

‘Pracademia – how a short but sweet collaboration panned out’ by Jane Birkett, Senior Officer, National Crime Agency (NCA)

Three months as Senior Practitioner Fellow with the Open University’s Centre for Policing Research and Learning (CPRL) taught me many things, not least that despite the chasm of differences between law enforcement and academia the two can cooperate extraordinarily well. This is of course dependent on the spirit of the people involved, their dedication to the cause and willingness to learn from each other, which I think (and know that I’m not alone from talking to my academic research team) is achieved with gusto in this union. In a nutshell, CPRL does what it says on the tin and more.

My research into Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS) was a foray into the unknown for me and my academic partner and supervisor, Graham, which is a credit to his interest in learning and autonomous supervisory style. It shows that fresh eyes on a new area of law enforcement and application of existing knowledge of psychological theory can be a successful combination.

The study saw me gaining access to the NCA’s team who source, manage and build relationships with the CHIS. Speaking of credit, this shows the openness and trust that the NCA senior management team placed in me and the university to expose some of the agency’s most sensitive work and assets. Naturally, close liaison with them ensured that the risk of exposure of tactics, methodology and tradecraft was mitigated whilst still letting me address the study’s aim.

There was something exciting, yet scary, about interviewing the officers who work covertly with the very type of person who they are trying to stop. Using CHIS they build up sufficient evidence to prevent criminals committing some of the most serious and organised crime that this country suffers from. What I discovered is that they are a group of very experienced officers who know their trade like the back of their hand; and in parallel with their absolute conscientiousness to the gravity of the situations they find themselves in they bring a welcome, necessary element of humour and personality. A key finding was the need for rapport building with the CHIS to get the most out of them, but what was striking was the way they go about communicating together, something that could be explored further by NCA’s team.

The Office of Surveillance Commissioners of course has plenty to say on the tactics, methodology and tradecraft used by all the UK’s covert police officers, not just the NCA’s, so any exploration of such matters will not be straight forward. Nevertheless, there’s nothing like a research study into a relatively uncharted sensitive topic to shake things up and give folk something to think about.