

ANALYSIS:

Sustainable networks: Creating effective police research partnerships

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A recent research collaboration agreement between the UK’s National Crime Agency and Cranfield University could exploit defence research expertise to tackle policing challenges such as organised and transnational crime, and the dark net; Policing Insight’s Andrew Staniforth looks at this latest research partnership, as well as the key to sustaining successful collaborations such as the N8 Policing Research Partnership.

Earlier this month, [Cranfield University](#) and the [National Crime Agency](#) (NCA), signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to share expertise and collaborate on projects of mutual interest.

“Responding to contemporary threats to neighbourhood safety and national security requires law enforcement agencies to collaborate across the public, private and academic sectors to build new alliances and develop strategic partnerships.”

Professor Karen Holford, Chief Executive and Vice-Chancellor of Cranfield University stated: “We are proud to establish this partnership between Cranfield University and the NCA, allowing us to address new and emerging challenges in security. Our joint working will help ensure our research has real impact and will bring great professional development opportunities on both sides.”

As transnational crime gangs embrace the latest tools, techniques, and technologies, serving to amplify their capacity and capability to exploit illicit trades in people, firearms and drugs, innovative methods of combatting their operations must be found to bring them to justice.

It has long been widely recognised among senior police leadership that innovation in policing is a joint endeavour. Responding to contemporary threats to neighbourhood safety and national security requires law enforcement agencies to collaborate across the public, private and academic sectors to build new alliances and develop strategic partnerships.

Knowledge exchange

The NCA leads the whole system response to serious crime to reduce the impact on the UK and its communities. Its multi-agency and multi-disciplinary function TRACER (Threat and Risk Assessment, Capability, Exploration and Research), which represents the whole intelligence and law enforcement community, leads the partnership with Cranfield University to develop knowledge and new technologies for future operational capabilities.

Speaking at the time of the signing of the new agreement, Kate Fisher, the NCA’s Deputy Director for TRACER, said: “Criminals have always adapted to changing circumstances and adopted new technologies, a trend that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. It requires the law enforcement community to focus on research and development in order to adapt to new threats and opportunities.

“The programming of specialist defence and security research into the NCA’s higher policing responsibilities of tackling transnational crime groups and dark net cyber criminals is an exciting prospect.”

“Working with academic partners such as Cranfield is critical, and so I am pleased that TRACER, as the lead for science and technology in the NCA, is here today to sign an MoU. It is a tangible sign of our commitment and ambition to deepen research ties.”

As one of the world’s leading universities for defence and security education, research and consultancy, Cranfield University offers the NCA a new strategic alliance with

unique expertise and facilities at the forefront of their fields, bringing a diverse range of capabilities from energetics and forensic sciences to international stabilisation, counter-terrorism, and cyber security. The new partnership will hopefully be able to exploit defence research expertise and findings to develop mainstream policing policy, practice and procedure.

The programming of specialist defence and security research into the NCA's higher policing responsibilities of tackling transnational crime groups and dark net cyber criminals is an exciting prospect, but sustaining research partnerships requires academia to deliver real and measurable positive outcomes for public safety.

Sustainability strategy

The NCA and Cranfield university can learn from the experiences of the UK's leading police academic network, the [N8 Policing Research Partnership](#) (N8 PRP), which combines policing expertise and academic rigour to deliver research on many strategic policing requirements.

N8 PRP was established in 2013 to enable and foster collaborations that will help address the problems of policing in the 21st century and achieve international excellence in policing research.

It is a platform for collaboration between universities, police forces, police and crime commissioners (PCCs), government and other partners working in policing policy, governance and practice.

There are currently 13 forces and PCCs working with the N8 PRP – Cheshire, Cleveland, Cumbria, Durham, Greater Manchester, Humberside, Lancashire, Merseyside, North Yorkshire, Northumbria, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire – which collaborate with the eight research-intensive universities in the North of England (Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York).

Success factors

The N8 PRP is currently led by co-directors [Chief Superintendent Ngaire Waine](#), Head of Criminal Justice at Merseyside Police and [Dr Geoff Pearson](#), Senior Lecturer in Criminal Law at the University of Manchester.

“It is the diversity of the partnership that is the real success, being able to offer a programme that sits above the bi-lateral relationship between police forces and their local universities, offering more cutting-edge ideas and research focus and collaboration.”

Since its inception, the N8 PRP has served as a vital framework for research collaboration and knowledge exchange between the research, policy and policing communities. The work it has undertaken has focused on how policing, community safety, crime prevention and victim services have all gone through unprecedented changes in recent years.

The N8 PRP's critical success factor is having a significant number of universities and police forces come together around shared objectives but being focused on the frontline policing challenges.

It is therefore the diversity of the partnership that is the real success, being able to offer a programme that sits above the bi-lateral relationship between police forces and their local universities, offering more cutting-edge ideas and research focus and collaboration.

The most important element in the N8 PRP is the foundational idea of co-production, designing and delivering research together that cuts across the boundaries of police and academic disciplines.

The real value of co-producing research in a partnership is that the ideas people come up with are amplified through inter-institutional collaboration, and the research outcomes are subsequently much greater than individual professions could deliver separately.

This approach on a large scale is ambitious and is in itself labour intensive, but co-production of research, with police officers and researchers working together, has proved really successful for the N8 PRP, and reflects true collaboration in action to solve contemporary police problems together.

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Link to online article at Policing Insight: <https://policinginsight.com/features/sustainable-networks-creating-effective-police-research-partnerships/>



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