Service Children's Progression ALLIANCE

THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN

THRIVING LIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVANCING POLICY AND PRACTICE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES

24th June 2025

Ministry of Defence

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

The Service Children's Progression Alliance is led by the University of Winchester & supported by the MoD

www.scipalliance.org

WELCOME

Naval Children's Charity

Clare Scherer MBE

Chief Executive, Naval Children's Charity

Co-Chair, Thriving Through Childhood and Beyond Steering Group

Chair, SCiP Alliance Management Group

Chair, Cobseo Children's Cluster

Thank you to the programme funder

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PROJECT STEERING GROUP & HIGHER EDUCATION ADVISORY GROUP

army families federation

HERIOT WATT UNIVERSITY

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Ministry of Defence

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

ARTS UNIVERSITY BOURNEMOUTH

Naval Families FEDERATION

Swansea University Prifysgol Abertawe

Edinburgh Napier UNIVERSITY

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

ROYAL AIR FORCE Families Federation

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AGENDA

1000	**Welcome**
1015	*Thriving Lives in Higher Education: Advancing Policy and Practice for University Students from Armed Forces Families* Report summary presentation from research leaders (Access Learning)
1045	Q & A
1055	Panel Discussion
1140	**Break**
1200	Introduction to the Thriving Lives Toolkit for Universities Table Discussions
1250	Closing remarks
1300	**Lunch and networking**

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WELCOME

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Philip Dent

Director, SCiP Alliance

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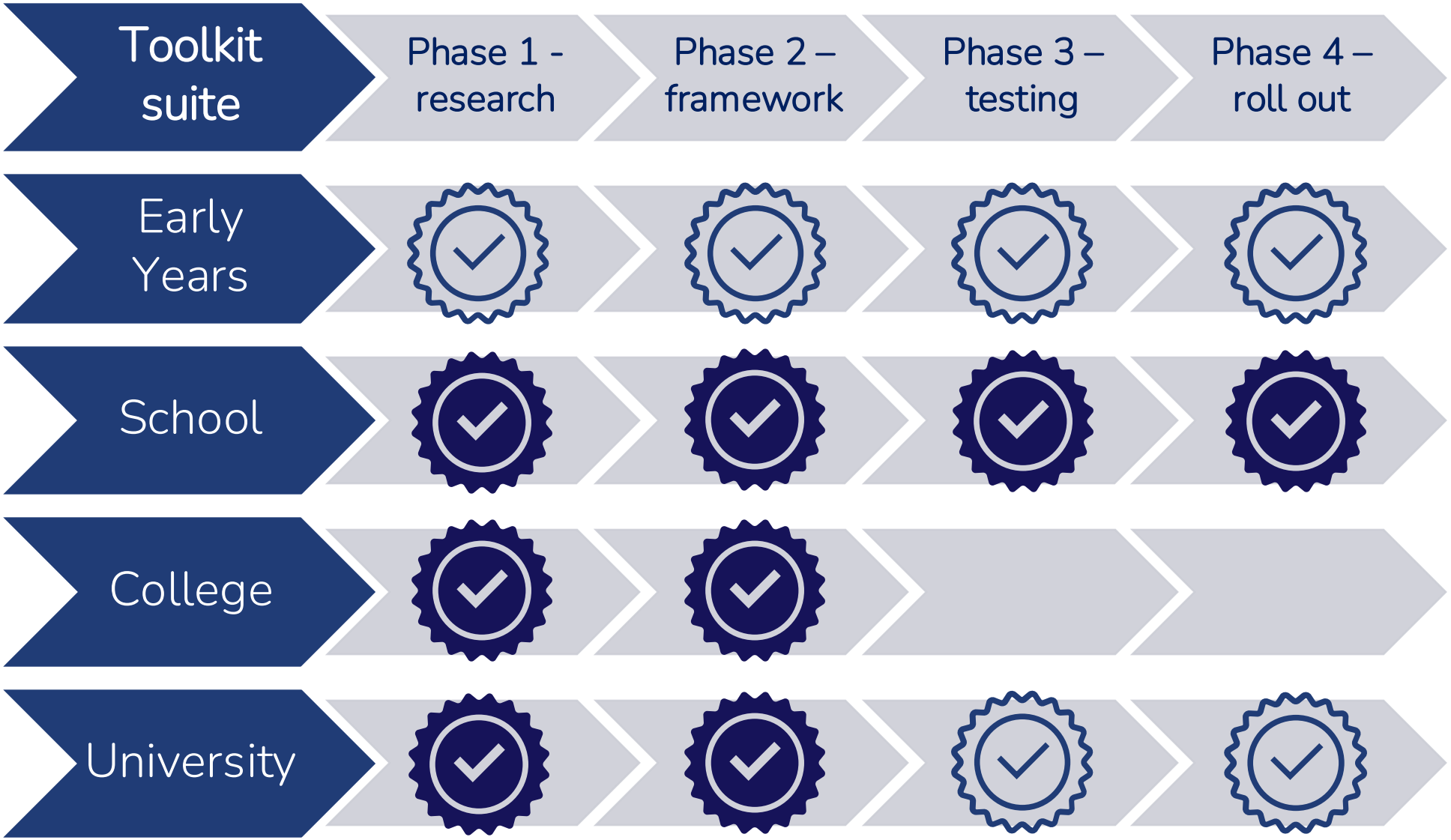

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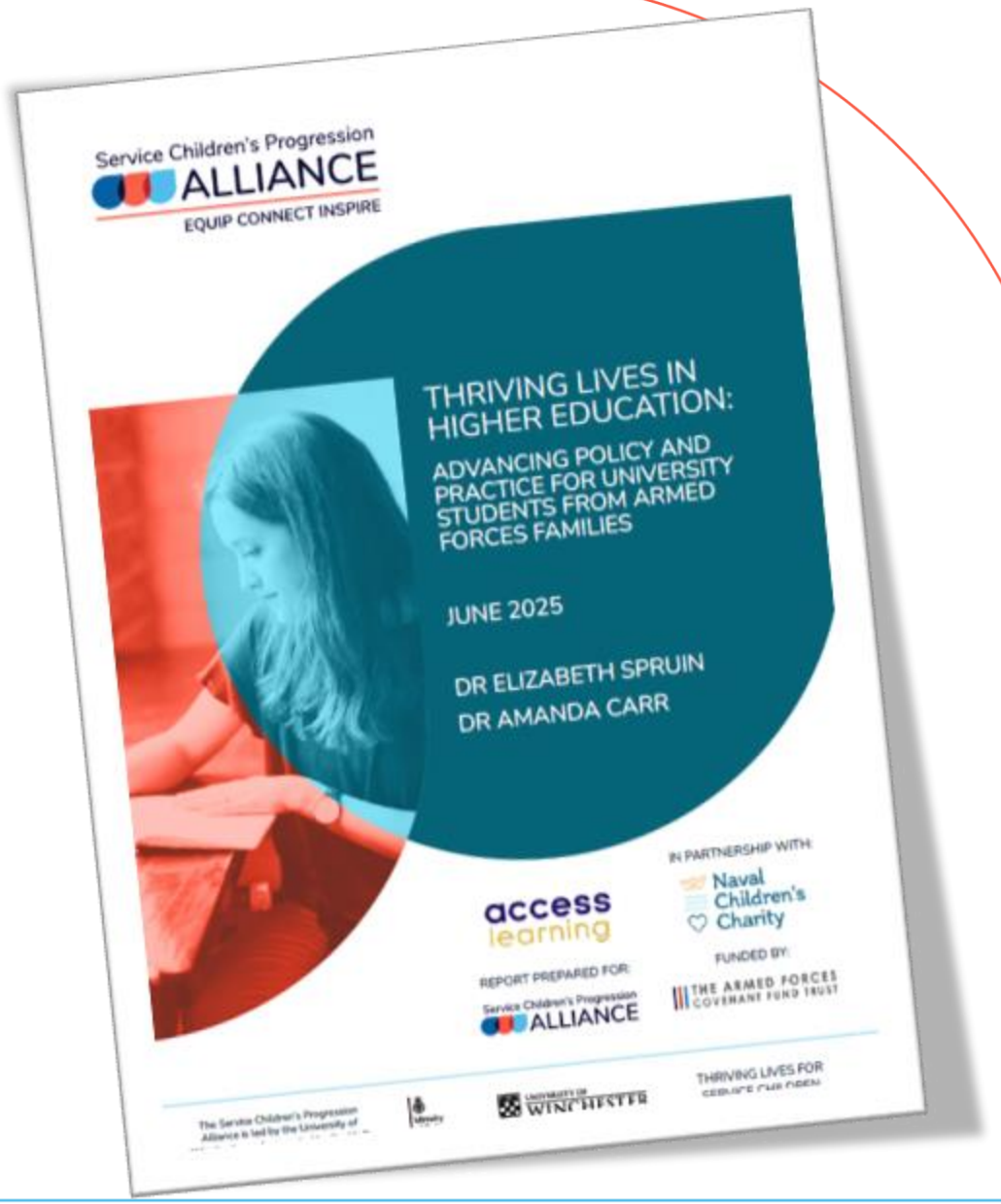
HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH LAUNCH

access learning

Dr Amanda Carr
Founding Director
Dr Elizabeth Spruin
Head of Research



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THRIVING LIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (HE): Advancing Policy and Practice for University Students from Armed Forces Families Report

Dr Liz Spruin & Dr Amanda Carr

24th June 2025

Project Overview

Background & Context

- University students from Armed Forces Families (AFFs) are included in the '*widening participation*' agenda as a priority group (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).
- Underrepresented in HE, with a participation gap of 24% vs. 43% (McCullouch & Hall, 2016).
- Lack of research and awareness, students are not identified (Atherton & Satchell, 2023).
- **Significant gaps** in evidence, strategy and targeted support.

Research Aims

- Understand the HE experiences of students from Armed Forces Families (AFFs)
- Identify effective practices that support students from AFF
- Provide inclusive, evidence-based recommendations

Methodology

Mixed-Methods Approach: Asset-based (*sources of strength*) and collaborative (*advisory group*)

Rapid evidence review: Academic studies, policy reports, sector publications

Secondary evidence:

- National Student Survey (NSS) 2022-2024
- Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) 2022 - 2024
- 166 Widening Access Agreements (WAAs)
- 91 Signed Armed Forces Covenants

Primary data:

- Survey: 200 students from AFFs, 50 HE stakeholders
- Focus groups: 30 students from AFFs, 7 groups
- In-depth interviews: 20 HE stakeholders

Triangulation of Evidence

Sampling Strategy

Targeted sampling strategy, ensure diverse representation from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and participants from across each of the four nations to ensure UK-wide relevance.

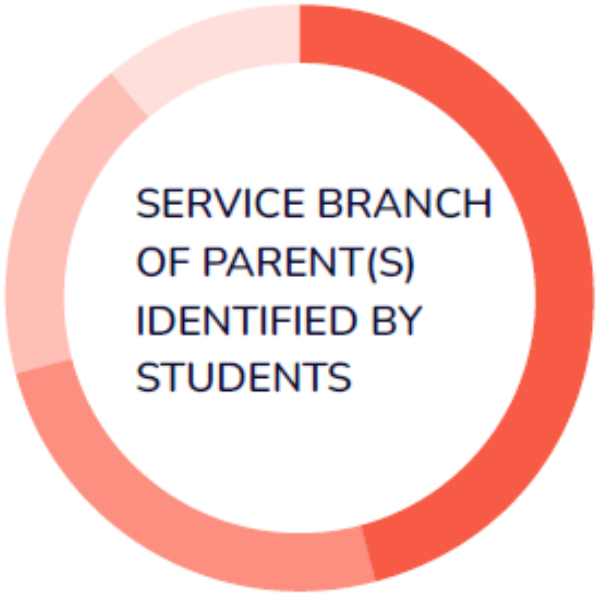
	NATION				
Participants (% row total)	England	Scotland	Wales	N.Ireland	Total
Students	183 (80%)	26 (11%)	19 (8%)	2 (1%)	230
HE stakeholders	54 (77%)	10 (14%)	4 (6%)	2 (3%)	70
HEIs	60 (82%)	8 (11%)	2 (6%)	1 (1%)	73

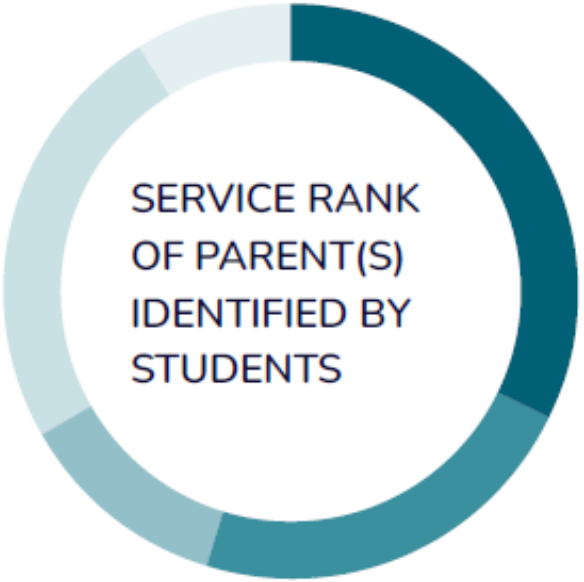
UK-Wide Relevance: Rich diversity of experiences, ensuring findings reflect different HE contexts and realities.

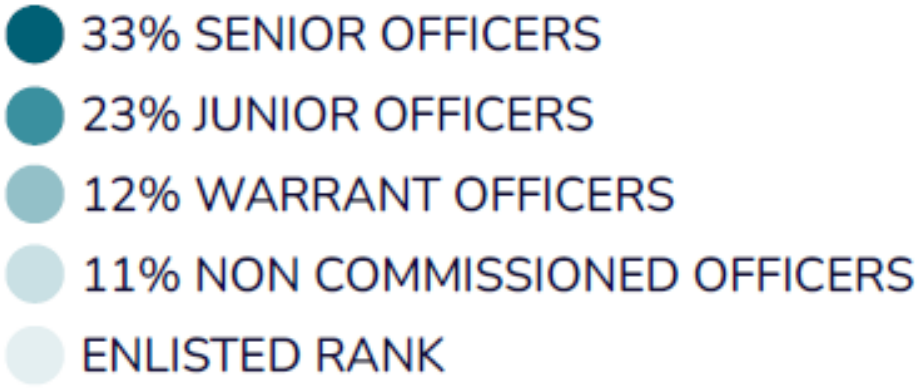
Representation and Diversity

Student Profile:

- Inclusion of all four service branches
- Diverse range of parental service ranks
- Inclusive and broad participant group



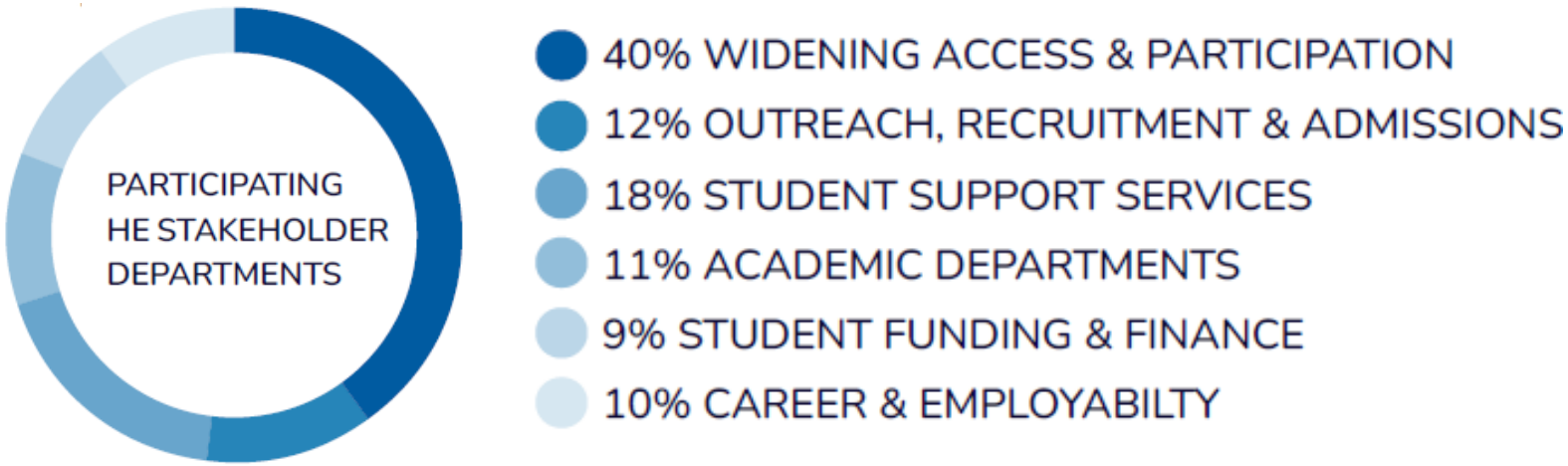




Representation and Diversity

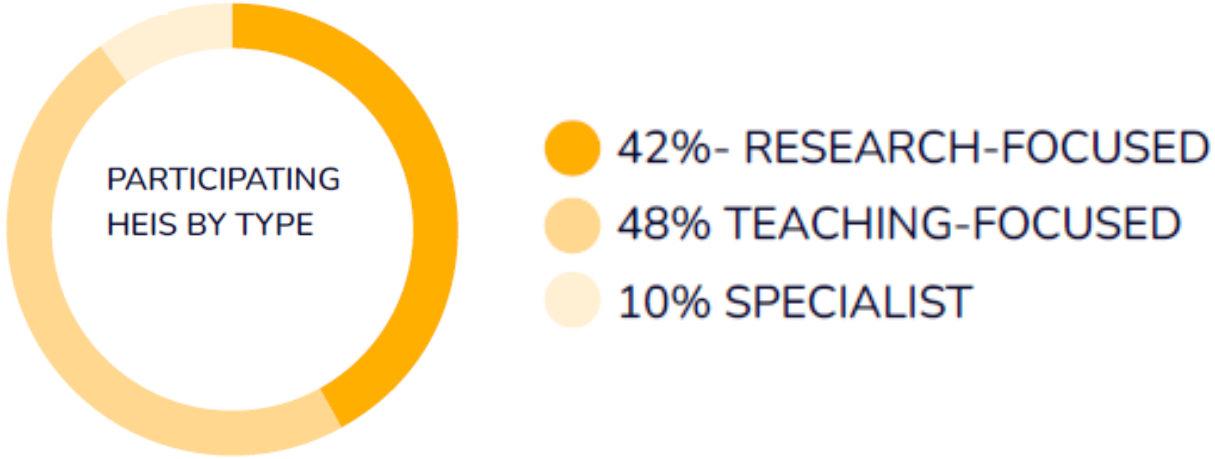
HE Stakeholders:

- Broad spectrum of professionals from various roles and settings
- Wide-ranging perspectives



HEIs:

- Balance of teaching-led, research-focused and specialist providers
- Representation from various types of HEIs



Secondary Data Analysis

UCAS and NSS

UCAS (2023)

Applications

- 20,075 applications from students from Armed Forces families
- **80%** acceptance rate (2024: **82%**)
- **3.3%** of total acceptances (2024: **3.7%**)
- Moderately-sized group (approx. 16,000)

Intersectional Challenges

- ↑ Disabilities (19.7% vs 14.3%)
- ↑ Mental health conditions (10% vs 7.9%)

NSS (2023, 2024)

Student Voice

Feeling unheard and excluded from decisions shaping their experience.

- ↓**1.1%** (2023), ↓ **2.2%** (2024)

Organisation & Management

Strategic planning does not reflect needs and unresponsive to challenges faced.

- ↓**1.0%** (2023), ↓**1.5%** (2024)

Important areas for targeted intervention

(Intersectional challenges, student voice, organisation & management)

Secondary Data Analysis

WAAs and AFC

Widening Access Agreements (WAAs)

Recognition:

- **166 WAAs** from across the UK
  - Access and Participation Plans, Outcome Agreements, Fee and Access Plans, Widening Access & Participation Plans
- **24%** (40 out of 166) indicate students from AAFs as a priority group.

Limited Recognition: Identifying and supporting AFF students as a distinct group.

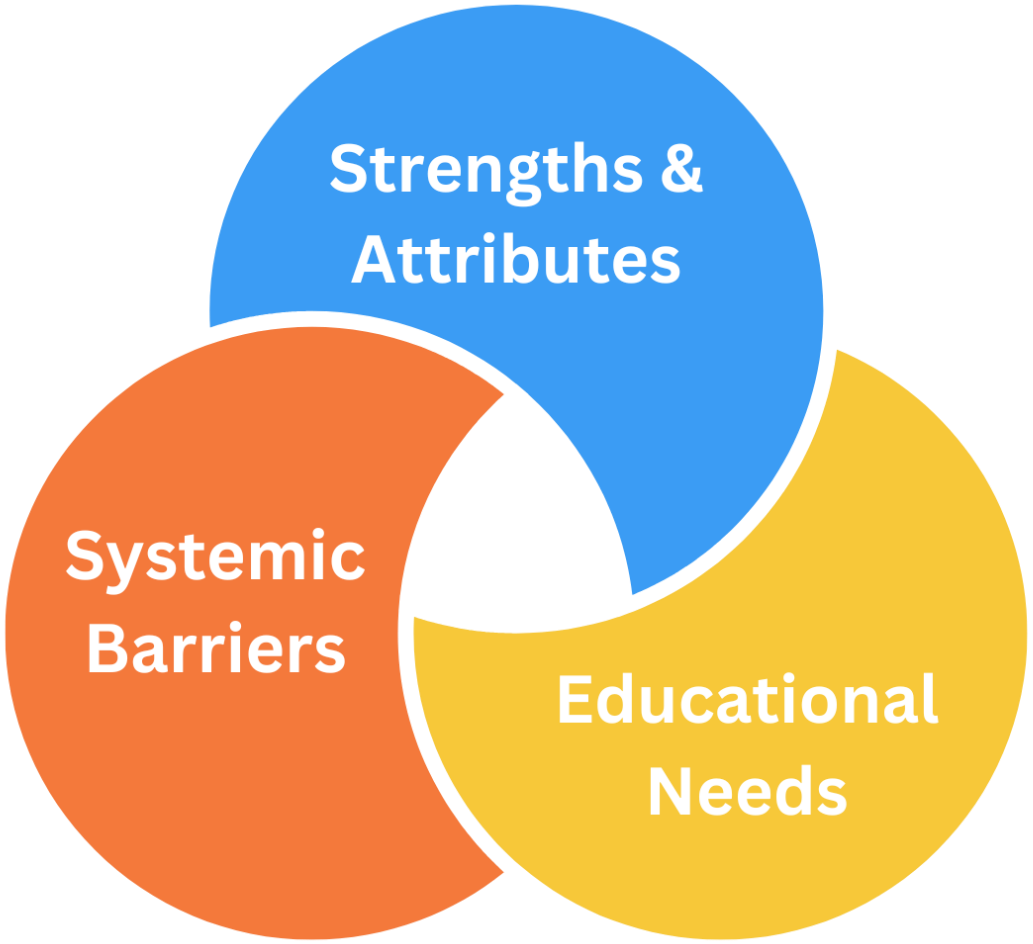
Armed Forces Covenant (AFC)

Commitment:

- **55%** (91 out of 166) have signed the AFC
- **11%** (10 out of 91) have bespoke pledges for AFF students
  - 76% reference pledges for Veterans
  - 88% for Military Spouses

Significant Gap: Institutional commitment to other Armed Forces affiliated groups.

Primary Data Analysis



Strengths & Attributes

Independence & Adaptably

- Developed through frequent relocations, early responsibilities.
- Enables smooth transitions into university life.

"Being able to adapt to a new environment is definitely an advantage. ***It's like another posting for me****, just without my family.* ***I've done this all before – ten times over.****"*

- Student (Scotland)

Discipline & Focus

- Military family instils discipline, organisation, commitment.
- Supports academic focus and goals.

Social Skills

- Frequent moves foster strong social skills and cultural awareness.
- Enhances openness to diverse perspectives.

Strength through struggle:

- AFF students bring considerable strengths to HE.
- Often arise from adversary
- Could be masking deeper needs.

Resilience & Perseverance

- Strong work ethic, masks hidden needs.
- Built through managing change, separation, emotional strain.

"It's ***not about being resilient*** *because sometimes you don't have a choice,* ***you just get on with it and persevere****. That's a better way to explain it."*

- Student (Wales)

Educational Needs

Parental Deployment & Family Mobility

Academic Needs

- **Reasonable adjustments:** Flexibility during family stress
- **Contextual admissions:** Recognise disrupted education
- **Career planning support:** Limited exposure to opportunities

Practical Needs

- **Accommodation:** Instability during holidays/relocations
- **Communication:** Poor awareness of support available

Pastoral Needs

- **Mental health:** Support during parental deployment
- **Sense of belonging:** Feeling isolated, disconnected

*"There **needs to be more support and understanding** for these things, similar to students with childcare responsibilities or additional needs." - Student (England)*

*"Universities **don't really understand the challenges we face**. Other groups seem to have support, but we seem to be invisible, and nothing is taken into account about our circumstances when applying to university." - Student (England)*

Systemic Barriers

"25% of stakeholders reported their institutions identified these students at enrollment." - Stakeholder Survey

Data & Identification

- **Lack of identification** at enrolment.
- **UCAS data not integrated** into student records systems.
- Hinders outcome tracking, engagement monitoring and targeted support.

Lack of Awareness

- **Poor staff awareness** of unique strengths and challenges.
- **Limited resources** to build understanding.
- Leads to opportunities for support are often missed.

"The barriers that service children face at university are unique because there is an intersection of different obstacles that overlap with, yet differ significantly from, those experienced by other student groups."

HE Stakeholder (England)

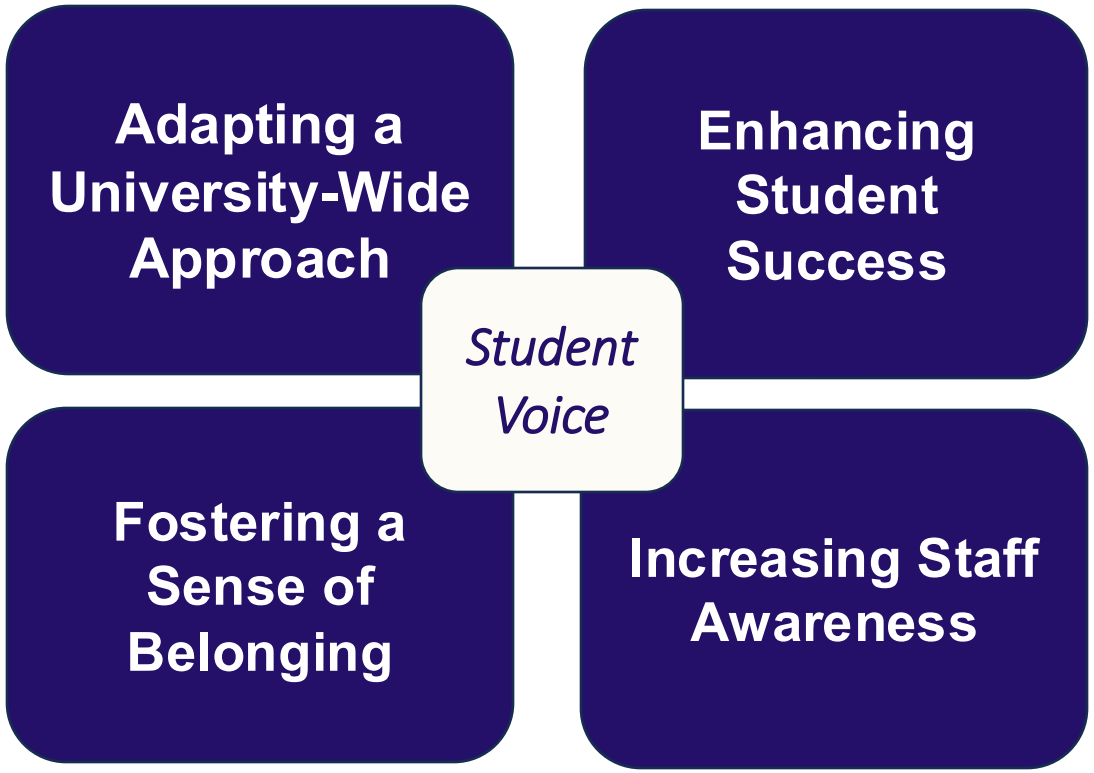
Lack of Strategic Planning

- **Minimal planning**, absent from strategies (e.g., WWA, AFC).
- **Limited institutional drive**, often depends on individual staff.
- Inconsistent provisions across the sector

Financial Structures

- **Issues with misclassification** in funding systems.
- **Lack of financial support** mechanisms for this group.
- Issues can cause delays in enrolment.

Priorities for University Practice



Adopting a University-Wide Approach

Integrate support for students from AFFs into institutional strategy and systems

Recommendations	Examples of Good Practice
1. **Leadership-driven strategy**: Prioritise students from AFFs in strategic policies.	AFF students identified as a priority group in WAAs (e.g., Access and Participation Plans)
2. **Identification and tracking**: Develop mechanisms to identify at enrolment.	Specific question at enrolment to identify Armed Forces-affiliated groups
3. **Strengthen commitments**: Sign the AFC, with pledges to address specific needs.	Targeted pledge commitments based on needs of AFF students
4. **Inclusive admissions process**: Recognise unique challenges and circumstances in admissions policies.	Include students from AFFs in contextual admissions policies

Enhancing Student Success

Provide flexible, inclusive academic and pastoral support, tailed to their needs

Recommendations	Examples of Good Practice
1. **Extenuating circumstances:** Provide flexible academic adjustments.	Policies allowing flexible deadlines, alternative assessments during parental deployment
2. **Dedicated well-being initiatives:** Enhance well-being and mental health provisions.	Additional counselling support during times of family stress (e.g., parental deployment)
3. **Clear communication:** Embed visible information at enrolment.	Handbook for AFF students provided at enrollment outlining support available
4. **Focused career support:** Enable cohort to articulate unique strengths.	Tailored workshops on employable skills

Increasing Staff Awareness

Equip staff with resources to better understand and support this cohort

Recommendations	Examples of Good Practice
1. **Resources for staff:** Develop accessible resources to build staff knowledge and understanding.	Centralised resource pack provided to all academic and professional services staff
2. **Institutional lead:** Establish and appoint an institutional staff lead.	Armed Forces Champion - Dedicated contact, coordinates and drives support initiatives
3. **Improve collaborative partnerships:** Build networks with other institutions to share best practices.	ADVANCE Network (Scotland) – National coordination, facilitates best practice sharing

Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Create inclusive communities and peer networks that reflect students' experiences.

Recommendations	Examples of Good Practice
1. **Student networks:** Create opportunities for students to connect and share experiences.	Peer network to support connection, share experiences and build lasting relationships
2. **Inclusive induction**: Incorporate information sessions during orientation.	Tailored induction for new AFF students to provide information and build connections
3. **Representation and advocacy**: Enable participation in student forums and advisory groups.	AFF student union representative to represent views and contribute to decision-making

Sector Recommendations

1. **Improve Financial Support Systems**
   - Streamline the financial application process
   - Enhance training for HEI finance teams
   - Create bespoke scholarships and bursaries

2. **Strengthen Collaboration with Armed Forces**
   - Establish a sector-wide network with HE and Armed Forces stakeholders

3. **Inclusion in Widening Access Agreements**
   - HE regulators should mandate inclusion in institutions WAAs

4. **Broaden Covenant Commitments**
   - All institutions should join the AFC
   - The Armed Forces Covenant Trust should provide guidance on pledges

5. **National Awareness Campaigns**
   - Increase visibility of cohort through targeted campaigns

6. **Data Collection and Sharing**
   - Develop a sector-wide framework
   - Strengthen data-sharing mechanisms

Moving Forward

Finalise and Launch Toolkit for HE

- Translate priorities into clear principles for practice
- Develop resources and self-assessment tools for institutions
- Share good practice and support institutional adoption.

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Naval Children's Charity

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Thank You!

info@consultaccess.co.uk

Our thanks to all the students and stakeholders who shared their time and experiences to shape this research. We are also grateful to the advisory panel for their valuable expertise, insight and ongoing guidance throughout the project.

access learning

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"I am grateful to have had the opportunity to read *Thriving Lives in Higher Education*, which is an excellent report that examines key issues pertaining to the experiences of students from Armed Forces families. It is a timely report that draws effectively from the emergent evidence base and enhances this with first-hand experiences from all parts of the UK. The recommendations challenge stakeholders to rethink and improve practice. I intend to reflect on the findings and recommendations as I work to strengthen fair access to tertiary education in Scotland."

Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access (Scotland)

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PANEL DISCUSSION

Chair: Dr Liam Satchell
University of Winchester, Higher Education Advisory Group Chair

- Sarah Harder-Collins, University of Winchester
- Rachael Edgar, Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT)
- Ellie Rowley, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
- Dr Angus (Gus) Ryrie, Liverpool John Moores University
- Jessica Smith, Swansea University & Centre for Military Gambling Research

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COMFORT BREAK

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ADVANCING POLICY AND PRACTICE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES

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THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION TO THE THRIVING LIVES TOOLKIT FOR UNIVERSITIES

Dr Liam Satchell
liam.satchell@winchester.ac.uk
Chair of the HE Toolkit working group

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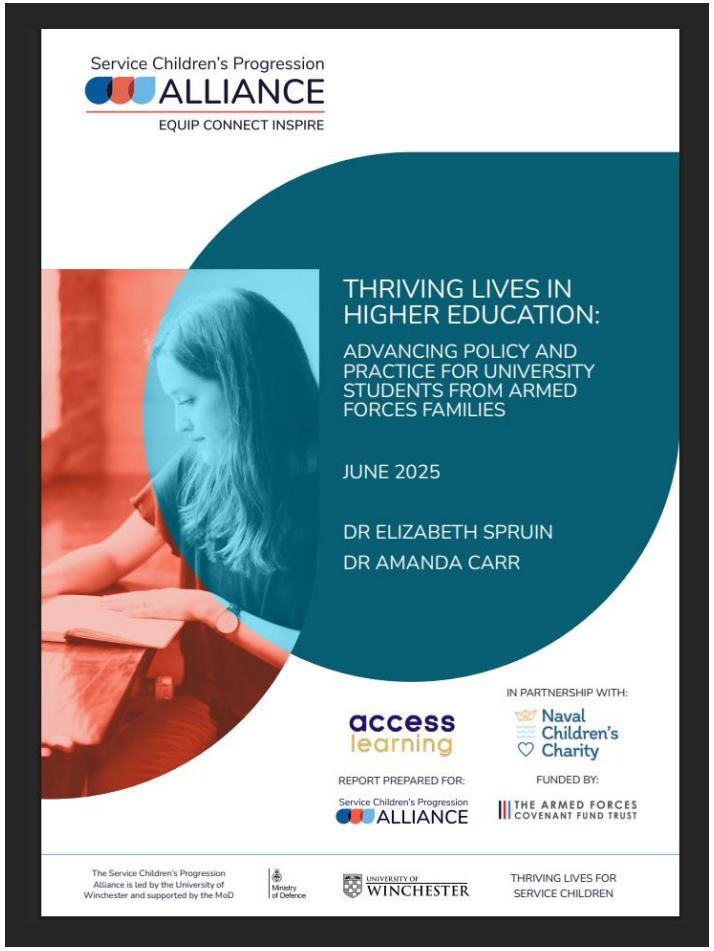
RESEARCH... INTO PRACTICE



helping schools support Armed Forces children

Thriving Lives toolkit

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SCIP ALLIANCE TOOLKIT SUITE

Early years

Schools

Further education

Higher education

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helping schools support Armed Forces children

Thriving Lives toolkit

Principle	Evidence Suggests	What Might This Look Like	Emerging, Developing and Embedding Practice
Adopting a University-Wide Approach	A university-wide approach is essential to embedding support for students from Armed Forces families. Many institutions do not systematically identify or track these students, limiting their ability to tailor interventions. Strong leadership and policy integration ensure sustainable improvements.	• Leadership commitment to including students from Armed Forces families in widening participation policies and strategy. • Clear mechanisms for tracking and monitoring their progress through student records systems. • Contextual admissions policies that account for the background and circumstances of these students. • Bespoke Armed Forces Covenant pledges addressing the needs of students from Armed Forces families.	**Emerging:** Universities will be in the early stages of reflecting on activities and may be implementing actions to enact this principle, but to a small extent, with limited institutional strategies or policies. **Developing:** Universities will have some recognition of students from Armed Forces families in policies and processes but may not yet have fully embedded these into strategic planning or student tracking. Some data may be collected at enrolment, but it is not consistently used to shape interventions or targeted support. **Embedding:** Universities will have a well-established and strategic approach, ensuring students from Armed Forces families are identified and integrated into university-wide policies. Policies and initiatives will be proactively monitored and refined based on student engagement and outcomes.

Reflect *Reflect with stakeholders on these key questions*	**Evidence** *Identify current practice that demonstrates where you are*	**Self-Assessment** *Assess your current practice*			**Action** *Identify next steps to improve your university-wide approach*
		Emerging	Developing	Embedding	
1.1 - To what extent does your institution currently identify and track students from Armed Forces families?					

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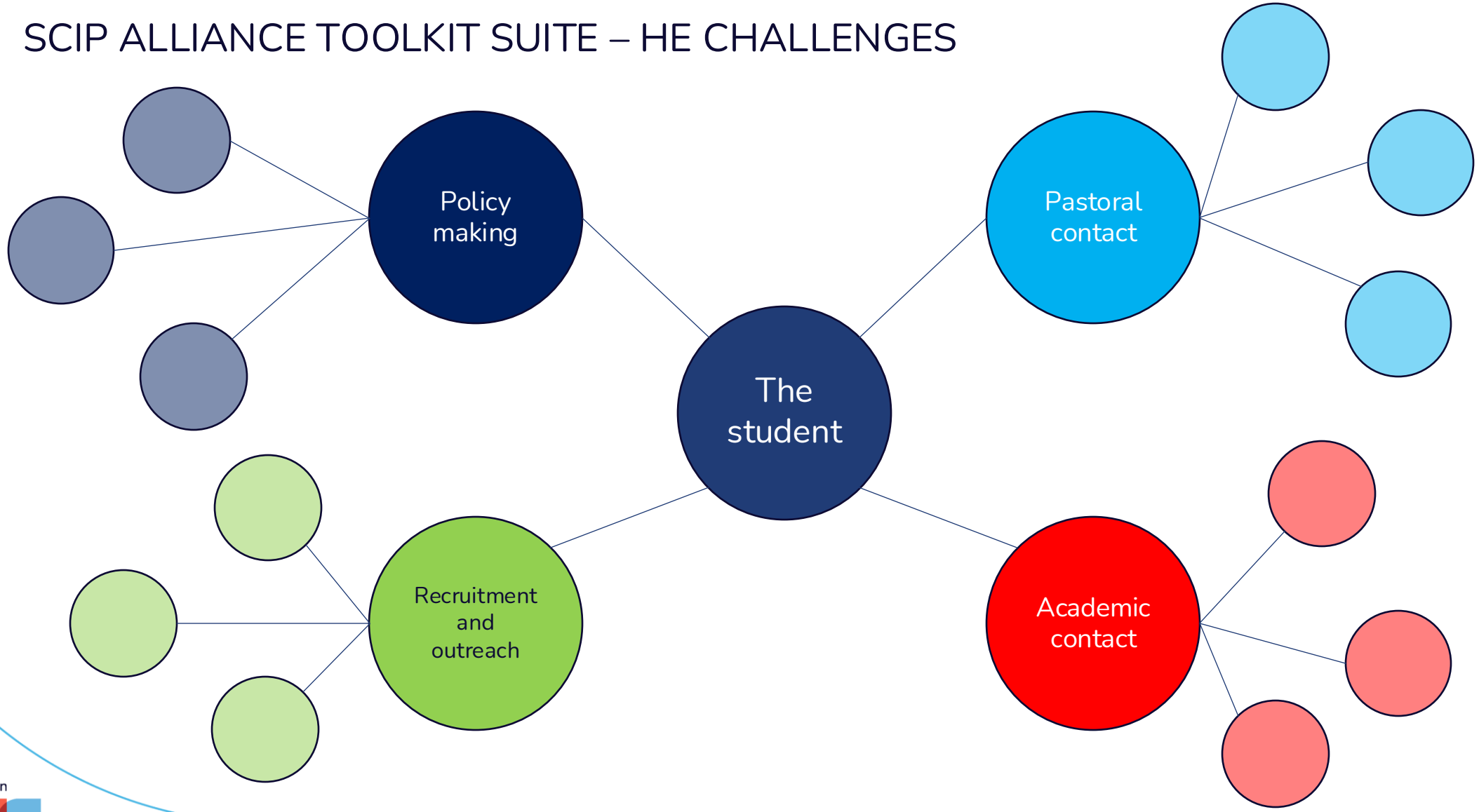
SCIP ALLIANCE TOOLKIT SUITE – HE CHALLENGES



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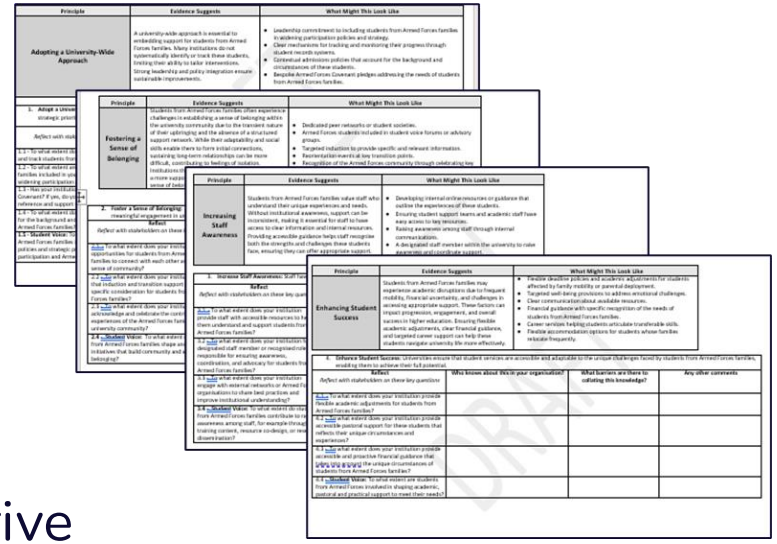
SCIP ALLIANCE TOOLKIT SUITE – HE SOLUTIONS

Activity – How do we turn knowledge into action?



In front of you is a draft of the HE toolkit.

It has 4 principles and 17 facets.
Read through the research-informed facets.

Help us identify who and what we need to work with to drive this change?

Who knows about this in your organisation?	What barriers are there to collating this knowledge?	Any other comments

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THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN

LUNCH & NETWORKING

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