

**WORK FUTURES RESEARCH CENTRE****Skills acquisition and motivations to join the armed forces**

In order to support the successful transition to civilian work and life after a military career, it is important to understand what makes military service attractive and what learning and training experiences are offered. Military service is experienced as challenging and meaningful work which provides good opportunities to acquire a wide range of skills, for learning and for personal growth. Better knowledge about motivations and skills acquisition of veterans contributes to overcoming stigmatizing stereotypes (associated with PTSD and other mental health issues) which might impede veterans' integration to civilian life.

**Key Points**

- Military service represents an alternative to education, training, and work in the civilian sector
- Military service is experienced as meaningful work, offering purpose and challenge, camaraderie and community
- The military offers opportunities to learn, train, and take on responsibilities
- Military service provides technical, communication, organisational, and leadership skills
- Military service contributes to personal growth
- Skills acquisition during military service needs to be better communicated to civilians, for example through 'skills passports'

**Introduction**

Research on military personnel has focused on socialisation processes into military culture and the development of military identities. Far less is known about the motivations to join the armed forces and opportunities for learning and skills acquisition in the military. What attracts

mostly young men and women to the armed forces and what training, skills and qualifications do they gain during military service? These are important questions both for the recruitment into the armed forces and for the successful reintegration in civilian work and life.

## The Study

The following findings are based on life history interviews that were carried out in the UK between May 2017 and July 2018 to investigate the pathways that led participants to join the UK Armed Forces and their skills acquisition experiences. Military service provides resources for personal growth and allows service personnel to acquire a wide range of skills. It is important to know, whether and how these skills can be transferred. Funding for this research project has been provided by the University of Southampton.

Research participants were recruited through personal contacts, word-of-mouth, flyers, advertisements in Soldier Magazine and a local newspaper, a Skills Fair at Tidworth Garrison, charities, and a military network in a large company. So far, sixteen white British men were interviewed. It is desirable to carry out additional interviews with women and men from different ethnic backgrounds. Research participants served in the British Army, the Naval Services and the Royal Air Force and included officer

and non-officer ranks. Ten participants had been officers who might have been more willing to talk about their experience than non-officer ranks. Perhaps they had a more successful transition due to access to more resources than lower ranking personnel. This will require further research.

The oldest participant was in his 80s and had served for two years in 1955 to 1957 (National Service). He was included in the sample because he was actively involved in his old regiment organisation and in supporting service leavers and veterans. The youngest participant was 27 and had served from 2008 to 2017. Only two participants had served less than five years, five had served between five and nine years, five between ten and nineteen years, and four longer than twenty years. Four research participants had left between 2015 and 2017, three in 2012 and 2013, nine had left earlier (between 1957 and 2005). This means that their transition experience reflects changes in services available to veterans.

## Key Findings

### *Motivations to Join*

Most respondents joined the Armed Forces from school, while some had graduated from university before commencing officers training. Overall, they disliked academic learning and had not performed well in academic settings, although they greatly enjoyed the sports

and social opportunities that school and university offered. Respondents stressed that they wanted to do something meaningful, make a difference and experience challenges. They were also attracted by the opportunities to travel, experience adventure, work outdoors and engage in physical activities.

***Personal Growth***

The time in the Armed Forces was experienced as a learning opportunity, building character, gaining self-confidence and transforming oneself. Those who were in leadership positions enjoyed being given responsibility, leading their regiment or battalion at a young age or serving as an instructor. They also embraced the discipline associated with joining the Armed Forces. Some described 'bullying' and explained that disciplinary acts were important and that disciplined and well-trained team members can rely on one another in a crisis situation. Furthermore, discipline was presented as character building. In addition to the initial training and socialisation into the culture of the armed forces, the career was experienced as challenging and providing opportunities for personal growth, through learning, training others and becoming a leader.

***Learning and Skills Acquisition***

Whereas learning in the settings of school and university was considered 'boring', acquiring skills and knowledge in the context of the military was perceived as enjoyable. This included attending various military colleges. Taking on responsibility and training troops in the UK and overseas was enjoyed. Throughout the military career, there were trainings and postings that allowed for sports and other outdoor activities. In hindsight, some respondents noted that they could have made more use of training opportunities during their military service.

***Making a Difference***

Respondents declared that they were interested in doing a meaningful job. Some veterans described the involvement in peacekeeping missions as satisfying because they could see that their presence made a difference for the local population.

***Camaraderie***

Overall, it was the relationships with other members of the British Armed Forces which was highlighted as meaningful. Throughout and across the interviews, camaraderie was emphasised as one of the most attractive aspects of the career overall. Nothing compared to the camaraderie experienced in the military. This suggests that the pursuit of a military career is the expression of a strong interest in, and attraction to, a sense of community.

***Risk and Security***

Military service includes a mix of voluntary risk taking and security. The strong emphasis on community and the fact that military careers are pursued within a large organisation (though offering frequent postings and learning opportunities) suggests that the military represents a contrast to careers which rely on individualised decision-making. However, discipline, structure and community are at the same time combined with a sense of adventure. Thus, the military provides a mix of risk and security, proving oneself and being part of a community.

## Policy Implications

This research highlights that the armed forces provide important learning opportunities associated with personal growth and the adaptation to new roles and responsibilities. The acquisition of skills and qualifications takes place 'on the job', closely related to immediate roles and responsibilities. Moreover, training and team work are relevant for the life and death situations faced by personnel. These learning experiences differ from academic learning at school, college and university. Upon leaving the armed forces, service

leavers and veterans are confronted with civilian institutions in which educational credentials are more highly valued than practical experience. In order to support the successful transition to civilian work and life it is therefore important:

- to highlight the skills that can be obtained during military service
- to map skills onto 'skills passports' and
- to assist veterans to communicate and civilian employers to understand military skills profiles.

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