

Armed Forces Students Post-16: Focus Group Report

A qualitative research study

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Executive Summary

In April 2021 we held three focus groups with Further Education (FE) college staff, Uni Connect practitioners and SCiP Alliance Hub leads as part of a wider research project to scope the support of Armed Forces students post-16. This report provides a short analysis of the current landscape for organisations that wish to understand and improve support for Armed Forces students in an FE context, particularly with regard to policy making and improving current practice.

Five key findings are identified:

1. Current support for FE college students is limited

The type and level of support that is offered to students is varied, with more direct support offered by participants who work within an FE college. However, in all cases, there is no support currently being delivered to Armed Forces students directly.

2. There is a huge appetite to do more with Armed Forces students in FE

It is acknowledged that there is a lot more participants could do to support Armed Forces students. The type of support that could be offered is extremely wide-ranging, reflecting the different context that participants work in. All participants agreed that they could provide more indirect support.

3. There is very little data on Armed Forces students collected post-16, and this needs to change

The consensus in each focus group is that access to data would be beneficial for all participants in all contexts and this data does not currently exist. However, it is agreed that a strong business case would need to be provided to justify why this data is being collected.

4. Current barriers to engagement are not insurmountable but will take work to overcome

All three focus groups identified several barriers within the context of their own work, with access to data and lack of awareness once again being important factors. Participants acknowledged that whilst none of these barriers are insurmountable, they will need to be considered when any resources or support are being developed.

5. Training and CPD would be hugely beneficial particularly if delivered by the SCiP Alliance

All participants agreed that the SCiP Alliance could especially help with Career and Professional Development (CPD) and FE-specific resources like the SCiP Alliance Thriving Lives Toolkit. Participants also considered that that the SCiP Alliance has a lot of leverage in this area. This could be used to encourage FE colleges to participate and engage with stakeholders wanting to provide support for Armed Forces students in FE.

Introduction

Work to improve Armed Forces student's outcomes in the FE sector presents a significant and enduring challenge because we know very little about Armed Forces student's experiences in this phase of their education. Furthermore, the tracking of Armed Forces student's post-16 is challenging and very few colleges are known to seek this data.

As part of a wider scoping exercise, the SCiP Alliance commissioned Louisa Dobson to lead a project to characterise the engagement barriers and needs for HE outreach, Uni Connect teams and SCiP Alliance Hubs to be able to support FE colleges to support their Armed Forces students and produce materials to help them to build engagement. In April 2021, Louisa Dobson conducted a series of focus groups to solicit feedback from FE Staff, HE Outreach Staff and SCiP Alliance Hub leads.

The aims of the focus groups were:

- to gather background information about the issue.
- to stimulate new ideas and encourage creative participant-led solutions.
- to identify potential barriers or problems.
- to identify areas where further research is needed.

Method of Delivery

Recruitment for two focus groups was conducted in March 2021, with the following groups being approached:

1. Uni Connect practitioners who had supported a similar SCiP Alliance project in early 2020.
2. SCiP Alliance Hub Leads

Following this initial recruitment exercise, a member of the SCiP Alliance Hub lead group, Dr Alex Blower, offered to approach a group of FE practitioners in the Portsmouth area to gain a perspective that was not yet being captured. There was sufficient interest to develop a third focus group with this cohort.

The next task was to organise a date to deliver each focus group. Participants were asked to complete a Doodle Poll to confirm their availability. Once this had been received, focus groups were set to take place as follows:

1. Tuesday 20th April, 3pm. Uni Connect practitioners – conducted by Louisa Dobson
2. Monday 26th April, 2pm. FE practitioners – conducted by Alex Blower and Louisa Dobson
3. Wednesday 28th April, 1:30pm. SCiP Alliance Hub Leads – conducted by Louisa Dobson

Due to Covid-19 restrictions in place at that time, the focus groups could not be conducted physically, so it was agreed that sessions would take place on Microsoft teams. Each session was recorded, with the permission of participants, so that transcriptions of the discussion could be downloaded. Participants were contacted by email to confirm the date and time of the focus group. To this email a participant information sheet was attached, detailing more information about the purpose of the focus group, and how it would be conducted. A copy of this is included in the appendix.

Each session began with a brief introduction to the project and each participant introduced themselves in turn. Participants were reminded that although the session was being recorded, all answers would be confidential and anonymised. The first two sessions lasted one hour, and the third session was 30 minutes. A set of questions was prepared in advance. These questions were worded slightly differently so that they were relevant to the group being interviewed but followed the same themes. A copy of these questions is included in the appendix.

Summary of key findings

Following an initial analysis of focus group discussions, **five key findings** have been identified:

1. Current support for FE college students is limited
2. There is a huge appetite to do more with Armed Forces students in FE
3. There is very little data on Armed Forces students collected post-16 and this needs to change
4. Current barriers to engagement are not insurmountable but will take work to overcome
5. Training and CPD would be hugely beneficial particularly if delivered by the SCiP Alliance

In this report, you will find a summary of these findings as taken from all three focus groups. These findings are summarised by discussion topic in the order that they were discussed in the focus group. These topics are:

1. Current support for FE college students
2. Support participants would like to provide
3. Usefulness in accessing data on Armed Forces students
4. Current and potential barriers to engagement
5. Support and resources that could be provided by the SCiP Alliance

Topic 1 – Current support for FE college students

Participants in all focus groups were asked to explain what support they currently provided to students in a college environment.

All participants from the Uni Connect focus group deliver outreach in a college environment. In some instances, the Uni Connect partnership also paid for a member of staff to be based in the college. However, the consensus was that most of the outreach they deliver tends to be geared to target Uni Connect learners, with nothing delivered specifically to Armed Forces students.

Participants in the FE College focus group came from a range of job roles including an academic tutor, progression mentor and admissions staff. This meant that participants were offering support in different capacities. The main observations were that pastoral support is offered in general, with no-one is assigned to Armed Forces students as a cohort and that they are not high on the radar of college SLT.

Participants from the SCiP Alliance Hub leads focus group came from a diverse range of organisations. Participants predominantly worked in the university sector, but organisations also included local authorities and armed forces charities. Responses to the questions were mixed, and participants gave the following feedback:

- Student recruitment teams were almost exclusively working in the sixth form space and recognised a gap in FE provision.
- Where there was target post-16 work, this was not being done with Armed Forces students.
- There was no direct support being given to colleges in Wales.

In conclusion, the type and level of support that is offered to students is varied, with more direct support offered by participants who work within an FE college. However, in all cases, there is no support currently being delivered to Armed Forces students directly.

Topic 2 – Support participants would like to provide

All participants were asked what support they would like to provide to students from an Armed Forces background if they were offered the opportunity.

Participants from the Uni Connect focus group suggested that they could easily provide better indirect support when they deliver outreach in FE. For example, one participant suggested that they could produce a list of students who were eligible to receive extra support and make sure all students had access to it. Two participants suggested setting up a mentoring scheme that would link Armed Forces students in FE with Armed Forces students in college feeder schools. One participant suggested that this might incentivise colleges who are focused on recruitment. Participants also suggested that Uni Connect could then connect FE colleges to Armed Forces students who study at university to include post-18 progression.

Participants from the FE Colleges focus group had the following suggestions:

- Facilitate a focus group with FE Armed Forces students
- Offer bespoke advice and guidance from the college careers team.
- Create a progression mentor role that had specific responsibility and focus on Armed Forces students, such as a 'designated teacher'.
- Create better links with the local service liaison officer from local military bases.

Participants from the FE colleges focus group were asked an additional question on Service Pupil Premium, and whether they thought this would be useful in an FE context. The consensus was that this would be welcomed but it would be important to make sure service pupils' premium money was ring fenced and not swallowed into operational costs. One participant noted that given it is now compulsory for students to remain in education or training until the age of 18, there is a clear business case to extend Service Pupil Premium to age 18. Participants suggested that this could be spent on the following: Field trips, academic interventions, college transport, ICT support and "removing any barriers to good progress".

Participants from the SCiP Alliance Hub Lead focus group had the following suggestions:

- Increase participation of FE colleges in the SCiP Alliance Hub network
- Offer CPD sessions to FE college staff.
- Utilise progression roles that sit within colleges to do more focused work, particularly around identification.
- Encourage FE colleges who may have adult learners with connections to the forces to recognise younger students who may come from an Armed Forces Background as well.
- Use student role models/alumni to return to FE colleges to promote HE progression.
- Run regional feedback sessions with FE colleges with a focus on Armed Forces students.

In conclusion, participants in all focus groups acknowledged that there was a lot more they could do to support Armed Forces students, in some cases going into specific details. The type of support that was offered was wide-ranging reflecting the different context that participants worked in. In all cases, access to data would be necessary so that students could be targeted. They all agreed that they could initially provide more indirect support.

Topic 3 – Usefulness in accessing data on Armed Forces students

Participants in all focus groups were asked if it would be useful within the context of their own role to identify Armed Forces students.

Participants from the Uni Connect focus group shared the following views:

- If they were to ask for data, there would need to be a compelling reason behind it, and a perceived benefit to the FE college.
- There is not a financial incentive to colleges to collect this data as there is with pre-16 schools who can claim Service Pupil Premium.
- As far as they were aware none of their FE colleges currently collect data about Armed Forces students.
- If they knew how many Armed Forces students there are in college, it would be easier to do some direct work and tailor outreach to that group.

Participants from the FE College focus group shared the following views.

- Colleges do not currently monitor and track Armed Forces students.
- It would be a straightforward process to include an additional tick box on the enrolment form.
- Colleges already monitor other vulnerable groups such as looked after students.
- It makes no sense that students that have received extra layers of support at school are suddenly offered nothing when they arrive in college. Participants noted that in their specific context, there will be many Armed Forces students in their feeder secondary schools.
- It would be institutional good practise that these students are tracked and monitored.
- If there was a tick box, students would need to be given a reason why they would tick it.
- Colleges receive information on Pupil Premium from secondary schools, but it was suggested that most do not do anything with that data.
- There is sometimes a fear of self-identification, and students may not want to disclose that they are from an Armed Forces background.

Participants from the SCiP Alliance Hub Leads focus group shared the following views:

- The main issue is that FE Colleges are not identifying Armed Forces students so are not able to provide that data.
- Where participants are already asking FE colleges for data, they need to be careful they are not asking for too much, as that could potentially put them off.
- If there was a tick box on an enrolment form, there would need to be a justification or explanation as to why that question was there.
- A particular challenge is the lack of data for post-school destinations.
- A lack of data often also means a lack of awareness in staff about this group.

In conclusion, the consensus was that access to data would be beneficial for all participants in all contexts. However, it was agreed that a strong business case would need to be provided.

Topic 4 – Current and potential barriers to engagement

All participants were asked what barriers they currently faced or that could potentially stop them from working with Armed Forces students in an FE context.

Participants in the Uni Connect Focus Group identified the following barriers:

- Working with specific groups might be a challenge because students will be spread out across college on different courses and pathways.
- Colleges are not able to provide any data on Armed Forces students.
- FE Colleges are complex institutions and finding the right contact can be tricky. Furthermore, engaging SLT is an added layer of difficulty.
- It takes time to build up a good connection with FE colleges and the staff they work with may not work in a relevant college department.
- As an external provider, you are not always given access to students you want to engage.
- Because this is a new initiative, unlike with schools, there is no baseline. This means it could be a challenge to get the colleges on board initially.

Participants in the FE focus group identified that the lack of both data currently available and awareness of the challenges and experiences of Armed Forces students were the main barriers to engaging this cohort in college.

Participants in the SCiP Alliance Hub leads group identified the following barriers:

- Funding and capacity of organisations mean that FE will not be made a specific target or focus.
- Colleges do not always engage well with other HE providers because they already have their own provision in place.
- It is much easier to incentivise a school to engage (by offering advice, CPD and funding) but these opportunities are often not available to colleges. Linked with this is the lack of Service Pupil Premium post-16 in England, Scotland, and Wales.
- Although FE Colleges are involved in SCiP Alliance Hubs, the emphasis tends to still lean towards University and Higher Education.

In conclusion, all three focus groups identified several barriers within the context of their own work, with access to data and lack of awareness once again being important factors. Participants acknowledged that whilst none of these barriers are insurmountable, they will need to be considered when any resources or support are being developed.

Topic 5 – Support and resources that could be provided by the SCiP Alliance

All participants were asked how the SCiP Alliance could provide support and what that might look like.

Participants in the Uni Connect focus group agreed that any material created by the SCiP Alliance would need to be singularly easy for colleges to engage with, with the Thriving Lives Toolkit being cited as a good example, particularly because it was relevant to schools with any number of Armed Forces students enrolled.

One participant suggested that there needs to be a lot of work to raise awareness of the challenges that service pupils face and suggested that the SCiP Alliance could offer CPD and training to college staff. Further to this, it was suggested that any external staff who work within FE would also benefit from training, to ensure the correct information is being delivered to FE students. One participant suggested that colleges would respond well if they could be awarded a kite mark.

Participants in the FE College focus group also identified training and CPD to be the most important support they needed to upskill FE practitioners. One participant also suggested they would benefit from FE-focused signposting to extra resources.

Participants in the SCiP Alliance Hub leads focus group agreed that training and CPD were important, and that Hub Leads could play a part in supporting this locally. One participant suggested that colleges should be encouraged to sign up to the Armed Forces Covenant, and that pressure could be applied by bodies such as OFSTED. One participant cited an example of where they had seen this done in a college for other target groups.

In conclusion, all participants agreed that the SCiP Alliance could especially help with CPD and FE-specific resources like the Thriving Lives Toolkit. Participants also considered that the SCiP Alliance has a lot of leverage in this area, and that this could be used to encourage FE Colleges to participate and engage with stakeholders wanting to provide support for Armed Forces students in FE.



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Participant information sheet

Post-16 Focus Group

What is the project about?

Work to improve Armed Forces student's outcomes in the FE sector presents a significant and enduring challenge. We know very little about Armed Forces student's experiences or outcomes in this phase of education. We do know that, as a group, Armed Forces students slightly outperform their peers at GCSE but are around one third less likely to access HE. This overview, however, masks huge disparities within the group. The tracking of Armed Forces students post-16 is challenging and very few colleges are known to seek this data.

Why have I been chosen/asked?

You have been asked to take part because you work with FE students, either in an FE college, or as part of an HE outreach programme such as Uni Connect.

Do I have to take part and options for withdrawal?

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any point.

What do I have to do?

You will be asked to attend a virtual focus group organised and delivered by Uni Connect Partnership FutureHY. The group will last about 1 hour and will involve up to 8 other participants. The group will be asked to share views and experiences and suggestions on a range of issues relating to your experiences of working with Armed Forces students within an FE environment. We will be taking notes and recording the event and only the research team will listen back and transcribe key themes from the recording.

What are the benefits of taking part?

You will be part of a larger project that is aiming to improve Armed Forces student's outcomes in the FE sector.

Data protection & confidentiality

All information you provide will be securely kept on a password protected document. No names or organisations will be identified within the research process unless you specifically consent to this. Data from any focus groups will be kept securely and fully anonymised. Names and other identifying features will not be used in any reports. Any demographic information we collect, and use will be used purely to provide context to any quotations in the report. Any personal and sensitive data (for example, names, ethnicity, age, gender) will not be kept with the data collected from the focus groups.

What will happen with the results of the study?

A report will be written and presented at the summer SCiP Alliance Board Meeting. All data used directly from participants will be fully anonymised.

Where can I get more information?

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Post-16 Focus Group Questions

FE Staff

1. How aware do you think your college is that there are any Armed Forces students studying there?
 - *To what extent do you think it matters?*
2. Do you think it would help if there was a tick box on the enrolment and/or application form where they could identify as a service child?
3. What ways do the college currently support Armed Forces students, either directly, or indirectly?
 - *Pastoral support*
 - *Academic Support*
4. Explain Service Pupil Premium, and how it is offered. - Currently, Service Pupil Premium is only available up to age 16. If it were extended to 18, what do you think it could be spent on in college to improve the experience of Armed Forces students?
5. Do you have any suggestions of what things you could do in your role to support Armed Forces students?
 - *What would you need to be able to provide this support?*
6. What other resources or information do you need to better support Armed Forces students?
 - *What could the college do?*
 - *What could the SCiP Alliance do?*
 - *Would something like the Thriving Lives Toolkit be useful in college?*
7. Do you know what extra support already exists for Armed Forces students through UCAS?

HE Outreach Staff

1. What work do you already do with FE colleges?
 - *What data have you collected?*
 - *Do you work with specific groups?*

2. Do you think it would be useful if there was a tick box on the enrolment and/or application form where they could identify as a service child?

3. What ways do you currently support Armed Forces students in a college environment either directly, or indirectly?

4. What barriers do you currently face that stop you from working with Armed Forces students?
 - *What would you need to be able to provide this support?*

5. What support would you provide if you had access to Armed Forces students?
 - *What do you do with Schools, that you could do with colleges?*

6. What other resources or information do you need to better support Armed Forces students?
 - *What could the college do?*
 - *What could the SCiP Alliance do?*

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to all the participants of the focus group interviews, who took the time to share their knowledge and experiences with us. Also, thank you to the many people who helped to recruit participants and to set up interviews.

A particular thank you to Dr Alex Blower for facilitating the FE College Focus Group.

About the SCiP Alliance

The SCiP Alliance is a partnership of organisations focused on improving the educational progression of children from UK Armed Forces and veterans' families. The Alliance is working for our vision of Thriving lives for Armed Forces students. The Alliance helps researchers, policymakers and practitioners work more effectively together to target evidence-based support at identified needs in a coherent system. We pursue these goals by leading collaborative work to develop a robust evidence base, connecting, and supporting practitioners and influencing policy to help those supporting Armed Forces students.

For more information, visit the SCiP Alliance website: www.scipalliance.org