

University identity and its impact on policing education: A comparative study of the University of the West of England, Bristol and the Rhineland-Palatinate Police University, Germany

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Abstract

University identity has been historically linked with traditional disciplines such as philosophy, history and education and has been accessible mainly to those from certain sections of the community. However, contemporary higher education has shifted its attention to vocational programmes such as nursing, probation and, more recently, policing. This article explores two universities, one from the United Kingdom and the other from Germany, that provide police education and who, through similar objectives, have unique identities that result in a distinct and very different student journey.

Keywords: *Pracademic; Policing Education; Organisational Identity; Higher Education; Police Professionalisation.*

Introduction

An organisation's identity is shaped by its context (sector), values (culture) and aims (purpose) (Ernst and Schleiter, 2021). Each element is influenced by the socio-political climate, demand and needs of the market and membership - the latter being those who work within the organisation, their beliefs and values that drive identity from within. This is usually presented in a statement or strategy that frames their aims, objectives and purpose, providing a symbolic understanding of the organisational ethos, and what it is striving to achieve within the sector. Ernst and Schlieter describe the cultural aspect as the 'professional factor' (p. 895), the narrative of the members

who are the specialists of that exclusive group who shape the nature of the organisation within its professional context. It is the individuals who form this membership who are the most influential – their performance is the measure of the organisation and thus how it is externally perceived. From this perspective, therefore, organisational identity is understood as the sector within which it operates and the sum of those who lead, strategies, and work within it.

Using the [Ernst and Schleiter \(2021\)](#) model, this article examines the current identity of the University of the West of England (UWE) and the Rhineland-Palatinate Police University, Germany ([Hochschule der Polizei Rheinland-Pfalz, 2016](#)) regarding their respective student police officer education. It explores how, or if, the introduction of police education influences their university identity both from within, but also externally as part of the higher education sector. It goes on to provide an exploratory comparative analysis of what impact their university identity might have on these officers' educational journey and what this may mean for future programme development.

Higher Education in England and Wales

The collective identity of universities in England and Wales is contextualised as higher education institutions (HEIs). Universities are classified as not-for-profit institutions; they are autonomous and promote free speech and free thinking, although there has been some rhetoric from the Higher Education Policy Institute in recent years about reclassifying them as becoming public sector organisations ([Gravatt, 2023](#)). They are traditionally aligned into two parallel planes: those of the elite redbrick institutions, primarily concerned with research, and those that transitioned from Technical Colleges, such as UWE, into teaching universities ([Napoli and Barnett, 2007](#)). They are situated within the higher education bracket of the education hierarchy, contextualised as an optional route for specialism beyond the compulsory schooling age. Once just for the wealthiest, the introduction of student loans following the Dearing Report in 1997 opened the prospect of university attendance to a much broader audience, allowing people from any background and of any age who meet the academic eligibility criteria an opportunity to study at the higher level.

UWE is very much at the heart of its local community, and this connection with the delivery of police education, with its attendant localised student/police identity, will

be discussed further in later research. For this article, however, what contributes significantly to the identity of the university is the pracademisation of the provision of teaching to the apprentice constables. This is the 'professional and technical [expertise]' of the policing academics, many of whom have served operationally 'at the heart of their communities' within the same police force the students they educate have themselves joined – hence the portmanteau term pracademic. This position is important because while the curriculum provided to the police students is national, its delivery is informed by the requirements of the local communities they serve.

The introduction of apprenticeships has pushed the potential student pool even wider, fusing industry and public sector organisations with academia. These programmes are helping to widen student participation, with lower eligibility requirements and are therefore attracting individuals who may not ordinarily have had the opportunity to engage in higher education. There are 43 different apprenticeships offered at UWE ([Find a course - UWE Bristol: Courses](#)) ranging from health, engineering and policing. This has resulted in a significant change in the identity of universities - shifting from providing education to only the higher academically able, to that of a more complex construct between the traditional and practice-based programmes. As will be explored in this article, the implication of the latter contributes to the presence of a different type of staff membership, the pracademic, and so to the identity of the university.

As with other organisations, university strategies also capture their collective organisational identity: the culture, values and goals ([Macdonald, 2013](#)). The strategy is symbolic of the different disciplines, defined by the reciprocal interactions of its membership in shaping culture and the culture shaping its members. Traditionally, a HEI was largely populated with academics, scholars and teachers of their discipline who were theory-driven and research-led. However, higher education has been perceived as being distant from the role of many different professions, not least policing. Academics teaching classroom theory is not seen as being relevant by many within law enforcement, and indeed some in society, to the reality of police practice ([Watkinson-Miley, Cox and Deshpande, 2021](#)). As such, the synthesis of universities with police areas has been fraught with professional and cultural tensions that have created an atmosphere of continued opposition and problematic integration ([Eason and Starr, 2024](#)). Despite this resistance, however, the [College of Policing \(2024\)](#) and

National Police Chiefs' Council have persevered with both their professionalisation vision as a response to the complexity of contemporary policing, and the need for an evidence-based approach to educating students.

The result of this move to apprenticeships and other vocational programmes has attracted the new 'pracademic' into the teaching and learning positions previously occupied by the career academic ([Posner, 2009](#); [Eason and Starr, 2024](#)). Pracademics are teachers who have practical experience in the discipline and can 'operationalise theory' ([Eason and Starr, 2024](#)) into the classroom environment in ways that the career academic cannot. This provides the student with a realistic understanding of how a theoretical model can be applied and utilised in, for example, decision-making and problem-solving practices. Thus, staff are no longer drawn just from academia, but from the profession itself.

The pracademic constitutes a large majority of the teaching and learning staff in the policing apprenticeship ([Eason and Starr, 2024](#)) together with other vocational programmes, shifting the collective beliefs and values from those of just academic knowledge to a mixture of theoretical and operational understanding. Whilst this difference is acknowledged by academics and the university, it is not necessarily understood or welcomed by each, as the new pracademic is not perceived by some as a university lecturer, in the traditional sense; they are perceived as lacking conceptual knowledge. Nevertheless, although only in a small number of available programmes in the university, the political agenda and rise in pracademic staffing levels have arguably shifted, at least in part, the identity of universities from the academic to that of evidence-based and practical skills institutions.

Another contributory factor to the changing identity of universities is the financial and competitive landscape. In England and Wales, the HEA sector's sustainability relies on its 'competitiveness and performance across selected quality criteria' ([Baltaru, Manac and Ivan, 2022, p. 2323](#)). These performance measures are based upon a variety of factors including the Research Excellence Framework (REF) - which measures research quality - Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) - measured against student experience and student outcomes - and the National Student Survey (NSS) - which measures student satisfaction – all of which feed into publicly available league tables, such as the Complete University Guide or the Good University Guide.

It is within these guides that the individual HEIs are ranked. This in turn shapes the way in which universities 'brand' or identify themselves and thus their provision and recruitment strategy. For example, a university that seeks to brand itself as of high research quality would focus on the REF and recruit staff with productive research profiles, who have a proven track record in income generation - funding bids - and thus attract future finance and research projects. This, in turn, supports the university vision by nurturing the collective identity of the staff to sit within the chosen profile of the institute; the profile that reflects its chosen identity.

The financial burden placed on universities, for example, stagnant fees for the past decade, the damage to international relations caused by Brexit and the government's increasingly stringent visa restrictions for international students ([Habib and Hastings, 2025](#)), also plays a crucial part in its identity. It forces them to promote traditionally academic programme routes that are more profitable, but not necessarily employer market viable due to their lack of specific vocational content.

Apprenticeships or apprenticeship-style programmes are vocational but generally more resource-intensive due to the mandatory rules and regulations of the Department for Education (DofE), together with employer needs and administration. Undergraduate-level apprenticeships are now also subject to Ofsted Inspection, another measurable ranking framework that can have a significant impact on recruitment, sustainability and popularity, all of which contribute to the university's identity – as a market leader, as a quality provider and as an employer's/student's choice.

It is evident that a significant number of universities in England and Wales sit within the context of financial constraint, regulatory bodies and a measurable framework within which it is profiled and ranked. These are intrinsically linked to the values of the university, which aims to provide high-quality teaching and learning that produces employment-ready graduates, springboarding them into a lifelong learning journey whose values are informed by those who teach them.

Higher Education in Germany

Higher academic education in Germany is differentiated in several respects. On the one hand, education in Germany is a matter for the federal states, which have at least a partial impact on higher education institutions in general and police academies

in particular. Overall, however, it should be noted that the structures between the federal states are comparable and the common foundations dominate. On the other hand, HEIs in Germany are classified according to different organisational forms – a distinction that carries more weight. In Germany, a general distinction is between universities, universities of applied sciences (HAW/FH) and universities of the arts.

While universities primarily focus on providing theoretical knowledge and methodological competencies, universities of applied sciences (HAW/FH) place a stronger emphasis on practice-oriented education. Universities of the arts, in turn, combine artistic, pedagogical, and academic training, distinctively integrating theoretical and practical elements. Of the 426 HEIs listed by the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, HRK), 120 are universities, 249 are universities of applied sciences (HAW/FH), and 57 are universities of the arts. Of these HEIs, 273 are state (public) institutions, and 153 are non-state but state-recognised institutions (115 of which are private and 38 church-maintained) ([HRK, 2024](#)).

In addition to these educational institutions, another type of HEI is of particular interest for this study: the higher education institutions for the civil service. These universities differ from the HEIs mentioned above in that they are specifically responsible for training and further education in the public service sector. In various constellations, the areas of public administration, finance, administration of justice and the police are covered here in particular. The Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences for the Civil Service (Rektorenkonferenz der Hochschulen für den öffentlichen Dienst, RK HöD) currently comprises 38 member institutions.

The focus of these HEIs is on training and further education in the public service sector, but also on applied research and academic counselling ([RK HöD, n.d.](#)). In 2023, these HEIs had 68,741 students and 9,485 continuing education students in a total of 172 degree programmes. The universities comprised 2,016 full-time faculty members (excluding professors), 998 professors and 6,504 lecturers, as well as 3,523 employees and 374 research assistants ([RK HöD, 2024](#)).

The aforementioned 'pracademic' can also be observed in German HEIs, although a dialectic picture must be drawn here: on the one hand, universities are moving even closer to application-oriented contexts; on the other hand, the European standardisation of study programmes and degrees as part of the Bologna Process –

an initiative designed to bring coherence to the Higher Education System across Europe - is also accompanied by a broader academisation dynamic of previously more practice-oriented training constellations - including in the police.

The 'pracademic' development is partly due to the issue of financing HEIs via their student numbers and third-party research funding. Since as early as the 1980s, a 'new relationship between higher education institutions and the state' has been observed – not least due to funding problems in the rapidly growing higher education system – which is documented in a withdrawal of the state with a simultaneous increase in the (relative) autonomy of HEIs. But this autonomy also means responsibility, which leads to 'increased cooperation with the private sector and more competition between universities for state funding' ([Kehm, 2021, p. 387](#), own translation). Against this backdrop, it is above all the so-called third mission – the social and practical relevance of academic work in addition to teaching and research – that is increasingly characterising academic culture in Germany.

However, the increasingly practical orientation is also accompanied by a process of academisation – or more precisely, an increasing overlap and permeability between training and higher education ([Severing and Teichler, 2013](#)). Even if the latest developments indicate that this process is not currently continuing ([Forschung & Lehre, 2022](#)), the academisation dynamic is not viewed positively. Rather, the (unintended) consequences of "overeducation" (Büchel et al., 2004) are being looked at and, sometimes even more so, a "mania for academisation" is being criticised, which is supposedly leading to a "crisis in vocational and academic education" due to the neglect of practical vocational education formats ([Nida-Rümelin, 2014](#), own translation).

While the relationship between the state and HEI in the case of universities for the civil service is only changing slightly due to their function and identity, and therefore the pressure of funding is not of comparable relevance, the process of academisation applies to these universities in particular: whereas training at the police academy, for example, used to be the norm, bachelor's degree programmes at police universities are now the standard in many federal states.

The cause of this change is just as diverse as its unintended consequences. However, concerning the values that characterise the education sector and its

institutions as well as the associated culture, it can be stated that despite tendencies towards a 'pracademic', the value of an 'institutionalised state' of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247 f.) through higher education remains significant and higher education thus continues to be a central point of orientation in the (educational) discourse.

The objectives of HEI in Germany are diverse and – depending on the sector and organisation – not homogeneous. As outlined above, both state and private HEI are increasingly exposed to competitive pressure for funding and students. In the case of universities, the associated 'valorisation of performance' (Götze, 2024, p. 8; Götze and Schneijderberg, 2022) is most clearly reflected in the so-called 'Excellence Initiative and Strategy' since 2005, which has initiated systematic competition not only for state funding, but also for the prestige of an 'elite university' (Kehm, 2021, p. 390 f.).

The universities for the civil service and the police HEI are not comparably involved in these competitive constellations and are to a certain extent relieved of a corresponding competitive situation. Rather, their objectives are based on the social, technological and political challenges facing the civil service. In this regard, the mission statement of the Rectors' Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences for the Civil Service identifies in particular 'demographic change and the resulting growing shortage of skilled workers', 'increasing awareness of the need to reconcile work and family life', 'dynamic information technology developments' and 'the changing demands of society' as key areas of responsibility (RK HöD, 2022, p. 1).

In summary, the central purpose of these HEIs is to maintain and further develop the civil service in its various facets. However, in view of the different areas of responsibility of these HEIs and the different conditions in a federal system, it is not possible to draw a fully uniform picture. One unifying, central theme emerges from the processes outlined above in the education sector itself: the successful organisation of the academisation process.

Police education at the University of the West of England

Despite the national PCER curriculum (College of Policing, 2026), there are no two similar collaborations - between university and police area - or delivery models across the country (Andrews, 2023). This dichotomy renders the PCDA and all other policing programmes open to interpretation and the strength of collaboration between

the university/police area. Perpetual changes in the curriculum have also hindered the development of the programmes, removing key criminological components significant for the evidence base to understanding crime, criminality and victimhood and operational practices, and an optionality in emphasis on others. The latter is very much denoted by the police area, but also national initiatives, for instance Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) or Neighbourhood Policing. Again, this creates multiple divisions in what is being taught across the country, albeit within the confines of the curriculum, how it is taught and the policing area priorities.

In May 2019, UWE joined the professionalisation of policing movement with the launch of the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), in collaboration with their external police partners ([Eason and Starr, 2024](#)). This was part of the initial transition for police education and training into the higher education sector, which has since transformed into a suite of recruitment programmes underpinned by the College of Policing curriculum - Police Constable Entry Route (PCER) - and Policing Vision 2030 ([College of Policing, 2026](#)).

At its inception, there were four members of teaching staff. Over the past six years, this number has increased significantly to 26 academic staff and 12 in the tripartite coordinators team. Aligned with the School of Social Sciences, the PCDA is the largest single provider of apprenticeships in the university and has thus received much investment. This has occurred not only with the expansion of staff numbers, but also in teaching space, which includes a purpose-built forensic simulation suite for scenario teaching and operational practice – drawing on the notion of the students' reflective development.

The UWE PCDA - labelled by [Andrews \(2023\)](#) as a 'sole model' (p. of delivery - PCEP and DHEP are unique in their structure, their delivery and their collaboration and therefore, as a policing provision have formed a very individualised sub-identity amongst their competitors, and also within both the university and the School of Social Sciences. Unlike many of its competitors, UWE does not require students to wear uniform. Presenting in uniform on campus could present myriad problems, including unwanted attention and possible hostility from the wider student population, as noted by [Joseph-Salisbury et al. \(2023\)](#).

There are further issues to be considered in relation to policing students' presence on campus, which contribute to the identity of the university. Frenchay Campus, Bristol, is part of the University of the West of England's estate that is open to the public, both for members of the student body and the local community. Thus, at UWE, the policing students are learning in an environment that reflects their operational context. They mix throughout the day with individuals who constitute the communities they serve. This is unlike the experience of the German officers for whom their environment is devoted to, and only accessible by, those within the police family.

In addition, British police officers are not civil servants, as are their German counterparts. In the United Kingdom, police officers of all ranks are servants of the Crown, a position that uniquely confers upon them within society a personal responsibility to enforce the law impartially and without favour. Once such officers take the oath of office, they are legally never off duty and, as such, are required to act as police officers whenever and wherever within England and Wales they deem the situation to warrant it.

This notion of personal responsibility will be explored in later research, but its implication for the identity of the university is such that it is depicted in the physical fabric of a portion of the buildings in which police students are educated – located within F Block on Frenchay Campus, Bristol. There is portrayed in written words the context (sector), values (culture), aims (purpose) and ethics by which these students' actions, as they inhabit the Office of Constable, are governed. Crucially for this article, they simultaneously work as student officers within an environment that physically portrays the unique identity of the policing aspect of the university within a public space also used on occasion by non-policing members of the organisation's community. The university structure physically reflects signs of the officers' identity in a manner the students themselves do not due to the requirement for them to not wear a uniform: in this context, theirs is an internal, unseen professional self within a physical environment representative of that identity by language that in turn shapes their occupation of the Office of Constable, with all the attendant responsibilities that will be discussed in a latter article.

A corollary of this position is that the policing programme team encourage officers to engage with the student community *as students*, when on a block of learning,

creating a safe learning environment in which guided reflective development can take place ([Li, 2009](#)). They are encouraged to discard their operational role as much as possible and use university facilities such as the library and support groups, designed to assist in their academic development and achievement. This is especially important for widening participation of policing students, some of whom may struggle with academic learning more so than the traditional student. It is also important for policing students whose progression to the substantive role of police constable is dependent upon their successful completion of their course.

The programme structure provides students with protected learning time within their university teaching block to ensure they have the space both to develop their knowledge and understanding, and in their preparation for assignments. This is very different to some universities that deliver this programme where the expectation is to prepare assessments and other independent learning activities in their own time, for example during rest day periods or annual leave, as noted by [Andrews \(2023\)](#). There is, however, an agreement with the external police partners to ensure a positive level of engagement, attendance and progress by each student. Joint policies and procedures have been designed to put clear processes in place for missed teaching, resits and welfare issues, including physical and mental health and wellbeing. Working in conjunction with those partners maintains high standards and graduate outcomes.

In policing, UWE has flourished, introducing a variety of programmes set against the College of Policing's entry requirements for professional police officers, employing a Black box thinking approach ([Syed, 2016](#)) to extend the professionalisation process beyond the average provision - through the interconnection of widening participation routes. The recent renewal of tenure with UWE's external police partners reflects this newly formed element of its identity as a high-quality police education provider, taking a lead in the shift from an academic-led to an evidence-based employment institution.

As a discipline, policing has created its own identity within the School of Social Sciences. The teaching staff, pracademics – all of whom have operational experience working with the U.K.'s Criminal Justice System - are dynamic, active teachers who value the profession and the way in which they can shape the future of British policing. The discipline is large and busy, teaching throughout the year on multiple cohorts across the programme years, between 0900 and 1700 hours per day when in class,

and often in collaboration with our external police partners. This contributes to the specific identity of the provision of police learning because it is very different from most of the traditional programmes taught across the two 12-week semesters that follow the traditional delivery model of a weekly one-hour lecture and seminar, although some specialisms - psychology, for example - do use laboratory-based practical learning as a teaching methodology.

Police education at the Rhineland-Palatinate Police University (Hochschule der Polizei Rheinland-Pfalz)

The Rhineland-Palatinate Police University (HdP) is an HEI specifically for initial and advanced police training. It offers the three-year bachelor's degree programme 'Police Service' and is involved in the two-year master's degree programme 'Public Administration – Police Management' of the German Police University (Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei, DHPol), as well as being the central advanced training institution of the Rhineland-Palatinate Police and its recruitment authority. In contrast to the UWE, non-police degree programmes are not offered.

Against this background, the HdP has a dual identity: on the one hand as a university and on the other as one of eight police authorities, i.e. organisational units that make up the Rhineland-Palatinate State Police. At the same time, the identity of the HdP as a HEI has also been subject to change ([Schade and Durben, 2022](#); [HdP, 2016](#); [Polizei Rheinland-Pfalz, n.d.b](#)). This applies both to its relocation from Koblenz-Asterstein to the Hahn campus in 1996 and to its institutional configuration. Previously – and for a period in parallel – operating as the police academy of the state (Landespolizeischule), the state of Rhineland-Palatinate discontinued training for the intermediate police service (in the sense of non-commissioned ranks) in 1996. Initially, training for the senior police service was instead provided through the Public Administration College – Department of Police (Fachhochschule für öffentliche Verwaltung – Fachbereich Polizei) ([HdP, 2016](#)). From 2009 onwards, this programme was transformed, due to the Bologna Process, into the accredited bachelor's degree programme 'Police Service' (HdP, 2016). Finally, in 2015, the HdP was established as a HEI on its own, emerging from the Department of Police of the Public Administration College.

In accordance with the law on public administration colleges (Verwaltungsfachhochschulgesetz), the HdP is now one of three public administration colleges in the federal state, alongside the Rhineland-Palatinate University of Public Administration and the Rhineland-Palatinate University of Finance. As a state institution with no legal capacity within the remit of the Ministry of the Interior and Sport (VFHG § 2), the HdP is generally categorised as one of the aforementioned civil service universities.

A total of around 1,600 students are taught at the three HdP locations (Hahn Campus, Enkenbach-Alsenborn and Wittlich-Wengerohr). The main campus in Hahn hosts the majority of the bachelor's degree programme as well as parts of the advanced police training programme. Additional elements of the degree programme and a range of (advanced) training courses are delivered at the campuses in Wittlich-Wengerohr and Enkenbach-Alsenborn. In contrast to the Frenchay Campus at UWE, all three campuses are secure facilities rather than publicly accessible university sites. Access is controlled through security checkpoints, and entry is restricted to members of the police service, staff and students of the HdP, and authorised visitors. The HdP employs a staff of around 400, of which approximately 80 are full-time and part-time teaching staff, who are recruited from police officers in the senior and higher ranks, as well as administrative civil servants and tariff employees ([Polizei Rheinland-Pfalz, n.d.a](#), own translation).

The bachelor's degree programme 'Police Service' with the two fields of study 'Uniformed Police' and 'Criminal Police' is understood as a practice-oriented degree programme insofar as 'specialist theoretical and practical content is taught in accordance with the requirements of the police profession' ([Polizei Rheinland-Pfalz, n.d.a](#), own translation). The programme comprises 180 credit points in accordance with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and is divided into 12 modules ([Polizei Rheinland-Pfalz, 2024](#)). Nine subject areas within Department I (initial training) are responsible for teaching the bachelor's degree programme.

This structure and tasks of the institution, and this tailoring of the degree programme, come with a specific and dynamic institutional culture ([Schade and Durben, 2022; HdP 2016](#)) that differs noticeably from the structures and culture described above at the UWE. The HdP students are primarily civil servant

candidates/civil servants on probation with the corresponding duties. Wearing a uniform during the academic day is both mandatory and a matter of course, and to a degree shapes the character of the campus. Accordingly, one could say that the student's habitus is predominantly that of future police officers and only secondarily that of students. This goes hand in hand with the hybrid role of the lecturers: while they are teachers and trusted advisors, they are also hierarchical supervisors of the students. In everyday student life, this is strikingly expressed, for example, in the fact that lecturers from the uniformed police typically wear uniforms – and, as part of this uniform, a service weapon. The dual identity of the HdP as an HEI is thus directly reflected in the identity of the teaching staff, and of the students.

This is reinforced by the close integration of police practice and academic studies, which is reflected, among others, in the absence of a semester model: firstly, the theoretical units at the Hahn campus are systematically accompanied, for example by operational training and sports units, among others. Secondly, the teaching phases on campus are regularly supplemented by practical training in the various police departments of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate. These are the hinge points where the academic content learned on campus first encounters practical 'reality' and the question of a possible 'practical shock' arises ([Endreß, Klimasch, and Müller, 2024, p. 512](#)).

Against this backdrop, police education at the Rhineland-Palatinate Police University can be characterised as academised in a specific form: while the BA programme and its curricula ensure a solid academic foundation, the programme's strong practical orientation aligns the training closely with the requirements of everyday police work. In this respect, the 'pracademic' constellation somehow appears to be inverted in comparison to the UWE ([Eason and Starr, 2024](#)): while the practical element of the programme forms the natural and long-standing foundation, it is the process of academisation which proves to be the more dynamic aspect – albeit still with a high proportion of practical content.

Discussion: An analysis of the similarities and differences in university and student identity

From a typological perspective ([Weber, 1949](#)), the two case studies of UWE and the HdP can both be described as constellations of pracademisation ([Eason and Starr,](#)

2024); however, they differ significantly regarding their points of departure and the direction of the process.

Institutional embeddedness

The most fundamental distinction concerns the institutional environment in which police education is situated. At UWE, police education is embedded within a comprehensive university that serves a broad range of academic disciplines and professional fields. Although policing programmes are guided by the professional standards of the College of Policing, UWE remains an autonomous university with responsibility for its academic programmes and institutional development.

By contrast, the HdP is an institution exclusively dedicated to policing. It operates under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior of Rhineland-Palatinate and forms an integral part of the state's police organisation. Accordingly, its mission is primarily oriented towards policing within Rhineland-Palatinate while also contributing, to a more limited extent, to policing at the national level. These differing institutional settings shape the respective understanding of what constitutes a university and, consequently, the identities that emerge within each institution.

Institutional structures and organisational identity

The contrasting institutional environments are reflected in the organisational structures of both institutions. At UWE, student officers are enrolled as university students and are employed by the partner agency who have a contractual agreement with the university to deliver the degree programme. At the HdP, students enter the programme as civil servants in training and are employed by the state police. This distinction of institutional structures is also reflected in the physical organisation of both institutions. UWE operates as an open university campus that is integrated into the wider university and community environment. In contrast, all HdP campuses are secure police facilities with controlled access, reinforcing their organisational affiliation with the police service rather than with the wider higher education sector.

Spatial-cultural identification

Beyond organisational structures, both institutions foster different forms of spatial and cultural identification. At UWE, police education is closely connected to local policing. Student officers develop their professional identity in relation to the

communities they serve and the geographical area in which they will subsequently work. Local partnerships, community engagement and the close relationship with regional police forces contribute to a strong place-based identity. At the HdP, identification likewise has a territorial dimension but is framed differently. Students primarily identify with the police of Rhineland-Palatinate as one of the state's public authorities and as an institution exercising the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. At the same time, this identity is embedded within Germany's federal policing system. The HdP is therefore perceived not only as the educational institution of the Rhineland-Palatinate police but also as part of a nationwide community of state police forces, particularly through the common career structures and the centralised education of higher police leaders at the German Police University.

Duties, responsibilities and professional orientation

Despite these institutional differences, both institutions operate within the principles of academic freedom in teaching and research. However, this freedom is exercised within different normative frameworks. At UWE, the design and delivery of police education are shaped by the professional standards and curriculum provided by the College of Policing, more specifically the PCER, which are aligned to operational practice. At the HdP, police education is primarily embedded within an accredited curriculum that is similarly aligned with the institutional requirements of the German police service. Given the HdP's dual identity as both a higher education institution and a police authority, as well as the dual roles of students as both learners and police probationers and of lecturers as both academic instructors and (in some cases) sworn police officers, additional normative frameworks become highly salient. In particular, the principle of legality (*Legalitätsprinzip*) plays a central role in shaping educational practice. Structurally, this may at times generate tensions with the academic principles of freedom of teaching and research, as the imperative of lawful police action may intersect with academic autonomy.

The role of lecturers

The role of lecturers further nuances this comparison. While credibility in bridging 'theory' and 'practice' may be derived either from prior police experience or from academic expertise ([Eason, 2025](#)), this dimension cannot be typologically assigned in a clear-cut manner to either institution, although institutional tendencies can be

observed. The pracademics who educate the students across all the pathways on the policing programmes assist in forging the identity of UWE. They exemplify the qualities and traits, highlighted earlier in this article, that [Ernst and Schleiter \(2021\)](#) outlined as the sum of those who lead, strategies and work within an organisation. In this context, the identity is a specific element of the wider university's uniqueness because it is specific to the delivery of teaching to police officers from a partner agency whose force area covers the university. Many of the pracademics were themselves previously members of the police force whose members they are now teaching. They have the expertise to be able to uniquely conjoin two perspectives that some in academia, indeed as do some within policing itself, view as being opposed; they can 'operationalise theory' ([Eason, 2025, p. 140](#)). There is a circularity of experience, expertise and identification within such staff that shapes the students' learning, which aids in the formation, building and strengthening of the policing identity at UWE. Like many of the students, a large percentage of the university's policing pracademics live within the communities in which they themselves once were employed as officers and wherein the student constables are now operationally deployed. Thus, there is both an occupational and personal investment within the pracademics towards their students, which in turn aids in the creation and maintenance of UWE's policing identity. It finds expression in the phrase articulated by [Ernest and Schleiter's \(2021, p. 895\)](#) phrase, the 'profession[al] factor'.

Student identity

The institutional differences discussed above are ultimately reflected in students' self-perceptions. At UWE, student officers predominantly understand themselves as university students preparing for a future policing career. At the HdP, students primarily perceive themselves as police officers who are simultaneously engaged in higher education.

These differing self-conceptions illustrate how institutional context influences identity formation. While UWE socialises future police officers through the structures and culture of a university, the HdP educates police officers within the organisational structures of the police service itself.

Conclusion

The socio-political climate referred to by [Ernest and Schleiter \(2021\)](#) has produced a shift within the British government's view of the educating and training of student police officers: the constantly changing nature of criminality, accompanied by the need to increase the national establishment of officers due to the austerity cuts of the mid 2000s, requires officers educated and capable of meeting, and indeed beating, the evolving sophistication of the means by which criminals of all types break the law. A corollary to this is an enhanced policing educational system, of which UWE is in the vanguard, that has shifted from training provided only within the policing organisations: an in-house, operationally based curriculum delivered by serving police officers. These have been replaced with university pracademics, individuals with a blend of experience within both the CJS, and academia.

The same general trend can also be observed in the German context, and particularly in the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate. Here, too, police education has increasingly placed greater emphasis on reflective learning and the development of critical thinking, enabling future police officers to respond more effectively to the complex challenges of contemporary policing in an increasingly dynamic and pluralistic society ([Durben and Rampp, 2026](#)). One example is the provision of initial police education exclusively through a bachelor's degree programme, as is the case in Rhineland-Palatinate, where entry into the police service is now based on this qualification. However, this process differs in an important respect from the model adopted by UWE; in Germany, the transformation mainly takes place within the police organisation itself, through dedicated police universities, rather than within a civilian higher education system.

What this highlights is that pracademisation is not a uniform process but takes different forms depending on the institutional context in which it develops. Rather than representing a simple transition from vocational training towards academic education, pracademisation can be understood as a continuous negotiation between competing and complementary demands: critical thinking, scientific inquiry and professional relevance, academic independence and organisational embeddedness, as well as theoretical reflection and practical competence development. The two cases demonstrate different ways of balancing these dimensions.

This suggests that the future development of police education should not focus solely on increasing academic content on the one hand or strengthening practical orientation on the other. Instead, the central challenge lies in creating institutional arrangements that enable meaningful interaction between academic knowledge production and professional practice. Both models offer valuable perspectives in this regard: UWE illustrates the potential of embedding police education within a broader academic ecosystem, while the HdP demonstrates the opportunities and challenges of integrating higher education directly within a police organisation. A comparative perspective on pracademisation can therefore contribute to a better understanding of how police education can develop structures that support both professional excellence and critical, evidence-based reflection. Against this background, a closer examination of university identities – and the identities of university members – becomes essential, as these constitute a key lens through which the institutional conditions, cultural patterns and boundary work between academia and professional practice can be understood.

Resistance to such processes exists, to varying degrees, in both worlds: the police and university. However, at UWE this unique combination of ‘operationalise[d] theory’ is provided to students for them to succeed in the Office of Constable. While the institutional context of the HdP and policing in Rhineland-Palatinate is not directly comparable, the dialectical and reflective integration of theory and practice generates structurally analogous benefits. As holders of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a democratic society and as members of a citizen-oriented police service, police officers are required to navigate increasingly complex legal, social, and ethical challenges. A pracademical model of police education prepares them not only to apply professional knowledge in practice but also to reflect critically on their actions, make evidence-informed decisions, and reconcile operational effectiveness with the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and public legitimacy.

Accordingly, the process of pracademisation extends beyond curriculum and pedagogy. It also shapes organisational identity, professional socialisation, and students' perceptions of themselves as either university students preparing for policing or police officers undertaking higher education. Therefore, the overall comparison indicates two distinct models. While both combine academic education with professional police training, they differ in the institutional environments in which this

integration takes place. UWE now embeds policing within the wider higher education sector, whereas the HdP situates higher education within the police organisation. Both, however, incorporate the pracademic.

It has been noted that at UWE, student officers tend to identify themselves primarily as police officers, whereas the university regards them as students first and officers second. In Germany, by contrast, the university is a police university, and student officers are therefore regarded primarily as police officers both by themselves and by the university. At UWE, attendance in the classroom is a day's duty with rules and regulations as though they were on patrol; for example, they are forbidden by police regulations to enter the Student Union bar as it is a licensed premises. Thus, for the duration of their course, the UWE students each occupy a liminal space, wherein their identity is interchangeably that of student/officer or officer/student dependent upon the specific moment of their probationary journey. Each brings with it a specific and special sense of identity. This unique aspect of the police student experience creates a duality of identity that will be further considered in greater depth in forthcoming research, on that occasion, not from the perspective of the organisation, but from that of the individual learner. Future research should thus examine how these different identity formations affect learning processes, the integration of academic knowledge into professional practice, and longer-term career development within policing.

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