates how cultural legitimacy in policing is linked less to the origin of knowledge than to its perceived practical value and alignment with occupational norms. In this sense, the struggle over knowledge legitimacy is not simply a debate between science and practice, but a negotiation over whose understanding of the police role, and the problems it faces, counts as authoritative. This understanding aligns with Manning and Martin's (2015) argument that policing must be understood as a sociology-of-knowledge enterprise, in which what counts as legitimate knowledge is shaped by institutional histories, cultural expectations, and competing professional and organisational interests. Their distinction between "a sociology of the police" and a "sociology for the police" (p. 246) highlights the epistemic tensions identified by Chan between critical, externally oriented forms of knowledge and the experience-based, operational knowledge that tends to dominate police organisations.

Comparative research in the Nordic region highlights how structural integration into higher education does not automatically shift the cultural hierarchies that shape knowledge legitimacy in policing. Recent research has argued that police professionalisation cannot be understood simply in terms of formal educational reform

or degree entry. Rather, the organisational conditions that support learning, reflection, and the integration of academic and experience-based knowledge are equally important. From this perspective, the concept of the learning organisation helps explain why the effects of academisation depend not only on curriculum design, but also on whether police organisations create the scaffolding needed for practical wisdom, team learning, and the meaningful blending of craft and science (Engelmann & Tatnell, 2025). In Sweden, for example, police education is formally located within universities yet remains organisationally dependent on the Police Authority, which has limited capacity to integrate academic competence into everyday practice (Jonsson & Persson, 2025). Jonsson and Persson (2025) describe this as a form of “two-world thinking” (p. 2), in which the pragmatic, event-driven logic of policing clashes with the theory-oriented, deliberative logic of academia. Similar patterns have been observed in the UK, where university delivery has not ensured cultural acceptance of academic knowledge within police organisations (Fleming, 2010; Hallenberg, 2012). Viewed through Chan’s (2003) lens, these examples illustrate a persistent imbalance of epistemic capital: experiential, action-oriented knowledge continues to carry higher symbolic value than analytic or research-informed forms of knowing.

Chan draws on the concept of anticipatory socialisation to further clarify how professional identity is formed before officers enter the field (Chan, 2001). Through training and education, recruits internalise cultural expectations about what counts as “real” police work and what forms of knowledge are valued. In Iceland, the shift from a police-run academy to a general university disrupted this process: students are exposed to academic norms of inquiry and reflection outside traditional police culture. This recontextualisation may influence their valuation of analytical and relational competence, indicating a redefinition of the professional habitus even before entering police education (Hoel & Dillern, 2022; Winnæss, 2023).

In this thesis, Chan’s framework explains (i) why university-based knowledge may carry limited symbolic capital within the police unless validated by high-status actors; (ii) how hierarchy and peer socialisation determine what forms of knowledge circulate through the organisation; and (iii) how graduates negotiate legitimacy by combining academic, experiential, and relational resources. For instance, a newly graduated officer, citing research on de-escalation techniques, may be met with scepticism by senior colleagues who feel theory is too abstract and privilege “street sense” as more legitimate. Over time, however, the same research can gain acceptance once translated into operational language or endorsed by a respected supervisor. Such interactions illustrate how symbolic capital and habitus regulate the movement of knowledge within the field of policing. Chan’s framework is preferred over broader organisational-culture theories because it directly theorises epistemic authority, the power to define what counts as legitimate knowledge. This is the setting in which the shift toward university-based police education is taking shape.

2.4 Integrating the lenses across the studies

Taken together, these three lenses provide a way to analyse professionalisation as a multi-level process in which different forms of knowledge interact across policy, educational and workplace settings. The purpose of integrating these lenses is not to develop a new theoretical model but to provide a coherent analytic frame for understanding how competence is constructed across policy, educational and workplace contexts. Shulman clarifies the content and ethical structure of professional knowledge; Eraut highlights the learning processes and organisational conditions that shape how knowledge is put to use; and Chan reveals the cultural dynamics through which particular knowledge forms gain or lose authority within police organisations.

Using these lenses in combination adds to the theoretical analysis by viewing the reform as a set of changes that shaped how different forms of knowledge were valued, learned, and enacted across the profession. This integrative frame supports analysis of how competence is defined at the policy and educational levels, how it is taken up and developed through learning and work, and how its legitimacy is negotiated within police organisations.

2.5 Complementary and alternative frameworks

Several influential perspectives inform this thesis but were not adopted as its primary analytical lenses. They provide important conceptual background and points of contrast to the main triadic framework of Shulman, Eraut, and Chan.

Evidence-based policing (EBP) (Lum & Koper, 2017; Sherman, 1998) has played an important role in supporting the policy case for university-based police education. It frames professionalisation largely in terms of research-informed decision-making and measurable effectiveness, and in this sense it supports arguments for academisation by positioning the university as a key site for the production and transmission of evidence. However, EBP offers less insight into how officers interpret, use, and legitimise evidence within everyday organisational and cultural contexts. In this thesis, EBP is therefore treated not as a primary explanatory framework, but as a reform discourse whose meaning changes as it moves between policy, curriculum, and practice. The findings suggest that evidence becomes practically significant only when it is recognised as relevant and legitimate by practitioners, a process more effectively illuminated through the lenses of Eraut and Chan (Fielding et al., 2020; Fleming & Rhodes, 2018).

Theories of professionalism and institutional logics (Abbott, 1988; Brante, 2013; Evetts, 2011; Freidson, 2001) also inform the thesis, especially in relation to the broader trajectories of police reform and professional authority. Brante's (2013) concept of pre-professionalisation helps frame policing as an occupation whose knowledge base, institutional infrastructure, and epistemic autonomy remain under development.

Freidson's (2001) distinction between market, bureaucratic, and professional logics provides a useful macro-level perspective on tensions between managerial efficiency and professional autonomy in Icelandic policing. Abbott's (1988) concept of jurisdictional competition likewise helps situate policing within wider systems of expertise. However, because this thesis focuses on how such tensions are expressed in policy, learning, curriculum, and workplace practice, it requires frameworks better suited to analysing how professionalisation is experienced and negotiated in practice. Shulman, Eraut, and Chan together provide that closer analytical focus.

Finally, Foucault's perspective on discourse, power, and knowledge (Foucault, 1978, 1979) was used in Study I to examine how reform policy constructed the legitimacy of transferring police education to the university. This Foucauldian lens helped expose the assumptions and power relations through which certain rationales, such as efficiency, quality assurance, and modernisation, were privileged while others were marginalised or silenced. More broadly, Foucault's work has informed the thesis by highlighting how struggles over legitimacy occur not only in texts but also across institutional practices. It is particularly helpful for understanding the tensions that accompany reform: between the language of improvement and the politics of control, and between aspirations for autonomous professional knowledge and managerial efforts to regulate it. While not a fourth theoretical pillar, Foucault complements the triad by showing how professional learning is shaped by wider relations of power and legitimacy.

3 Previous research

This chapter reviews previous research relevant to this PhD project, with particular attention to how professional knowledge and competence have been understood, organised, and legitimised in police education and practice. Its purpose is to situate the project within existing research on police professionalisation, academisation, and learning, rather than to provide an exhaustive review of the literature. Previous studies have shown how police education reforms have been used to promote professionalism and organisational legitimacy. Less attention, however, has been given to how such reforms shape the ways knowledge is interpreted, valued, and enacted in everyday police work. In particular, relatively few studies have examined how academically grounded forms of knowledge are taken up, translated, or resisted within police organisations following educational reform.

The chapter is organised into five interrelated sections. Section 3.1 reviews international developments in police education, highlighting variation in the pace and rationale of academisation. Section 3.2 examines research on police professionalisation and academisation, situating educational reform within broader debates about autonomy, managerial control, and legitimacy. Section 3.3 focuses on evidence-based policing and debates about the role and limits of scientific knowledge in practice. Section 3.4 reviews how professional knowledge and competence in policing have been conceptualised, with attention to analytical, ethical, and experiential dimensions. Section 3.5 examines workplace learning and police culture, focusing on how knowledge is learned, valued, and legitimised in organisational contexts. Together, these sections provide the empirical and conceptual background for the research questions that guide the thesis.

3.1 Developments in police education internationally

Over recent decades, police education in many countries has shifted from police-run training schools to the university sector, though the progression, structure, and rationale for this shift vary considerably (Cordner, 2019; Paterson, 2011, 2015; Rogers & Frevel, 2018; Williams & Paterson, 2021). Similar developments have occurred in other professions, including nursing and teaching, often through gradual processes of “academic drift,” in which vocational institutions increasingly resemble universities in their curricula and research activities (Brint et al., 2005; Jóhannesdóttir, 2008; Tight, 2015). In contrast, some jurisdictions have pursued more deliberate policy decisions to relocate police education directly to the university sector, positioning academisation as a strategic reform rather than an incremental institutional evolution.

In several areas, reform has been linked to wider attempts to improve legitimacy, accountability and performance. External reviews, scandals and political pressures have occasionally accelerated change, as seen in Australia and the UK (Cox, 2011; Gudjonsson, 2003; Wimbush & Ransley, 2007). Research on the re-professionalisation of policing in England and Wales suggests that claims to professionalism often emerge in periods of regulatory restructuring or declining public trust, illustrating how educational reform becomes entangled with broader governance agendas (Holdaway, 2017).

Across Europe, the Bologna process has contributed to expanding higher education models within police training systems (Jaschke & Neidhardt, 2007; Paterson, 2015). Despite this, research evaluating the impact of university-level education remains mixed. Some studies identify positive associations with analytical capability, communication skills and professionalism (Herrington, 2017), while others highlight ambiguous or negative outcomes, including tensions between academic frameworks and operational realities (Cox & Kirby, 2018; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017; Norman & Williams, 2017). A comprehensive review by Brown (2020) concludes that the international evidence base remains too inconsistent to draw firm conclusions about the benefits of academisation. More recent comparative research reinforces this picture of diversity and uneven implementation. Pepper et al. (2025) illustrate how jurisdictions such as California, England and Wales, Ontario, and Tasmania vary significantly in how higher education is incorporated into initial police training. Their analysis highlights the persistent tension between aspirations for professionalisation through academic study and the operational pressures to produce deployable officers rapidly. They also suggest that political intervention, funding constraints, and recruitment challenges continue to shape the extent to which higher education becomes meaningfully integrated into police training systems (Pepper et al., 2025). This complexity helps explain the mixed international evidence on the outcomes of academisation.

A broader movement towards research-informed and evidence-based policing has further challenged traditional boundaries between academic knowledge and police practice. Weisburd and Neyroud (2011) argued that policing requires a paradigm shift analogous to the scientific foundation of medicine or education, positioning research literacy as a core professional competence. This perspective has influenced Nordic debates and is particularly relevant to Iceland's transition to a university-based model.

Recent comparative studies suggest that while rationales for academisation tend to converge, such as improving adaptation to societal change, enhancing professional appeal, and strengthening legitimacy, the political, historical and organisational drivers shaping these reforms differ markedly across contexts (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). Research from Ireland, Sweden and Norway similarly highlights persistent tensions between theoretical knowledge and practical training, suggesting that academic

integration does not automatically strengthen frontline competence (Hagen et al., 2023; Lappalainen & Nordström, 2025; Thompson & Payne, 2019).

Overall, the international literature characterises academisation as a contested field shaped by institutional capacity, cultural expectations, and divergent views on the purpose of higher education in policing. These dynamics provide an important frame for understanding the Icelandic case, where academisation occurred rapidly and with limited prior empirical foundation. Yet in Iceland, little is known about the political or discursive rationales behind the 2016 reform, leaving a gap in understanding how legitimacy for the reform was constructed.

Taken together, the international literature portrays police education reform as part of a broader movement towards professionalisation through higher education, shaped by political pressures, institutional capacity, and contested understandings of legitimate knowledge. While the rationales for academisation often converge across jurisdictions, the ways in which professionalism is pursued, and the consequences for occupational autonomy and knowledge practices, remain ambivalent. These tensions point to the need for closer engagement with research on professionalisation and academisation. The following section therefore examines how these processes have been understood in relation to professional authority, organisational control, and legitimacy in policing.

3.2 Police professionalisation and academisation

The idea of professionalisation has long held a strong normative and political appeal in the study of work and occupations. As Freidson (2001) argued, professionalism represents a distinctive “third logic,” separate from the market and the bureaucracy. It grants occupational groups a degree of autonomy, public trust, and moral responsibility in exchange for adherence to shared ethical standards and specialised expertise. Building on this, Evetts (2003, 2011) distinguishes between occupational professionalism, grounded in collegial discretion and knowledge-based judgment, and organisational professionalism, shaped by managerial control, performance indicators, and bureaucratic accountability. These competing logics coexist uneasily in many public service domains, including policing, where professional autonomy and state oversight must be continually negotiated. Professionalisation is both a promise and a form of control, as it aims to create skilled, ethical practitioners, yet it also establishes new hierarchies and rules that regulate how work and authority are organised. Within policing, this ambivalence is particularly visible. As Sklansky (2011) observes, the ideal of professionalism has exercised a “persistent pull” on police reform for more than a century. Professionalism promises expertise, discipline, and integrity, yet it also reinforces hierarchy, exclusion, and a technocratic distance from the communities it serves.

Historically, attempts to professionalise policing have tended to alternate between two aims: improving officers’ ethical standards and judgement, and strengthening

managerial control through efficiency, rules, and accountability (Freidson, 2001; Evetts, 2011). An example of this can be found in an interview-based study in England, where professionalisation was widely experienced as a managerial, top-down project, even as many officers asserted that policing was already a profession grounded in craft and ethics (Lumsden, 2017). Similar patterns are reported by Hallenberg and Cockcroft (2017), who found that although officers welcomed the rhetoric of evidence-based and university-linked policing, many perceived these developments as externally imposed reforms that reinforced hierarchy rather than enhancing professional autonomy.

In recent decades, this long-standing negotiation between ethical autonomy and managerial control has taken a distinctly academic turn. Across Europe and beyond, police education reforms have paralleled similar developments in other public service professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work (Björnsdóttir, 2015; Brint et al., 2005; Jóhannesdóttir, 2008). Neave (1979) described this long-term trend as academic drift—the gradual adoption of university norms, structures, and prestige markers by vocational institutions seeking social legitimacy. Yet contemporary reforms are more purposive than academic drift suggests, and the Icelandic reform exemplifies this shift: rather than evolving gradually, police education was deliberately relocated to the university sector as a strategic act of academisation. Following Smeby (2007, 2015), academisation better captures the deliberate, policy-driven character of recent changes, in which professional education is consciously aligned with higher education frameworks to strengthen both public accountability and knowledge-based legitimacy. Academisation thus represents a key mechanism through which states pursue the dual goals identified by Evetts: elevating occupational standards and reinforcing organisational control.

Two interrelated but distinct dimensions of academisation can be identified: institutional and epistemic. Institutional academisation refers to the structural incorporation of police education into the university system through degree requirements, research expectations, and academic governance (Martin, 2022; Smeby, 2015). In sociological terms, this process reflects what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) called institutional isomorphism, or the tendency of organisations to adopt similar forms, procedures, and symbols to gain legitimacy within a shared institutional field. In policing, this manifests in the establishment of degree frameworks, Bologna alignment, and external quality assurance systems that signal conformity with higher education norms. Such reforms elevate the formal status of police education and create new avenues for academic collaboration, but they can also produce symbolic compliance rather than substantive transformation. As Martin (2024) notes, many recent university–police partnerships remain primarily administrative, focused on credentialing rather than on cultivating new epistemic practices. Similarly, Cockcroft (2019) argues that institutional isomorphism in policing extends beyond structure to culture, promoting a hybrid professionalism in which managerial and academic norms are adopted symbolically to enhance legitimacy but may dilute policing’s distinctive professional knowledge base.

By contrast, epistemic academisation involves a deeper transformation in the nature and status of professional knowledge. Drawing on Smeby's (2015) notion of epistemic cultures, this dimension concerns how professions construct, validate, and circulate knowledge, and how reflective, research-informed reasoning becomes embedded in practice. Within policing, epistemic academisation implies that analytical, ethical, and relational forms of understanding should stand alongside operational experience as legitimate foundations for judgment. Yet as Greene (2014) cautions, the emergence of "police science" can also reproduce new hierarchies of knowledge, privileging managerial or positivist forms of evidence over moral or experiential insight. Similarly, Martin (2022, 2024) argues that even when police education formally integrates research and theory, the epistemic norms of higher education are often only partially absorbed, with academic work valued instrumentally for accreditation rather than as a mode of inquiry. In line with this, Cockcroft (2019) describes how cultural isomorphism within police–academic partnerships produces a form of hybrid professionalism in which the language of evidence and research is adopted symbolically but rarely transforms everyday epistemic practices. This results in what he terms "organisational hybridity" (p. 225): an organisational environment that performs academic legitimacy without fully internalising academic reflexivity. In this sense, academisation cannot be reduced to the formal relocation of police education into universities. It also depends on sustained dialogue between academic and occupational communities that can reshape what counts as valid professional knowledge in policing.

The interaction between institutional and epistemic academisation reveals the ambivalent role of universities in professional reform. On one hand, institutional alignment enhances transparency, research integration, and international comparability. On the other hand, it introduces new forms of managerialism and performance control, which Evetts (2011) terms the shift from occupational to organisational professionalism. This duality mirrors Sklansky's (2013) observation that professionalism's moral appeal is inseparable from its disciplinary function. In a similar way, academisation can support the development of reflective practitioners, while also strengthening external forms of authority over professional knowledge.

These theoretical distinctions become particularly visible in a comparative perspective. In the Nordic countries, these dynamics have unfolded differently. Norway and Finland integrated basic police education early and comprehensively within higher education: Norway through the Norwegian Police University College (PHS) with a research mission and a 3-year bachelor's degree, and Finland through the Police University College (Polamk), a university of applied sciences with substantial research and development activity (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). Sweden shifted police education to universities from 2015 onward, but delivery remains distributed across several universities and demonstrates variability in curriculum design and demands, signalling a more incremental trajectory (Leijon & Stigmar, 2022). Denmark, by contrast, still delivers initial training through the Police College (Politiskolen) under the National Police,

reflecting a predominantly vocational model with alternating school and practicum phases. A brief experiment with a professional bachelor's degree in policing (2011–2016) ended after only a few cohorts, following the 2015 security crisis (terrorist attacks in Copenhagen) and political decisions to shorten the training; the reform was widely seen as decoupled from its strategic aims and marked by strong institutional resistance to academisation (Diderichsen, 2017). Recent comparative research further highlights how professionalisation in Finland and Sweden reflects a hybrid form of professionalism, balancing academic inquiry with occupational traditions and organisational control (Engelmann & Tatnell, 2023).

Iceland represents the most recent case of full institutional academisation, with the 2016 reform transferring police education to the University of Akureyri and introducing degree-based qualifications within the Bologna framework. While this reform aligns Iceland structurally with broader Nordic trends, it also provides a distinct vantage point for examining how educational reform reshapes the conditions under which professional knowledge is defined, learned, and legitimised. Rather than treating the reform primarily as a question of outcomes, the Icelandic case is used here to examine how new institutional arrangements interact with existing occupational cultures and forms of expertise, and how these interactions are experienced and negotiated in practice.

The distinction between institutional and epistemic academisation is central to this thesis. It shows that police professionalisation must be understood not only as structural reform, but also as an ongoing negotiation over what counts as legitimate professional knowledge in practice. The next section develops this point by reviewing research on professional knowledge and competence in policing.

3.3 Evidence-based policing and the limits of scientific knowledge in professional practice

The professionalisation of policing in recent decades has been strongly shaped by the rise of evidence-based policing (Sherman, 1998, 2013), which holds that police decision-making should be guided by systematic research on “what works,” particularly experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations. This perspective frames policing as an applied science in which interventions can be optimised through rigorous evidence and measurable outcomes (Lum & Koper, 2017). Within the sociology of professions, the emphasis on scientific knowledge resonates with Freidson's (2001) argument that professional authority rests on a specialised knowledge base controlled by the profession itself. From this viewpoint, evidence-based policing can be seen as an effort to strengthen the epistemic foundations of police work and reinforce claims to professional status.

However, the nature and authority of this specialised knowledge remain contested. Scholars have questioned whether evidence-based approaches adequately capture the complexities and uncertainties of frontline police work, where officers frequently face situations that are ethically charged, relationally demanding and resistant to standardised solutions (Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017; Lumsden, 2017; Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). A narrow focus on “what works” risks reducing professional judgment to the application of decontextualised evidence, obscuring the interpretive, ethical and situational dimensions of competence that are central to democratic policing. These critiques highlight that while research-informed practice is an important component of professionalism, it cannot replace the broader capacities associated with reflective judgment, relational understanding and contextual awareness.

In this sense, debates around evidence-based policing put focus on the continuing questions about the types of knowledge that are granted legitimacy in the profession and the organisational and cultural conditions that shape their uptake. These issues are particularly relevant to the Icelandic reform, as they illuminate the kinds of epistemic and organisational tensions that may have motivated government policy to pursue a university-based model.

3.4 Police professional knowledge and competence

In contemporary discussions of professional education, there is growing recognition that competence cannot be understood merely as the mastery of fixed knowledge or technical skills. Instead, it involves the development of a reflective and critical relationship to knowledge itself (Eraut, 1994; Freidson, 2001; Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015; Hill, 2025; Smeby, 2007). In policing, this perspective has gained particular relevance as higher education reforms have sought to produce officers capable of ethical reasoning, analytical judgement, and contextual awareness. Yet, as Martin (2024) observes, overly academic curricula risk alienating practitioners if they fail to connect with the lived realities of police work. To address this, Martin advocates hybrid models that combine the epistemic rigour of higher education with the experiential and relational grounding of professional practice. Such approaches are seen as essential for strengthening police legitimacy in increasingly diverse and complex social contexts.

Viewing professional competence as a dynamic process rather than a fixed attribute highlights how practitioners continually integrate, reinterpret, and apply knowledge in their work. Eraut (2004a) distinguished between formal, non-formal, and informal learning, emphasising that much professional growth occurs incidentally through participation in workplace practices. This view aligns with Shulman’s (1987) conception of professional knowledge as a composite of content, pedagogical, ethical, and contextual understanding—knowledge that must be transformed into practice through judgement and reflection. Competence development, therefore, depends not only on

what professionals know but on how they continue to learn, deliberate, and evaluate their actions in uncertain or morally charged situations.

Smeby (2007) and Knorr Cetina (1997, 2003) conceptualise this ongoing engagement as a “wanting structure” (Knorr Cetina, 1997, p. 17), a disposition toward knowledge characterised by curiosity, self-awareness, and recognition of one’s own epistemic limits. A wanting structure develops when professionals realise that their knowledge is never complete and must be continually updated and questioned. Instead of viewing this as a sign of weakness, such awareness reflects a deepening connection to the epistemic foundations of the profession and a commitment to continuous learning. This idea reframes competence not as a state of proficiency but as a relational and evolving process sustained by reflection and dialogue. This suggests that professional education should therefore cultivate dispositions that support inquiry, humility, and openness to alternative perspectives alongside technical and procedural skills.

In the policing context, these theoretical perspectives highlight persistent tensions between different knowledge domains. Research suggests that officers often value experiential knowledge, derived from practice, intuition, and peer interaction, over academic or research-based forms of knowledge (Cockcroft et al., 2025; Gundhus, 2013; Rogers et al., 2022). This preference reflects the socialisation processes within police culture, where credibility is built through practical competence and group recognition rather than formal credentials (Winnæss, 2023). Yet studies also suggest that reflective and relational competence, such as empathy, communication, and ethical judgement, are increasingly viewed as essential to effective policing and public trust (Williams & Paterson, 2021; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). Bridging these domains requires educational frameworks that enable officers to translate theoretical understanding into contextually grounded practice, while also recognising and articulating the tacit dimensions of professional knowledge. From this perspective, professional competence emerges as a hybrid construct that integrates analytical reasoning, experiential insight, and moral judgement.

3.5 Workplace learning and police culture

While academisation has altered the formal structures of police education, much professional learning continues to occur informally within police organisations. Studies across occupational settings support the claim that the workplace remains a central site for the consolidation and transformation of professional knowledge (Billett, 2009; Cockcroft et al., 2025; Eraut, 2004a). Eraut’s typology of implicit, reactive, and deliberative learning highlights that professionals often acquire new understanding not through structured instruction but through participation, feedback, and the interpretation of complex situations. These processes depend on access to collegial dialogue, trust, and organisational conditions that allow for reflection in and on action. In policing, however, such conditions are frequently constrained by hierarchical

structures, operational pressures, and entrenched occupational norms (Chan et al., 2003; Fielding, 1988; Van Maanen, 1973, 1975).

Research on police socialisation consistently indicates that new recruits learn the unwritten rules of the profession through observation, imitation, and peer interaction (Chan et al., 2003). This socialisation process shapes attitudes toward authority, discretion, and the use of knowledge in practice (Chan, 1996; Charman, 2017). The durability of these informal learning cultures helps explain why educational reforms often produce limited change in workplace behaviour. Van Maanen's (1973) ethnographic work first demonstrated how recruits internalise "street wisdom" (p. 412) through informal mentoring and storytelling, creating a shared interpretive framework for action. More recent studies (Cockcroft & Hallenberg, 2022; Fleming & Rhodes, 2018; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017) support the notion that such cultural transmission continues to define the moral and cognitive boundaries of police work, often privileging practical experience over abstract theory. As a result, academic or evidence-based knowledge may be perceived as externally imposed rather than organically developed within the occupational community.

Nevertheless, research also documents the potential for change when workplace learning becomes reflexive and dialogic. Eraut (2004a) and Billett (2009) emphasise that professional environments capable of supporting reflection, peer feedback, and collaborative inquiry can transform implicit experience into explicit knowledge. Studies from the Nordic context, especially Norway and Sweden, indicate that structured reflection seminars and mentoring systems can help bridge the gap between academic theory and fieldwork (Hagen et al., 2023; Lappalainen & Nordström, 2025). These practices support what Eraut (2000) describes as knowledge use rather than mere possession, helping students internalise and apply theoretical models in complex, real-world settings. Such endeavors depend on leadership support and a culture that values critical discussion rather than conformity. Without these organisational enablers, professional learning risks becoming a process of adaptation rather than development.

The intersection between workplace learning and police culture also has implications for the legitimacy of knowledge. Chan (2003) conceptualises police culture as an occupational epistemology, a system of meaning that defines what counts as valid knowledge and who has authority to produce it. Within this system, experiential and relational competence often hold higher status than abstract or research-based insights. However, as policing becomes more diverse and knowledge-intensive, the ability to bridge these epistemic domains gains strategic importance. Recent research suggests that as policing becomes more knowledge-intensive, the ability to bridge occupational and academic domains is gaining strategic importance (Brown, 2020). While traditional police culture often privileges experiential over formal knowledge (Chan et al., 2003), current reform debates emphasise the need to incorporate ethical reasoning, conceptual clarity, and reflective capacities into professional policing

frameworks (Cox, 2011; Williams & Paterson, 2021; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). These developments point toward a form of professionalism consistent with Smeby's (2007) view that competence develops through a deepening connection to knowledge and a wanting structure, that is, the recognition of knowledge limits and the continuous drive for deeper understanding.

Despite these encouraging trends, significant gaps remain in understanding how workplace structures enable or constrain comprehensive professional learning in policing. Few studies have examined the mechanisms through which academic knowledge circulates within police organisations or how it becomes legitimised in everyday practice. Persistent hierarchical structures and risk-averse management practices often restrict opportunities for shared reflection and meaningful knowledge exchange (Cox & Kirby, 2018; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017). These gaps are particularly relevant to the present thesis, which examines reform not only as a change in educational structure, but also as a change in the conditions under which professional knowledge is interpreted, enacted, and recognised in practice. The following chapter therefore outlines the materials and methods used to examine these processes in the Icelandic case.

4 Materials and methods

This thesis applies a multi-method, multi-level design to trace how professional knowledge and competence are constructed and legitimised within the Icelandic police profession. This alignment is important because Shulman foregrounds the content and ethical dimensions of professional knowledge, Eraut explains how learning develops in organisational contexts, and Chan draws attention to the cultural and symbolic hierarchies through which knowledge becomes legitimate.

Accordingly, the design connects three analytic levels—policy, education, and workplace practice—through four interrelated studies. Rather than treating each dataset as an isolated evidence source, the research views them as sites of discourse and practice in which knowledge is produced, translated, and authorised. The design is informed by a constructionist epistemology, which treats social reality as shaped through meaning-making and institutional practice rather than as simply observed (Cohen et al., 2018; Khan & MacEachen, 2021). It also incorporates critical reflexivity, recognising that data are shaped by power relations and by my own position as both insider and researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Brown, 1996). Table 3 summarises the four studies, their data sources, methods, and guiding research questions.

Table 3. *Design Overview of the Four Articles, with research questions*

Article	Data Sources	Methods	Research Questions
1	Policy and legislation documents (2014–2016)	Historical discourse analysis (Foucauldian-informed)	RQ1: What characterises the discourse on police education reform in Icelandic policy documents? RQ2: What are the discourse’s legitimating principles, tensions, and contradictions?
2	Administrative series (staffing, graduates, retention, gender composition) and survey series (public trust)	Descriptive statistics and interrupted time-series analysis (ITSA)	RQ1: Did the police education reform in Iceland improve student attraction, diversity, and retention? RQ2: How has moving police education to university level affected trust in the police service?
3	RECPOL longitudinal student surveys (NPA 2011–2015; UNAK 2017–2021)	Scale development (EFA/CFA), reliability testing, paired/between-group competence valuation tests	RQ1: How do police students value new types of educational content in contrast to traditional content before and after the reform? RQ2: Are the new content areas considered legitimate knowledge in police education by students?
4	Semi-structured interviews with newly graduated officers	Reflexive thematic analysis (constructionist)	RQ1: What counts as legitimate knowledge, skills, and competence to newly graduated police officers, and how is it created? RQ2: What is the value of a theoretical university education for practical policing, and how does theory integrate into practice?

Note. NPA = National Police Academy; UNAK = University of Akureyri; EFA = Exploratory Factor Analysis; CFA = Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

4.1 Document analysis using a historical discourse approach

In the first article, I adopted a historical discourse approach to analyse policy and legal documents, drawing inspiration from scholars like Foucault (1978, 1979). This approach was chosen over other thematic discursive methods, as we wanted to examine, in addition to the themes present in the discourse, its legitimating principles, contradictions, tensions, and discontinuities. The primary objective of this approach is to uncover the historically and politically determined rules that dictate what can and cannot be expressed, where, and how (Jóhannesson, 2010). Specifically, the research methodology is guided by Foucauldian discourse theory, which conceptualises discourse as a collection of competing ideas and metaphors that encompass both written texts and practical manifestations. These discursive practices establish the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable and normal within a particular context (Foucault, 1979). These legitimising principles are not necessarily coherent or logical entities but rather emerge through the struggles of ideas (Foucault, 1979). A part of the analysis is to identify tensions, contradictions, as well as continuities and discontinuities within the discourse (Jóhannesson, 2010).

To guide the analysis, a six-step approach developed by Jóhannesson (2010) and Sharp and Richardson (2001) was utilised. The initial step involved defining the scope of our inquiry, focusing specifically on the discourse surrounding police education reform as depicted in Icelandic policy documents spanning the years 2014 to 2016 (see Table 4). This period was chosen because of the significant reform initiatives undertaken in police education during that time.

Table 4. *Overview of the data analysed using historical discourse analysis*

Dataset	Type	Pages
Ministry of Interior (2014)	Policy report	40
Ministry of Interior (2015)	Policy report	126
Bill with commentary (2016)	Legal text	12
Parliament Committee on Judicial Affairs and Education (2016)	Legal text	3
Total		181

While this analysis drew methodological inspiration from Foucault, the interpretation was grounded in the Icelandic institutional context. The aim was not to uncover hidden ideology but to understand how reform discourse itself constructed legitimacy—how certain rationales (efficiency, modernisation, quality assurance) became thinkable and actionable, while alternative narratives about professional autonomy or critical inquiry were marginalised (Jóhannesson, 1993, 2010; Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2015). The analysis was therefore both historical and reflexive: policy texts were treated as artefacts of power/knowledge relations through which the reform was made possible.

4.2 Quantitative analysis

Two articles draw on quantitative data to examine how the 2016 education reform influenced police staffing and how students' competence valuations developed before and after the reform. Both analyses use secondary data sources but with different emphases: system-level developments on the one hand, and student attitudes on the other.

The second article relies primarily on descriptive administrative data from the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police (NCIP) and the University of Akureyri (UNAK), supplemented by Gallup survey data on public trust in the police. These data provide insight into trends in recruitment, staffing, retention, and gender composition of the police service across several decades. Special attention is given to the period surrounding the 2016 reform, which closed the National Police Academy (NPA) and introduced a university diploma programme. Because NCIP records are compiled annually on February 1st, a lag structure was built into the analysis to account for the fact that June graduates first appear in the following year's statistics. Interrupted time-series analysis (ITSA) was applied to test whether the reform coincided with significant changes in staffing levels, degree composition, and public trust. ITSA is considered one of the strongest quasi-experimental designs available for non-randomised settings (Wagner et al., 2002) and was used here with segmented regression models, Prais–Winsten correction for auto-correlation, and reporting of both level and slope changes. Alongside these time-series analyses, retention was calculated for selected graduation cohorts from the NPA (2001, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2014, 2016) and UNAK (2018, 2019, 2020) to assess longer-term settlement into the profession. My main role in this study, in addition to co-writing the article, was to compile gender-specific graduation data for 1997–2023 and to calculate three-year retention rates, which were then compared across institutions. The analysis procedures and statistical models are described in detail in article II (Oddsson et al., 2024).

The third article extends the quantitative approach by analysing Icelandic data from the European RECPOL project, which collected longitudinal survey responses from police students at the beginning and end of their studies. This dataset provides a rare opportunity to examine how competence valuations changed over time within intake

cohorts at the NPA (2011–2015) and UNAK (2017–2021). Drawing on earlier conceptualisations (Karp et al., 2020; Kohlström et al., 2017), the items were operationalised into two broad constructs—enduring competence (occupation-specific knowledge, practical skills, decisiveness and independence) and emerging competence (academic knowledge, organisational/written competence, and perspective-taking and critical reflection). Factor analysis was used to verify the structure of these constructs in the Icelandic context, followed by reliability testing (Cronbach's α and ω). Confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good model fit for both enduring and emerging competence, supporting the robustness of the measurement model (Bragason & Damen, 2025).

With this measurement foundation established, paired-sample tests were conducted to compare competence valuations at the start and end of education within each institution. Additional analyses compared NPA and UNAK students, as well as male and female students. In line with the research questions, paired t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used for within-group comparisons, while Mann–Whitney U tests and linear regression models with interaction terms were applied to examine between-group differences. These analyses made it possible to examine changes in competence valuations over time and differences between educational contexts and student groups (Bragason & Damen, 2025).

Together, these quantitative approaches, system-level interrupted time-series analysis and individual-level longitudinal survey analysis, complement one another. The former examines changes in police staffing capacity and retention following the reform, while the latter analyses how students' competence valuations differed across educational contexts and over time.

Quantitative data in this thesis are treated not as neutral indicators, but as representations of institutional reasoning. Staffing statistics, survey responses, and competence scales show how the state and the profession measure, value, and define success. In Foucauldian terms, such data participate in the same power/knowledge relations through which reform is rendered visible and legitimate. Interpreting them through the lens of professional knowledge therefore involves attending both to their patterns and to their silences: what is measured, what is left unmeasured, and how numbers themselves become part of the legitimating language of reform (Foucault, 1978).

4.3 Qualitative interviews using reflexive thematic analysis

The qualitative component was designed to bring the knowledge process down to the level of experience, that is, how newly graduated officers construct, integrate, and legitimate professional knowledge in everyday practice. The decision to use reflexive thematic analysis reflects a constructionist stance consistent with the theoretical framework—knowledge and meaning are co-produced between participants and

researcher rather than “discovered” in data (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Cohen et al., 2018). The analysis thus aimed not to represent individual psychology but to illuminate shared cultural and organisational processes of learning and legitimacy.

Article IV examines how newly graduated police officers construct, integrate, and legitimate professional knowledge in everyday practice following the 2016 education reform. I adopted a qualitative design using reflexive thematic analysis with a constructionist orientation, treating meaning as co-produced by participants and researcher and analysed through theory-sensitised interpretation (Shulman, Eraut, Chan). The goal was to illuminate the cultural politics of knowledge legitimacy—how academic, experiential, and relational forms of knowing are weighed and translated in operational contexts.

The study included 12 officers (7 women, 5 men), all graduates of the University of Akureyri diploma programme for prospective police officers (2018–2022) with ≥ 2 years’ service at the time of interview and posted across urban, rural, and mixed districts. An initial pool of 30 eligible graduates was selected at random from the National Commissioner’s Office Data Analysis Unit. From this, participants were purposively selected to maximise variation (graduation year, gender, posting) and invited by email with an information sheet. Interviews were conducted January–March 2025, following written informed consent and institutional ethical approval.

Data collection was via semi-structured interviews (≈ 60 –90 minutes) conducted in Icelandic, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim; relevant excerpts were translated to English for analysis and reporting. The guide explored three areas: (1) how officers construct and legitimate different knowledge forms; (2) the interplay of formal education and informal workplace learning; and (3) organisational conditions shaping reflection, sharing, and use of knowledge.

Analysis followed the reflexive thematic analysis cycle of familiarisation $\rightarrow$ coding $\rightarrow$ theme development $\rightarrow$ review/refine $\rightarrow$ define/name $\rightarrow$ reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023). Coding proceeded inductively, with theory-sensitised attention to professional knowledge (Shulman), workplace learning (Eraut), and police culture/epistemic authority (Chan). Coding and memoing were supported in NVivo and a thematic map was produced to interrogate relations between themes and subthemes and to maintain a clear decision trail from data to interpretation (Byrne, 2022).

The sample size was guided by an information-power logic, whereby the adequacy of the sample is judged in relation to the study aim, the specificity of the sample, and the depth and quality of the data, rather than numerical saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The twelve participants were deliberately selected to provide heterogeneity in gender, experience, and organisational context, and generated sufficiently rich and varied data to support the development of coherent and nuanced themes.

Reflexivity and analytic rigour were addressed through a reflexive journal, regular analytic discussions with co-authors outside policing, active negative-case seeking, and a transparent audit trail of coding and theme development.

With regards to ethical approval, the procedures conformed to national guidelines and were approved by the University of Iceland ethics board (SHV2024-112); participants provided informed consent prior to the interview, could withdraw at any time, and are de-identified in reporting. Data are stored on encrypted drives with restricted access.

The analysis produced three interrelated themes that form the structure of the article's findings: (1) integrating academic and experiential knowledge, (2) organisational learning, and (3) relational competence. Together, these themes illustrate how different forms of knowledge succeed or fail to gain legitimacy in everyday police practice. The qualitative findings complement the system-level patterns in staffing and retention (Article II) and the student valuation shifts observed in the RECPOL data (Article III). Taken together, these strands of evidence portray how curricular and organisational reforms are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in the daily realities of policing.

The interview process also became a site of reflection and learning. Several participants noted that articulating their reasoning aloud helped them recognise links between theory and practice that they had not previously considered. In this sense, the data collection itself served as a form of professional dialogue, echoing Eraut's (2004a) notion of deliberative learning and illustrating the dynamics of knowledge construction that the study set out to explore.

4.4 Ethics and the researcher's reflexivity

Reflexivity in this thesis is both ethical and epistemological. Because the thesis examines how legitimacy is constructed, it also required reflexive attention to my own position as a producer and interpreter of knowledge. Acknowledging insider knowledge meant recognising both its advantages, the ability to interpret contextually, and its risks, the temptation to normalise familiar practices. The following sections outline how these tensions were managed.

I approached this project as what Brown (1996) terms an "outside-insider": for more than two decades I have worked within Icelandic policing—first briefly as a summer officer, later as a researcher at the Office of the National Commissioner, and, more recently, as director of training responsible for establishing the Police Training and Professional Development Centre (PTPD) when the education reform took effect in 2016. This vantage point afforded unusual access to people, data, and context. It also strengthened the inquiry by enabling contextually salient questions, fine-grained interpretation of organisational nuances, and the translation of practice-based meanings into analytically robust categories. In addition, long-standing professional relationships fostered trust with participants and data custodians, which enhanced candour in

interviews and the completeness of documentary evidence, even as interpretations were subjected to external peer challenge. I was mindful that this could create ethical complexities around power, confidentiality, and confirmation bias. Therefore, I treated positionality as something that needed to be disclosed, examined, and actively managed throughout the research process.

4.4.1 Governance, approvals, and data protection

All studies complied with institutional and national requirements. The qualitative component (Article IV) received approval from the University of Iceland Ethics Committee. The University of Iceland served as data controller for thesis materials; partner institutions (UNAK Research Institute; Office of the National Commissioner) provided data under written agreements that specified scope, minimisation, retention, and security. Processing followed GDPR principles: only the minimum necessary personal data were handled; identifiers were anonymised or removed as soon as feasible; and all files were stored on encrypted, access-restricted drives with documented decision trails. Where small-cell risks might identify individuals (e.g., rare postings), we suppressed or masked details in reporting.

4.4.2 Positionality, values, and conflict-of-interest safeguards

I began this PhD with a strong belief—shaped by years of experience as a psychologist and educator—that university-level police education is essential to a learning-oriented, publicly trusted police service. Since 2008, I have taught police psychology to all prospective police officers, both at the Police Academy and the University of Akureyri. I also contributed to the 2015 ministerial working group that laid the groundwork for the reform and, following the reform, have headed the Centre for Police Training and Professional Development since 2016. Rather than viewing these experiences as liabilities, I treated them as potential sources of bias that required explicit reflection and transparent management. They gave me insight into the reform's intentions but also the responsibility to question my own assumptions. To safeguard the integrity of the research, I maintained a clear separation between my professional and academic roles: all research decisions followed university governance procedures, and no police employee had access to raw data or preliminary analyses. Regular debriefing with supervisors outside policing, reflexive memos, and the deliberate search for counterexamples helped me remain alert to how my position shaped interpretation. My position throughout the thesis has been that openly acknowledging my values does not weaken the rigour of the research; rather, it is an ethical requirement that supports transparency and accountability.

4.4.3 Study-specific ethical considerations

Article I (historical discourse analysis). The corpus consisted of public policy and legal documents (2014–2016). Because I co-authored the 2015 working-group report, this document was treated as a conflict-of-interest risk. Mitigations included explicit disclosure, supervisory oversight of coding and theme formation, and an audit trail linking claims to textual evidence and to the wider legal–administrative timeline.

Article II (administrative and survey time series). NCIP/UNAK administrative extracts and Gallup trust indicators were used under data-sharing agreements and processed in accordance with data minimisation principles. Personal identifying fields were not imported into analysis files; derived variables (e.g., cohort retention, degree status) and analytic choices (e.g., payroll timing lags) were documented. Small-cell suppression was applied where appropriate (Blumberg, 2008).

Article III (RECPOL longitudinal student surveys). Participation in RECPOL was voluntary, with informed consent, and coded identifiers were used to enable within-cohort comparisons over time. For this thesis, I accessed anonymised analysis files only, provided by the University of Akureyri Social Science Institute and the National Police Academy archives. Reliability and fit indices were reported transparently, acknowledging attrition, and avoiding causal language beyond the design’s warrant.

Article IV (interviews with newly graduated officers). The qualitative study focused on twelve UNAK graduates (2018–2022) with at least two years’ service across urban, rural, and mixed postings. Participation was voluntary with written consent, the right to withdraw, and the right to skip questions. Given policing’s hierarchy and my insider role, I took steps to reduce power imbalances: invitations and consent materials stated explicitly that participation or refusal had no employment consequences; all communication was via University of Iceland e-mail and face-to-face interviews were taken at the premises of the School of Education; participants chose interview mode, location (online via UI teams or UI facilities), and timing; interviews were conducted in Icelandic, audio-recorded with consent, and could be paused at any point. An “off the record” option was offered for sensitive topics, and participants could retract material prior to transcript confirmation. A light distress protocol (pause/stop and signposting to support) was in place. Transcripts were pseudonymised on creation; quotations were edited only to prevent identifiability (ellipses/brackets used to signal any changes), not for meaning. Where Icelandic quotations were translated to English, I checked translations against the originals to preserve sense and tone, retaining culturally specific terms where necessary.

4.4.4 Reflexivity and quality

Reflexivity was embedded rather than appended (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018). I maintained an audit trail of coding iterations, theme maps, and decisions; used memoing to examine where my pro-reform stance might be shaping attention; and sought disconfirming material (e.g., accounts that resisted academic knowledge,

instances where organisational learning stalled) to test emerging claims. Regular debriefs with co-authors outside policing challenged field-norm assumptions. Across the project, I triangulated evidence types so that conclusions would not rest on a single method or vantage point, that is policy discourse (the rules of what could be said), system-level series (what changed and when), student valuations (how competence were understood during training), and officers' lived accounts (how knowledge was legitimised and used in practice). Throughout the project, I grappled with how best to conceptualise the competence that the reform sought to cultivate. Early drafts drew on the notion of holistic competence, but this term proved too diffuse to capture how different knowledge forms intersect in professional judgment. I experimented with the concept of integrated competence to emphasise the interplay between academic, practical and relational knowledge, yet this framing risked implying a level of coherence that neither the data nor the organisational context consistently supported. The eventual shift toward comprehensive competence reflects a more analytically clear concept: it acknowledges the breadth of knowledge expectations introduced through university-based education while allowing room for the persistent tensions, gaps and hierarchies that shape how competence is enacted in practice.

Reflexivity also entailed acknowledging that research itself is a form of professional practice subject to its own norms, hierarchies, and legitimating rituals. Maintaining transparency about analytic choices, triangulating data types, and documenting interpretive decisions were, therefore, not only methodological safeguards but also enactments of the same epistemic accountability that this thesis advocates for professional education.

4.4.5 Residual risks and limitations

Insider proximity can never be entirely neutralised (Reiner, 2000). I was aware that my professional position might influence both what participants chose to share and how I interpreted their accounts. Some officers may have moderated their candour, while I, in turn, could have been more attuned to interpretations consistent with the reform. To minimise these risks, I kept a clear boundary between my professional and research roles and provided enough contextual detail for readers to assess the credibility of the interpretations. I also made my analytic decisions transparent so that others could trace how conclusions were reached (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Because the qualitative study focused mainly on frontline officers, future research should extend to managers and supervisors to better understand how knowledge circulates and is mediated across different levels of the organisation.

The ethical approach in this thesis combines formal governance (approvals, GDPR-compliant data management) with ethics-in-action: role separation, explicit disclosure, careful sampling and consent procedures, translation and quoting protocols, and a reflexive analytic stance. This combination acknowledges both the opportunities and obligations of researching as an outside-insider and is intended to maximise credibility, trustworthiness, and public value (Brown, 1996; Reiner, 2000).

While the limitations of the qualitative study are mainly addressed above, it is also important to acknowledge constraints related to the quantitative data and analyses included in the thesis. The survey data analysed in Article III originate from the international RECPOL project and were therefore not designed specifically to address the Icelandic reform context. As a result, the operationalisation of enduring and emerging competences reflects theoretically informed proxies rather than direct measures of professional competence, and interpretations should be understood at the level of students' valuations rather than observed capability.

In addition, the longitudinal design relied on matched responses at two time points across multiple cohorts, which reduced the available sample and may have introduced attrition-related bias, particularly in the university cohorts, where programme progression was contingent on selection for practical training. While paired data strengthen internal comparability, they limit statistical power and constrain the use of more complex modelling strategies. Finally, the analyses are descriptive and comparative and do not support causal claims about the effects of academisation. These limitations were mitigated using validated measures of constructs, consistency with prior RECPOL studies, and triangulation with qualitative findings elsewhere in the thesis.

Finally, the limitations of Articles I and II should be acknowledged. Both studies rely on documentary and institutional analyses of policy texts, legislative material, and formal accounts of implementation. While these sources are well-suited to examining how police education reform was framed, justified, and institutionally organised, they provide limited insight into informal practices, contested interpretations, or how policies were experienced by practitioners on the ground. The analyses, therefore, focus on the discursive and organisational conditions under which the reform was articulated and legitimated, rather than on its practical effects or outcomes. These limitations are addressed throughout the thesis through the inclusion of survey and interview data that capture students' valuations of competence and officers' lived experiences of knowledge and learning.

4.4.6 Integrated methodological design

Taken together, the four studies constitute an integrated methodological design linking discourse, institutional systems, educational experience, and professional practice. Each level of analysis—policy, education, and workplace—captures a different setting in which professional knowledge is shaped and legitimised. By combining documentary, quantitative, and qualitative approaches within a reflexive, constructionist framework, the thesis addresses both the structural and cultural dimensions of reform. This chapter has shown how the methodological design was guided by the theoretical concern with learning, knowledge use, and legitimacy. The next chapter presents the main findings across the four studies and highlights the common patterns that emerged across these settings.

5 Findings

This PhD research set out to investigate how the 2016 police education reform in Iceland reshaped the meaning, legitimacy, and circulation of professional knowledge within the police field. The overall aim was to understand how professional knowledge and competence are defined and negotiated across three interlinked arenas: policy, education, and workplace practice. To address this aim, four studies were conducted, each examining a different context in which the reform was articulated, implemented, and experienced: from the policy discourse that framed the reform, through its implementation in a flexible university programme, to students' changing competence valuations and graduates' negotiations of legitimacy in everyday police work.

The findings of the four studies are first presented in an integrated overview (Section 5.1). Section 5.2 then identifies the main patterns and tensions that recur across the studies and summarises their interconnections in a table of common threads. Section 5.3 draws these strands together by outlining the themes that are taken forward into the Discussion chapter.

5.1 Overview of the four studies

The four studies that comprise this PhD project together examine the 2016 reform of police education in Iceland, each focusing on a different context in which the reform was articulated, implemented, and experienced, from policy formation to professional practice. While they differ in data, scope, and method, they share a common concern with how the reform was articulated, implemented, and experienced across policy, education, and professional practice.

Study I analyses governmental and legislative documents produced between 2014 and 2016 to examine how the discourse surrounding the transfer of police education to university level was constructed, and to identify the legitimating principles, tensions, and contradictions it contained. The article identifies two contrasting legitimating principles in the reform discourse: the validation of police competence through a university diploma, and the view of policing as a unique public-sector profession with its own practice-based knowledge and legitimate claim to curriculum control. These principles frequently coexisted but also revealed contradictions, particularly in debates about curriculum control and in the tension between practice-based and theory-based knowledge. The analysis suggests that the reform discourse was shaped by competing political and administrative ambitions, reflecting a broader struggle over who has the authority to define legitimate police knowledge as education moved to the University of Akureyri.

Study II uses administrative and longitudinal secondary data to examine how the introduction of flexible, university-based police education related to Iceland's police staffing crisis. The article shows that the reform helped accommodate more students, improve gender representation, and raise the educational level of the police. Interrupted time-series analysis indicates that the reform helped reverse the downward staffing trend. The study also examines public trust in the police and finds that confidence remained high after the transition to university education. Taken together, the findings provide a system-level account of how flexible learning expanded access and capacity and shaped the early implementation of the reform in a small-state context.

Study III uses longitudinal RECPOL survey data to examine how police students' valuation of professional competences changed before and after the shift to university-based education. The article distinguishes between enduring competences—practical, operational, and decision-making skills—and emerging competences associated with broader theoretical knowledge, communication, organisation, reflection, and adaptability. Across both categories, students in the university model consistently rated these competences as more important than did their predecessors at the National Police Academy, indicating a shift toward a broader and more academically oriented understanding of police professionalism. The article interprets these trends as evidence of changing orientations toward the knowledge base of policing during the period of educational reform.

Study IV draws on interviews with newly graduated police officers from the 2018–2022 cohorts of the University of Akureyri to examine how they make sense of professional learning as they enter frontline work. The article investigates how graduates describe the relationship between academic, experiential, and relational knowledge, the conditions that enable or constrain reflective practice, and the cultural expectations that shape their early professional identities. While participants recognised the value of academic insight, ethical reasoning, and critical reflection, they also reported that workplace norms and peer culture continued to privilege experiential authority and established ways of doing things. The article shows how graduates navigate these tensions in everyday work, negotiating legitimacy and articulating their understanding of professionalism and competence within a changing educational and organisational landscape.

Taken together, the four studies provide a multi-level account of how the 2016 reform of police education unfolded in Iceland. They show how the reform was articulated in policy, implemented within the education system, reflected in students' competence valuations, and negotiated in practice by new officers. Across the articles, the findings indicate that new institutional arrangements interacted with existing professional norms and expectations in uneven and sometimes tension-filled ways.

5.2 Common threads across the studies

Across these studies, a consistent tension emerges between policy aspirations for professionalisation and the enduring cultural hierarchies that privilege experiential authority. Overall, the findings suggest that professionalisation in policing extends beyond curriculum or credential reform; it is an ongoing cultural process shaped by organisational learning and the relational enactment of knowledge in practice.

Table 5 summarises the main findings across the four studies and identifies common threads linking policy, education, and practice during the reform. The columns correspond to the four articles, while the rows represent four cross-cutting dimensions: legitimating knowledge, competence formation, cultural translation, and the policy–practice gap.

These common themes form the basis for the Discussion, in which I examine how the findings across levels relate to existing theory and to the wider professionalisation of policing. The common threads illustrate how Iceland’s police higher education reform unfolded across interlinked dimensions of legitimacy, competence formation, cultural translation, and the persistent policy–practice gap. Together, the four studies suggest that professionalisation was not a single event, but a multilevel process negotiated through discourse, institutional design, and everyday practice. These common threads also indicate how the three theoretical lenses speak to one another. Shulman helps illuminate the redefinition of professional knowledge, Eraut draws attention to its situated learning processes, and Chan clarifies the cultural negotiations through which legitimacy is shaped within the police field.

Table 5. *Common threads across the four articles*

Theme / Dimension	Article I: Policy Discourse	Article II: Flexible Learning	Article III: Competence Valuation	Article IV: Workplace Legitimacy
Legitimizing Knowledge	The reform was legitimised through two competing logics: the university diploma as validation of police competence and the guarding of policing as a distinctive, practice-based vocation.	Flexible learning legitimised the reform politically and symbolically by reconciling workforce needs with academic and institutional standards, making university education feasible in a small-state context.	Students at UNAK valued both enduring competence (e.g., law, operational skills) and emerging competence (e.g., reflection, communication) more highly than their NPA-trained peers, signalling a shift in legitimacy toward a broader competence profile.	The study revealed how knowledge is legitimised in practice: academic knowledge gained recognition but remained mediated by organisational culture and experiential hierarchies.
Competence Formation	Policy discourse emphasised legal and operational competence as the foundation of professional expertise, with increased but still limited attention to reflection or ethical judgement.	The flexible model widened access, increased diversity, and allowed students to combine study with temporary police work, shaping competence through simultaneous exposure to education and practice.	University students reported higher valuations of critical reflection, communication, and ethical awareness, reflecting the integration of academic and professional learning aims.	Competence was primarily enhanced through informal learning, peer mentoring, and organisational routines; reflection and relational judgement emerged as key aspects of professional capability.
Cultural Translation	Reform texts assumed a seamless transfer of academic knowledge into practice, underestimating the strength of police culture in mediating new knowledge forms.	Flexible delivery introduced tensions between pedagogical coherence and operational pragmatism, revealing how institutional design mediates cultural acceptance of reform.	Findings suggest that students are increasingly open to a wider range of competences, though traditional role expectations remain influential.	Translation of academic knowledge into practice remained fragile; experiential authority and peer norms continued to shape legitimacy in everyday work.
Policy—Practice Gap	Tensions persisted between the rhetoric of professionalisation and the police authority's practical control of the curriculum.	Workforce imperatives occasionally overshadowed pedagogical goals, underscoring the reform's dual role as both a professional and pragmatic project.	A clear shift in competence valuations after the reform, suggesting that the broadened competence profile established during education raises questions about how such values are later supported in practice.	The lack of structured organisational mechanisms (such as reflective meetings, internal seminars, and opportunities for research) limited the integration of academic knowledge into practice.

5.3 Interpreting reform across policy, education, and practice

The 2016 police education reform produced both alignment and dissonance across policy, education, and practice. While the reform broadened the competence base and embedded academic knowledge within police education, its translation into workplace culture remained partial and uneven. Across the four studies, a recurring finding is that legitimacy in policing continues to be negotiated through the interplay of formal authority, experiential expertise, and relational practice. The reform therefore cannot be understood solely as a curricular or institutional shift, but as an ongoing cultural process that reshapes what counts as valid professional knowledge.

Taken together, these findings return directly to the thesis's central research questions: how professional knowledge is constructed and legitimised across policy, education, and workplace contexts, and how the move to university-based education has reshaped the meaning and valuation of police competence in Iceland. The results indicate that although structural alignment with higher education altered the profession's formal knowledge base, cultural and organisational conditions continue to mediate whether and how this knowledge is recognised, used, and valued in practice.

The Discussion chapter interprets these integrated patterns through the theoretical triad of Shulman, Eraut, and Chan. It places the Icelandic reform in dialogue with wider debates on professional knowledge, workplace learning, and cultural legitimacy, and considers the broader implications for police education and professional learning in small-state contexts.

6 Discussion

This chapter brings together the findings of the four studies to examine how professional knowledge is constructed, valued, and legitimised across policy, education, and workplace contexts. Rather than treating these as separate spheres, the discussion considers their interdependence: how policy discourse shapes educational design, how educational experiences influence workplace learning, and how cultural hierarchies condition the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge. Across the thesis, the reform emerges as more than a structural or curricular change. It also appears as a process through which the knowledge base of policing was broadened, while the conditions for recognising and using that knowledge in practice remained uneven.

The findings are interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Shulman, Eraut, and Chan. These perspectives do not produce a single unified account, but together they provide a way of analysing how educational reform interacts with organisational learning conditions and occupational culture. Shulman helps clarify how the reform reshaped expectations regarding the content and ethical dimensions of police knowledge. Eraut highlights how the enactment of such knowledge depends on workplace affordances and opportunities for reflection. Chan, in turn, informs how epistemic authority continues to be negotiated through cultural hierarchies within the police field. Taken together, these perspectives support an understanding of professionalisation as a dynamic and negotiated process unfolding across multiple levels.

The discussion develops three interrelated lines of analysis. First, it examines how the reform reconfigured the meaning of professional competence, particularly through the relationship between enduring and emerging dimensions of knowledge. Second, it analyses how organisational conditions, including workplace affordances, supervisory practices, and peer norms, shape the enactment of knowledge and the possibilities for reflective practice. Third, it considers how cultural hierarchies and forms of symbolic capital influence whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate in policing. Together, these lines of analysis show that while formal alignment with higher education can be achieved relatively quickly, the deeper cultural shifts required for academic knowledge to become embedded in everyday practice unfold more unevenly.

6.1 Linking reform and professional learning: a multi-level perspective

When examined through the theoretical perspectives outlined earlier, the Icelandic reform shows that educational and cultural change rarely occur at the same pace. Policy

processes, educational institutions, and everyday police practice operate according to different logics and often change at different speeds. At the policy level, reform discourse drew legitimacy from two main rationales. One was technocratic, emphasising efficiency, workforce planning, and flexibility in response to staffing shortages. The other presented the reform as a professionalisation project that would raise policing to the level of other university-based professions (Freidson, 2001). Together, these rationales made the reform both administratively workable and symbolically meaningful (Oddsson et al., 2024). Yet the findings suggest that formal alignment with higher education was achieved more quickly than the deeper changes needed for new forms of professional knowledge to become established in practice. Similar tensions have been described elsewhere, where academisation has combined state-driven aims of efficiency with broader ambitions to professionalise the occupation (Neave, 1979; Paterson, 2011; Brown, 2020; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022; Diderichsen, 2017). The Icelandic case differed, however, in that the shift was not gradual. It resulted from a deliberate policy decision to move police education directly into the university sector. In this sense, academisation in Iceland is best understood not as slow institutional drift, but as a politically driven restructuring of where police knowledge would be located and how it would be validated.

At the educational level, the introduction of a flexible university diploma reshaped how police knowledge and competence were developed (Bragason & Damen, 2025). By combining academic study with part-time police work, the programme gave students greater opportunity to move between theory and practice than the earlier model had allowed (Oddsson et al., 2024). This resembles what Eraut (2004a) describes as deliberative learning, where reflection develops through comparison between formal concepts and real cases. Students learned not only to draw on experience, but also to describe and examine that experience in academic terms. The findings suggest that this supported the development of analytical and relational competence, and encouraged a view of knowledge as something to be interpreted and used rather than simply received. At the same time, this integration remained fragile. Once students entered full-time service, opportunities for structured reflection and dialogue largely disappeared. This suggests that professional learning depends not only on curriculum design, but also on whether the workplace provides time, support, and opportunities for reflection (Bragason et al., submitted; Eraut, 2000). Similar concerns have been raised in UK research, which shows that graduate-entry reforms require supportive workplace cultures if academic learning is to become part of practice (Cockcroft et al., 2025; Cockcroft & Hallenberg, 2022; Wood et al., 2018).

At the workplace level, the reform exposed the continuing strength of cultural hierarchies that privilege experience over formally recognised knowledge. Chan's (2003) concept of occupational epistemology helps explain why new graduates still need to translate academic knowledge into the language of practice in order to gain legitimacy (Cockcroft, 2019; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017). Professional learning

therefore develops across policy, education, and workplace settings, but its effects depend on how open the boundaries between these settings are (Martin, 2022, 2024).

When the links between policy, education, and workplace practice are weak, knowledge remains compartmentalised and academic learning becomes detached from operational realities. Under such conditions, practical experience is unlikely to feed back into curriculum development or policy. Reform may open access to new forms of knowledge, but cultural and organisational conditions determine whether these are integrated into everyday work. From this perspective, professionalisation is better understood not as a linear progression, but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by the strength of the connections between policy, education, and practice (Evetts, 2003, 2011; Freidson, 2001; Sklansky, 2011). This also aligns with Willis and Mastrofski's (2018) argument that reforms based on research and academic education succeed only when police culture becomes more receptive to new kinds of knowledge.

6.2 Constructing legitimacy: translating academic and experiential knowledge

A second strand of the analysis examines how academic and experiential forms of knowledge are translated across the boundaries between education and practice. Shulman (1987) argues that professional education succeeds not when knowledge is simply transmitted, but when learners develop the capacity to represent, adapt, and justify it in action. In this thesis, Shulman's framework helps show that the Icelandic reform was more than a structural change. It was also concerned with what would count as legitimate professional knowledge and how such knowledge would be understood, articulated, and justified in practice (Freidson, 2001; Martin, 2024; Smeby, 2007). The findings suggest, however, that these translation processes were uneven. University education broadened the conceptual vocabulary of policing by introducing research literacy, ethical reasoning, and reflective practice, but the standing of this knowledge remained limited within the occupational field (Chan, 1999; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017). Graduates often had to demonstrate the practical usefulness of academic ideas before these were recognised as legitimate by peers or supervisors. This reflects what Eraut (2004a) describes as the conditional translation of formal knowledge into workplace action, and what Williams and Cockcroft (2019) identify as the need to express evidence-based reasoning in the practical language of police work.

This pattern highlights the importance of legitimacy in professional fields undergoing academisation. Chan (1999, 2003) argues that knowledge gains authority only when it is recognised by those who hold influence within the occupational culture. This resonates with wider critiques of police epistemologies, where academic knowledge often competes with the credibility associated with practical experience (Gundhus, 2013; Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). In Icelandic policing, such recognition was shaped by local hierarchies and informal gatekeeping (Article IV). Officers' accounts suggest

that academic knowledge was most likely to gain traction when supported by relational trust and when expressed in familiar, action-oriented terms. This parallels Hallenberg and Cockcroft's (2017) finding that legitimacy in police learning depends heavily on peer recognition and on the symbolic value of practical competence. In such moments, the boundary between theory and experience become less rigid, allowing reflective reasoning to become part of everyday decision-making. Legitimacy, therefore, was not conferred by credentials alone, but negotiated through practice, communication, and existing cultural norms (Article IV).

The interplay between academic and experiential knowledge also reflects Eraut's (1994, 2004) distinction between knowledge possession and knowledge use. University education can widen access to concepts and frameworks, but its long-term impact depends on whether organisations create conditions in which such knowledge can be used, discussed, and developed collectively. Without structured reflection or opportunities for dialogue across ranks, academic knowledge risks remaining an individual rather than an organisational resource. The reform therefore illustrates both the potential and the fragility of integrating academic knowledge into professional learning.

6.3 Rethinking competence: from instrumental skills to comprehensive competence

The third analytical theme examines how the meaning of competence shifts across the four studies. Rather than appearing as a fixed or purely technical attribute, competence emerged as a multi-dimensional capacity shaped by cognitive, ethical and relational dimensions of police work (Eraut, 2004a; Shulman, 1987). Across the thesis, competence is therefore understood not simply as operational skill, but as the ability to interpret situations, exercise judgment, and act responsibly in relation to others. This interpretation is consistent with research suggesting that legitimacy in police learning depends not only on demonstrable practical ability, but also on the forms of competence that are recognised and valued within occupational culture (Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017). Shulman highlights the role of judgment in bringing different forms of knowledge together, while Smeby (2007) draws attention to the dispositions that support such judgment, including curiosity, awareness of one's own knowledge limits, and an ongoing orientation towards learning. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that competence in contemporary policing is better understood as comprehensive and dynamic than as a narrow set of instrumental skills.

The quantitative findings from Article III support this interpretation. Students educated under the university model valued both enduring and emerging competences more highly than their pre-reform counterparts, indicating a broader appreciation of reflection, communication, and ethical reasoning alongside operational proficiency. The qualitative findings from Article IV extend this pattern. Newly graduated officers

described professionalism not only in terms of technical capability, but also through empathy, relational sensitivity, and moral judgment. Although these dimensions were less visible in policy discourse (Article I), they proved central to legitimacy in everyday practice.

Taken together, the findings point to a shift in how professionalism is understood: away from competence as predominantly technical mastery and towards a more reflective, relational, and ethically informed engagement with practice. This interpretation echoes Freidson's (2001) view of professionalism as grounded in trust and informed judgment rather than strict technical control. Across the four studies, competence appears not as a single quality, but as something defined, developed, and legitimised differently across policy, education, and workplace contexts. Studies I–III show a broadening of the competence profile associated with professionalisation, while Study IV provides a more detailed view of how cognitive, experiential, and relational elements are combined in situated practice.

For this reason, the thesis adopts the term *comprehensive competence* to describe the broader profile of professional capability that emerged in the reform context. The term captures a form of competence that includes technical skill, but is not exhausted by it. It also includes reflection, ethical judgment, relational sensitivity, and the capacity to continue learning across changing situations. In this sense, the reform did not only relocate police education to the university sector. It also encouraged a wider understanding of what police officers need to know, how that knowledge is used, and what kinds of competence are recognised as legitimate in practice.

6.4 Implications for theory and practice

From a theoretical perspective, the findings point to professionalisation as a dynamic relationship between education, organisational structures, and culture. This interpretation builds on the three theoretical perspectives introduced in Chapter 3: Shulman's multidimensional model of professional knowledge (1986, 1987), Eraut's typology of workplace learning (1994, 2004), and Chan's cultural analysis of policing (1999, 2003). Shulman clarifies how academic programmes redefine the content, structure, and moral dimensions of professional knowledge (see also Shipton, 2023), while extending his concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to policing helps explain how officers translate theoretical understanding into ethically informed, context-sensitive action. Eraut (2004b) adds a dynamic perspective, outlining how such knowledge is enacted and sustained through workplace affordances, that is, opportunities, relationships, and organisational conditions that enable learning and reflection in practice. Chan's framework (2003) reveals the cultural mechanisms through which legitimacy is granted or withheld, linking professional knowledge to power, hierarchy, and symbolic capital. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that institutional reform alone cannot produce epistemic change. Professionalisation

depends on the interdependence of knowledge structures and learning conditions, together with cultural recognition (Martin, 2024; Smeby, 2007), a process that requires continual negotiation rather than structural realignment alone.

The thesis also contributes to the emerging field of police science by foregrounding the epistemic dimensions of police professionalisation. It suggests that reforms influence not only what officers learn but also how knowledge gains legitimacy within police culture. By integrating insights from Shulman, Eraut and Chan, the thesis demonstrates the value of analysing police work as a dynamic interplay between professional knowledge, everyday practice and organisational culture, thereby extending current discussions on the knowledge base of policing.

Practically, the study points to several design principles for police education and organisational learning. First, curriculum reform should embed structured opportunities for reflection that extend into the workplace, e.g. facilitated debriefings, cross-rank seminars, or reflective practice groups (Charman, 2017; Eraut, 2004b). Second, mentoring systems that prioritise dialogue over evaluation can support the translation of academic insight into operational reasoning (Eraut, 1994; Heslop, 2011). Third, fostering collaborative inquiry through peer observation, action research, or practice-based research partnerships can help bridge the persistent divide between academic and experiential knowledge (Rogers & Frevel, 2018; Rogers & Gravelle, 2020; Willis & Mastrofski, 2018). Finally, leadership development should explicitly address the cultural dimensions of legitimacy, preparing supervisors to act as facilitators of learning and translation rather than as custodians of tradition (Chan et al., 2003; Cockcroft et al., 2025; Cockcroft & Hallenberg, 2022). As discussed earlier, developing a learning organisation within policing requires deliberate structural support for reflection, dialogue, and feedback (Charman, 2017; Heslop, 2011). In the Icelandic case, the findings suggest that such conditions remain uneven. The practical implication is that reform cannot stop at programme design: it also requires organisational support for reflection, dialogue, and the collective use of knowledge in practice.

6.5 Surprises and gaps in the findings

Several aspects of the findings differed from expectations. One surprise was the degree of pragmatism and openness among newly graduated officers toward integrating academic and experiential knowledge. This contrasts with earlier accounts of cultural resistance to academic or evidence-based perspectives within policing (Chan, 2003; Gundhus, 2013; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017; Sklansky, 2013). Those studies emphasised the strength of occupational boundaries rooted in the symbolic value of experience and the suspicion of externally generated knowledge. The findings of this thesis suggest that Icelandic policing may be entering a transitional phase in which academic forms of knowledge are becoming more widely accepted, particularly among younger officers educated within the university system, reflecting an emerging “hybrid”

professional identity (Martin, 2024; Cockcroft & Hallenberg, 2022). This pattern suggests that cultural boundaries may be more permeable (Chan, 2003; Eraut, 2004) in smaller and more relational organisations than previously assumed.

A second unexpected finding was the strong emergence of relational competence as a marker of professionalism. While reform documents emphasised analytical and evidence-based competence, participants repeatedly defined good policing in terms of empathy, communication, and moral judgement in uncertain situations (Article IV). This interpretation resonates with Shulman's (1987) notion of the moral dimension of professional knowledge and Shipton's (2023) argument that police education must prepare students not only to know what to do, but to reason why and how to act with integrity. The contrast between policy discourse (Article I) and lived professionalism (Article IV) highlights the moral, interpersonal, and contextual aspects of competence, dimensions that are integrated in comprehensive competence.

A further insight concerns structural gaps that limit the translation of new knowledge into organisational learning. Despite increased academic involvement, opportunities for systematic reflection, collaborative inquiry, and dialogue across ranks remain limited (Article IV). As Eraut (2004b) emphasises, professional learning depends not only on individual capability but on organisational affordances, i.e., the time, trust, and structures that enable deliberative reflection. Chan's (2003) analysis helps explain why such affordances are not easily realised, as cultural hierarchies within policing continue to privilege experiential authority and reproduce patterns of epistemic gatekeeping. Future research could therefore explore how mentoring systems, internal seminars, or participatory research initiatives might strengthen these affordances and foster greater permeability between academic and experiential knowledge (Chan, 2003; Charman, 2017; Heslop, 2011).

These findings also point to the value of longer-term research. A longitudinal design following graduates across multiple career stages would help clarify how the legitimacy of academic knowledge develops as officers gain experience. It would also show whether the influence of the reform is sustained in everyday practice or weakens over time as organisational norms and cultural expectations reassert themselves.

7 Conclusions

This thesis shows how the 2016 reform of police education in Iceland reshaped the meaning, value, and legitimacy of professional knowledge as police education moved from a vocational model to a university-based programme. Through four interrelated studies, the research explored this transformation across policy (Bragason et al., 2025), educational (Oddsson et al., 2024; Bragason & Damen, 2025), and workplace levels (Bragason et al., submitted), drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Shulman (1987), Eraut (1994), and Chan (1999). Taken together, these perspectives offer a way of tracing how professional knowledge is constructed, valued, and legitimised within a changing professional field.

7.1 Summary of key insights

Across the four studies, the findings suggest that the reform achieved institutional alignment with higher education, while epistemic and cultural change unfolded more slowly and unevenly.

At the policy level, legitimacy was constructed through two coexisting logics: a technocratic rationale centred on workforce efficiency and flexibility, and a normative rationale emphasising professionalisation through academic standards and university affiliation. This dual rationale helped make the reform administratively feasible while also giving it symbolic credibility, yet it also generated tensions between short-term staffing objectives and the long-term educational vision of developing a knowledge-based profession.

At the educational level, the shift to a university-based model expanded police students' competence base and introduced a stronger orientation toward reflective and analytical learning informed by research. The flexible structure of alternating between academic study and part-time operational work created conditions for integrating theory and practice and for articulating experience through academic reasoning. However, sustaining this reflective capacity after graduation proved challenging as workplace routines offered limited time and institutional affordances for structured reflection and collective learning (Eraut, 2004b).

At the workplace level, the research revealed enduring cultural hierarchies that continue to privilege experiential authority over academic insight. Newly graduated officers often needed to translate theoretical concepts into the practical language of policing to gain legitimacy among peers and supervisors. This translation process illustrates how organisational learning is mediated by symbolic power, habitus, and peer recognition

rather than by formal structures alone (Chan, 1999). Despite such barriers, the findings also indicate emerging change: new officers increasingly value relational and ethical competence (communication, empathy, and discretionary judgement) as integral components of professionalism and public trust. These shifts suggest a gradual movement toward a more comprehensive competence in Icelandic policing, where academic, experiential, and relational knowledge are beginning to be seen as mutually reinforcing dimensions of professional expertise.

Looking across the four studies indicates that the reform strengthened the foundations for what this thesis terms comprehensive competence: a broad form of professional judgment in which officers draw on theoretical, experiential, relational, and ethical knowledge. The findings suggest that these dimensions do not cohere into a single integrated model but are mobilised differently across policy, education, and workplace contexts. While the reform expanded the profession's formal knowledge base and introduced structured opportunities for reflective learning, the extent to which academic knowledge gains authority in practice continues to depend on workplace affordances and cultural hierarchies. Consequently, professionalisation in Icelandic policing appears less as a uniform outcome of structural reform and more as an ongoing process negotiated across institutional levels, shaped by both new educational arrangements and enduring occupational norms.

7.2 Theoretical contributions

This thesis contributes to the emerging field of police science by showing that police professionalisation must be understood not only as a matter of educational structure or institutional reform, but also as a question of how professional knowledge is defined, learned, and legitimised. In this respect, the thesis foregrounds the epistemic dimensions of reform: not only what police officers are expected to know, but also how different forms of knowledge gain authority within the police field.

A second contribution lies in the way the thesis brings together the perspectives of Shulman, Eraut, and Chan. Rather than proposing a new theory of police professionalisation, it demonstrates how these established frameworks can be used in combination to analyse reform across policy, education, and workplace practice. This analytical framing helps explain how policy aspirations shape curricular aims, how workplace conditions influence whether academic and experiential knowledge can be enacted, and how cultural hierarchies regulate whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate. The contribution is therefore analytical rather than theory-building, but it offers a more integrated account of how professionalisation unfolds across multiple levels in a small-state policing context.

A third contribution is the refinement of comprehensive competence as an analytical lens for understanding professional learning in policing. Rather than treating competence as a fixed attribute or measurable outcome, the thesis conceptualises it as

an evolving relationship between knowledge, judgment, and practice. In this sense, competence includes not only technical skill, but also ethical reasoning, relational sensitivity, and the capacity to continue learning across contexts. The concept is used here not as a universal model of police competence, but as a way of capturing the broader profile of professional capability that emerged in the Icelandic reform context.

Taken together, these contributions show that institutional reform alone cannot transform the knowledge foundations of policing. Professionalisation is better understood as a negotiated process shaped by the interaction of knowledge structures, workplace learning conditions, and cultural recognition. In this way, the thesis contributes to police science by offering a more differentiated account of how educational reform reshapes the epistemic conditions of policing across policy, education, and practice.

7.3 Implications for policy and practice

The findings suggest that educational or curriculum reform alone is unlikely to transform professional practice. While the move to university-based education broadened the competence base of policing, its impact depends on organisational structures that enable officers to use academic knowledge together with ethical and relational forms of understanding in their daily work. Sustained opportunities for workplace learning such as protected time for reflection, supportive supervision, mentoring arrangements and structured feedback are essential if graduates are to develop the form of comprehensive competence promoted through the reform.

The results also emphasise the importance of addressing cultural expectations surrounding experiential authority. When experiential knowledge remains the primary source of legitimacy, academic insight tends to enter practice only selectively and often through processes of translation shaped by peer norms and hierarchical expectations. Leadership is particularly important in shaping these organisational conditions, as supervisors who encourage dialogue, inquiry and shared reflection can support the development of reflective practice, whereas those who reinforce traditional authority structures may limit the uptake of new forms of knowledge.

At the broader system level, the findings point to the need for ongoing coordination between the University of Akureyri and the Centre for Police Training and Professional Development to ensure that educational aims align with workplace conditions. Without such alignment, the reform risks producing graduates whose knowledge and expectations are not fully supported by organisational structures or cultural norms.

Although these insights arise from a small-state context, they may be relevant for jurisdictions considering or implementing the academisation of police education. They suggest that the success of university-based models depends not only on curriculum design but also on the organisational and cultural environments into which graduates move. At the same time, any policy transfer should be approached cautiously, since the relationship between education, workplace learning, and occupational culture is shaped by local histories, organisational capacities, and political priorities.

7.4 Future research

The findings point to several directions for further research. Longitudinal studies that follow the same cohorts of graduates across career stages would deepen understanding of how professional knowledge, identity and comprehensive competence develop over time, and how workplace cultures either support or erode reflective capacity. This type of research could clarify when and how academic and experiential knowledge, together with relational forms of expertise, become stabilised or marginalised as officers progress into specialised roles or supervisory positions.

Comparative research across Nordic and other small-state contexts could further clarify how systemic factors such as organisational scale, centralisation, labour-market conditions, and inter-institutional collaboration shape the pathways and pace of police professionalisation. These comparisons may also reveal whether the tensions identified in Iceland between academisation, workforce demands, and cultural expectations are characteristic of similar jurisdictions or more context-specific.

More focused studies of mentoring, supervision, leadership practice, and peer learning could offer detailed insight into the organisational mechanisms that support or constrain reflective practice. This includes examining how supervisors shape the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge, how informal peer cultures influence the uptake of academic knowledge, and how relational competence can be deliberately supported in practice.

A further line of inquiry concerns the sustainability of the flexible-learning model itself. As staffing levels stabilise, it remains uncertain whether police students will continue to have access to part-time operational posts alongside their studies. Future research could examine how changes in workforce capacity affect opportunities to connect theory and practice, and whether limits on such opportunities weaken the pedagogical benefits on which the model depends.

7.5 Concluding reflections

Viewed as a whole, this thesis illustrates that the reform of police education in Iceland represented both an institutional and cultural turning point. It established new formal structures of professional learning while revealing enduring questions about the nature of police knowledge and the sources of professional legitimacy. As indicated throughout, professionalisation is not a finished state but an ongoing negotiation between academic and experiential worlds, and between tradition and renewal. Understanding this negotiation is crucial not only for the future of police education in Iceland but also for broader discussions on how professions evolve in response to social and epistemic change.

The thesis has traced how knowledge, competence and legitimacy are continually constructed and contested within Icelandic policing as it transitions toward a university-based model of professional education. Although centred on a single national reform, the findings speak to broader questions about how professions develop new knowledge bases, how they support learning across institutional settings, and how they negotiate the relationship between formal education and professional practice.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that reforming police education involves not only institutional restructuring but also a reorientation of professional thinking and knowledge practices. When learning is treated as reflective, relational, and shared across professional settings, reform has greater potential to reshape the conditions under which knowledge becomes legitimate. In this sense, comprehensive competence captures not a finished ideal, but an evolving form of professional capability grounded in the ongoing interplay between learning, practice, and legitimacy.

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Article I

Article I

Police education reform in Iceland: examining the legitimating principles, contradictions, and tensions in policy discourse

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, in many countries, police education has shifted from vocational training schools run by the police to universities. In Iceland, in 2016, basic police education was reformed, the National Police Academy was closed, and a new university programme was created. In this article, we analyse the discourse in two reports from 2014 and 2015 and two legal texts from 2016 leading up to this education reform. A six-step approach to discourse analysis was utilised. Our main research questions were as follows: What characterises the discourse of police education reform in Icelandic policy documents? What are the discourse's main legitimating principles, tensions, and contradictions? We identified two contrasting legitimating principles in the discourse: the validation of police competence through a university diploma versus policing as a unique public-sector profession. There is a discontinuity in both social structures and practices, leading to a new approach to knowledge development via research and university education. This shift has produced uncertainty, as well as tensions that can occur when traditional vocational training is transformed into university programmes. These findings could have implications for other occupations seeking professional status with a strong tradition of control over their own basic training and knowledge bases.

KEYWORDS

Education reform; police; historical discourse analysis; knowledge paradigms; curriculum control

Introduction

In recent decades, in many countries, police education has shifted from vocational training schools run directly by the police to university programmes. These changes have been rationalised and implemented in highly diverse ways. In some countries, police training schools have developed into university colleges, and in others, police education has been contracted out to established universities (Cordner, 2019; Paterson, 2011, 2015; Rogers & Frevel, 2018; Williams & Paterson, 2021). Most research has focused on whether university education produces better police officers or on the

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barriers to the implementation of new university programmes (Brown, 2020). Research on policy documents leading to police education being moved to the university level is scarce.

In Iceland, as part of a larger police reform, basic police education was reformed by closing the National Police Academy, which had previously offered one-year basic training for police officers, and establishing a new university-level programme by amending the Police Act in 2016 (Parliamentary document no. 1215, case no. 742). Following a competitive bid by four universities, it was decided that the University of Akureyri would offer, from the autumn of 2016, a new two-year police diploma programme (120 ECTS), which is equivalent to a foundational degree in the UK (Rogers & Gravelle, 2020). This diploma programme makes students eligible to become police officers, with the students having the option of completing a one-year “top-up” programme, leading to a 180-ECTS BA degree in Police Science (University of Akureyri, n.d.).

In this article, we examine the discourse on police education reform in selected Icelandic policy documents published from 2014 to 2016, including the two working-group reports and two legislative documents.

Background

In the second half of the twentieth century, there was an expansion of occupational and professional programmes in universities globally (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, & Levy, 2005; Holmberg & Hallonsten, 2015). For example, teacher and nursing education have been moved to the university level (Björnsdóttir, 2015; Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, & Levy, 2005; Jóhannsdóttir, 2008).

In several European countries, the Bologna process has led to reforms in police education, with police academies being granted university status (Jaschke & Neidhardt, 2007; Paterson, 2015). Studies have, however, not been unanimous regarding the success of this development. In a recent review article, Brown (2020) concluded that the evidence base is not strong enough to draw definitive conclusions about the benefits that a university education may have had for the police. Thus, many unanswered questions remain regarding the objectives and implementation of police education at the university level.

In 2008, Danish police training shifted to the university level as part of wider police reform efforts. According to Diderichsen (2017), one of the main reasons for this reform was credentialism, that is, a reliance on earned credentials rather than ability when hiring staff. The transfer to the university level was appealing to the Danish police, an organisation that is constantly under pressure to present itself as a legitimate, modern, and efficient organisation. Other reasons for the reform included the need for police to perform more complex tasks, making the police workplace more attractive, creating opportunities for specialisation, allowing comparisons with other professions for which training has been moved to the university level, and strengthening ties with external partners (Diderichsen, 2017).

Terpstra and Schaap (2022) compared the transition of police education to the university level from a policy perspective in Norway; Finland; and North Rhine-Westphalia, in Germany. Their findings highlight similar arguments across these

countries, including the need to assist the police in adapting to a more complex society, enhance the appeal of the police profession, keep police training from falling behind training for other professions, and improve the image and working conditions of the police. Moreover, the creation and development of university police programmes were significantly influenced by historical and political circumstances, as well as organisational structures. In general, police unions strove for higher wages, to keep up with other professions in terms of education, and for a less hierarchical police organisation. In all these countries, university police programmes were seen as legitimate, but their structures and content remain contentious issues (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022).

New models of policing, such as community policing, intelligence-led policing, and evidence-based policing, have emerged in EU countries (Jaschke, 2010). This change demands that police education systems transition from practice-based knowledge models to theory-based knowledge. Enhancing the connection between theory and practice is vital in strengthening education quality, especially in professional education programmes, such as police education (Hagen, Damen, & Hermansen, 2023). This is, for example, evident in Swedish police education, as Leijon and Stigmar (2022) found in their study on the curricula of five universities that have been contracted to deliver police education by the Police Authority. Their findings demonstrate that there are differences in knowledge requirements, on a high-order cognitive level, between universities. Furthermore, that there is a need to integrate and balance both practice-based knowledge and theory-based knowledge in police education. These researchers also emphasise the need for a curriculum that is both conceptually and contextually coherent for police education as a university discipline while also allowing for the variation and flexibility needed to meet the changing knowledge requirements of policing (Leijon & Stigmar, 2022).

In summary, developing policing from an historically practice-based knowledge in vocational schools, which were sometimes run by the police, into an academic discipline is likely to create tensions in the discourse between knowledge paradigms. This is perhaps clearest in the evidence-based-policing literature, which favours randomised controlled trials over human experience (Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). Although such contrasting knowledge paradigms are evident in the research literature, it is unclear whether and how they appear in the discourse on police education reform in policy documents.

Research questions

Police education reform is not a simple, linear process; rather, it is significantly influenced by historical and political factors. In this study, we examined how police education reform in Iceland was discussed in selected Icelandic policy documents. The main research questions were as follows: What characterises the discourse on police education reform in Icelandic policy documents? What are this discourse's legitimating principles, tensions, and contradictions?

Method

This study is based on historical discourse analysis, which was chosen over other thematic discursive methods, as we wanted to examine, in addition to the themes present in the discourse, its legitimating principles, contradictions, tensions, and discontinuities. This approach is derived from, among others, Michel Foucault (1978, 1979). Its main aim is to search for the rules that determine, historically and politically, what can and cannot be said, as well as where and how it can be said (Jóhannesson, 2010). More specifically, our research methodology was informed by Foucauldian discourse theory, which characterises discourse as a set of multiple competing ideas and metaphors that encompass both text and practice and establish what is considered acceptable and normal at a given time (Foucault, 1979). These legitimating principles are not necessarily coherent or logical entities but, rather, constructed during the struggle between ideas (Foucault, 1979). As a result, there are tensions and contradictions involved in what becomes legitimate, which we searched for (Jóhannesson, 2010), as well as continuities and discontinuities in the discourse (Foucault, 1998).

This article uses the six-step approach developed by Jóhannesson (2010) and Sharp and Richardson (2001). The first step involved identifying the focus of the inquiry, namely the discourse surrounding police education reform in Icelandic policy documents between 2014 and 2016. We selected this event because it was a major reform event in police education. Basic police education had been delivered by the police since 1936, and now, a new diploma programme at a university was to replace it.

Selection of documents

The second step was to gather materials that were suitable for answering the research questions. In deciding which documents were relevant to the analysis, we studied *Police Union Magazine*, reports by ministerial working groups, newspaper articles, letters sent by stakeholders, and documents from parliament. In the end, we decided to study the following four texts: two formal ministerial policy documents; the bill, with an accompanying commentary, passed by the parliament as law to amend the Police Act 90/1996; and the official recommendation to parliament by the Standing Committee on Judicial Affairs and Education.

The first two documents are reports by separate working groups prepared regarding police education reform in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The first report compared the status of police education in Nordic countries with the training offered by the National Police Academy (Ministry of the Interior, 2014). The second report considered whether police education needed to be changed and, if so, how. This report also includes 12 letters outlining stakeholders' views (Ministry of the Interior, 2015). These reports were administrative documents based on limited scientific evidence and specialist knowledge, and they were composed without the direct involvement of the academic community in Iceland. In this article, we refer to them as working-group reports.

The third document is the bill proposed in the Icelandic parliament, with an accompanying commentary (Icelandic parliament, 2016). The commentary outlines the reasoning for the education reform and explains each paragraph of the bill. In addition, the commentary establishes the reasoning for the proposed bill and reviews

Table 1. Overview of the analysis data.

Dataset	Short name	Type	Pages
Ministry of the Interior, (2014)	Mol 2014 report	Policy report	40
Ministry of the Interior, (2015)	Mol 2015 report	Policy report	126
Bill with commentary (2016)	Bill	Legal text	12
Parliament Committee on Judicial Affairs and Education (2016)	Committee on Judicial Affairs	Legal text	3
Total			181

the development of police education in Nordic countries. We refer to this text as the bill. The fourth document is an official recommendation made by the parliamentary Standing Committee on Judicial Affairs and Education, which oversees policing matters (Parliament Committee on Judicial Affairs and Education, 2016). In this document, the committee outlined its reasoning for supporting the bill. We refer to this text as the committee recommendation.

We consider these four documents to provide a reasonable picture of the policy regarding police education reform. Table 1 contains an overview of the documents. In sum, the material comprised 181 pages.

Analysis

The third research step involved analysing the documents to identify discursive themes. Discursive themes are composed of recognisable recurring ideas, words, phrases, and categories, as well as practices. In addition, they involve issues that one would expect to discover but that are only occasionally or never stated (Jóhannesson, 2010, 2013). Understanding what is not being discussed is crucial (Foucault, 1979; Sharp & Richardson, 2001). Silence refers to the absence of issues that would reasonably be expected to be addressed, given previous knowledge, but are neglected or intentionally omitted, and thus, such an omission can reveal what cannot be legitimately discussed. Therefore, this is crucial in understanding the gaps in and limitations of policy discourse, and silence about a certain issue can be viewed as a discursive theme (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2015).

This analysis involved three actions. First, we familiarised ourselves with the documents by thoroughly reading and rereading them. Second, we identified specific words, phrases, and statements related to discussions of the reasons for the police education reform. This action involved both a bottom-up process, whereby recurring key statements were coded, and a top-down process, whereby possible discursive themes from the literature were searched for. We focused on sentences in which the objectives of and rationale for the education reform were discussed, such as professionalism, evidence-based practices, more complex crime, and specialisation. The third action involved categorising discursive themes by grouping similar phrases together, comparing them with the text, and then coding and recoding the text according to the themes.

The fourth research step involved an examination of how the discursive themes formed patterns of legitimating principles in the discourse. More specifically, we considered what was appropriate or safe to express at certain times and in specific contexts (Bourdieu, 1988; Jóhannesson, 2010, 2013), and we outlined the tensions and contradictions between and within the principles.

Table 2. Overview of discursive themes in the documents.

Dataset	University diploma to meet the needs of a changing society	Production and implementation of theory-based knowledge	Curriculum control	University education to increase diversity in the workplace	Silence about the appeal of the police as a workplace
Mol 2014 report	X	X	X	X	X
Mol 2015 report	X	X	X	X	X
Bill	X	X	X	X	X
Committee on Judicial Affairs			X	X	X

The fifth step of this research approach was an analysis of the historical conjuncture of discourses in the policy documents, that is, the interplay between historical and political conditions and the arguments behind ideas and practices. In the Discussion section, we will specifically consider why some ideas have gained more discursive legitimacy than others. The sixth and final step in our historical discourse analysis was writing a report. To this end, we wrote our initial analysis of the discursive themes, including tables with word counts, and generated themes based on recurring patterns in the text.

Findings

We identified four themes and one important silence in the discourse of the studied documents (see Table 2). These themes are university diplomas meeting the needs of a changing society, the production and implementation of theory-based knowledge, curriculum control, and the use of university education to increase diversity in the workplace. The little that was discovered about the appeal of the police as a workplace was defined as a particular silence.

University diplomas to meet the needs of a changing society

The need for police reform to meet changing societal needs was a consistent theme in the reports of the working groups and the bill. These societal changes include a greater need for education to deal with more complex crimes, demands for international cooperation in police work, and police officers working with colleagues with university degrees (Ministry of the Interior, 2015).

One issue involved in this theme was the perceived need for specialisation within the police service to investigate new and more complex crimes, for example, cybercrime and financial crime; the need to attend to the diverse needs of victims, and an emphasis on crime prevention. It was argued that crime is becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted due to internationalisation of crime and online offending (Icelandic Parliament, 2016, Chapter II). Furthermore, new working procedures in sexual and domestic abuse cases were considered to require broader knowledge and new skills (Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 33). Therefore, a broader education based on science and innovation was needed to expand traditional police knowledge and thus meet changing societal needs.

Another issue within this theme was the contention that police tasks are becoming not only more complex but also more demanding in terms of cooperation with international partners in the field of policing. For example, the 2015 report stated that “the participation of the Icelandic police in international police cooperation is increasingly important, and knowledge and training must be aligned with the requirements of other countries” (Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 5; all translations by the authors). We interpreted this statement as referring to cross-border crimes, which increase the need for collaboration with colleagues from police agencies across the globe. The knowledge and skills of the Icelandic police were seen to be lacking as compared to those of other police officers in the Nordic region, leading to tensions between Nordic education requirements and the existing police education system. Scientific literacy was used as an argument to support the implementation of the changes needed to tackle complex crime using evidence-based methods.

In both reports and draft legislation, the university system was seen as a legitimate authority for police education, with references to the educational reforms implemented in Norway, Denmark, and Finland (Icelandic Parliament, 2016, Section II of the commentary). The shift towards university-level education for police officers was perceived as a means of legitimising the professional status of the police and ensuring that officers have a certain level of knowledge and training. This prominent discursive theme was reflected in the documents on the structure of the university diploma, curriculum proposal, and competence framework (Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 25).

Production and implementation of theory-based knowledge

The 2014 and 2015 working group reports highlight the significance of police involvement in the creation and implementation of theory-based knowledge. The 2014 report proposed transforming the National Police Academy into a research centre within the police service. Similarly, the 2015 report suggested closing the National Police Academy and, instead, establishing a new section within the National Police Commissioner’s Office, thus leading to the creation of the Police Training and Professional Development Center, with a focus on, among other things, producing research. These recommendations underscored the perceived importance of police engagement in research activities and the implementation of theory-based knowledge. However, the emphasis on police involvement in research shifted in the 2016 bill, which no longer mentioned research and development as part of the centre’s responsibilities. Instead, the bill outlined that scientific research in police matters would be the primary task of an independent university. The bill stated that the minister responsible for university affairs would establish an agreement with a university regarding teaching and research activities in police studies. This agreement would be formulated in accordance with university legislation and “in consultation with the Police Training and Professional Development Center” (Icelandic parliament, 2016, Section x).

It is worth noting that the working group reports did not consider universities to be leaders in police research. Although university engagement in research may be implicit, the working-group reports emphasised the importance of police involvement in research (Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 23). This emphasis likely reflects

a paradigm shift towards evidence-based policing education and practices. Therefore, active police engagement in research was considered crucial in facilitating this shift.

To equip students with the necessary research skills, a new knowledge paradigm was needed. Evidence of this can be found in the draft competence framework for the new university diploma, which included courses in research methods and statistics (Ministry of the Interior, 2015). This view can be seen in the 2015 report, in which the limitations of the one-year training programme at the National Police Academy were discussed:

The current study program does not promote the development of the profession with a scientific approach and does not teach students to acquire new information and develop in their work. Changes in society and the new demands placed on the police in the plans of the authorities are, therefore, unlikely to be adapted [by the current study program] to the work of the police using evidence-based methods.

(Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 22)

The 2014 and 2015 reports highlight the prevalent discourse of professionalisation, which was driven by the recognition that police officers require increased opportunities for further education, both domestically and internationally. In addition to the need for evidence-based practices, it was also argued that “theoretical and practical training needs to be increased so that first response in the field is in accordance with evidence-based methods” (Icelandic parliament, 2016, Section II in the commentary).

This theme indicates tension between who should be responsible for research and innovation, the police or the university. Despite the clear intentions of the working-group reports for police involvement in research, these intentions did not materialise in the final bill.

Curriculum control

The working group reports emphasised the importance of police ownership of the basic police training curriculum. Policing was viewed as a specialised field, thus casting doubt on whether universities could adequately equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills for the police profession. Although universities could contribute certain soft skills, the prevailing vision was that practical training, in which practice-based knowledge is acquired, should allow the police to shape students into police officers. The absence of discussions of academic freedom and university involvement in curriculum development in the reports indicates the view that the police should control the curriculum and the universities should teach what is outsourced to them. The language used, such as the term “contract”, suggests that curriculum ownership resides firmly with the police, while universities are primarily responsible for implementing the curriculum determined by the police (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, p. 11; 2015, p. 23).

However, a shift in the discourse regarding police ownership of the curriculum emerged in the bill and the Judicial Committee’s recommendation. The commentary accompanying the 2016 bill explicitly stated that the university, as an independent and autonomous entity, would assume responsibility for the structure and development of the Police Education Program. It was further emphasised that any cooperation between the Police Education and Training Center and the university should take this autonomy into account (Icelandic parliament, 2016, III. Main discussion). This shift in discourse signified a power struggle over curriculum ownership.

The documents indicated a belief that certain knowledge specific to policing can only be obtained within the police service: “By nature, there are certain aspects of police work in which it is important that trainees receive training within the police, such as instruction in the use of force, firearms training, and specific investigative methods” (Icelandic parliament, 2016, 37th article). Another example from the same section reads as follows: “It is expected that the police training and professional development centre will liaison with the university community concerning knowledge of police officers’ duties and engage in further cooperation and coordination in terms of police education issues” (Icelandic parliament, 2016, 37th article).

These passages exemplify the shifting discourse on and power struggle over curriculum ownership in police education. Furthermore, they underscore the tension between police-specific knowledge and academic knowledge, as well as how this tension surfaces in the control and development of police education programmes.

University education to increase diversity in the workplace

We considered it relevant to examine what the documents said about the backgrounds of the prospective students in the university programme. The 2014 report emphasised that increased student diversity was important and that by situating the police programme in a general university, this could be achieved:

This scenario is apt to increase the diversity of the group that applies to the police, as students are part of a large and diverse group of students rather than a small group that has passed the tests of a selection committee specifically tailored for the police .

(Ministry of the Interior, 2014, p. 10)

Gender equality and diversity, for example, regarding individuals with immigrant backgrounds and those from underprivileged socioeconomic settings, were otherwise absent from the report. This is noteworthy because the appendix to the same report shows that members of the Parliament Standing Committee on Judicial Affairs felt that there was an opportunity in the education reform to better balance the gender ratio, with the police organisation traditionally being very male dominated (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, p. 25).

The 2015 report addressed the need to market the new university study by considering the production of promotional material that would appeal to “both genders” and reflect the diversity of the community (Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 27). In the 2016 bill, an equal gender ratio was not addressed as a specific aim of the reform; rather, the document stated that some stakeholders had mentioned, in the preparation of the bill, “that the program should contribute to equality and the equal status of the sexes within the police” (Icelandic Parliament, 2016, Section II). Despite some stakeholders emphasising gender equality, mainly the Icelandic Human Rights Center (Ministry of the Interior, 2015, p. 109), neither the working groups nor the bill highlighted this element or the ways in which it could be addressed.

Although diversity and gender equality were recognised in some instances in the documents, the specific measures and actions taken to achieve diversity and equality were not clearly articulated. Thus, this discursive theme also represents a silence in the documents. It may be implied that gender equality would be attained by establishing

a university diploma, as most university students in Iceland are women. However, this silence could have implications if the measure of competence used for the university diploma excludes individuals from marginalised backgrounds or those with practical expertise but limited formal education.

The importance of attracting students from rural areas was mentioned in the 2014 report, which recommended that “emphasis should be placed on distance learning in order to attract students from all over the country, and it should be promoted to meet the need for staffing in rural areas” (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, p. 11). Neither the 2015 report nor the 2016 bill reflected this view. This could have implications for the aims of the reform regarding diversity, as it may contribute to the perpetuation of regional disparities and hinder the creation of a more inclusive and diverse workforce within the police institution.

Silence about the appeal of the police as a workplace

There is a lack of discussion of the police as an attractive workplace for the future if policing were to become a profession that requires a university degree. In using the term “attractiveness”, we refer to pay, image, and career opportunities. Given the growing competition for staff and young people’s expectations for professional development, it would be prudent to enhance the appeal of a career in policing for qualified individuals by addressing these factors directly.

Creating a new university diploma would lead to more opportunities for further education and allow students to pursue other employment opportunities (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, p. 5). The silence on career opportunities is noteworthy in that they could potentially see police officers grow into leading positions that have been exclusively for lawyers working outside the police force. Moreover, no reference was made to the possibility that police work would be a more reputable profession, with higher pay, if it were a university profession, as opposed to one based on vocational training.

Discussion

We now turn to the fourth and fifth steps of the research process to identify the legitimating principles, tensions, and contradictions in the discourse, as well as discursive continuities and discontinuities.

Legitimating principles in the discourse

We identified two sets of ideas that we consider legitimating principles, although each principle is not a coherent or logical entity (Jóhannesson, 2010). The first legitimating principle that we considered is *the validation of police competence through a university diploma* as a response to evolving societal demands for quality service and increasingly complex crime. The focus was on transferring police training to an established university to ensure that officers gain a certain kind of expertise. A university diploma was seen as a means of legitimising and validating the knowledge and skills of police officers and providing students with general competences that form a base for specialisation and life-long learning. The

university diploma serves to implement theory-based knowledge to develop policing to handle the complex and challenging issues of the future. This reform was seen as a means of improving the quality of policing and maintaining police legitimacy. Additionally, the reform was seen as increasing research competence, which would support the development of evidence-based practices within the police.

This discourse is consistent with the findings of several other European studies showing that police education has been reformed and transferred to the university level in response to a changing society (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). Similar arguments were observed in Denmark, where police education was reformed to require a university degree; this was done because of the need for officers to perform increasingly complex tasks and to create opportunities for specialisation (Diderichsen, 2017).

The second legitimating principle we considered involves *policing as a unique public-sector profession with its own practice-based knowledge*. Based on this principle, it is necessary for the police to control the curriculum. The tension between the university and the police was evident in the 2014 and 2015 reports (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, 2015). This reform is a significant step into new territory, and it is understandable that there is scepticism about whether a university can provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to fully prepare them for police work, as the diploma holder can be appointed to a position with police powers. Therefore, it was considered normal that the police should be in control of the police education curriculum and its development. However, this reasoning was modified in the 2016 bill, which explicitly states that the university is an independent institution and has the privilege of academic freedom. The university must hold full control of the curriculum, as well as research and development, in accordance with the Higher Education Institution Act No (2006). This autonomy was further stipulated in the official recommendation to Parliament Committee on Judicial Affairs and Education (2016). This change in direction likely came from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, as the working groups were formed by the Ministry of the Interior, creating tensions between the two ministries, as police education was to be moved from one ministry to the other. From the 2014 and 2015 reports, it is evident that the intention of the working groups was to contract police education out to universities, but that was impossible due to the Higher Education Institution Act No (2006), thus causing a shift in the 2016 bill, leaving universities in control of the diploma programmes and able to establish a completely new curriculum for prospective police officers.

This tension about curriculum control is consistent with the findings of Terpstra and Schaap (2022), who found that there are continuous debates regarding the structure and content of police education in Norway; Finland; and North Rhine-Westphalia, in Germany. This is still the case, regardless of police authorities having more control of the curriculum in these countries. The working group reports (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, 2015) state that police-specific knowledge can only be developed and produced by the police and that the police should have control over what is taught in their training programmes. This is, perhaps, unsurprising because of the historical origins of the police, for whom practice-based knowledge is valued over theory-based knowledge for cultural reasons (Williams & Cockcroft, 2019).

Contradictions and tensions in the historical conjuncture of discourses

When analysing the data, we encountered not only the two legitimating principles but also various tensions and contradictions. One contradiction involves the belief, which is evident in the second legitimating principle, that police-specific knowledge can only be developed and produced within the police. This represents the tension between knowledge paradigms given the diminishing influence of practice-based knowledge the face of an ascending theory-based paradigm. The transfer of power over knowledge from police officers to academics can be seen as controlling rather than empowering police officers (Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). However, as crime is becoming increasingly complex, global police services have witnessed limitations in traditional practice-based knowledge and the need for more specialised expertise.

The second contradiction concerned who should control the curriculum of the police university diploma. The two documents prepared by the working groups of the Ministry of the Interior in 2014 and 2015 were both clear that the police, rather than the university, must have control over the curriculum, whereas the bill and the parliament's standing committee emphasised the autonomy of the university. This is a tension between the idea that the police should have control over what is taught in their training programmes and the idea that universities should have control over the curriculum to ensure academic standards. This contradiction reflects the struggle over the authority to define what constitutes legitimate knowledge in police education.

In general, changes occur slowly in organisations such as the police. In Iceland, there has been a longstanding tradition of police training being handled by the police service since 1936, with a focus on practice-based, rather than theory-based, knowledge. We see this as a discontinuity caused by contemporary societal changes and the emergence of complex global crime. These instances of historical conjuncture lead to shifts in knowledge-creation and -dissemination practices. This discontinuity challenges traditional modes of knowledge transmission within the police service, leading to the introduction of new knowledge forms via research and university education. This has led to contestations over the legitimacy and control of knowledge, as well as existing social structures, such as the police academy, and practices, such as research and innovation in policing. This represents a discontinuity in both social structures and practices, leading to a new approach to knowledge development via research and university education. This sudden shift has produced considerable uncertainty. In response, the Center for Police Training and Professional Development was established to ensure continuity in the dissemination of practice-based knowledge via practical training and internships.

The tension between the need for police-specific knowledge and academic knowledge underscores the existing disparities in knowledge hierarchies. The emphasis on practice-based knowledge has historically privileged certain forms of knowledge over others. This disparity signifies a struggle for the dominance of specific knowledge forms, reflecting the ongoing contestation over the legitimization of various knowledge paradigms within the discourse of police education reform. Historical discourse analysis, as an approach, illuminates the underlying complexities and tensions that shape the reform process and highlights the broader contestations over knowledge authority and institutional power within police education reform.

Conclusion

This article examined the discourse in policy documents in preparation for police education reform in Iceland. The discourse seems to be characterised by the belief that the university diploma can meet the needs of a changing society, one facing increasingly complex crime, by helping to adopt a systematic and scientific approach to the production of police-specific knowledge. Tension can be seen regarding who should control the curriculum and research. In the context of police education having been under the control of the police since its establishment, it is to be expected that the Ministry of the Interior did not want to lose control completely, whereas the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture sought to ensure university autonomy. The struggle for control over the curriculum reflects, in our view, a deeper tension between practice-based and theory-based knowledge. Although a theory-based approach to police education has been gaining dominance, practice-based knowledge must also be valued in the discourse (Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). Helping police officers integrate systematic theoretical approaches and thus find innovative ways to deal with their everyday work could empower them to create new knowledge.

The limitations of this study are that there were only four policy documents that were available for easy access. Some other arguments may be found in informal documents, but when we searched for materials from stakeholders, such as the Police Officer's Union, little was found. Additionally, this article does not address the implementation of the new university diploma programme or the university and police partnership that followed. There is a need for further research to examine the outcomes of the reform and its impact on the police profession, as well as to gain insights into the practical implications of the reform and the challenges associated with implementing theory-based knowledge in police practice.

Despite the long-standing debate about the curriculum of police education in many countries, the case of Iceland is noteworthy because it is the first time that basic police education has been moved from the police themselves to a general university that has full autonomy over the programme. By establishing the Police Training and Professional Development Center, potential conflicts were created because there are now two entities delivering different parts of police education. The University of Akureyri delivers theory-based knowledge, and the Center delivers practice-based knowledge. This divided education delivery is unlikely to bridge the gap between theory and practice, which is important (Leijon & Stigmar, 2022), but further research should examine how this particular educational process fares, and if the steps taken to bridge it will function.

This article has highlighted the tensions that can occur when traditional vocational training is transformed into a formal university programme in an autonomous university. Although the theory-practice nexus is well documented in pedagogical research, this study finds evidence of this conundrum in policy documents published in preparation for education reform. The transfer of police training to the university level may lead to tensions and power struggles for other occupations with a strong tradition of control over their own basic training and knowledge bases (e.g. prison guards, fire-fighters, and customs officers). This study has practical implications for policymakers attempting to establish organisational structures that support the integration of theory and practice.

Disclosure statement

The first author was a member of the 2015 working group but did not participate in the 2014 working group or the legislative process. Since 1 June 2016, the first author has been involved in leading the Center for Police Training and Professional Development and working with the University of Akureyri to develop a diploma programme for prospective police officers. Due to this work, the first author has insight into the processes that preceded the police education reform, as well as subsequent developments after the bill was passed by the parliament.

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Article II

Article II

Flexible Education Reform and Iceland's Police Staffing Crisis

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Word count: 3958

Abstract

In 2018, Iceland had Europe's second fewest police officers per capita and experienced the continent's biggest reduction in officers since 2009—after suffering the biggest financial crisis in modern economic history. Fewer officers, a growing, more diverse population, and a tourist boom fueled a police staffing crisis peaking in the mid-2010s. In this case study, we document, using secondary data and interrupted time-series analysis, how moving basic police education to the university level in 2016 and shifting from face-to-face learning to flexible learning—a form of blended learning—helped Iceland accommodate more students, reverse the downward trend of police staffing, improve female representation, and raise the education level. Moreover, public trust in the police remained high. The case of Iceland demonstrates that blended learning can facilitate police–university partnerships, accommodate more students by expanding access, capacity, and capability, help address staffing challenges, and optimize resources.

Keywords: blended learning, education reform, Iceland, police staffing, police–university partnerships

Article III

Article III

Reforming police education in Iceland: A comparative analysis of students' competence valuations before and after the transition to university education

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Reforming police education in Iceland: A comparative analysis of students' competence valuations before and after the transition to university education

Abstract

Over the past few decades, police services worldwide have encountered significant challenges, notably due to technological advances, globalisation, and the rise of online crime. Iceland has responded to these changes by aiming to expand police students' competences, notably through the implementation of an educational reform that involved closing the National Police Academy and establishing a blended learning university diploma programme for aspiring police officers. In this study, we investigated students' reception of this development in knowledge and competences before and after the reform. We aimed to contribute to the professional education policy literature by using longitudinal data to compare students' valuations of enduring and emerging competences before and after the transition from the police academy to the university level. The study participants were police students attending the Icelandic National Police Academy in 2011–2016 and the University of Akureyri in 2017–2023. The findings showed that university-level police students placed a higher value on both enduring and emerging competences than did those at the National Police Academy. This suggests that students at the university level regarded these competences as a more integral component of police education than academy students, despite most of them having worked as police officers during their education and already being integrated into an experience-based police culture. This study contributes to the literature on police education reform by providing empirical insights into how educational influence students' valuations of key competences, with implications for professional education policy and practice.

Keywords: police education reform; competence; police students; gender

Article IV

Article IV

Legitimising Police Knowledge: Professional Knowledge, Culture and Practice in Icelandic Policing

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Manuscript accepted for publication in Criminology & Criminal Justice
subject to minor revisions.

Word count: 7,905

Legitimising Police Knowledge: Professional Knowledge, Culture and Practice in Icelandic Policing

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how professional knowledge is constructed and legitimised within contemporary policing. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 12 police officers in Iceland following a shift to university-based education, the analysis uses Shulman, Eraut and Chan to explore how academic, experiential and relational knowledge are negotiated in practice. The findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of knowledge in policing is not determined solely by its evidentiary basis, but is produced through cultural, organisational and relational processes. While academic knowledge is gaining recognition, its authority remains contingent on existing hierarchies and experiential norms. Informal learning, peer interaction and relational competence emerge as key mechanisms through which knowledge is translated and enacted. The study advances criminological debates on police professionalisation by conceptualising knowledge legitimacy as a culturally mediated and organisationally embedded process.

Keywords: Police education reform, Legitimate knowledge, Icelandic police culture, Professional knowledge, Vocational–academic transition

Introduction

In recent decades, the landscape of police education has undergone significant transformations driven by broader efforts to professionalise policing and align it more closely with academic and knowledge-based standards. Traditionally rooted in vocational training models, police education in many Western countries has transitioned to university-based programmes intended to foster analytical thinking, reflective practice and a deeper engagement with societal complexities (Cordner, 2019; Paterson, 2011; Rogers & Frevel, 2018). This shift echoes wider reforms in professions such as nursing, teaching and social work, where the integration of academic knowledge has become increasingly central to claims of legitimacy and expertise (Fielding et al., 2020). In the context of policing, however, this transition remains contested.

The academisation of police training has raised fundamental questions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge in policing and how different forms of knowledge—academic, experiential and relational—are validated, transmitted and enacted in professional practice. While evidence-based policing has gained traction as a model that promotes the use of research to inform decision-making (Lum & Koper, 2017; Sherman, 1998), research consistently highlights the cultural and structural challenges that academic knowledge faces within police organisations. Officers often report that academic knowledge is undervalued or difficult to apply, while field experience and peer learning retain strong cultural capital (Gundhus, 2013; Williams & Cockcroft, 2019; Willis & Mastrofski, 2018). This

epistemological tension is not simply a pedagogical issue but speaks to deeper issues of identity, legitimacy and authority in police culture.

Despite growing scholarly attention to the effects of educational reform on policing (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022), relatively little is known about how newly trained officers themselves navigate these tensions as they transition from university programmes to operational roles (Cockcroft et al., 2025; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017; Williams et al., 2019). To date, research has focused on signature pedagogies, training curricula or macro-level policy shifts (Bragason et al., 2025; Cordner, 2019, 2020; Oddsson et al., 2024; Shipton, 2023). What remains underexplored is how officers understand and legitimise knowledge in everyday practice, particularly in relation to organisational culture, informal learning and peer socialisation. This perspective is essential to determining not only whether education reforms reshape individual professional identity and competence and whether they spark broader organisational learning and development within the police service.

The Icelandic context provides a timely and instructive case for addressing such issues. In 2016, police education in Iceland was moved from a one-year vocational training programme at the National Police College to a two-year (120 ECTS) academic diploma programme at the University of Akureyri (UNAK), marking a significant shift in the epistemological foundations of police education. The reform aimed to modernise the profession by embedding critical thinking, evidence-based practice and academic rigour into police education (Bragason et al., 2023; Oddsson et al., 2024). While similar reforms have taken place in Norway, Sweden and

Finland—often guided by shared Nordic values of egalitarianism and professional transparency—Iceland’s small, unitary structure and relatively high levels of public trust in the police offer a unique environment to examine how such reforms are received and enacted at the ground level (Diderichsen, 2017; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022).

Nearly a decade after the 2016 reform, its impact on knowledge legitimacy within Icelandic police culture remains unclear. Evidence suggests that university-enrolled police students value both enduring operational skills and emerging competences—reflective, interpersonal and organisational—more highly than their vocationally trained predecessors, even when working alongside their studies (Bragason & Damen, 2025). These findings indicate that university education can shift professional values within a strongly experiential culture. However, Bragason and Damen’s (2025) study captured students’ perceptions during their education and left open whether—and to what extent—these values translate into practice after graduation. This study addresses that gap by examining how newly graduated officers navigate tensions between academic knowledge, experiential learning and relational competences once embedded in everyday police work, analysing their lived experiences and meaning-making as they integrate diverse forms of knowledge into professional competence and negotiate legitimacy within organisational culture.

This study contributes to criminological debates on professionalisation, police culture, and the legitimacy of knowledge in policing. While previous research has

examined police education reform and evidence-based policing, less attention has been paid to how different forms of knowledge are negotiated and legitimised in everyday police practice. By examining how officers integrate academic, experiential, and relational knowledge, this study provides insight into the cultural and organisational processes through which professional competence is constructed and sustained.

To address these questions, the study draws on an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Shulman's (1986) theory of professional knowledge, Eraut's (2004) typology of workplace learning and Chan's (2003) analysis of police culture and epistemic authority. Together, these perspectives provide a lens for exploring how police officers in Iceland construct and legitimise professional competence in the context of post-reform policing. The study focuses on how academic, experiential and relational knowledge are navigated, integrated and valued in everyday practice and asks: *What counts as legitimate knowledge, skills and competence to newly graduated police officers, and how is it created?* To answer this, qualitative semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of graduates were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis guided by these three theoretical frameworks.

Conceptual Framework

The study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks to build an integrated analytic lens that gives a broader view of the knowledge cycle in policing.

Shulman's theory of professional knowledge provides the foundation for analysing the multidimensional nature of competence in policing (Shulman, 1986, 1987).

Originally developed in the context of teacher education, Shulman's framework identifies several domains of knowledge that professionals must integrate: content knowledge (disciplinary expertise), pedagogical content knowledge (how to translate that content for specific contexts), curricular knowledge (understanding how content fits into broader structures and purposes), and contextual and ethical knowledge (awareness of the social, moral and institutional environments in which practice occurs). This framework is highly relevant to policing, a profession that requires not only legal and procedural expertise but also the ability to navigate complex interpersonal situations, adapt to evolving social challenges and exercise moral judgement.

Shulman's emphasis on pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)—teachers' repertoire of representations, analogies and strategies for making subject matter learnable—is particularly useful for this study, highlighting the importance of translating abstract or academic knowledge into actionable understanding (Shulman, 1986). In the policing context, officers' ability to interpret research, reflect on it and apply it meaningfully in dynamic environments can be seen as a form of PCK. Using Shulman's framework, this study can illuminate how newly graduated officers mobilise different forms of knowledge and how these efforts are shaped by both formal education and informal experience.

Michael Eraut's typology of workplace learning complements this framework by shifting the focus from what professionals need to know to how and where they

actually learn (Eraut, 1994, 2000). Eraut distinguishes between three main types of informal learning in the workplace: implicit learning (unconscious absorption of norms and behaviours), reactive learning (on-the-spot learning during tasks) and deliberative learning (intentional reflection embedded within work routines). These categories are especially relevant to policing, where knowledge is often acquired informally—through observation, mentorship, trial and error and conversation (Charman, 2017). These distinctions allow for a more nuanced understanding of how officers construct competence not only through formal instruction but also through the situated, relational and often invisible processes that unfold in the flow of everyday police work.

Importantly, Eraut's (2004) framework also draws attention to the sociocultural conditions that enable or constrain learning. Factors such as team dynamics, organisational culture, time pressure and psychological safety all influence whether and how officers engage in reflexive or collaborative learning. Specifically within the police context, Andreasen et al. (2025) showed how these organisational and interpersonal dynamics shape the opportunities officers have to share knowledge, reflect on practice and challenge established norms. In this sense, Eraut's work bridges individual cognition and organisational context, allowing the study to explore not only what officers learn but also under what conditions and with what consequences.

Janet Chan's analysis of police culture adds a critical cultural dimension to the study by highlighting the contested and relational nature of knowledge within policing (Chan, 1996, 1999; Chan et al., 2003). Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of

field, capital and habitus, Chan argues that police culture is not monolithic but composed of multiple, sometimes competing, discourses and practices (Chan, 2004). Knowledge legitimacy is not only about accuracy or usefulness but also power—who gets to define what counts as knowledge, who is authorised to share it and whose experience is considered credible. This perspective is important for understanding the tensions described by participants in this study, particularly issues such as generational divides, hierarchical gatekeeping and informal resistance to academic learning.

Chan's framework helps explain why university-based knowledge may struggle for legitimacy in operational settings, even when it is either evidence-based or institutionally endorsed. It also reveals how cultural capital is unevenly distributed within police organisations, with experienced officers often commanding more authority than academically educated recruits (Cockcroft & Hallenberg, 2022; Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2014; 2017). By incorporating Chan's insights, the study can move beyond a simple dichotomy between theory and practice and instead analyse the cultural politics of knowledge legitimisation within Icelandic policing.

Data and Methods

Design and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative, reflexive approach, using semi-structured interviews to examine police officers' experiences of knowledge legitimacy, learning and competence development in the post-reform policing landscape. The sample comprised 12 graduates of the University of Akureyri's (UNAK) police education programme, each with at least 2 years of professional experience following graduation. The interviews were conducted by the first author between January and March 2025 and lasted between 1 and nearly 2 hours.

Potential participants were initially randomly selected from a list of graduated police students (approximately 180) from UNAK from 2018 to 2022 by the Office of the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police, which produced a list of 30 eligible graduates. From this group, the principal researcher selected individuals and contacted them via email with an invitation to participate and an information sheet about the study. The selection aimed to ensure representation across graduation years, gender, geographical location (urban and rural postings) and a range of professional experiences. After this initial contact, the researcher contacted each participant individually to arrange an interview, either in person or online. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews. The study received ethical approval from the University of Iceland Ethics Committee in accordance with national guidelines for social science research.

While sample size in qualitative research is guided by depth of enquiry rather than statistical generalisability, this study included 12 semi-structured interviews—

sufficient to explore diverse perspectives and develop rich, coherent themes. The number of interviews was not predetermined; instead, it was determined reflexively during data collection based on the researchers' assessment of analytic sufficiency. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019) view that reflexive thematic analysis relies on 'information power rather than numerical saturation', we judged 12 interviews to be adequate because the data set contained rich, heterogeneous accounts—spanning gender (7 women, 5 men), posting context (urban, rural, mixed) and 2–7 years of service—that together generated sufficiently detailed and varied insights to develop coherent, nuanced themes. This diversity and depth provided enough analytic leverage to develop nuanced, coherent themes that addressed the study's research questions. Further interviews were unlikely to add substantively new insights.

The interview protocol focused on three key areas: (1) how officers construct and legitimise different forms of knowledge in practice, (2) how they experience the interplay of formal and informal learning and (3) how organisational culture and peer interactions shape their ongoing competence development.

Conceptual Framework and Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Byrne, 2022), an approach that treats meaning as actively constructed and acknowledges the interpretive role of the researcher. In this approach, themes were developed through an iterative process of engagement with the data, informed by the researcher's theoretical and conceptual lenses. See Table 1.

Table 1

Description of the reflexive thematic analysis process

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarisation	The first author familiarised himself with the interview data through repeated reading of the transcripts and initial note-taking. Particular attention was given to participants' meaning-making around knowledge, competence and identity.
2. Generating Codes	Systematic coding of the data was conducted using Nvivo15. Coding was approached inductively, with sensitivity to the theoretical lenses of Shulman, Eraut and Chan. Codes captured patterns related to knowledge construction, integration and legitimisation.
3. Combining Codes into Themes	Related codes were grouped into initial candidate themes, reflecting broader patterns across the dataset. A reflexive approach was maintained, with attention to both semantic and latent meanings.
4. Reviewing Themes	Candidate themes were reviewed, refined and restructured in an iterative process, ensuring coherence and distinction between the themes. A thematic map was developed to visualise the relationships between the themes and subthemes.
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Final themes were defined and named to clearly reflect their core analytic focus, in alignment with the study's research questions and conceptual framework.
6. Producing the Report	Selected data extracts were analysed and presented in the Findings section, illustrating how officers construct, integrate and legitimise knowledge in the context of Icelandic police education reform. Reflexivity and theoretical interpretation were foregrounded throughout.

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 police officers (5 men, 7 women), all graduates of the University of Akureyri's diploma programme (120 ECTS) for prospective police

officers between 2018 and 2022. All participants had at least 2 years of professional experience in the Icelandic police service and were working in various operational units across the country. See Table 2.

Table 2

Background information on participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Year of Graduation	Experience in Rural or Urban Policing
P1	Female	27	2021	Rural
P2	Female	27	2022	Rural
P3	Female	28	2020	Mixed
P4	Male	39	2021	Rural
P5	Female	33	2022	Mixed
P6	Male	29	2021	Mixed
P7	Female	27	2019	Rural
P8	Female	39	2022	Urban
P9	Male	28	2018	Mixed
P10	Female	35	2018	Rural
P11	Male	29	2020	Urban
P12	Male	28	2019	Mixed

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was an integral part of the analytical process. The first author engaged in ongoing reflection on how his position within the Icelandic police education

system and his familiarity with the broader context of the 2016 education reform might have shaped his interpretations. Recognising that analysis is always informed by the researcher's perspectives and conceptual lenses, the data were approached with an awareness of how the researcher's background might influence the construction of themes. However, the interpretations were thoroughly discussed with the coauthors. Neither of them have a police background but had extensive background in research in higher education, curriculum studies and teachers' knowledge. Further, using three complementary theoretical lenses helped to keep the focus on the interplay between knowledge legitimacy, organisational learning and professional identity, allowing for a nuanced and reflective interpretation of the data.

The main researcher's dual role as both an academic and professional insider inevitably shaped the research process. This position afforded distinct advantages, including deep contextual understanding, enhanced access to participants and the ability to build trust and rapport that encouraged candid and nuanced accounts. It also enabled a more informed interpretation of organisational dynamics and cultural references that might otherwise have been missed by an external observer. At the same time, this closeness to the field carries the risk of interpretive bias, as professional assumptions and insider perspectives could subtly influence the analysis. To address this, the researcher engaged in sustained reflexive practice, maintained transparency in analytical decisions and incorporated explicit positionality discussions with the other researchers.

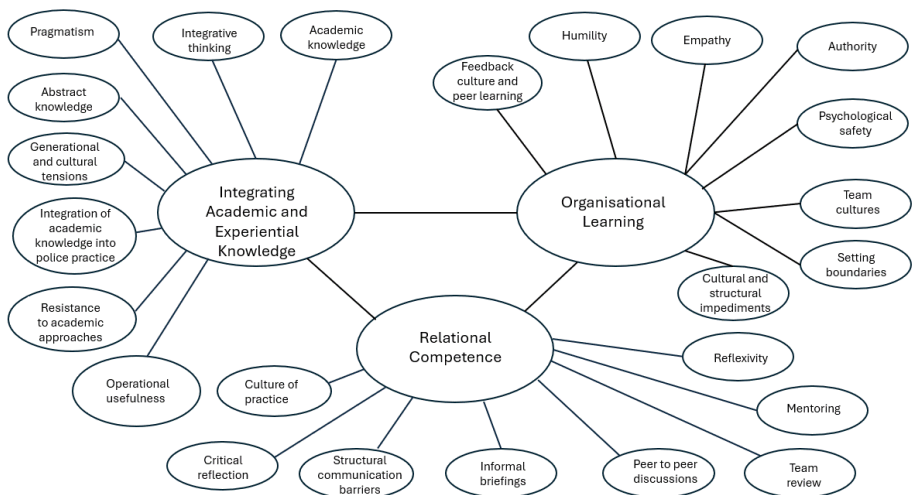
Findings

How Icelandic police officers perceive and integrate knowledge into their professional practice is organised into three sections, each reflecting a main theme emerging from the interviews. The themes inform how professional competence is constructed, how formal and informal learning processes interact and how different forms of knowledge gain legitimacy in everyday policing. In the presentation of findings, participants are referred to by number (e.g. P1, P2, see Table 2) and gender where relevant to provide readers with a sense of context.

Each theme is introduced with its main analytic thread and subthemes, which reflect the patterns of meaning identified in the data (see Figure 1). The narrative was written in the authors' own words and supported by selected quotes from the participants (translated into English by the authors). These quotes are used to evidence analytic claims and illustrate how the officers themselves talked about and interpreted their professional learning and competence.

Figure 1

Thematic map of the reflexive thematic analysis



Theme 1: Integrating Academic and Experiential Knowledge

A recurring thread across interviews was the evolving relationship between academic knowledge and experiential learning in Icelandic police practice. Participants widely acknowledged that while experience remains central to police competence, scientific insights and formal education are increasingly valued, particularly as policing contexts become more complex, diverse and socially demanding.

Several participants reflected on their own development in this area, describing a shift from initial scepticism towards more integrative thinking. One officer observed, ‘You take a course and this course is based on some specific science ... but I would say that the very core would be the experience’ (P6). Another expressed

it more critically: 'You cannot just learn from science. You cannot just learn from trial and error' (P8).

This pragmatism, valuing both theory and practice, shaped many accounts. Officers emphasised that police education should offer 'a certain foundation' (P1, P4) but warned that overly academic or abstract knowledge could feel disconnected from field realities if not translated into meaningful action.

The theme also revealed generational and cultural tensions surrounding the integration of academic knowledge into police practice. Several participants associated resistance to academic approaches with older officers or entrenched hierarchical structures. Others described how higher-ranking officers often gatekeep access to updated knowledge, reinforcing a top-down flow of information that rarely reaches the frontline:

When you are at the bottom of the pecking order, I feel a little. Well, new knowledge never really gets through to the general department. Because here, you know, station managers, chief inspectors, representatives ... they get invited to go, and here, you know, there are discussions, there's a panel, there's a conference. (P5)

This structural dynamic is compounded by cultural attitudes among some of the more experienced police officers, who are perceived to be dismissive or even threatened by academic input. One participant noted, 'It is a bit like they feel that

something is being taken away from them, that they are not as important' (P9).

These reflections underscore how the legitimacy of academic knowledge is not only a matter of evidence but also of power and perceived professional values.

Still, many participants emphasised positive change, suggesting a gradual but meaningful shift in how academic knowledge is perceived within the service: 'There was a certain negativity towards academic research ... I think it is on the decline and we are slowly and steadily moving towards science having a full role in police work' (P3). Others echoed this optimism, describing noticeable changes in attitudes over the past few years. This shift appears to be driven not only by internal developments but also by external pressures. Another participant pointed out that the police service is 'constantly evolving', and that contemporary social challenges—including mental health, community engagement and working with marginalised groups—require an 'improvement in the knowledge base of police officers' through continuing education and formal courses (P10). This was accompanied by an acknowledgement that 'the profession has changed tremendously' and is now 'very different from what it was', underscoring the need for adaptation and a more knowledge-informed practice (P10). These accounts illustrate there is growing recognition within the profession that science and education are essential to meeting the demands of modern policing.

The participants also drew attention to how operational usefulness shapes the legitimacy of academic knowledge. One participant described how 'seeing statistics in black and white' (P3) influenced his mindset on harm reduction, noting that he

had previously been sceptical of such approaches but reconsidered once confronted with concrete data that challenged his assumptions and aligned with his real-world observations. Others underscored the value of ‘descriptive statistics’ in exposing patterns of racial or procedural bias, such as differences in pretrial detention decisions (P11). One officer summarised, ‘If research supports some policing procedure ... it’s just a matter of course that it is used here. I do not see why it should be any different from any other profession’ (P12). This illustrates how, for some officers, the use of research is becoming normalised as part of standard operational reasoning. This pragmatic orientation reflects a broader shift in epistemic culture, where evidence is legitimised through its demonstrated utility and seamless integration into routine practice.

Still, the integration of science into practice is not seamless. Officers voiced concerns about tokenistic applications of research—one of them said ‘ticking theoretical boxes’—and the risk of losing practical nuance (P5). A more reflexive stance was apparent in accounts where officers described learning from difficult or ambiguous situations, highlighting how mistakes or uncertainty often led to deeper reflection. For example, one participant admitted, ‘We messed up this matter ... but we did not know any better’, emphasising the importance of reviewing incidents afterwards (P1). Another reflected that guiding colleagues through the procedures exposed gaps in their own understanding: ‘When I have to explain it, I start to learn more’

(P9). These accounts illustrate how trial, error and dialogue can foster critical thinking and adaptation in practice.

This theme highlights a gradual cultural shift in how academic and experiential knowledge is negotiated in Icelandic police work. The observed tensions and adaptations reflect not only practical concerns but broader struggles over what counts as legitimate knowledge, following Chan's (1996) interpretation of Bourdieu, suggests evolving patterns of symbolic capital within the police field.

The evolving interplay between academic and experiential knowledge described in Theme 1 sets the stage for deeper issues about how such knowledge is shared, circulated or resisted within the organisational context of policing. This led us to the second theme, which explored the organisational conditions that shape—and sometimes constrain—learning, reflexivity and professional development within the police service.

Theme 2: Organisational Learning

A central theme across the interviews was the interplay between individual critical reflection and the broader organisational capacity to share and use knowledge, which we call organisational learning. Participants highlighted both the potential and limitations of current knowledge-sharing practices within Icelandic police culture as well as the value of reflexivity in challenging assumptions and fostering growth.

Officers frequently described how formal knowledge, including research findings, statistics or new practices introduced via professional development, did not always

reach the frontline. One participant pointed to structural communication barriers: 'New knowledge never really gets through to the general patrol department ... sending a long email to all staff doesn't work' (P5), referring to frontline staff not reading long emails due to their time being dedicated to operational services during their shift. Thus, communicating new procedures via email was not seen as an effective way of implementing new procedures. The interviewee elaborated further that while some supervisors gained insight through conferences, 'in the end, the knowledge does not get all the way to where it needs to go' (P5). Another officer described the frustration of seeing senior management rely heavily on abstract statistical measures that 'do not reflect what is really happening' (P1), suggesting a disconnect between top-down data use and the lived experiences of frontline officers.

However, participants also described localised practices of knowledge circulation that played a critical role in everyday learning, particularly in the absence of systematic structures for professional development. These practices included informal briefings, peer-to-peer discussions, team reviews and mentoring relationships with younger or less experienced colleagues. One officer shared how leading a group on domestic violence procedures had taught them more than expected: 'The funny thing is ... being asked to share the experience, I started to learn more' (P9). Another officer explained this dynamic even more directly: 'The best learning is having to present knowledge' (P3), highlighting how the act of teaching deepens one's own understanding. These examples reflect a growing awareness that teaching, peer support and collaborative learning not only enhanced

individual competence but also contributed to a shared, living body of knowledge.

In this way, learning is understood not as a top-down transmission but as a reciprocal and socially embedded process integral to the culture of practice.

Closely linked to this was a strong current of critical thinking and reflexivity.

Participants often framed intellectual humility and openness to change as essential to effective policing. One officer reflected, 'If you start presenting yourself in public like you know everything ... that is where mistakes happen. When you think you have everything figured out and have really nothing to add to anything' (P9).

Such a mindset of continuous learning and that overconfidence can undermine good judgement was echoed across several accounts. Another officer articulated that 'the most important of all this is perhaps the knowledge of how to seek knowledge' (P6), emphasising that knowing how to learn is more foundational than having all the answers. Others connected reflexivity with vulnerability and humility in practice, such as the need 'to get through the shift, you simply have to be able to ask ... you will not know everything' and to 'have the courage to ask stupid questions' (P3).

These attitudes reflect a recognition that policing is not only complex and unpredictable but also morally and intellectually demanding. As one participant put it, 'if you have decided beforehand ... how you are going to solve it, then everything will go wrong' (P6), highlighting the value of flexible thinking and situational adaptability.

This reflective stance was also supported by routine debriefings and questioning of assumptions in day-to-day work. 'I always took a debriefing after every task ... and

we discussed it' (P4), one officer explained, pointing to the role of collaborative reflection in competence development. This account reveals how reflection is not simply an academic exercise but a practical and ongoing habit. Officers also recognised the moral complexity of their role, signalling epistemic humility and a deeper capacity for nuanced decision-making.

This reflexivity extended beyond academic knowledge to everyday critical decision-making. As one participant put it, 'You cannot just learn from science ... You have to be able to adapt to any environment' (P8), underscoring the importance of combining evidence with contextual judgement and common sense. In this sense, reflexivity was not simply intellectual—it was a practical orientation to the unpredictable realities of the job.

Ultimately, this theme highlights a critical dimension of professionalism in policing: it is not achieved through academic curriculum or policy alone but through the cultivation of a learning culture grounded in reflexivity, openness and shared responsibility. The findings suggest that professional knowledge was not confined to formal instruction; it emerged in the relational spaces of practice in conversations, mistakes, questions and collaborative sense-making and reflection. Officers described drawing on formal, experiential, statistical and conversational knowledge, all of which must be critically engaged with and adapted to the realities of frontline work. As one officer described it, 'We owe it to ourselves and people to try something ... then you can admit it did not work, but we did not know unless we

tried' (P9). This illustrates a pragmatic and reflexive approach to problem-solving to improve public service.

Importantly, organisational dynamics surfaced in this theme, including the uneven circulation of knowledge and varied opportunities for feedback and reflection.

Participants consistently linked professionalism not only to what one knows but also to how one communicates, collaborates and exercises judgement in the face of human complexity. The next theme turns to this relational dimension of policing, exploring how officers cultivate empathy, ethical awareness and interpersonal skills in the context of everyday encounters with the public and colleagues.

Theme 3: Relational Competence

A key theme emerging across the interviews is what may be described as professional relationality, where the interviewees described the practice of navigating police–public encounters through empathy, authority and reflexive openness. Participants consistently reflected on the emotional, ethical and interpersonal complexities of the role, especially when working with vulnerable individuals or in high-stress situations. This theme also encompassed a broader ethos of openness to feedback, learning and maintaining professional boundaries.

Balancing empathy and authority was identified as both essential and challenging. One officer explained it as follows: 'Being able to show empathy but also being able to set boundaries ... standing your ground ... but being able to show a lot of balance' (P7). Another officer, when reflecting on a colleague who he felt

overshared with a suspect, asked, ‘How deep into this personal thing do you have to go?’ (P11). These reflections underscored the ethical tension between authentic connections and professional distance—a line that must be carefully negotiated in practice. As another participant put it, ‘You cannot just be cold ... but you also cannot let people walk over you’ (P12). Officers saw this balance as foundational to public trust: ‘Respect that everyone is just equal under the law ... we are not the punishment’ (P11).

Feedback culture and peer learning emerged as closely connected to relational competence. Several participants described the importance of reviewing incidents with colleagues: ‘We often review things afterwards ... [what] would you have liked to have done differently?’ (P11). Another noted how informal debriefings had been adopted from a mentor early on: ‘We always had a chat after every assignment ... I have adopted this approach with others’ (P4). These interactions often occurred ‘in the car’, ‘on the way back from a scene’, or during downtime—moments of informal but deeply meaningful learning (P10, P12).

The participants also emphasised the role of humility and psychological safety in cultivating this openness. One officer stated, ‘I am not above taking advice from an untrained police officer’ (P4), while another described the importance of being approachable: ‘You can just be there and be trustworthy ... even with silly questions’ (P8). These reflections suggest that the capacity for relational professionalism is built not only through individual experience but also through team cultures that value reflection, respect and shared growth.

Although many interviewees welcomed more open and reflective dialogue, they simultaneously pointed to deep-seated cultural and structural impediments. Several described senior officers as dismissive of open discussion or hesitant to share practical wisdom (P5, P9, P12), a stance that can hinder adaptation. One participant uttered the paradox: 'Police officers hate change ... but they also hate the status quo, so you cannot really win' (P6). An equally powerful norm was the expectation to 'always defend the police' (P9), which discouraged self-criticism in public and suppressed candid feedback. New recruits felt this tension acutely. Wanting to prove competence from day one, they felt they were 'thrown into the deep end' (P7) and quickly learned that admitting uncertainty may jeopardise credibility (P8, P12). At the same time, survival hinged on 'conforming to the flow from the beginning' to 'get support and be part of the whole' (P3). In short, participants suggested that the very norms that foster solidarity, defend the organisation and reward rapid shows of competence and privilege seniority may also influence the day-to-day workplace climate. As a result, setting boundaries, staying emotionally attuned and remaining open to feedback emerged not as fixed, teachable skills but as ongoing negotiations continuously shaped by organisational culture.

Participants' considerations on empathy, authority and boundary-setting indicated that relational competence is not simply a personal trait, but a professional practice shaped by police culture and institutional expectations. Taken together, these findings highlight that professionalism in policing is not merely technical or procedural but deeply relational. As one officer powerfully put it, 'What if my mom

is calling the police? I want her to get the most professional solution to the task... This is someone's mother' (P6). This perspective encapsulates a broader aspiration shared by many participants: to be competent, reflective and humane in the exercise of their authority. These findings suggest that professional identity in policing is deeply tied to ethical and contextual judgement, aligning with Shulman's view of professional knowledge as inherently moral, situated and pedagogical in nature.

Discussion

This study set out to examine what forms of knowledge newly graduated police officers in Iceland regard as legitimate following the 2016 reform that shifted police education from a vocational model to a university-based system. It asked what knowledge, skills and competences officers value and how these are created and sustained—insights that are crucial for understanding both individual professional development and the broader potential for organisational learning in policing.

This study extends existing research on police professionalisation by showing that the legitimacy of knowledge in policing is not determined solely by its evidentiary basis, but is negotiated through cultural, organisational, and relational processes. Rather than residing in a single domain of expertise, legitimacy emerges through the interplay of academic, experiential, organisational, and ethical dimensions. This highlights both the cultural politics of knowledge legitimisation and the organisational conditions required to sustain reform.

Three interrelated themes illustrate this process. First, newly graduated police officers view academic and experiential knowledge as complementary, although scepticism from senior colleagues continues to limit the acceptance of research-based insights. Second, competence is shaped as much by organisational learning and informal knowledge-sharing as by formal education, yet structural barriers often constrain the flow of new knowledge. Third, relational competence—balancing empathy, authority and reflexivity—emerged as a critical dimension of professional practice but one that is also mediated by cultural norms and workplace dynamics.

Integrating Academic and Experiential Knowledge

Graduates viewed theoretical and practical competences as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. This valuation of both enduring operational skills and emerging academic competences mirrors earlier research in Iceland (Bragason & Damen, 2025). Participants emphasised that academic knowledge gained legitimacy only when translated into actionable, context-sensitive forms—an application of Shulman’s (1986, 1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)—the capacity to adapt abstract insights into usable professional practice.

Officers valued pragmatic instruction and examples that linked theory to policing realities. Statistics, case studies and research were considered legitimate when directly applicable, for instance, in harm reduction or detention decisions. Such accounts show that operationalising evidence is central to transforming academic input into practice.

Nevertheless, scepticism persisted, particularly among senior officers who questioned the relevance of university-based learning. This ambivalence reflects international findings that academic knowledge often struggles for traction (Gundhus, 2013; Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). Similar tensions have been reported in the UK (Williams et al., 2019) and in police tutoring arrangements in England and Wales (Cockcroft et al., 2025), highlighting that struggles over legitimacy are embedded in professional identity formation across contexts.

Generational and hierarchical divides were evident. Younger officers were generally open to knowledge-based approaches, while some experienced colleagues perceived academic expertise as undermining authority grounded in service years. This dynamic reflects Chan's (2003) analysis of cultural capital within policing, where experiential authority outweighs other forms of knowledge. Despite such resistance, the participants observed a gradual softening of attitudes driven by internal change and external pressures for more knowledge-based policing.

Organisational Learning and Informal Knowledge Practices

While university education provided an academic foundation, competence was consolidated largely through informal learning. Participants highlighted peer dialogue, mentoring and collaborative reviews as central to development. These accounts mirrored Eraut's (2004) typology of workplace learning, which stresses implicit, reactive and deliberative forms of knowledge acquisition in everyday practice.

Officers described knowledge flowing more effectively through team briefings, car-ride discussions and debriefs than through formal training or long directives.

Sharing knowledge with peers was itself a learning process: explaining procedures deepened understanding and enhanced team cohesion. Such accounts underline how professional knowledge circulates in relational spaces rather than through formal channels.

At the same time, organisational barriers restricted knowledge dissemination. Senior officers often attended courses and conferences but did not always pass insights to frontline staff, and communication by email was widely regarded as ineffective. These dynamics highlight the sociocultural conditions that enable or constrain learning, echoing Eraut's view of workplace context as decisive.

The findings support and extend Chan's (2003) argument that knowledge in policing is shaped by distributions of cultural capital, demonstrating how academic knowledge continues to compete with experiential authority within organisational hierarchies. Similarly, Hallenberg and Cockcroft (2017) showed how higher education may be met with indifference or hostility, reinforcing how cultural capital shapes legitimacy.

The implication is clear: Without organisational strategies that support reflection, mentoring and cross-rank dialogue, university education alone cannot transform a

police service into a learning organisation. Reform must be complemented by institutional mechanisms that normalise collaborative learning and reflexivity.

Relational Competence

A further theme concerned relational competence: the ability to navigate encounters with empathy, authority and reflexive openness. Interviewees consistently described situations in which professional judgement required balancing compassion with the need to maintain boundaries and enforce the law. Such competences were seen as foundational to public trust and professional legitimacy.

These findings echoed Shulman's (1987) argument that professional practice is inherently moral. The ethical dimension of competence was visible in officers' reflections on fairness, equality and dignity. One participant captured this ethos succinctly: 'Respect that everyone is just equal under the law ... we are not the punishment'.

Officers also connected relational competence to workplace culture. Mentoring, informal feedback and psychological safety were crucial to developing interpersonal skills. New recruits described being 'thrown into the deep end', learning quickly that admitting doubt could jeopardise credibility. These pressures shaped how relational professionalism was enacted and legitimised.

Relational competence therefore reflects not only individual attributes but also collective norms. It is both learned and constrained through workplace interactions,

further underscoring the embeddedness of professional knowledge within the organisational culture.

The Cultural Politics of Knowledge Legitimation

Bringing these themes together, the study illustrates how competence in policing is shaped by pedagogical, organisational and cultural processes. Shulman's framework shows how academic and ethical dimensions enrich practice, Eraut explains how informal and situated learning drive competence development and Chan highlights why legitimacy remains contested, with power and cultural capital determining which forms of knowledge gain authority.

These cultural politics help explain why academic knowledge continues to face some resistance despite institutional reforms. In Iceland, as elsewhere, experiential authority carries symbolic weight, often overshadowing knowledge-based approaches. Yet, interviewees' accounts also reveal emerging spaces of acceptance, where evidence is legitimised through pragmatic usefulness. The gradual normalisation of research-informed reasoning suggests that cultural shifts are possible, but they require organisational reinforcement and sustained dialogue.

By situating the Icelandic case within these theoretical perspectives, the study moves beyond a simplistic theory–practice dichotomy. It demonstrates that the challenge is not whether theory or practice is superior but how different forms of knowledge are legitimised, translated and embedded in professional culture.

Implications for Police Education and Practice

The findings have important implications for police education and organisational development. First, universities must continue to design curricula that balance enduring operational skills with emerging academic competences. Drawing on Shulman's (1986, 1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), police education should focus on how academic insights are translated into forms that are meaningful and usable in operational contexts. Courses that embed research within casework, scenarios and field-relevant examples not only enhance learning but also strengthen the perceived legitimacy of academic knowledge by demonstrating its practical value.

Second, police organisations must create conditions for knowledge to circulate across ranks. Informal learning is powerful but requires reinforcement. Structured mentoring programmes, reflective forums and collaborative debriefings could institutionalise practices already valued by officers. Annual training cycles and professional development opportunities should be designed to encourage dialogue rather than the one-way transmission of information.

Third, relational competence must be recognised as central to professional development. Programmes that foster psychological safety, feedback culture and ethical awareness will help graduates navigate complex encounters while maintaining public trust. These strategies also counteract organisational norms that discourage vulnerability or reflexivity.

Finally, reform must be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-time curricular change. Embedding evidence-based insights into police culture requires sustained organisational commitment, leadership support and deliberate strategies to reduce epistemic inequalities. Evidence-based policing models developed internationally (Fielding et al., 2020; Lum & Koper, 2017; Sherman, 1998) underline that knowledge translation is as much a cultural and organisational challenge as an educational one.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

A key strength of this study lies in its qualitative design, which enabled an in-depth exploration of officers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. Reflexive thematic analysis provided flexibility and rigour, while the integration of Shulman, Eraut and Chan offered a distinctive analytic lens. The focus on newly graduated officers—an underrepresented group in the literature—adds a novel contribution by capturing how educational reforms are translated into early professional practice.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study draws on a relatively small sample, appropriate for qualitative research but insufficient to capture the full heterogeneity of perspectives within the Icelandic police service. The reform itself is relatively recent, meaning that the findings reflect a transitional period rather than a stable new norm. Furthermore, the specific organisational and cultural context of Iceland limits its transferability to other settings.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to trace how knowledge legitimacy evolves as officers progress through their careers. Studies following graduates into supervisory positions could reveal whether academic knowledge gains legitimacy over time and how it shapes organisational learning. Comparative research across countries would also shed light on how different educational models and cultural traditions influence the politics of knowledge in policing (Rogers & Frevel, 2018; Terpstra & Schaap, 2022).

Implications and Conclusion

The Icelandic case shows that professional competence in policing is constructed at the intersection of academic, experiential, organisational and ethical knowledge.

University education has broadened the repertoire of legitimate knowledge, yet its impact is still constrained by cultural resistance and structural bottlenecks.

Reforming education alone cannot create a learning organisation; complementary strategies that foster reflexivity, reduce hierarchy and support knowledge-sharing are required.

Curricula should balance operational skills with academic competences and, following Shulman's (1986, 1987) idea of PCK, ensure that research is translated into usable practice. Organisations must reinforce informal learning through mentoring, reflection and dialogue while also recognising relational competence as central to professional practice.

This study demonstrates that professional knowledge in policing is not simply acquired through formal education or experience, but is actively constructed and negotiated within organisational and cultural contexts. By highlighting the interplay between academic, experiential, and relational knowledge, the findings advance understanding of how legitimacy is produced within policing and underscore the importance of examining knowledge as a central dimension of professionalisation in contemporary police organisations.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide for article IV

Introduction

I am not here in the capacity of your former teacher or as the head of the Police Education Centre (MSL). In this context, I am acting as a researcher, and this interview is part of my doctoral studies at the University of Iceland. I will treat all information shared in this interview as confidential.

You may find that I occasionally ask the same question more than once, but this is intentional, as I aim to approach the topic from different perspectives. You might also feel that I should already know the answers to certain questions, but for research purposes, I sometimes need to ask about things you may assume I already know.

May I record the interview? The recording will be deleted once the data have been processed.

Interview Questions

1. Background

- a. Could you tell me a little about yourself—your background, education, and professional experience?
- b. What is your current position within the police?
- c. How long have you served in the police, and what kinds of roles have you held?
- d. What led you to choose a career in policing?

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2. Competence and Knowledge in Police Work

- a. What kinds of competence should a police officer possess when beginning their work?
- b. What knowledge or information do you consider most important in your daily duties as a police officer? (e.g., laws, regulations, LÖKE, SIS, etc.)
- c. Could you describe a complex case for which your education prepared you—one that required in-depth knowledge of laws and regulations? What about areas such as psychology, criminology, or diversity?
- d. In your view, what constitutes traditional competence in policing, and which competence do you see as more recent or emerging requirements?

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3. Informal Learning and Knowledge Creation

- a. Can you provide examples of informal learning experiences—such as advice or guidance from more experienced colleagues—that have been particularly useful to you?
 - b. Can you recall a situation in which advice from an experienced colleague significantly influenced how you handled a case?
 - c. How is useful knowledge created within the police profession? Through work experience, international collaboration, formal training, or scientific research?
 - d. Do you consider the use of scientific methods valuable in creating or supporting professional knowledge in policing? How do your colleagues discuss such topics—for example, in the break room or in the patrol car?
- .

4. Preparation and Alignment Between Theory and Practice

- a. How well do you think your police education prepared you for the tasks you face as a police officer?
 - b. In other professional programmes, such as nursing or teaching, students sometimes encounter situations where practical knowledge does not align with theoretical knowledge. Have you experienced this in police education, and if so, how was it resolved?
- .

5. Valued Forms of Knowledge

- a. Do you think certain forms of knowledge—such as operational skills or theoretical understanding—are more highly valued within the police?
 - b. If so, why do you think that is?
- .

6. Reflection and Curriculum Development

When you look back at your police education in relation to your current work, is there anything you would change in the programme if you were responsible for designing it today?

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7. Decision-Making and Ethics

- a. How do you approach decision-making in situations where several different courses of action are possible and no single correct solution exists?
 - b. Do you reflect on ethical considerations or different perspectives during your decision-making process?
- .

8. Closing Questions

- a. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked about?
- b. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
- c. You are welcome to contact me later if you remember something you think is important and would like to share.

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Follow-up prompt:

If the participant says, *"I was thrown into the deep end,"* follow up with:

"Could you explain what you mean by that in a bit more detail?"