The Politics of Higher Police Education: An International Comparative Perspective

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Abstract Several countries have introduced mandatory higher education for all police officers. However, we have scant empirical knowledge about the arguments and debates underlying these systems. This contribution unpacks the ‘politics of higher police education’ in Norway, Finland, and North Rhine-Westphalia. We discuss the circumstances and dominant actors’ views, expectations, and arguments involved in the introduction and evolution of higher police education, and how to understand similarities and differences between these three countries. We find that similar arguments recurred in each case: helping the police adapt to a changing society, making the police profession more attractive, preventing police education from lagging behind similar professions, and improving police–citizen relationships. Specific historical or political contexts and organizational arrangements also played important roles in the introduction and shaping of higher police education. The higher police education systems as such are seen as legitimate, but there are fierce ongoing debates on both substance and form.

Introduction

Higher education for police officers, for instance, at the level of bachelor or master degree, has often been presented as important to counter a wide range of more or less chronic shortcomings of the police. Higher police education is, for instance, expected to improve police occupational culture and ethical awareness of officers, to help the police adapt to changes in society, to raise professional status, and to increase police legitimacy. Although there is a broad range of research available on the effects of higher police education, the empirical evidence on this issue is scant and inconclusive (Paterson, 2011; Paoline et al., 2015; Brown, 2020).

Even more important in the context of this article, is that there are important differences in how higher police education has been established in different countries. In general, despite the important arguments that support higher police education, the introduction of such a system seems to have been neither self-evident nor easy. On the contrary, it often seems to have been a non-linear process, with many different actors involved, resulting from a wide range of views and interests, and dependent on factors such as power relations, processes of framing, and agenda-setting. This implies that it may be expected that this ‘political’ process will continue even after the introduction of higher police education.

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In this article, we aim to analyse the politics of higher police education from an international perspective, by concentrating on the introduction of higher police education in three Northwestern European countries: Norway, Finland, and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) (Germany). The purpose of this analysis is to uncover which actors and what circumstances, views, expectations, and arguments have been involved in this process.

The following section introduces the theoretical perspective, research question, and methods of this study. Next, the main features of the three countries’ police education systems are discussed. Then the focus shifts to the trajectories and motivations to introduce higher police education. Finally, the article analyses the contemporary debate surrounding higher police education in the three countries.

Research question and methods

This study views higher police education through the lens of professionalization (Fleming, 2014), also applying some notions from institutional theory. While for many decades the police have been pushing for more professionalization (Stone and Travis, 2011; Sklansky, 2014)—in a much wider sense than the term was used in the USA in the era of the ‘professional police’—this occupation firmly belongs in the category of semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969; Fleming, 2014; Fielding, 2018).

The drive for the professionalization of the police is closely matched with the rise of new, complex societal and technological problems. Such challenges are perceived to increasingly require specialized training and education. This goes beyond the need for technical skills and ‘better personnel, with better training’ (White, 1972, p. 61). The police are also said to require a more solid intellectual and indeed moral basis (Stone and Travis, 2011; Sklansky, 2014).

In the process of professionalization, occupational training and education tend to become increasingly linked with universities and the development of knowledge (Freidson, 2001). This is most visible in those countries where police education is close to the higher education system (Rogers and Frevel, 2018). To be fully professionalized, however, the police should also be able to successfully claim a professional domain and, crucially, construct an exclusive knowledge base (Freidson, 2001). For the police, this ambition proves hard to realize.

Yet higher police education has powerful symbolic elements as well. Theoretical training, systematic knowledge, and vocational qualifications can be used as legitimation strategies (Ritzer, 1975; Crank, 1994), signalling that the police are trustworthy professionals (Worden and McLean, 2017). What complicates matters is that in the case of the police, professionalism and police education are the outcomes of institutionalization processes with many actors involved, often also from outside the police. These actors, with different perspectives and interests, are positioned in a web of interrelations, dependencies, conflicts, and collaborations (Scott, 2014). And while such actors tend to behave goal-oriented, the outcomes of these processes may not be foreseen or intended. Police education may then be shaped by power relations, competition and emotionally salient concepts or fault lines (Fleming, 2014).

In this article, we will deal with the complex politics of higher police education in three European countries. It is assumed that these ‘political’ elements cannot only be found in the process leading to the introduction of higher police education but also after it was established. The ‘political’ perspective draws the attention both to the arguments underlying the decision to introduce higher police education and to the main actors and (power) relations involved. Our main question is: ‘How and why was mandatory higher education for the police introduced in Norway, Finland, and North Rhine-Westphalia, what have been the main debates since its introduction, and how can we understand differences between these countries?’
These three countries were selected because each of them has higher education as a requirement for all police officers.

This study applied two research methods. First, between 15 and 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted in each country, for 53 key informants in total. These informants were selected on the basis of diversity of their positions in relation to (higher) police education at different moments. This resulted in diversity in perspective, experience, expertise, and views on police education. We first contacted one or two key persons working at the police university college in each country. We asked them for key informants. The interviews with these key persons provided us with other names of more informants. Among the key persons who were interviewed, were police university college staff, teachers, researchers, politicians (at the national level), representatives of police unions, higher ranked ministry officials, and police officers at different positions in the police service. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a topic list. The most important topics were changes in and organization of (higher) police education, processes of decision-making surrounding police education reforms, the main elements and principles of police education, and the most important debates about police education. Moreover, we asked about the perceived (positive and negative) consequences of the introduction of a system of higher police education for a range of issues, including the quality of police work, professionalization of the police, work ambitions, and career of police officers, police cultures, relations between police and citizens, etc. Because of the differences in context, developments and debates, these topics had to be adjusted partly for each country and, given differences in expertise and experience, for each category of key informants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with an extensive transcript of each interview. Interviews in Norway and Finland were conducted in English, while those in NRW were mostly done in German. Occasionally, additional information was asked later by e-mail and some preliminary findings were checked with local informants to ensure we did not make factual errors.

Secondly, for each country, documents were studied, both scholarly publications and a range of other documents, such as policy documents and (historical and legal) overviews. We were particularly interested in documents explicating the ‘logic’ behind important developments and decisions and in documents about important debates concerning higher police education. The selection of these documents was based on our own search and on recommendations by informants. The availability of documents differed between the three countries, with especially Finland having relatively few English-language publications on the subject.

The qualitative analysis started with coding and decoding of the qualitative data that we collected. Next, the data (both from the interviews and the documents) were analysed and reported for each country separately. This was followed by the final step, the qualitative cross-national comparison.

Police systems and systems of police education

To understand the debates and political processes resulting in the introduction of higher police education, we first focus on some main elements of the organization of the police and of the police education system for each of the three countries (see also Table 1).

Norway

The Norwegian police have a tradition of decen-tralization and strong local orientation (Larsson, 2010). Similar to other Nordic countries, police in Norway have a low density: only one officer on every 549 inhabitants. The Norwegian police claim to follow the Peelian police principles. This implies not only adhering to the principle of policing by consent but also that the police officers are normally unarmed, perceive themselves primarily as
members of the local community, and have a generalist view of their job. The Norwegian police force has only limited room for specialization. Historically, the Norwegian police have distinguished lensmenn (roughly speaking, the rural police) from the regular police (Larsson, 2010; Høigaard, 2011). These two branches, including their education, were integrated in 1994.

Over the past few decades, the police in Norway have undergone two major reforms: in 2001 and 2015. Both have contributed to more centralization and the closure of many police stations. Especially, the 2015 reform changed the traditional preventative and generalist approach with a focus on visibility, leading to a more reactive style of policing, more emphasis on emergency response (beredskap), a less generalist view on police work, and less discretion for operational officers (Gundhus, 2017; Christensen et al., 2018).

Police education in Norway has been concentrated at the Police University College (Politihøgskolen), which is part of the police organization, since 1992. In 2004, the police educational basic programme was accredited at the bachelor level. Young people who want to join the police first have to obtain this bachelor degree. Because this bachelor programme is highly popular, and due to Norway’s higher education selection system, the students who are admitted tend to be good academic achievers.

The bachelor programme takes 3 years (180 European Credit Transfer System or ECTS). The first and third years feature a combination of theory and practice; the second year is devoted to internships in the police organization. Each year contains courses about police and society, preventative policing, operational police work and emergency response, and criminal investigation. There is no room in the curriculum for specialization.

The Norwegian Police University College has two master programmes. The oldest one, introduced in 2004, is Police Science, a social scientific programme of 120 ECTS taking 4 years of half-time study. A second master, on the criminal investigation (90 ECTS over 3 years), was introduced in 2016.

### North Rhine-Westphalia

In the Federal Republic of Germany, each of the states (Länder) has its own police system, police force, and police act (Frevel, 2018). NRW has the

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**Table 1:** Features of systems of police education in Norway, NRW, and Finland

| Key Features                              | Norway       | NRW          | Finland       |
|------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Year of introduction of higher police education | 1992         | 1994         | 2014          |
| Level                                    | 3 years bachelor | 3 years bachelor | 3 years bachelor |
| Bachelor programme since                 | 2004         | 2008         | 2014          |
| Room for specialization in bachelor programme | No (no electives or specialization tracks) | No (no electives or specialization track) | Only limited room for electives |
| Educational organization                 | Police University College (Politihøgskolen) | University of Applied Sciences for Police and Public Administration (Hochschule für Polizei und öffentliche Verwaltung) | Police University College (Poliisiammatti-korkeakoulu) |
| Core elements of educational programme   | Comparatively strong focus on social sciences and ethics | Broad range of academic topics and different types of practical training | Comparatively strong focus on practical training and managerial courses |
| College part of police organization?     | Yes          | No           | Yes           |

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largest police force in Germany. The police density in NRW is considerably higher than in Norway: one officer on every 359 inhabitants. The police force is hierarchically subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior of NRW. The operational work is mainly organized in 47 regional police districts, in addition to which there are three state-level units with specialized tasks.

In Germany, all positions in state organizations are divided into four levels: the low, middle, higher, and highest levels. Each level corresponds with certain educational requirements and specific pay scales. To understand police education in NRW, it is essential to realize that the lowest two levels in this police force were abolished in the mid-1990s (Frevel, 2018). Until that moment, in the basic police, all operational positions were at the middle level, but in the criminal investigation, they were at the higher level. Despite the elimination of this distinction (and of the differences in career opportunities and pay scale) (Lange and Schenck, 2004), there is still a difference in status and prestige between the two sectors.

The University of Applied Sciences for Police and Public Administration (HSPV) in NRW has a specific police bachelor programme of 3 years, accredited since 2008. All new police officers have to obtain this bachelor degree before they become a fully fledged police officer. The HSPV is independent of the police (Frevel, 2018).

A main principle of the bachelor programme is the trinity of theory, training, and practice. To realize this principle, three different organizations participate in the bachelor programme. The HSPV is responsible for the theoretical (academic) aspects by providing both general courses (such as criminology or law) and police-specific courses. Training is given by a special unit of the police organization. There, police students wear a police uniform, in contrast to the university courses, where they wear civilian clothes (Dübbers, 2015). Students learn police practice through an internship at one of the regional police stations.

After the 3 years’ bachelor education, new officers first spend 1 year in the patrol service at a regional police station. Next, they join the riot police for another 3 years. Hence, police officers can begin specialization no earlier than 7 years after they started their police education.

A police master programme is provided by the German Police University. This management-oriented programme operates for the police forces of all German states.

**Finland**

Similar to Norway, the Finnish police force is traditionally highly decentralized. In line with the predominance of rural policing in Finland, police work there is generally perceived as a generalist and as consisting of a broad range of tasks. Police density is rather low: one police officer per 750 inhabitants. The governance and accountability of the police are the responsibilities of the Finnish Minister of the Interior (Haraholma and Houtsonen, 2013; Virta and Taponen, 2017).

The Finnish police service has undergone several organizational reforms since the 1990s. These reforms were mainly motivated by NPM-considerations, such as increasing efficiency and effectiveness. Between the mid-1990s and 2014, the number of police districts was reduced from 229 to 11. The responsibility for the management of the police was transferred from the provincial authorities to the then-new national police chief (Haraholma and Houtsonen, 2013).

The Police University College of Finland, established in 2008, is providing all police education in the country. The Police University College is part of the police organization, but is autonomous in its education and research activities.

Finland introduced higher police education as a general requirement for all police officers much later than Norway and NRW. Only in 2014 did Finland establish a 3-year police bachelor program. The bachelor programme is generalist in nature and has almost no room for specialization.
The programme is predominantly practice-oriented, has several courses on (business) management issues, but is almost without social science courses. About 1 year of the programme (the second year) is spent doing internships in the police organization. Selection and admission procedures for the Finnish police university college are independent of the central higher education selection procedure in Finland.

The Finnish police university college also has a master program. This programme of 2 years full-time study (120 ECTS) is mainly focused on leadership and management of the police.

The introduction of higher police education

Although Norway, NRW, and Finland have fairly similar systems of higher police education with a bachelor degree as a requirement for all police officers, there are important differences in the trajectories that gave rise to these systems. A clear distinction can be made between Norway and NRW on the one hand and Finland on the other. First, we will describe the different trajectories and then we discuss the reasons to introduce systems of higher police education.

Trajectories

Both Norway and NRW established their system of higher police education already in the 1990s. In both countries, this was the outcome of a decades-long process, with many actors involved and with decisions taken step by step resulting in the contemporary system with bachelor and master degrees.

In Norway, this process goes back to the 1970s. The Norwegian police at the time were strongly criticized for how they dealt with radical student movements and youth subcultures. The government asked several commissions for proposals to reform the police and police education. The commissions argued for a new vision on the role of the police and for changes in police education: it should pay more attention to social processes and changes in Norwegian society (NOU, 1979, 1981). Police leadership education, it was suggested, should be of higher level (NOU, 1979, p. 129). At first, these proposals did not result in clear reforms. However, throughout the 1980s, the aims of ‘social integration’ of the police and of higher levels of police education gradually gained support in Norway. This was seen as necessary because of the growing complexity of society and police work and an increasing need to collaborate with partners (Hove, 2012).

In the late 1980s, both the ministry and police unions published reports that argued for a transition of the police school to a (practice-oriented) police college. A third report, commissioned by the police school itself, stated that police education should be much more than only practical training; it should also promote critical reflection and problem-solving skills of police officers (Hove, 2012). Societal integration gained prominence and suggestions for revising police education included adding an internship in partner organizations.

Based on these reports, another commission was tasked with drawing the outlines of a new police college. In 1992, this institution was established with a curriculum including much room for theory, ethics, and social science. After the year 2000, the Norwegian police education has been strongly professionalized, with formal accreditation of the bachelor, the emergence of new master programmes, and a growing research department at the police university college.

In NRW, this process was also commenced in the 1970s. In those years, a group of young police officers wanted the German police to become more ‘citizen-oriented’ (Dübbers, 2015), less army-like, more communicative and better able to de-escalate conflicts. One of their issues was the need of higher education for police officers (Frevel, 2018). In the mid-1970s, a change in federal law determined that all German states should require at least a 3-year preparatory programme...
for police officers at supervisory positions. To meet this standard, the NRW government decided to create an educational programme with both practical and scientific courses for initially a small number of higher-ranked positions in the police (Gross, 2003). This programme was taught by the College of Public Administration (since 2019 HSPV). The argument was that this would create the opportunity for police students to also attend non-police courses and interact with other students and teachers (Mokros, 2016), and would foster an ‘academic, reflexive’ attitude (Dübbers, 2015).

From the mid-1980s on, police unions, police leaders, and many German state ministries of the interior tried to take new measures to make the police occupation more attractive. The police unions not only strove for higher salaries and better career opportunities for police officers, but also wanted to improve the image and social status of police work (Lange and Schenck, 2004). The NRW government, strongly supported by the police unions, took a radical decision: all positions in the police at the lowest and lower levels were abolished; only positions at the higher and the highest levels remained. A main argument underlying this decision was that most operational police work is much more complex than is often assumed and demands competencies and education at the higher level. The new 3-year programme, to be mandatory for all new police students, was located at the College of Public Administration. This decision was dependent on a coalition of different actors with diverging views and interests. Since 1994, after 3 years of education, all new police officers have started their career at the higher rank of Inspector. The lowest pay scales and positions were abolished (Frevel, 2018).

In Finland, the road to mandatory higher police education differed in several respects. First, this system was introduced more recently, in 2014. Secondly, the introduction of Finnish higher police education was more dependent on pragmatic considerations, involved less political debate and included fewer political actors than in the other two countries.

Finnish police education was traditionally divided between training for new police recruits and education for police leaders. The basic training underwent professionalization especially in the 1980s, when it became recognized as a 2-year vocational education at the Police School in Tampere (Jansson, 2018). Changes in leadership education in the 1990s, however, were decisive in shaping the future trajectory of higher police education in Finland. Before 1996, higher leadership positions in the police were usually held by lawyers with a university degree who came from outside the police. From that year on, however, police officers could also access these positions. This necessitated a professional knowledge base for police supervisors and leadership. The Police (leadership) College in Espoo was then accredited as a university college-level institution with a small research department, offering a 3-year bachelor programme mandatory for police supervisors. From 1998 onwards, special master programmes for police chiefs were introduced at the universities of Tampere and Turku.

In 2008, practical and financial considerations made the two police educational institutions merge into the Finnish Police College. Despite the fact that this new institution had the status of a university college, most of its programs did not award a bachelor degree. In 2011, a commission that evaluated the basic police education programme concluded that it would be fairly easy to transform the existing basic programme of 2.5 years (165 EC) into a 3-year bachelor programme of 180 EC, solving this problem. This suggestion was, in contrast to the trajectories in Norway and NRW, accepted without much discussion. In 2014, the new bachelor programme for all new police officers started, with some modernizations in the programme and setting. Still, the Finnish police bachelor has retained more traditional elements than the other two countries’ programmes—including the fact that all students wear the
uniform. A master programme for Finnish police leadership was introduced in 2016.

Arguments
There are important similarities between Norway, NRW, and Finland in the main arguments to introduce higher police education as a requirement for all officers. These arguments reflect different aspects of the police professionalization agenda. Four interrelated arguments may be distinguished.

First, and in line with what Brown (2020) found, the main argument was that the increasing complexity of the social, legal, and technological environment in which the police operate has made police work much more complex as well. This demands more expertise and knowledge from police officers, but also more analytical capabilities, reflexivity, flexibility, and communicative skills. In NRW, the argument was that much police work on the streets is more complex than was often assumed. It requires officers who have the competencies to judge morally, legally, and socially very diverse and complex situations. In this view, higher police education is not primarily a matter of learning (technical) skills and knowledge (Ausbildung), but more of (academic) Bildung, the development of a general intellectual capacity and attitude to reflect critically on complex issues. A similar view is, in different terms, expressed in Finland and especially Norway where selection and education concentrate on enhancing the ethical and intellectual competencies of police officers.

Secondly, higher education was also seen as a way to make police work more attractive, in terms of pay, image, and career opportunities. In both Norway and Finland, the system of higher education created room for police officers to grow into leading positions that used to be exclusive for lawyers from outside the police. Moreover, it was intended to enhance horizontal mobility in the police organization. In NRW, the improvement of the salary and status of police officers was a main factor for the police unions to support this reform.

Thirdly, each of these countries has had rising levels of education among the general population over the past few decades. It was felt that the police could not stay behind in this development. The alternative would be that police work becomes to be seen as an unattractive occupation. Other professional groups such as nurses and teachers had already raised their level of education. Because the police increasingly have to cooperate with higher educated partners, the need for the police education reform was felt to be more serious. In an age of ‘life-long learning’, the police need a high starting level to follow this trend. If not, so it was feared, ambitious students would choose other occupations.

Fourth, higher levels of police education were deemed necessary to promote a more open and responsive style of policing and to reduce detrimental police practices. In NRW, higher police education aimed to promote a more citizen-oriented, communicative and less hierarchical police organization—less militaristic and more democratic. In Norway, the education reform had comparable aims but formulated differently: integration in local communities, more focus on prevention and cooperation with citizens and partner agencies. These arguments align with those mentioned by Brown (2020), although issues such as the reduction in corruption and the use of violence are less prominent here. Considerations around citizens and local communities were less central to the Finnish police education reform, which was mainly motivated by pragmatic arguments. The Finnish police enjoy the highest level of public trust of any European police organization (Schaap, 2018), decreasing the need for becoming more citizen-oriented.

Differences
In addition to the main arguments for the introduction of the higher police education systems
that recur in all three countries, there are some arguments that are only relevant in one or two of them. These latter arguments are often related to the specific historical or political context and organizational arrangements of police and police education. We concentrate on a few examples.

In Norway, the development of police and police education often reflects the historically dominant social democratic view on the police. This may help explain why Norwegian police education emphasizes social science courses. The fact that the Finnish bachelor programme is mainly oriented towards practice and management is in line with the former practical, vocational education of police officers and with the roots of Finnish higher police education in the management-oriented police leadership course.

The system of higher police education in NRW is partially motivated by the desire for a non-militaristic and democratic police. Given the history of the German police during the Nazi era, it is now considered crucial that police officers are able to reflect critically on their job and what is going on in society. A similar logic was applied in Norway, where the memory of the Quisling regime was invoked to argue for the importance of incorporating history and social science in the curriculum, and for democratic accountability of the police. In Finland, these arguments were mostly absent.

Specific organizational issues may also be relevant in how decisions are made about higher police education. For instance, the long-lasting conflict between patrol service and criminal investigation departments in NRW was an important incentive for the decision that all officers should attend the same programme and without any room for specialization in the first years after the bachelor programme. The traditional powerful position of lawyers, with their almost exclusive access to leading positions in the Norwegian and Finnish police, made the establishment of higher police education an important step in the emancipation of police officers in these two countries, creating new career opportunities that were closed before.

**Ongoing debates**

In each of the three countries, interviews with stakeholders and (policy) documents show that the current systems of higher police education are generally seen as legitimate. The existence of higher police education in itself does not raise much debate. The original aims and arguments to establish higher police education are still seen as valid. It is generally assumed that higher police education has resulted in more professional officers and better quality of police work. Yet none of these countries has systematically evaluated their system of higher police education. The evaluation may be perceived as potentially threatening the status quo, a reason to waive such studies (Frevel, 2018), which may be seen as an illustration of the politics of police education.

Despite general support for higher police education in these countries, some aspects of these systems are hotly contested. In Norway and NRW, the main issues in these debates are broadly similar. We concentrate on four of the most important topics.

The tension between ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ elicits the fiercest debates. While neither country appears to have a strong movement in favour of abandoning higher education as a requirement for all police officers, there is the widespread view that police work mainly requires practical experience and not ‘theory’. A practical orientation dominates among both police officers and police students, sometimes in the form of ‘anti-theoretical’ attitudes (and especially in Norway also anti-social sciences). Even after 25 years of higher police education, police culture has not lost its traditional anti-academic pragmatism (Bowling et al., 2019). In NRW, during the first years of the new police education, the fear was expressed that it could result...
in ‘over-qualification’ of police officers (Gross, 2003). The fact that most of the highly educated police officers maintain a practical orientation shows that this fear did not materialize.

A second issue concerns the relation between ‘generalism’ and ‘specialism’. All three countries have based their police education on the notion of generalism with little to no opportunity for specialization. In Norway and Finland, this reflects the dominant view that the police (should) have a broad range of tasks. The largely rural nature of the two countries, with their long distances and low police density, shaped this view. In the Norwegian case, the social democratic principles of policing play a role as well. Over the past years, there have been calls for more specialization in police education in Norway (and to a lesser extent in Finland) because of the increasing importance of issues such as cybercrime, terrorism, and new information technologies. However, the Norwegian Police University College maintains its position that generalist education should precede specialization. In NRW, police education is based upon the ‘unity of education and career’. Especially criminal investigators are asking for more room for specialization in police education.

Thirdly, debates often concern the (contested) independence of the police education institution: to what extent is the police university college independent in its education and research? Should it follow the priorities of ministry and police service? In Norway, the future direction of the police university college was unclear because its small size was seen as inefficient. There were those who advocated its merger with other higher education institutions, with the risk of losing much of its identity. In NRW, the former University College of Public Administration (FhoV) had to change its name to the University of Applied Sciences for Police and Administration after almost 25 years, a highly symbolic measure suggesting more affinity between education and police.

The issue of students wearing police uniform can be understood as symbolic for the degree of independence of the police university college. Norwegian police students are not obliged to wear uniforms, signalling the position of the university college as being distanced from the police force. Finland’s Police University College has stronger connections with the police organization and as such, students wear uniforms in class. In NRW, students do not wear police uniform at academic courses, but they do so during practical training, indicating the ambivalent and contradictory (in-)dependence of higher police education there.

There have also been recurring debates about (potentially) adverse consequences of the selection of students for higher police education. The police bachelor programme in Norway is very popular. As a result, only students with high academic performance and motivation are admitted. The mere suggestion that lower-class students are underrepresented in the Norwegian police education (Fekjær, 2014) is a sensitive issue, given the importance of equality and proportionality in Norwegian police principles. In NRW, only students with Abitur are admitted to the police bachelor program. This may conflict with the desire for more officers from ethnic minorities.

In contrast to Norway and NRW, Finland features less debate about its higher police education system. The Finnish police higher education system had a more recent start and was developed more gradually. In addition, the introduction of the Finnish bachelor programme was mainly motivated by pragmatic considerations and much less by politics and ideology, which fits in with a broader pattern of depoliticization of the Finnish police (Kostiainen, 2018).

**Concluding remarks**

We have shown that the politics of higher police education are at work in times when systems of higher police education are introduced, as well as much later, when these systems develop. Different actors are involved, each with their own views and
interests, and they apply certain strategies, power relations, policy symbols, and processes such as agenda-building.

From this perspective, the similarities we found between the three systems of higher police education (and their dominant unresolved issues), are remarkable. This implies that the professionalization processes in these different contexts share many characteristics. This is confirmed by the fact that the types of arguments used to justify and motivate the introduction of higher police education are often quite similar. The importance of symbolic and political elements in the formation of higher police education, despite their differences in relevant actors, historical context and political situation, has not led to fundamental differences between countries.

This does not automatically mean that the police, in these three countries, are professional in the scholarly sense of the word (Wilensky, 1964). Such a statement would depend on a range of other factors. Rather, the introduction and development of higher police education are elements of an ongoing, non-linear, process of professionalization. First, higher education in itself does not guarantee exclusive dominion over a professional domain. Secondly, the quite practically oriented higher police education systems we observed are unlikely to ensure the development of a unique knowledge base for the profession (Freidson, 2001).

The findings of this study may be relevant for countries that consider adopting a system of higher police education comparable with those in the countries analysed here. Despite the fact that originally, the proposal for higher police education raised much debate (especially in Norway and NRW), these debates are currently generally seen as outdated. In these countries, higher education for all police officers is now generally perceived as legitimate and as an important step towards further professionalization of the police. Since then, developments have shown that the fear that higher educated police officers would not be willing to do ‘ordinary’ police work or that the police would be confronted with ‘over-qualification’, has not materialized. Although higher police education is still raising debate, the decision to introduce higher education for all police officers is in itself currently uncontroversial. Indeed, it is valued for several reasons: to promote the professional level of the police needed in an increasingly complex society, to stay in tune with the rising levels of education of other relevant professional groups and society in general, and to improve the image and working conditions of police officers. These arguments have proven to stand the test of time in these countries and, as a consequence, may be relevant considerations for other countries facing similar decisions about higher police education.

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