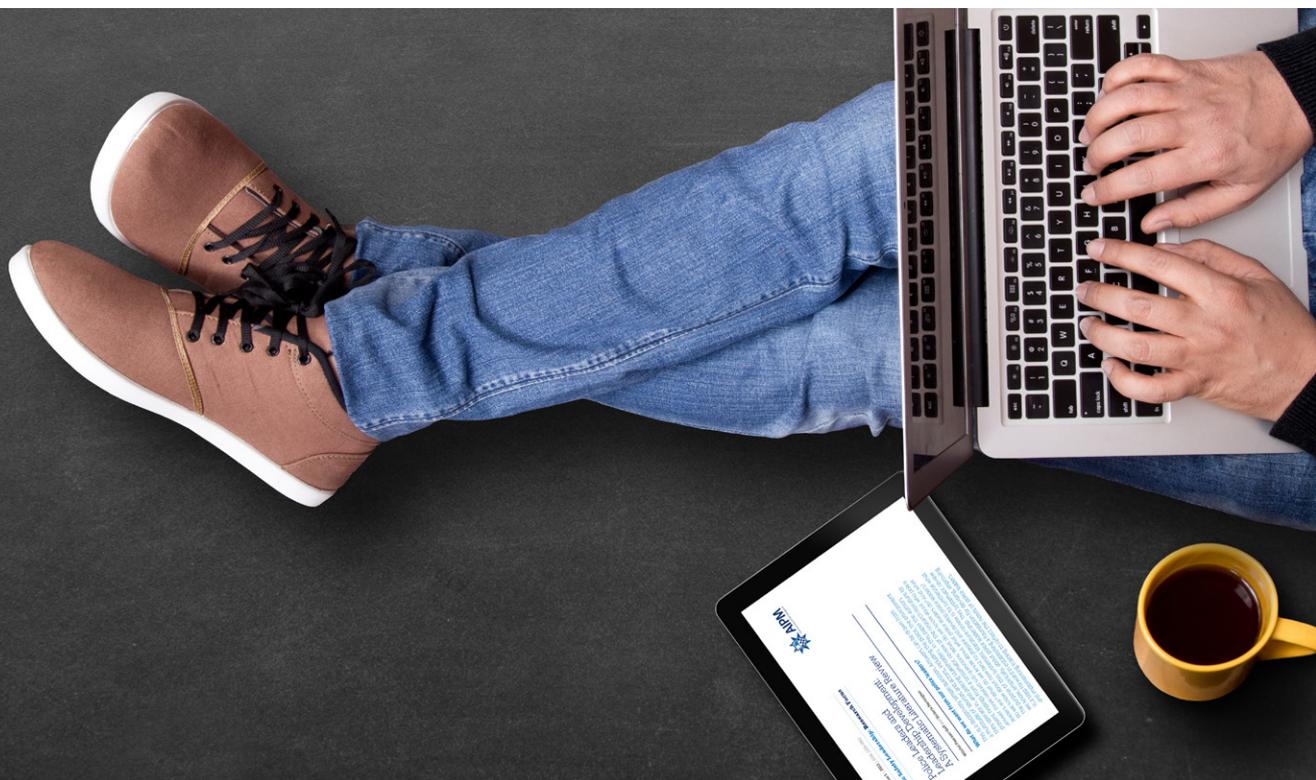# The AIPM National Police Research Inventory: A Summary of Findings

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There continues to be much debate about the value of research to policing. The evidence-based policing (EBP) movement has gained significant traction across the world, and it is increasingly commonplace to hear about police organisations engaging with the body of knowledge when thinking about changes to policy and practice. Responding to this trend in late 2015 and early 2016 the Australian Institute of Police Management (AIPM) held a series of three roundtable discussions on the topic of police research (see Herrington, 2016, for a summary). Attended by 51 individuals representing 16 organisations, these roundtables explored some of the key challenges for those interested in police research. Four key themes emerged:

- That there remained some confusion about what constitutes good quality research, and that randomised control trials were not the only useful methodological approach to helping police improve practice

- That relations between academics and police do not tend to facilitate the use of research in informing practice, and that little is known about the breadth of research being undertaken across Australia

- That police organisations need to invest more in their relations with professional researchers, to supplement the work being done internally to build in-house research cultures

- That without an organisational culture of learning, the real value of research and its ability to inform practice will be hard to realise.

As a result of these roundtable discussions, the AIPM sought to contribute further to our understanding about police research. Addressing the second of these above points by undertaking a National Police Research Inventory (NPRI) the AIPM set out to survey the research currently underway by university-based academics. This document sets out the findings from this audit to provide police practitioners and academics with a sense of *who is doing what, and how they are doing it*, so that areas of mutual interest and ongoing knowledge gaps can be better identified and addressed.

Methodology

The focus of this scoping exercise was *university-based research*. There were several reasons for this:

- First, university-based research at PhD level and higher was used as a proxy indicator for research quality, with such research guaranteed by university governance bodies to be of a minimal publishable standard. This is the basic metric of research quality in the academic world, and therefore guarded against less robust research activity contaminating the dataset.

- Second, focusing on academic research allowed us to better understand the breadth and depth of partnerships and relationships between universities and police. It has often been argued that the state of relations between these two groups is less collaborative and collegiate than it might be (Bradley and Nixon, 2009), but this experience is certainly not uniform, and there are well-known pockets of good practice across the country. This scoping exercise allowed such activities to be captured.

- Third, by concentrating on research undertaken by universities we were able to get a national snapshot of research across the country, including that which might not otherwise come to the attention of police.

provide police practitioners and academics with a sense of who is doing what, and how they are doing it, *so that areas of mutual interest and ongoing knowledge gaps can be better identified and addressed*

Process

The deputy vice chancellors (research) (DVCs) of each of the 40 universities in Australia were contacted by email in early December 2015 and informed about the research. This initial contact was coupled with an email to the deans of faculties who we might reasonably expect to be involved in police related research (e.g. social science faculties or policing faculties). Forty-four deans[1] were contacted. In each case they were advised of the research, its scope and aims, and asked to distribute a link to an online survey among staff who they thought likely to be engaged in police research and scholarship. The survey was also distributed through the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology — the peak body for criminologists in Australia and New Zealand — and through the criminology mailing list coordinated by the University of Sydney, CrimNet. I was hoped that through these formal and informal channels most university-based police researchers would be alerted to the survey, and would have an opportunity to complete the short survey about their research if they chose to. The online survey was available for completion between the 15th December 2015 and the 18th February 2016 (see Appendix A for a copy of the survey). Participants were asked to create one survey entry for each piece of police research they were involved in that met two criteria:

1. It was at PhD level or above (Masters and Honours level research was excluded), and

2. It was ongoing or had been completed within the last 12 months.

Key findings

A total of 209 responses were received relating to distinct research projects that met the inclusion criteria outlined above. These contributions were drawn from 21 of the 40 universities approached, although in seven cases respondents chose not to leave details of their university affiliation, so we cannot be sure that more universities were not represented (Figure 1). Drawing on the named universities, we can see that every state and territory except the Northern Territory had a research-active university (the Australian Capital Territory is home to a policing campus for Charles Sturt University), meaning that opportunities for local engagement between police and academia were good.

[1] In a small number of universities more than one department may have been involved in police research, and as such, separate letters were sent to multiple Deans.

Figure 1: Survey contributions by university (number of projects)
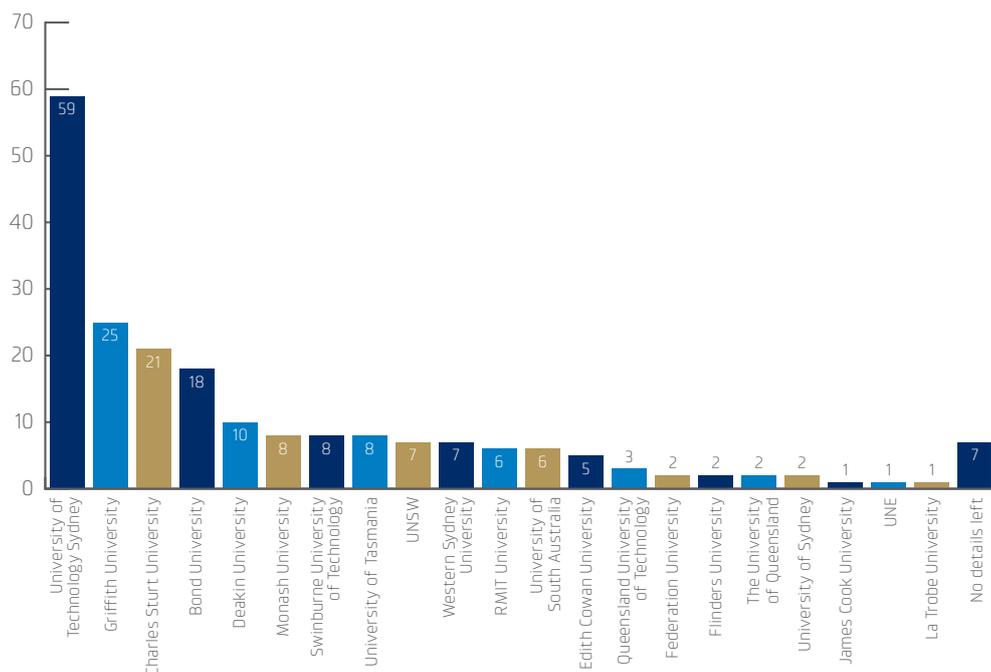
What is clear from Figure 1 is that the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) was undertaking more than twice as many police research projects as the next most prolific university (Griffith University). Looking at the data closely we can attribute this to the large number of forensic science projects undertaken in UTS's Centre for Forensic Science. Most of these projects were funded in part or in full by the university (n=38), signalling significant university investment in the centre (police contributed to the funding for 17 projects).

After UTS the next most police research intensive universities were Griffith University, Charles Sturt University, and Bond University. In Griffith University, half (n=12) of these research projects were funded through PhD scholarships; four were funded by police. At Charles Sturt University half (n=11) represented unfunded research projects (wherein an academic will undertake analytical work as part of their day to day academic duties without cash funding); four projects were contracted by police. At Bond University only one project received cash funding (through the university), with the remaining projects undertaken by Bond's new Tactical Research Unit without funding. This is interesting in that it underscores that among the most prolific police research universities, most current research is being undertaken pro bono through the normal course of an academic's scholarly duties.

In fact if we look at research funding sources across the whole dataset we can see that internal university funding (for example seed funding to help academic staff carve out time away from teaching to undertake research, or to travel to engage in research), and pro bono research (i.e. that undertaken through the course of an academic's normal work load) accounted for more than half of all police research funding (56%). Police, by contrast, contributed funding to only 18% of research projects (See Figure 2).[2]

That police funded 18% of current research activity does not necessarily mean that they only had a voice in 18% of all projects. In fact half of the reported research projects had some direct engagement with police as either collaborators or funders.[3] We can speculate that for those projects involving collaboration, police will have been able to provide input on research methodology and/or the contextualisation of findings. In some cases collaboration may even stretch to their being co-producers of research findings. In other cases the degree of collaboration may be much less. Either way this is positive for police. It indicates that police are engaging in more research than they are effectively 'purchasing', suggesting an effective bang for invested buck; and it suggests too a greater jurisdictional appetite for police research engagement than funding alone might imply (see Figure 3).

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2   Where projects received funding and support from multiple sources, all sources are counted. The exception is projects that received no funding.

3   Research was categorised by researchers as either 'on police' (involving communication with police to facilitate data collection only); 'with police' (involving a degree of collaborative design or data collection); or 'for police' (where independent research had been contracted by police). Police funding was spread across these second and third categories.

Figure 2: Funding sources for police research (number of projects by funding source)
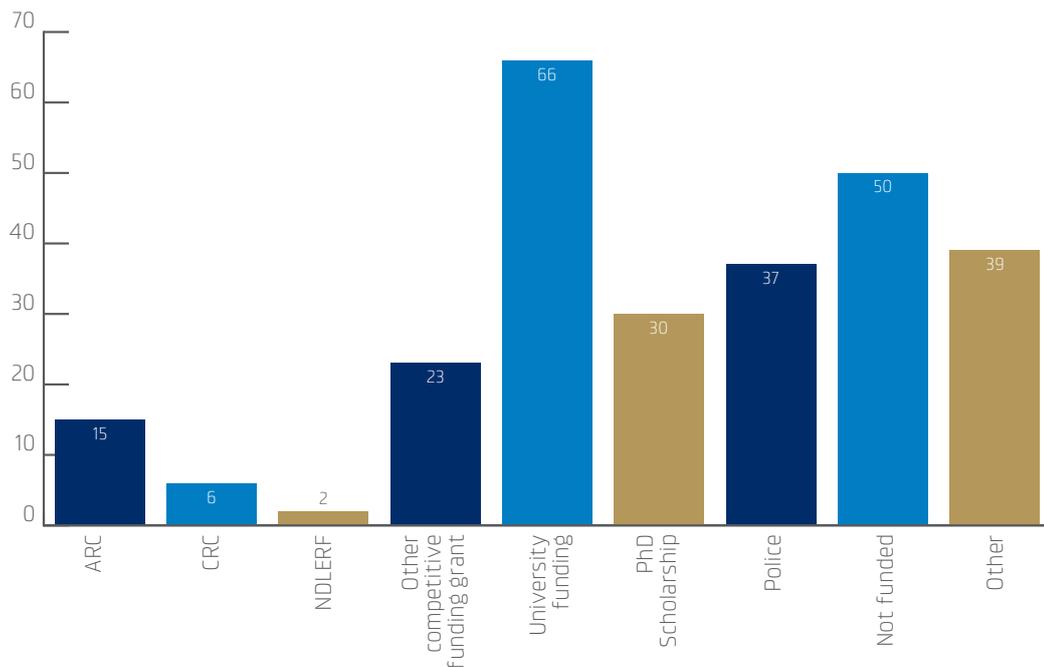

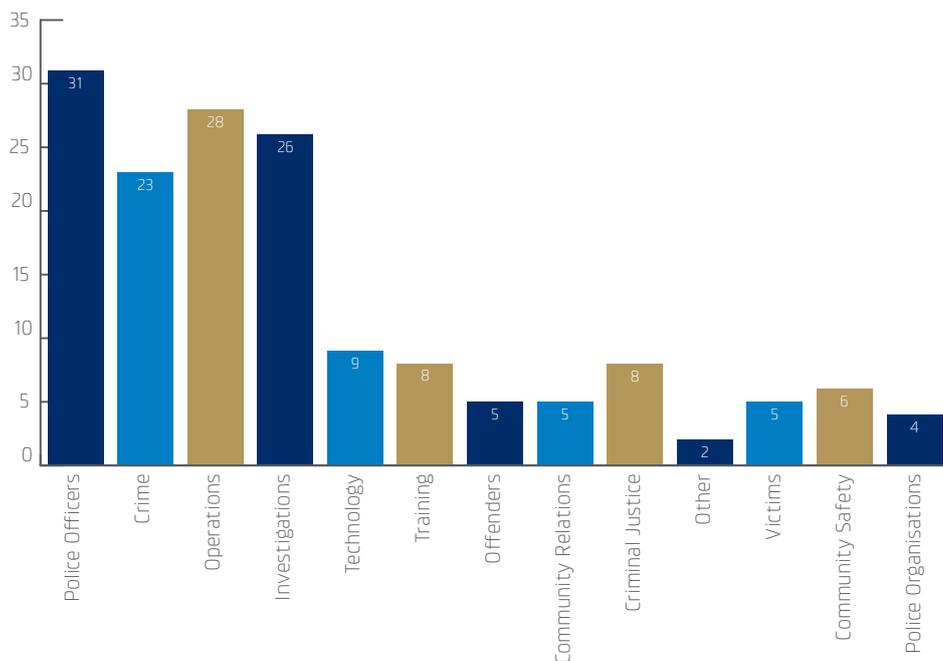**Figure 3: Is the research undertaken collaboratively with, for, or on police (% of projects)?[4]**

4   Details of the 59 research projects provided by UTS did not include data beyond project title and funding. As such these 59 studies are excluded from all further analysis, including this analysis on police collaboration. This is based on the remaining 150 research projects instead.

- With police
- On police
- For police
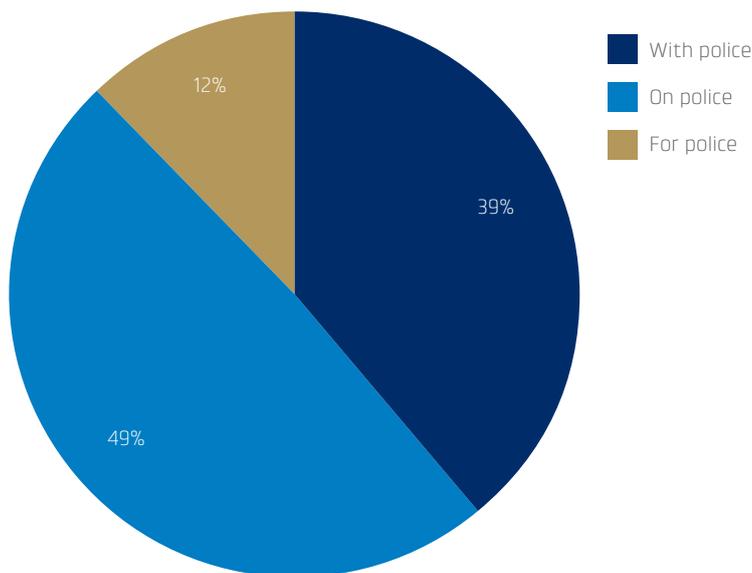
As you would expect, a breadth of research themes were evident across the dataset. Once details of the forensic research undertaken by UTS had been removed (because no further details about this research were available), the most popular themes for research were police officers, followed closely by research dealing with aspects of police operations, investigations, and crime types (See Figure 4).

Within these broad thematic categories there was considerable variation in the *type* of research being undertaken. For example, within the thematic category of *operations* there was research looking at the perceptions, effects, and impacts of using drug detection dogs in Australia; an evaluation of body-worn video cameras from the perspective of offenders; and an examination of the impact of implementing mental health co-response teams, to name a few. The *investigations* category included research looking at ways to improve eyewitness identification; the communication of forensic scientific information; and the investigation and prosecution of cyberstalking.

Figure 4: What issues are being looked at by research (number of projects by theme)?

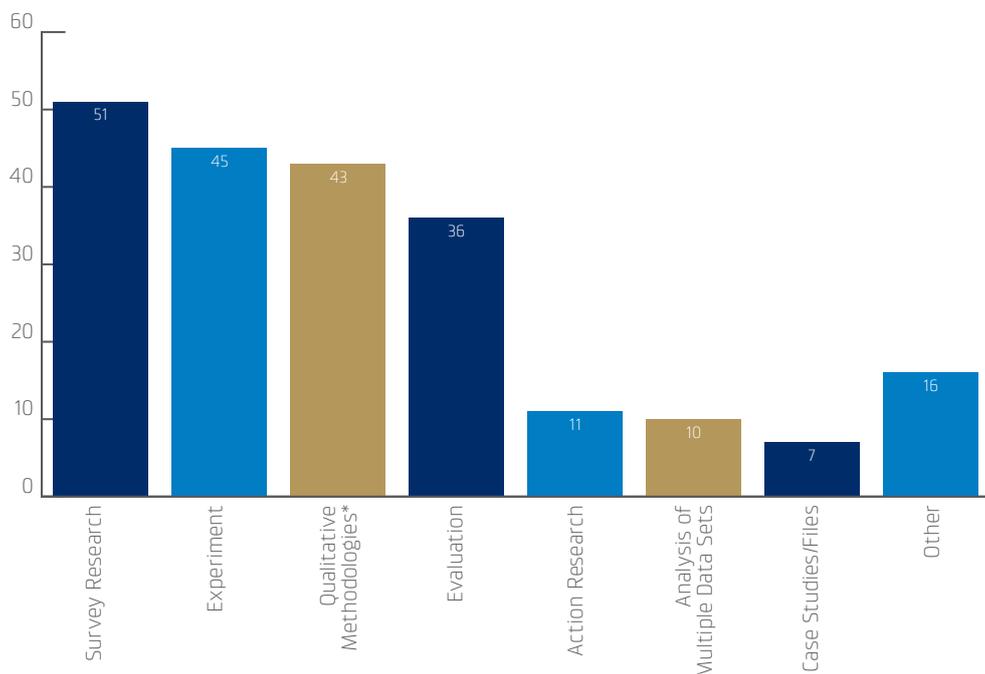| Theme	Number of projects
Police Officers	31
Crime	23
Operations	28
Investigations	26
Technology	9
Training	8
Offenders	5
Community Relations	5
Criminal Justice	8
Other	2
Victims	5
Community Safety	6
Police Organisations	4

As we might expect with the variety of research projects being undertaken across Australian universities, a variety of methodologies were being employed too, and over a third of research projects (39%) used a mix of methodologies.[5] Survey research was the most popular methodological approach used across studies (34%), followed by some sort of experimental design (30%), and qualitative approaches (29%) (See Figure 5).

5   Respondents were able to tick as many methodologies as they liked, which means that methodological totals exceed the number of studies included in the analysis, although relate to the 150 projects drawn from 20 universities once UTS had been excluded.

Figure 5: Research methodologies (number of projects by methodology)

*Qualitative methodologies included ethnography, discourse analysis etc.

Methodology	Number of projects
Survey Research	51
Experiment	45
Qualitative Methodologies*	43
Evaluation	36
Action Research	11
Analysis of Multiple Data Sets	10
Case Studies/Files	7
Other	16

police are engaging in more research than they are effectively 'purchasing', suggesting an effective bang for invested buck;

It is positive that there is so much variety in methodological approaches reflected in our data. There has been much debate in recent years about the value of evidence-based policing (EBP) and, with that, a debate about the relative merits of different methodological approaches (see Herrington, 2016, for more on this). More recent thinking has suggested that policing is better served by drawing on an array of research that addresses a variety of questions, using different methodological designs and data collection techniques (Tilley and Laycock, 2016). What our data here indicate is that the Australian police research landscape contains a healthy diversity of research approaches. Importantly this diversity is maintained when we look only at those research projects that received police funding (20 of the 150 projects) (see Table 1). We can speculate that this means police organisations have an appetite for commissioning and financially supporting research that employs a variety of methodological approaches.

Table 1: Methodological approaches among police-funded research[6]

Methodology	Count
Experimental design	9
Survey research	9
Qualitative methods	4
Action research	3
Evaluation research	8
Other	6

Also encouraging in our data is how respondents were planning on communicating their research findings. There is much said about the *dialogue of the deaf* in Australian police-academic relations (Bradley and Nixon, 2009), and the disconnect between the *language* of academia and that of policing has often been regarded as a key reason more academic research doesn't find traction in policing and change police practices (Herrington, 2016). There are many reasons for this, including a tendency among academics to concentrate on (and be rewarded for) publication in highly technical or niche journals, which are not readily accessible to many police officers practically or conceptually. It is interesting then that almost all respondents noted that the implications for policing would be clearly identified in any publications that emanated from their projects (94%), although this was self-assessed. A clear caveat here is that "implications for policing" may mean different things to practitioners and academics, and as such while an academic may believe they have clearly identified practical implications, the practitioner may not agree. That said, more than three quarters (81%) indicated that their research would result in a publication specifically for police — although, again, such "publications" may range from mandatory research summaries provided to police as required as part of the data collection arrangements, and as such there is no guarantee that these publications will be in a format able to be distributed to and digested by officers across the organisation. As such neither of these figures allows us to conclude the likely impact of these research projects on policing but, taken at face value, these data suggest that academics seem to be working hard to better engage the likely end-user of their research.

All of this leads us to conclude that there is much to be positive about when reflecting on the university-based police research landscape in Australia. Australian scholars are engaged in police research with very little cost to police (by drawing largely on the resources of their universities) and are committed to ensuring that their findings stand a good chance of helping inform police practice by tailoring communication. Moreover our analysis suggests that there are a range of methodological approaches being employed across Australia, and a healthy diversity in the types of questions being addressed. In short, there is plenty of scholarly research, relevant to the Australian context, which police can engage with if they choose to.

[6]   Respondents could nominate more than one methodological technique, meaning that this data reflects the 39 approaches used across the 20 projects.

Other police research hubs

Increasingly of course universities are not the only location in which high quality, practically relevant research of value to police organisations occurs. The AIPM has its own, modest, research centre with a focus on research to inform police and public safety leadership. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) also engages in literature reviews and policy analysis of interest and value to police. And the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) is another significant contributor to the landscape. In fact the AIC had 15 unique research projects underway at the time of this NPRI (see Appendix 2 for a summary of these projects), being undertaken by a staff of 26 academics. In addition to the work of the AIPM, the ASPI and the AIC, individual jurisdictions are organising themselves into research hubs too. Western Australia Police has invested heavily (financially and symbolically) in an evidence-based policing unit, and other jurisdictions have organised internal research teams to varying degrees. This research did not examine what research police organisations themselves were conducting, although given the rise in this type of in-house activity, it would make sense for future research audits to consider this.

Senior leaders need to prepare the organisation for this by creating a climate of learning and knowledge-based evolutionary practice.

What next for police research?

That brings us to think about what is next for police research. If we recall the launch pad for this piece — a series of roundtables held at the AIPM concluding that relations between police and academia were not as fruitful as they might be — our data are surprising. There is actually much proactivity and diversity in the academic police research landscape, and a clear opportunity for police organisations to capitalise on this with minimal financial investment. But is that the *right* thing to do. Should Australia's police organisations have more of a connection with academic police scholarship, or are the ad hoc arrangements in place sufficient? Are there things that police organisations can do to better foster relevant research, and better leverage off the wealth of knowledge generation being undertaken in various locations across Australia?

You will not be surprised to hear that we think that there are. Two of these were set out as themes three and four at the AIPM roundtables: a need for police to better invest in their relationships with university-based academics; and a need for police leaders to encourage a culture of learning in which research evidence is an important component in decision making.

Regarding the first, most police organisations are in the enviable position of having a number of local universities in their state with whom they can foster close relations[7] — although engaging effectively with academia requires police to have a degree of understanding about how universities work, what they want to achieve from the relationship, and how different disciplines and different styles of research will enable them to answer research questions in different ways. All academics have a preferred way of seeing the world. Crudely put, psychologists will see the world in terms of individuals and the decisions they make; sociologists will take a macro view about the influence society and structures have on our behaviour; and economists will have a different take again. Within these disciplines there are those who favour a qualitative approach to doing research, and those who favour quantitative analysis; and there are scholars who embrace applied research and are open to collaboration and articulation of practical implications, and those who prefer to retain a distance from policing and comment on practice from afar. Academia is a very broad church, and all approaches can be valuable in helping our organisations understand the challenges we face and how we might deal with these. In many ways the key challenge for police is in recognising who they could, and should, be engaging with to achieve the best knowledge outcome based on the particular question being asked. Navigating this landscape can be difficult for those outside the academy, and investing in one or two *critical friends* (internal or external) who can help organisations make sense of the landscape and help pair research questions with suitable experts is a good idea.

7   Clearly the Northern Territory — currently the force least well served by local universities — may wish to look interstate for academic relationships, or to invest locally in helping Charles Darwin University, based in the NT, better serve the local police research needs.

What police organisations must do is better navigate the police scholarship landscape and do so as savvy consumers. Police organisations must also shine a light within on their true appetite for research.

Second is the need to reduce the possibility for inefficient duplication of effort (and police funding). The impetus for this study was a sense that no one had a comprehensive picture of police research being conducted across the country. Individual organisations may be across the work being undertaken in their local universities, but there is no mechanism by which police officers in one state can be regularly updated about the ongoing knowledge generation being undertaken across the country. This makes it difficult for police to know where to invest their limited funds in research, and there is a risk of *reinventing the wheel* in jurisdictions across the country. To be clear, replication of research is not always a negative, and it is in fact a very important part of building knowledge. But as the NPRI has broadened our understanding of the breadth of research being undertaken, so it has highlighted that research activity in one locale could be valuable in helping police in another locale better tailor their own (related) research question, or divert their limited resources to answering something else. The profession may wish to think more deeply about how such communication can be routinised, and how high quality research activity as well as findings can be better shared and leveraged off across the country.

That leads us to consider the true organisational appetite for research insights across policing. Police organisations are not naturally set up to incorporate new research knowledge into practice, and as such are not often described as *learning organisations*. The oft-quoted Peter Senge characterised learning organisations as those in which "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, collective aspiration is set free, and people learn how to learn together" (Senge, 1990: 3). Learning organisations are competitive, agile, and innovative. Learning helps organisations push ahead with new ways of operating and see learning as an investment rather than a distraction. They reward learning, and accept that challenging existing ways of doing things is to be embraced rather than crushed. Moreover learning organisations do not fear failure, but see it as a learning opportunity and a necessary outcome of innovation and pushing the boundaries. So in learning organisations uncomfortable home truths and uncomfortable evidence are embraced and learnt from, not buried away in someone's bottom drawer. Integrating research evidence requires an organisational appetite for learning new ways of doing things, yet police organisations — indeed many bureaucracies — exist to ensure uniformity, consistency, and maintenance of the status quo. Moving past this to create organisations that value learning, and therefore value research, requires leadership, but we do not just mean support — or even benign neglect — from senior officers in the organisation. Instead learning organisations require the type of leadership that engages the whole organisation in the movement of knowledge: shared leadership. Shared leadership moves past a dependency on formal leaders and their top-down edicts, toward acceptance and cultivation of ideas and activity generated throughout the organisation. A culture of learning relies on shared leadership, because it relies on members throughout the organisation having the commitment, courage and confidence to incorporate new ideas, insights, and evidence. Senior leaders need to *prepare the organisation* for this by creating a climate of learning and knowledge-based evolutionary practice.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, our data do not support a perception of academic police scholarship as poor quality or of little relevance to policing, or of academics as uninterested in engaging with police. Certainly there are pockets of academic snobbery and aloofness, as in any profession, and it is important that academic activity encompass the broad range of intellectual activities from highly collaborative applied research to armchair theorising. What police organisations must do is better navigate the police scholarship landscape and do so as savvy consumers. Police organisations must also shine a light within on their true appetite for research. Are they hoping to *rubber stamp* a decision with "proof" or do they really want the insight that research can bring — good and bad — to change practice as needed? Getting the most from research means being responsive to it, and being responsive requires a culture of learning across policing. There are many reasons why such a culture does not come naturally to our hierarchies, meaning the role for police leaders is, then, to create a climate of learning and better engagement with research, and in doing so to forge more productive relationships with academia and all it has to offer.

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