

Blog: 'Pracademia – A World of Opportunity' by Jane Birkett, Senior Officer, National Crime Agency and Senior Practitioner Fellow, Open University (August – November 2016).

'Pracademia – A World of Opportunity'

Do you like research? Want to be part of a movement? Develop professional skills? Work within a totally different world? Well then I'd thoroughly recommend this!

As a practitioner, ask yourself, as I did, how do we progress our trade and address the challenges we face as the world around us relentlessly develops? The answer, in my humble opinion, is easy: By working in partnership with those who have the skills and resource to do it! The concept of disciplinary cross-pollination is not new, nor is it complex, but it is still quite timidly applied and needs to be exploited more within the world of law enforcement.

Luckily, various funding streams and support from innovative ministers allows collaborations to exist and research to be conducted. I am fortunate to be working with the Open University's Policing Consortium as a 'pracademic', or 'senior practitioner fellow' more formally, on a three month secondment. The opportunity was open to all members of the Consortium so I am joined by five other officers from various police forces and we are all beavering away on sections of an assortment of research topics.

The research is stringent in its outlook and working directly with law enforcement, embedding officers into the projects, follows the trend led by the College of Policing of 'evidence-based policing' – that is, ensuring that the research is what practitioners want, that it is grounded in theory and practice, and that it is translated into a language that all parties can understand. You can check out my project outline on the College's 'research map':

<http://whatworks.college.police.uk/Research/Research-Map/Pages/ResearchProject.aspx?projectid=536>

I am exploring the relationship that NCA officers within our Human Intelligence Team form with informants, the kind who are in the most serious of organised crime groups and who, for whatever reason, have decided to work covertly in our team. So not only am I immersed in academia but I'm also meeting colleagues from teams that I wouldn't ordinarily have exposure to, and learning another area of our business – what's not to like? My research aims to expose the workings of the officers from a psychological perspective, in particular how they build rapport and communicate with the informants; an otherwise unexplored topic from a national perspective in the UK.

Balancing the officers' disclosure between what is publishable and what is sensitive 'tradecraft' that can't be revealed is challenging but not insurmountable, so I'm confident that it will make an interesting read.

My experience of academia so far, as you can probably tell, has been positive; the supervision is great but at a distance, providing support but autonomy, the rest of the team are welcoming, friendly and helpful, but the IT set up is familiarly chaotic, and the facilities are superb, with access to a huge selection of books, journals and materials to inform background reading. All in all, if you are an independent and inquisitive person, like me, you'll flourish in an opportunity to be a 'pracademic', a lovely mixture of practitioner and academic rolled in to one.

To find out more about the Open University Policing Consortium visit their website: <http://centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk/#the-consortium>