

Military involvement in education and youth activities in the UK

This briefing summarises key elements of military involvement in education and youth activities in the UK and the main concerns this raises. It focuses on primary and secondary level state schools, rather than sixth form, further or higher education, or independent schools, although many of the activities discussed are present in these other areas of education. It notes where similar activities take place within non-school youth organisations.

HOW THE MILITARY IS INVOLVED

The British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force are all involved in the state education system in a number of ways including careers and curriculum visits to schools. Most of this activity has developed or significantly increased within the last decade.

The armed forces also sponsor and partner some individual schools. Parts of the defence industry, including arms companies, are involved in similar ways. Additionally, 'military ethos' is promoted through school-based cadet units and other programmes. The military and defence industry are well funded and readily able to capitalise on opportunities made available to reach young people within the education system.

Careers and curriculum visits

Every year thousands of visits are made by the armed forces to UK schools, to promote military careers, to run curriculum, student development or physical activities, and to interview for pre-recruitment courses at armed forces bases.¹ There are some areas where almost every state school is visited, often a number of times each year.² The visits are mainly to secondary schools, but there are also a small number of visits to primary and special schools. Independent schools are visited far less than state schools.

Many visits to schools involve presentations about life in the armed forces or activities at careers events. Military interests also have an input into the curriculum, more recently through STEM activities which are delivered in schools or to school-age audiences by the armed forces and defence companies.³ One of many examples is the Education Roadshow run by BAE Systems – listed as the world's fourth largest arms company and making 95% of its profit from the sale of arms - in conjunction with the RAF and the Royal Navy.⁴ They visit over 400 schools a year.⁵ The military and defence industry are also involved as sponsors and/or in providing activities for many STEM and other careers fairs and awards schemes, such as The Big Bang Fair which is sponsored by all three armed forces as well as a number of arms companies, and the Futures Day at Farnborough Airshow.^{6,7}

Interests outside of education, including central government, the armed forces and armed forces charities are also active in promoting military interests and perspectives, by providing

curriculum material for Armed Forces Day, Remembrance, WW1 commemorations, and other learning resources. For example, in 2014 the *British Armed Forces Learning Resource*, produced by the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Defence, was promoted to all schools by the Department of Education. It was criticised by educational professionals as one-sided promotion of the armed forces.⁸

Military ethos and cadets in schools

A relatively new development is the promotion of 'military ethos' in schools, which started in 2012 as a Department for Education policy.⁹ Military ethos programmes are particularly focused towards schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Private organisations, mainly staffed by ex-military personnel, provide 'alternative provision with a military ethos' to students who are struggling or at risk of failing, and also provide whole-class and whole-school activities.

Between 2012 and 2016 nearly £90 million of new funding was pledged to military ethos and cadet projects, including Troops to Teachers.¹⁰ Over £50 million of Libor fines were awarded to the Cadet Expansion Programme in 2015 but most of the other funding came from the Department for Education. The target of opening 500 new cadets forces in state schools by 2020, focused in deprived areas, has nearly been reached and a new target has recently been announced by the Defence Secretary.^{11,12}

Sponsorship by military interests

Since 2012 the government have encouraged the sponsorship of schools and colleges by a part of the military. This has mainly developed in University Technical Colleges which provide academic and technical education for 14-19 year olds. Around half (49%) of the 50 UTCs now open are sponsored by, or affiliated with, part of the armed forces and/or part of the defence industry.¹³ Sponsors and partners have an influence on the ethos, direction and curriculum of the school. This development has been facilitated by the strong emphasis given in government policy to technical and careers-led education – particularly science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) - and diversification within education, which has brought many outside interests into the system as providers.

The Military Covenant

Over 60 primary and secondary schools or academy trusts, have signed an Armed Forces Corporate Covenant since they were introduced in 2013.¹⁴ While the Corporate and Community Covenants commit organisations and public authorities to ensuring that military communities are not disadvantaged, schools signing them also pledge support for cadets, Armed Forces Day and other military initiatives.¹⁵

Involvement in other youth activities

The armed forces provide careers and curriculum activities to non-school youth organisations, such as the Scouts and

Girlguiding, where they sponsor and provide activities for skills-based learning and badges.¹⁶ They also provide STEM activities and residentials for uniformed youth activities.¹⁷ There are about 3000 Sea Cadet, Army Cadet, and Air Cadet units in the community.¹⁸

Regional differences

Scotland and Wales have devolved education decision-making so are not included in policies initiated by England's Department for Education. However, the armed forces make many visits to schools in all parts of the UK, as do the defence industry, and Wales and Scotland have a growing number of new cadet forces in state schools.¹⁹

ISSUES RAISED BY MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

The growing involvement of military interests within education raises concerns and questions in relation to education best practice, ethics and child rights.

Recruiting activities in schools

The aims of the Ministry of Defence's 'youth engagement' are clearly evidenced in their internal documents.²⁰ Two defence aims are primary - influencing 'future decision-makers' to support the military and its operations, and encouraging young people to enlist.

'The army careers advisers who operate in schools are skilled salesmen.'

Head of Army recruitment strategy (see 22)

The military do not acknowledge that the activities they run in schools are about recruitment despite around three quarters of visits being careers orientated.²¹ They focus on the narrow argument that they do not sign anyone up in school, characterising recruitment as an event rather than a longer-term process. This is despite the Army describing its activities in schools as part of a 'drip, drip, drip' approach to build interest in young people and steer them towards enlistment.²² There have been recent calls for recruitment to be further emphasised, with material about the armed forces included in the curriculum and for active marketing of a forces careers to cadets.²³

This drip-feed approach is also being used to 'raise awareness' about the military and defence companies to the captive audience of young people within schools. Is this marketing operation acceptable within education, even if it can support the learning of young people?

Child welfare

There is a growing body of research showing that enlistment into the armed forces at a young age can be particularly harmful to physical and mental health, as well as post-service life outcomes.²⁴ Risks are exacerbated by pre-service vulnerability.

Furthermore, the high drop-out rate of young recruits suggests that many sign up without sufficient awareness of the realities of armed forces life. Once they have dropped out, they find they are no longer in education or training and are without a job.

A one-sided picture

Military-led school activities generally give a one-sided picture of life in the armed forces. They do not foster an awareness of the significant physical and psychological risks, legal obligations and ethical considerations of a military career. This is aggravated by the particular psychological and psychosocial vulnerabilities of adolescents in the context of sophisticated military recruitment marketing strategies and making long-term risky decisions.²⁵

Issues around the welfare and vulnerability of young people in relation to enlistment should inform schools' duty of care towards their students so that they ensure that information about the risks of enlisting, particularly at a young age, is provided alongside activities and materials that promote the military.

Weapons in schools

Armed forces activities in schools or at careers events often involve encouraging young people to handle weapons or sit in military vehicles. Using military hardware as a marketing tool to instantly engage impressionable children is unethical and counters other messages being given to young people about the dangers of weapons and the importance of non-violent means of conflict resolution.

Teaching controversial issues

The activities of the military, and allied interests, are often controversial and generate many reasonable and diverse opinions. To promote them as if there were no legitimate concerns and diverging viewpoints, obscures the concerns and presents military actions as morally unambiguous. Special consideration needs to be given when teaching about, or engaging with, controversial issues.²⁶

There is a legal imperative, written into the Education Act, to provide a 'balanced presentation of opposing views' around 'political' issues.²⁷ Guidance from the Citizenship Foundation includes 'giving equal importance to conflicting views and opinions'.²⁸ Furthering defence agendas within education could undermine balanced learning if no critical or alternative perspectives are brought in.

Lack of balance with other providers

The resources available to the military and the defence industry allow it to have a widespread presence at numerous schools in many different ways, far above any other public service provider or industry.²⁹

There is a risk that the direction of learning and careers options are being skewed, as the military and defence industry have a disproportionate influence. Science and technology learning should focus more on industries that promote the public good and long term sustainable security. More generally, does a focus on military ethos or perspectives normalise military approaches and steer away from a diversity of innovation and creative approaches?

Lack of consultation and scrutiny

Schools often do not consult parents about their child's involvement in military activities, yet for some parents it will go against deeply held convictions or religious belief. The European Convention of Human Rights says the state shall respect the right of parents to education that conforms with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

Furthermore, there has been little scrutiny of the involvement of military interests within education, even where policy has been initiated by government departments. Where policy and practice has been examined - by the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament- regulatory measures have been recommended.^{30,31}

'Adolescence is a time for learning, questioning, receiving pastoral and academic guidance and growing as inquisitive, confident global citizens. Militarisation by stealth is not the best way to support our children, and neither parents nor school leaders have had a say in its validity.'

Chris Gabbett, secondary school headteacher (see 47)

Targeting disadvantage

Military ethos projects, including the cadets, are being targeted towards less affluent communities. Some young people – often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged – are offered more military options as alternative provision or as career options. A range of opportunities need to be developed and equally available to all young people, whatever their socio-economic group or geographical location. While the armed forces can be a good career choice for some, it poses greater risks for many, particularly from disadvantaged communities, and should not be seen as a direct route towards social mobility.³²

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which have recommended that the age of recruitment into the UK armed forces is raised to 18, has also recommended that ethnic minorities, children of low income families and

children from vulnerable groups are not specifically targeted for recruitment activities.³³

Prioritised over other youth activities

The National Youth Agency has expressed concern that military activities in schools are favoured over other youth work which could yield similar benefits.³⁴ In the same timespan that tens of million pounds have been granted to military-centric activities within education, other youth programmes and wider education have faced damaging cuts.³⁵

Military ethos projects and cadets are characterised as helping to develop the potential of young people and raise educational attainment, particularly for those who come from more disadvantaged communities. However, their comparable effectiveness in relation to other youth activities, remains unproven as projects have generally been evaluated in isolation or rely on self-reporting.³⁶ A review of alternative provision with a military ethos stated that fun and engaging content and new activities contributed to the success of the activities but that, 'Military Ethos AP was not necessarily a quick-fix; neither was it successful for all pupils.'³⁷

Prioritised over peace education

The promotion of the armed forces in schools is not balanced with education for, and about, peace.³⁸ There are individual initiatives focusing on sectarianism, extremism, and violence reduction, but there is an absence of a compulsory and organised curriculum for peace education within schools, despite UN recommendations that it becomes a fundamental subject.³⁹

There are also many civil society education initiatives about peace and for peace, such as curriculum materials and whole school restorative approaches.⁴⁰ Greater promotion of these, and wider human rights and social justice issues, could help address the lack of formal peace education and provide important alternative viewpoints around issues affecting young people now and in the future.

Marginalising individuals and groups

Many people are concerned about the involvement of military interests in schools and other parts of civic life for a variety of reasons, such as concerns about recent military actions, school-based marketing activities and promoting militarism. Where there is a significant military presence those with concerns may be marginalised and less able to feel part of the community.

Providing youth activities within a military framework at the expense of more universal provision will exclude some young people, particularly if there is an overarching military ethos to the school. A particular concern is how this affects children and their families who have experienced war and violence outside of the UK. Will schools with a significant input from the military or the defence industry offer a welcoming and inclusive culture to all?

Ethos or ethics?

'I think schools need a learning ethos, not a military ethos.'

Brian Lightman, former General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders, 2015 (*The Unseen March*)

Using the education system to promote careers which are associated with unique risks, and to provide validation for controversial activities, poses a number of ethical questions for educators.⁴¹ In addition to risks to physical and mental health, there are moral questions to be considered around activities that affect the life and wellbeing of others. The risk of moral injury for serving personnel – a reaction to an act of transgression which shatters a moral framework - has growing

recognition, particularly in the US. How the concept of moral exploitation - or 'unfairly offloading or outsourcing moral burdens onto those who are vulnerable' - applies to those in the military is also gaining more recognition.⁴²

Schools have an important part to play in reducing the potential for exploitation by informing young people of the risks and moral issues associated with military action. An approach which focuses on ethical debate, prioritising a learning ethos rather than a military ethos, will help young people make informed decisions and help schools avoid becoming a marketing channel for defence interests.

Positive values, discipline, teamwork etc are already at the heart of many schools' good practice, and do not need to be associated with a military ethos.⁴³

VOICING CONCERNS

There is a high level of public support for raising the minimum age of recruitment in to the UK armed forces to 18 years of age. Around three quarters of the general public agree that the age of recruitment into the UK armed forces should be no less than 18 years.⁴⁴

'The UK Government should end the recruitment of children under the age of 18 into the armed forces and visits of armed forces to schools.'

UK Children's Commissioners, 2016 (see 48)

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) have recommended that the UK cease its recruitment of under-18s into the armed forces. These calls have been backed by many children's rights and welfare organisations and many civil society organisations.^{45,46,47} Parliament's Defence Committee and Joint Committee on Human Rights have also called for the policy to be reviewed.

The UNCRC and the UK's four Children's Commissioners have also called for military recruitment activities in schools to be stopped.⁴⁸ Calls for regulation but also wider public debate around the activities of military interests within the education system have been backed by many education, faith, campaigning and other civil society organisations, as well as individuals affected by the issue.⁴⁹

In 2015 the Welsh Government accepted recommendations to ensure that armed forces visits to schools take account of their 'unique nature as a career and the need to encourage an open and honest exchange of views with pupils about their role'.⁵⁰ The Scottish Government are considering recommendations for scrutiny, guidance and regulation around armed forces visits to schools. These include commissioning a Child Rights and Welfare Impact Assessment, providing information on the risks and legal obligations of an armed forces career as part of school-based careers information, and exploring further how parents and young people should be consulted.⁵¹

SUMMARY

The education system must equip students with the ability to think critically. Schools also have a duty of care towards their pupils. The input of outside interests must be carefully monitored and regulated to ensure balance and that the education system operates in the best interests of students.

While military-themed activities may be engaging to some young people they are not appropriate for many or for the education system as a whole. Their expansion should not be at the expense of more universal provision which is accessible to all students regardless of their interest in military activities.

The values promoted by 'military ethos' organisations are not unique to the military and it is not helpful or correct to suggest that they are, by singling them out from other public services. Teamwork, leadership and other positive attributes associated with 'military ethos' flourish in many other parts of society.

There is insubstantial evidence that military branding is necessary for effective well-funded provision and concerns that military themed youth activities are primarily serving the wider purpose of promoting the military to school students. Focusing military themed projects within disadvantaged communities raises additional concerns.

Military activities are by nature controversial and potentially divisive. The imposition of a single ethos on institutions, or activities which serve a diverse public, is problematic.

There is growing awareness around the question of whether furthering defence agendas in schools and youth organisations is appropriate. However, with the rapid and unregulated involvement of military interests in schools, and changes within the education system more widely, there needs to be a far more scrutiny and debate amongst educators, young people and their parents, decision-makers and wider society.

A quick guide to concerns raised by military activities and military ethos in schools is *The Unseen March*, a short film made by Quakers in Britain: <http://www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/peace/challenging-militarism-1/the-unseen-march>

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