



**Higher Education Engagement among Students with Armed
Services Backgrounds:**

A Literature Review

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Contents

Literature Review: an overview	2
Methodology.....	4
General observations arising from the literature review	5
Categories of Armed Services students / potential students	6
Supporting Service Personnel and Veterans into, and in, Higher Education.....	6
Wounded, Injured and Sick.....	8
Early Service Leavers.....	8
Supporting Service Spouses and Partners in, and into, Higher Education	8
Supporting Service Children into, and in, Higher Education.....	10
Points of engagement, with current and ex-service personnel, and their families.....	11
Recommendations	12
Before university.....	12
At University.....	13
Bibliography	14

Literature Review: an overview

Although there is a great deal of academic research into the interplay of military and civilian life, and also into the reintegration of veterans into non-military life, this literature is problematic from the perspective of a university wishing to understand (and improve) participation in higher education from those with an armed services background because:-

- Much of it is American / focuses on the US armed forces – the American experience is contextually very different to the British (in terms of demographics, deployment, type and length of service, educational backgrounds, public policy, funding etc).
- Research tends to focus on all aspects of civilian versus non-civilian life (issues such as housing, career progression and healthcare) with relatively little focus on education, and higher education, in particular.
- Research focuses primarily on armed services personnel / veterans, and not on their families.
- There is a strong selection bias – research tends to focus on small numbers of self-selected individuals who are not typical of their cohort (for example, service children in higher education or service personnel who have successfully completed an Access to Higher Education Diploma).

When considering higher education engagement with students with an Armed Forces background, there are two crucial documents:-

1. The Armed Forces Covenant¹, which is “a promise from the nation that those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly”², was introduced in 2011 (although the concept stems back to 2000). It impacts universities, both as employers and as educators. Universities are not covered by the statutory duties, established by the Armed Forces Act, 2021, relating to education (these relate to schools and some post-16 institutions). Sheffield Hallam University first signed the covenant in 2017, and re-signed, in partnership with the University of Sheffield, in 2022. Each signatory makes a customised pledge; Hallam’s pledge³ focuses primarily on its role as an employer; Hallam achieved a silver award for Armed Forces community support, from the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme, in 2022. The government publishes an annual Armed Forces Covenant report.⁴
2. Lord Ashcroft’s 2014 *Veterans’ Transition Review* report⁵. Although this is almost entirely focused on service leavers, and not their families, this is the most comprehensive, contemporary, report on service leavers’ transition into civilian life, and is fundamental to public policy.

¹ <https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/>

² Brooke-Holland and Mills, p. 4

³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630871/Sheffield_Hallam_University_Armed_Forces_Covenant_20170623.pdf

⁴ The 2022 report is available at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1125589/Armed_Forces_Covenant_annual_report_2022.pdf

⁵ Available at <https://www.veteranstransition.co.uk/vtrreport.pdf>

There are two particularly active research centres / organisations within the UK:-

1. The Service Children's Progression Alliance, which is hosted by the University of Winchester (which itself has strong links with military organisations and is proactive into research with respect to military and veteran life):-

<https://www.scipalliance.org/>

This organisation has hubs around the country; the Yorkshire hub is based in York (at York University and York St John University).

2. The Centre for Military Research, Education and Public Engagement at Edinburgh Napier University:-

<https://www.napier.ac.uk/study-with-us/armed-forces/centre-for-military-research>

The most significant source of research into the Armed Forces, and all associated matters (including education) is the government, and in particular, the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces themselves.

Ashcroft claims, in his *Veterans' Transition Review*:-

““Service Leavers as a whole begin new careers, enjoy good health and are no more likely to suffer PTSD, become homeless, commit suicide or go to prison than the rest of the population.”⁶

This is not an uncontroversial statement, and researchers have taken issue with it. It is disingenuous in failing to acknowledge that those not included within the 'as a whole' often face significant challenges and absolves the armed forces of their responsibility for their failures with respect to transition. However, what it perhaps does usefully highlight is that the under-representation of students with a military background in higher education is not due to any characteristics that are inherent to that population but are partially due to perception (specifically the perception that university is not a good fit for them) and partially due to practical barriers that are not insurmountable.

⁶ Ashcroft p.14

Methodology

A literature review was carried out in a systematic way. Searches were conducted across electronic catalogues and search engines using the terms “military”, “armed forces”, “military children”, “military families”, “armed forces families”, “armed forces children” in conjunction with the terms “university”, “students”, “higher education”, “education”. As a result of these searches, another further key term “military transition”, the phrase used by Armed Forces in the UK for supporting armed forces members for the end of their service and rejoining the civilian population, was identified as key and further searches were performed using this term. These searches were conducted in January 2023.

In addition to general catalogue and search engine searches, three key resources were identified as having a particular focus on research or statistical analysis relating to armed forces’ members and their families; the Ministry of Defence, Forces in Mind (a charity that supports ex-service members and their families through transition) and the Service Children’s Progression Alliance (a partnership of organisations, mainly UK universities, focused on improving outcomes for service children). These resources were searched for “education”, “higher education” and “university”.

Two documents were identified as key to current policy (both governmental and university) with relation to education and military families. The *Armed Forces Covenant*, which in its current form dates to 2011, is a commitment, made by the government and other institutions, to support armed forces personnel and their families; access to education is one facet of the commitment. Sheffield Hallam University has signed the *Armed Forces Covenant*. In 2014, Lord Ashcroft published *The Veterans’ Transition Review*, which provided a comprehensive review of the contemporary situation and recommendations for future action; this is the most significant report related to government policy with respect to transition and familial support. Since the 2014 report, there have been significant changes to the Career Transition Partnership (including alterations to eligibility to participation), the introduction of a new spousal support system in 2018 and a new transition programme in 2019. These documents are significant references for this literature review.

A number of exclusion criteria were applied to the search results. Literature that focused on military families in countries other than the United Kingdom was excluded. There is a significant amount of literature on military families in the USA, but there are significant differences in both the educational and military context in America (for example, American soldiers tend to be deployed to more locations and there is a higher recorded incidence of PTSD in American forces). The literature search was date-bounded; because of the significant changes since Ashcroft’s 2014 *Veterans’ Transition Review*, only literature from 2014 onwards has been included. Literature that focused exclusively on primary or secondary education was excluded, although articles on military children’s educational experience through school and university was included. Twenty-one reports and articles were included in the final review.

General observations arising from the literature review

1. **With respect to recruitment, the point of effective intervention is not during application but at least two or three years prior to potential application.** There is evidence to suggest that armed forces children begin to disengage with education during post-sixteen education; intervention needs to occur before they enter post-sixteen education. Service leavers (with over six years' service) are offered a transition package, that may extend over their final two years of service; they are offered significant support in terms of career and life planning. Transition is a key period in deciding what a veteran will do when they leave the armed forces, but also an opportunity for them to acquire the educational qualifications they need to access university.
2. **The first year of University, and the transition from first to second year, is the crucial period with respect to retention.** Rose and Rose suggest that service children have a 'transitory mindset'. They settle into new situations readily, easily make friends and are adaptable and resilient. However, they are accustomed to frequent change and relocation and may find integrating into a settled university community more challenging as time progresses.⁷
3. Whilst the issue of increasing participation is complex, and many of the solutions are costly, both in terms of time and money, **there are some very simple but effective changes that could be made immediately.** For example, one useful exercise would be to review the university's "Study Here" pages from the perspective of students with an Armed Forces background. The phrase "A-levels or A-Level equivalents" means very little to armed services leavers; simply adding a link "But what if I don't have A-levels?" to the entry requirements page, that links to a page explains about alternative qualifications or experience, and Access course, removes a barrier to applications.
4. **A sense of community is important.** The University is proactive in supporting its cadet organisations. Other ways in which community might be fostered include establishing a shared space, groups or societies, events, and supporting mentoring.
5. **The barriers to participation that those with an armed services background face are distinct from the barriers that other under-represented groups face.** For example, generally (and there are exceptions), most are not significantly disadvantaged economically or with respect to educational attainment. Barriers may include, but are not limited to, geographical mobility, the lack of a UK home address, additional caring responsibilities, the impact of deployment, limited exposure to civilian life and lack of life skills.

⁷ Rose and Rose, p.16

Categories of Armed Services students / potential students

The Centre for Military Research, Education and Public Engagement, at Edinburgh Napier University, identifies six different categories within the Armed Forces (AF) community, all of whom require different support to access, and to thrive within, Higher Education.⁸

1. Current serving personnel (AF personnel still in active service)
2. AF personnel about to enter resettlement
3. Veterans
4. WIS (personnel who had had to leave service due to Wounded Injured & Sick)
5. Early Service Leavers (AF personnel who have left service early i.e., less than 6 years' service)
6. Family members (Spouses, partners, and service children)

Supporting Service Personnel and Veterans into, and in, Higher Education

“Veterans are defined as anyone who has served for at least one day in Her Majesty's Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations”.⁹ As Lord Ashcroft points out, in his *Veterans' Transition Report*¹⁰, this is not a particularly helpful or useful definition.

The armed forces make distinctions between leavers based on how long they have served – less than four years, four to six years, or six years or more. The Career Transition Partnership provides support to those leaving the service. Service Leavers with six or more years' service, or those who are medically discharged, receive a full package of support for up to two years pre-discharge and two years post-discharge, including Career Information, Advice and Guidance. A limited support package is available for those serving four or more years, and a virtual online career support programme, Future Horizons, is available for those serving less than four years. RFEA, the Forces Employment Charity, offers lifelong career support and advice to armed forces personnel. Wounded, Injured and Sick personnel receive a full package of support, including Return to Work support, re-skilling and the opportunity to pursue courses; one of Macer's interviewees identifies Personnel Recovery Units as a good opportunity to engage with personnel considering Higher Education¹¹.

Service leavers who have served for at least six years, or those who are medically discharged, are entitled to study for a higher education degree with their tuition fees paid in full, for up to five years from their discharge, under the Publicly Funded Further Education / Higher Education scheme (the time limit used to be ten years but changed to five).¹²

⁸ <https://www.napier.ac.uk/study-with-us/armed-forces/centre-for-military-research>

⁹ *Veterans: Key Facts*, p.2

¹⁰ Ashcroft, p.30

¹¹ Macer, p. 39

¹² Forces in Mind (2017), p.68

Providers must be ELCAS-approved; Sheffield Hallam University is an ELCAS-approved provider.

The Armed Forces have a culture of continuing professional development, described in Ashcroft's *Review*: the following description and associated statistics are derived from that *Review*, which draws on 2012 statistics¹³ Minimum entry requirements for the armed forces are Entry Level 2, which is equivalent to the literacy and numeracy normally achieved by seven- to eight-year olds. As of 2012, all navy and RAF recruits exceeded this level on entry, but 3.9% of army recruits entered with this minimum level of literacy and numeracy. 39% of army recruits, on entry, have literary and numeracy associated with an eleven-year old. The army, and particularly the infantry, is associated with recruitment amongst young people with very low levels of educational attainment. Macer quotes one army professional as observing:-

"The pool that the infantry sort of dip into are lads from Council Estates that haven't done particularly well at school ... when they hear university they sort of assume that you're not talking about them." ¹⁴

However, all service personnel are expected to achieve Level 1 (equivalent to D to G in GCSE) and Level 2 (A-C in GCSE) functional skills in literacy and numeracy as their careers progress, with the target being that all personnel achieve Level 1 within three years of joining. Armed Service personnel have opportunities to acquire education and qualifications through apprenticeships, an accreditation for learning scheme, and University short course programmes. They also have the opportunity to sit GCSEs and A' Levels of their own choice, although they have to study for these in their own time. A specific but widespread issue for service personnel and leavers is that there is often not a clear correlation between military and civilian qualifications. For example, Macer identifies that one hurdle personnel (and spouses) face in achieving Access to Higher Education diplomas is that they do not appreciate that their Level 1 and Level 2 functional skill achievements in literacy and numeracy are not equivalent to GCSE Maths and English when it comes to entry requirements for these courses¹⁵.

Macer, in "Understanding the journey to and through 'Access to Higher Education Diplomas' for adults with a Service background", identifies diplomas as a well-established access route to higher education, and a route that is particularly well-suited to those with a Service background (with many courses being designed for distance or online learning, for example) but one that is not frequently used by Service personnel or their spouses and partners, and one that is not well promoted or known about. Macer highlights that Service personnel could engage with AHED courses during service / transition so that they are prepared for university when they leave the service: "Many ex-Service personnel talked about their frustration at not having been made aware of AHED before they were discharged and suggested that, had they known, they could have started to prepare for their AHED course whilst still in Service." ¹⁶

Macer identifies qualifications "timing out" as an issue for serving personal and service leavers, as well as spouses and partners. They may not be able to evidence recent academic study, and education may be interrupted by long deployments abroad (so it may,

¹³ Ashcroft, pp. 33-44

¹⁴ Macer, p.30

¹⁵ Macer, p.78

¹⁶ Macer, pp.39 -40

for example, not be possible to begin a Higher Education course within five years of acquiring an Access to Higher Education qualification).¹⁷

Macer focuses on transition (the period when personnel are offered support as they prepare to leave the armed forces) and access to higher education, although the research is pertinent to current personnel more generally. Current serving personnel, including those in their last few months of service who are engaging with the resettlement process, may still be on active deployment. They may be located at some distance from higher education institutions, and may not be in one fixed location. They may have limited time to complete applications, to attend open day events, or to study. They may also have limited or virtually no access to the internet (this is particularly an issue for members of the Navy on active deployment). Macer highlights that for many veterans, engagement with an education course is a valuable way of re-engaging with civilian society in a controlled and structured environment.¹⁸

Wounded, Injured and Sick

Those who leave the armed forces through medical discharge (Wounded, Injured and Sick) receive a full career transition support package, regardless of length of service. Charities such as Help for Heroes also provide recovery support, that includes career recovery and planning. Wounded, Injured and Sick veterans not only face the prospect of the unexpected truncation of their military career, but also may have to substantially revise their post-military plans. Depending on their wound, injury or sickness, wounded, injured and sick applicants may have specific support needs based on their physical or mental health.

Early Service Leavers

Early Service Leavers – those who have left with less than six years' service – tend to leave because they are unable to complete basic training. Army recruits (the army accounts for approximately half of the UK's armed forces, and has the largest number of service leavers) tend to be drawn from a low socio-economic background, and may have literacy and numeracy issues. Early service leavers probably represent the most challenging group with respect to higher education recruitment and retainment. They have, in some sense, "failed" at their chosen career (and many had few alternative career opportunities). They have not been in the armed services long enough to take advantage of the educational opportunities that the forces offer, and they receive the least support from the armed forces in terms of career planning and transition.

Supporting Service Spouses and Partners in, and into, Higher Education

The Armed Forces offer relatively little proactive support for family members seeking to enter higher education (although in very limited circumstances, with official approval, resettlement benefits may be transferred from veterans to their spouses – if, for example, wounded,

¹⁷ Macer, pp. 58 -61

¹⁸ Macer, pp. 79-80

injured, or sick (WIS) personnel are unable to take advantage of their benefits because of their injuries).

Military spouses (wives, husbands, civil partners and long-term partners) often place their educational or career aspirations on hold to support their military partner's career. Whilst the latest Armed Services Covenant report establishes that military partners enjoy a slightly higher rate of employment than the general UK population (81% for military spouses and partners as opposed to 76% in the general population)¹⁹, those jobs are often part-time, low paid, on a zero hours or self-employed basis or temporary. Employment opportunities for the spouses and partners of serving personnel are significantly impacted by their (sometimes isolated and remote) location, uncertain periods of residence, disrupted education, and the impact of their partner's deployment, often at short notice²⁰. Career progression can be severely impacted when partners are forced to move frequently. The same factors significantly impact access to higher education for the partners of serving personnel. Qualifications in the "caring professions" are chosen by significant numbers of military spouses and partners²¹; this is probably partly because the job opportunities are geographically widespread, the career is well-suited to a mobile population, and there are opportunities for well-paid agency, temporary or shift work patterns.

A number of initiatives exist to assist armed forces' spouses and partners in their career progression – for example, the partner career support programme²², the Forces Employment charity's Families programme²³ and Recruit for Spouses²⁴. There appear to be no similar initiatives to support and encourage spouses and partners to explore access to higher education.

Transition and resettlement of armed forces personnel is often the point at which their partners and spouses will consider access to higher education as well, as many of the issues associated with study whilst part of an armed services family that is on active service disappear, when the serving partner leaves the service. Transition is a good opportunity to target not only armed service leavers, but also their spouses / partners.

Spouses and partners of serving armed forces personnel may effectively be in a single parent role if their spouse / partner is on active duty or deployed. They may have complete responsibility for childcare, or other caring responsibilities.

Sheffield Hallam's "Who is eligible" page²⁵ identifies armed forces personnel, and children of military families, as eligible for the SHU Progress scheme, which offers additional support during application and the first year of University. It does not identify spouses and partners as eligible for the scheme (although they may qualify under the mature student category).

¹⁹ *The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2022*, p. 65

²⁰ <https://www.fdmgroup.com/blog/military-spouse-challenges/>; The Centre for Social Justice (2016), pp. 14-15 and pp., 39-53.

²¹ Macer identifies that 73% of spouses interviewed were planning to pursue an NHS-funded degree (pre-2017), p.53

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/personalised-career-support-for-hundreds-of-military-spouses>

²³ <https://www.forcesemployment.org.uk/programmes/families-programme/>

²⁴ <https://recruitforspouses.co.uk/>

²⁵ <https://www.shu.ac.uk/study-here/apply/shu-progress/who-is-eligible>

Supporting Service Children into, and in, Higher Education

McCullough, Hall and Ellis provides perhaps the most current and relevant analysis of service children and the impact of their background on their education. Considerable support, financial and practical, is provided to schools for their service family children up to the age of sixteen, but in post-sixteen education, there is little government or military support or strategic planning. That service children are under-represented in higher education is indisputable; 43% of their contemporaries reach university, but only 24% of service children do.²⁶ McCullough et al argue however that the process of disengagement begins in the post-sixteen phase. McCullough et al highlights that service children may be dissuaded from university because of their perception of higher education. "If university is perceived as three years of sedentary, inactive study, it might not be as attractive as other opportunities"²⁷

Whilst the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Defence claim that children with a armed forces background do not differ significantly in educational attainment from their peers²⁸, McCullough and Hall claim that there are not accurate statistics relating to the educational attainment of armed forces children (particularly for post-sixteen education).²⁹

McCullough et al³⁰ identifies factors that may contribute to the under-representation of Services children within the higher education sector. These include:

- Frequent mobility
- Family separation
- Loss of personal agency
- Erosion of personal ambition with respect to education.

Ince, Chappell & McHugh observe "students have experienced, and some continue to experience, high levels of unpredictability in their lives that may impact on their studies at university, such as the loss of a parent, separated families, moving schools and moving house".³¹

Children may be moved at key stages of their education, may be more susceptible to bullying and may take on more caring responsibilities; they are also often located at some distance from their extended family. Whilst the armed forces provide significant support to the children of the armed services, particularly those whose parents are deployed abroad, this support is focused on pastoral care rather than academic achievement and the support is focused on pre-sixteen education³².

²⁶ This is a figure calculated / extrapolated from other statistics by McCullough and Hall, p. 18 n

²⁷ McCullough, Hall and Ellis, p. 25-26

²⁸ Department for Education, p. 6, *The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2022*, p. 37

²⁹ McCullough and Hall, p. 6

³⁰ McCullough, Hall and Ellis, p.5

³¹ Ince, Chappell & McHugh, p5,

³² Lawrence, p.7

Service children may also experience a greater sense of disruption and disconnection on arrival at university. Engagement with a military community is an important aspect of their childhood; they rely on a sense of community with other service children who understand the different experiences and challenges they face as a result of their parent's occupation.

Points of engagement, with current and ex-service personnel, and their families

Macer identifies the following potential points of engagement (with respect to Access to Higher Education courses, but they are also relevant for higher education provider)³³:-

MOD Transition Fairs;

Service Education Centres;

Personnel Recovery Centres/Units; -

Resettlement Centres; -

Career Transition Partnership's Workshops, Job fairs and e-magazine, Focus;

Service Leaver Packs provided by Units;

Family Welcome Packs provided by Units;

Help for Heroes, particularly their Recovery Programme, Band of Brothers and Band of Sisters networks;

HIVEs;

Individual Service Family Federation Adult Education/Career Specialists, magazines, websites and social media groups

³³ This list is copied directly from Macer, p. 73

Recommendations

Before university

Pre-sixteen engagement, and outreach activities that directly engage with military communities (for example, military schools or bases, cadet organisations)

Engagement during transition. With the support of the Career Transition Partnership, armed service leavers plan what to do when they leave, up to two years in advance. Any plan that targets leavers, as opposed to those in transition, is likely to be unsuccessful; [points of engagement](#) identifies ways of engaging with armed forces personnel during their service.

Taster / open days that focus on the whole University experience – societies, sports, OTCs, volunteering, community – rather than the academic and social.

Targeted support during the UCAS application phase – applicants with an armed forces background can experience very particular problems during the application phase – military versus civilian qualifications, no UK residential address, the difficulty of establishing the ‘ordinary residence’ (and some consequentially being processed as international students),

Consider Housing Preferences Like international students, many armed forces personnel, leavers or spouses / partners may need support in finding accommodation that is suitable for families. Service children have often grown up on military bases, in a relatively secure environments with their own military police; the transition to university may be easier if students who have been a service child are encouraged to consider managed halls of residence rather than private sector housing.

Use ambassadors One issue that students with a military background identify (whether veterans or family members) is a perceived lack of people like them in Higher Education. Encouraging students with an armed forces background to act as ambassadors or mentors will present potential students with someone who they can directly identify with, and provide them with someone to ask questions of, who share a similar background and experience to them.

Revise the www.shu.ac.uk/study-here pages. Students from a military background often share a conception that university isn’t for them, and these pages do little to dispel that idea. Information for students from a non-traditional background should be well signposted and easy to locate. The pages should more clearly acknowledge that university is for people of all ages and backgrounds. Care should be taken not to exclude people; for example, referring to “A-levels or A-level equivalents” as the entry criteria does not help armed forces leavers identify the best pathway into higher education.

Signpost Access to Higher Education pathways, particularly via www.accesstohe.ac.uk

Provide a single point of contact specialist Services admissions advisor

Revise entrance requirements – consider whether specific military qualifications may be suitable for specific courses, and offer flexibility with respect to time limits relating to qualifications.³⁴

³⁴ Safer Communities Directorate, p. 5

At University

Create a community of military families – through a society, a social space, a social network

Support Officer Training Corps Service children face a choice between higher education and a career in the military; OTCs allow continued engagement with their military background. They offer a support network and counter the idea that education is an inactive and passive experience. OTCs also ease the transition from a military community into civilian adulthood for children who may have spent their entire childhood within military communities.

Signpost the financial support available – debt can have a serious impact on military careers, and students with a military background can be very adverse to acquiring debt. In addition, some veterans may have little personal experience of managing personal finance or budgeting (typically, for example, charges for subsidised service family accommodation are deducted at source from pay so veterans may not be used to paying regular housing, water or energy bills).

Offer the same support to Armed Services partners / spouses as you do to single parents those with additional caring responsibilities Armed services partners may be entirely responsible for childcare, and often find themselves remote from their extended families, due to their partner's military posting.

Be flexible in supporting Armed Forces family students – children and partners / spouses may experience their armed family relative being deployed during study, sometimes in dangerous circumstances. Their family residence may change, and their family may relocate abroad. Students may have a higher-level of term-time absence than their peers, and may be absent at short notice.

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