Service Children's Progression ALLIANCE

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THRIVING LIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

ADVANCING POLICY AND PRACTICE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES

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CONTENTS

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DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance) defines a Service child as "a person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular Armed Forces, or as a reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person's life."

In this report, we use the term *students from Armed Forces families* to describe the cohort of university students who meet this definition. While this population is more commonly referred to as *Service children* in the context of pre-university education, the term *children* is less appropriate when discussing university students given their age and stage of education.

During our primary data collection, we asked participants about their preferred terminology and they expressed no strong preference for either term. However, when reflecting on their own experiences, participants often referred to themselves as *Service children*, which we have preserved in the direct quotes to authentically reflect their voices. In addition, where we discuss early educational experiences or schooling, we occasionally use the term *Service children* for contextual clarity.

For the purposes of describing university experiences, however, we use the term *students from Armed Forces families*. This aligns with the terminology adopted by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the National Student Survey (NSS). This dual approach ensures consistency with national datasets while respecting how participants chose to describe themselves.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

This report examines the experiences of students from Armed Forces families (Service children) in Higher Education (HE) across the UK. It highlights and addresses significant gaps in research and practice concerning this, as yet, underrepresented student cohort. Despite their recent inclusion in the widening participation agenda, targeted support for students from Armed Forces families in HE remains limited. This research aims to bridge this gap by exploring the barriers, needs, and strengths of this cohort, and presenting evidence-based priorities and recommendations to enhance their experiences and outcomes in HE.

Students from Armed Forces families bring unique strengths to HE, including resilience, adaptability, and strong social skills, cultivated through their unique experience of military family life. However, frequent relocations, disrupted education, and the emotional challenges of parental deployment also create distinct needs that HE institutions must address. The findings of this research highlight systemic barriers, including inadequate identification mechanisms, limited institutional awareness, and gaps in strategic planning. Complex financial structures and administrative errors exacerbate these challenges, leaving many students from Armed Forces families without equitable support.

Drawing together findings from existing literature, secondary evidence and primary data from students themselves as well as HE stakeholders, this report concludes with a framework for action including a set of priorities for practice for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and a number of sector-wide recommendations. The priorities focus on adopting a university-wide approach, enhancing student success, increasing staff awareness, and fostering a sense of belonging. These strategies are complemented by broader recommendations targeting policymakers, Armed Forces stakeholders, and student finance systems to address systemic barriers and ensure consistent, meaningful support for students from Armed Forces families.

KEY FINDINGS

This research has provided valuable insights into the experiences of students from Armed Forces families in HE, highlighting their unique strengths, challenges, and the systemic barriers that can complicate their journeys. These findings provide an important foundation for developing tailored strategies to support this group within universities and across the HE sector.

STRENGTHS

Students from Armed Forces families bring considerable strengths to their university experiences shaped by the unique demands of growing up within a military family. Resilience and perseverance emerged as defining traits, developed in response to frequent relocations and the emotional challenges of parental deployment. Independence and adaptability also stand out as key characteristics, cultivated through early responsibilities and navigating new and often unfamiliar environments. In addition, students from Armed Forces families often demonstrate strong social skills and cultural awareness, largely influenced by early exposure to diverse communities and environments. These qualities enable students from Armed Forces families to connect with others and excel in collaborative environments. Discipline and focus, instilled by the structured ethos of military and family life, also equip these students with the organisational skills, determination and motivation to succeed academically.

NEEDS

Despite their strengths, the research also highlights several needs that reflect the unique challenges faced by students from Armed Forces families. Frequent relocations and disruptions to schooling can compromise educational continuity, creating specific academic needs that require tailored support, such as flexible deadlines and targeted career guidance. Pastoral needs are also significant, with the emotional strain of parental deployment and mobility affecting mental health and well-being. Practical challenges, including housing stability, insufficient financial support, and difficulties accessing resources were recurring themes that underscored the gaps in institutional provision for this cohort.

BARRIERS

The study identified several systemic barriers that amplify these challenges for students from Armed Forces families. A lack of robust mechanisms for identifying these students at enrolment leaves them largely invisible within most institutions, limiting the ability to tailor support. Similarly, gaps in institutional strategic planning often result in this cohort being overlooked in equality, access, and participation strategies. Financial complexities and administrative errors, such as misclassification as international students, can lead to the incorrect application of tuition fees and restricted finance options. Moreover, limited awareness among university staff about the experiences and needs of students from Armed Forces families results in missed opportunities for early intervention and support. Finally, many students struggle to foster a sense of belonging at university due to their unique circumstance being poorly understood by staff and peers.

SUMMARY

Addressing the unique needs and strengths of students from Armed Forces families requires coordinated action across the HE sector. This report identifies actionable priorities for universities to adopt institution-wide strategies, enhance student success, increase staff awareness, and foster a sense of belonging. These are complemented by sector-wide recommendations aimed at tackling systemic barriers and driving inclusivity. While progress is underway, challenges such as limited identification, gaps in awareness, and constrained financial resources highlight the need for greater collaboration across institutions and sectors. By addressing these gaps, HEIs can create an equitable environment that values and maximises the strengths of students from Armed Forces families and supports their success.

01. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The *Thriving Through Childhood and Beyond* project, a Naval Children's Charity and Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance) partnership, seeks to enhance the educational experiences of children and young people from Armed Forces families from early years through to HE. The project, funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Trust transformational grants programme, builds on the successes of the SCiP Alliance's Thriving Lives Toolkit for schools; supporting hundreds of primary and secondary schools across the UK to reflect on school practice through a framework of 7 principles. The SCiP Alliance is a national partnership of educational practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and military partners that champions the progression and success of Service children through evidence-based practice and collaboration.

This report specifically examines the experiences of students from Armed Forces families in HE across the UK. Despite their inclusion in the 'widening participation' agenda[1], there remains a notable lack of research into this cohort's experiences and outcomes in HE. This gap in understanding presents significant challenges for developing effective institutional strategies and policies to support these students, who remain underrepresented and have largely gone '*Under the Radar*'[2], often overlooked in HE research and practice.

Service children, defined by the SCiP Alliance as "a person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular armed forces, or as a reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person's life"[3] are a diverse group shaped by shared experiences. Frequent relocations, disrupted education, and the emotional strains of parental deployment often set them apart from their peers. While these factors can create unique strengths for students from Armed Forces families within HE, such as resilience, adaptability and independence, they can also have an inverse impact on academic progression, a sense of belonging, and on the mental health outcomes of this cohort.[4]

Participation data underscores the underrepresentation of students from Armed Forces families in HE. While 43% of the general population progress to university, it is estimated that only 24% of those from Armed Forces families make this transition.[5] Furthermore, progression data from the Department for Education highlights a gap in progression to HE for this cohort, with students from Armed Forces families being 5% less likely to attend university compared to their non-military peers.[6] Despite recognition of these differences by the Office for Students (OfS) and the inclusion of this group within the widening participation agenda, targeted support for these students within HE remains limited.

1 Walker, J., Selous, A., & Misca, G. (2020). Living in our shoes: Understanding the needs of UK armed forces families.

2 Atherton, G., & Satchell, L. (2023). Under the Radar. Service Children and Higher Education in England. Winchester: University of Winchester, Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance.

3 Granada, A., & Mulcahy, E. (2022). Diversity Meets Complexity: Supporting Armed Forces Young People to Thrive in Post-16 Education. Winchester: University of Winchester, Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance.

4 Ince, C., Chappell, A., & McHugh, E. (2021). University Students from Military Families: The Same but Different. Brunel University London; Rogers, K. (2023). Higher Education Engagement among students with armed services backgrounds: A literature Review. Sheffield Hallam Students' Union.

5 McCullouch, J., & Hall, M. (2016). Further and higher progression for service children: Research paper. University of Winchester.

6 Atherton & Satchell (2023)

This report presents findings from the first phase of this project which focuses on understanding the experiences of students from Armed Forces families attending HE in the UK. It synthesises existing literature and evidence, analyses secondary data, and presents primary research findings to address current gaps in understanding the unique strengths and challenges of this group of students. Drawing these sources of evidence together, the report concludes with a set of evidence-based priorities for practice and recommendations aimed at improving current provision for students from Armed Forces families in HE.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project is part of the wider Naval Children's Charity and SCiP Alliance partnership to expand the Thriving Lives Toolkit across the student life course. The research aims to:

- Understand the educational experiences of students from Armed Forces families in HE across the UK.

- Identify effective operational practices that support students from Armed Forces families in a variety of HE settings.

- Provide an evidence base to inform tailored recommendations at key stages of the student lifecycle.

- Develop inclusive, research-informed recommendations to enhance educational experiences and outcomes of this cohort.

ABOUT ACCESS

Academic Consulting and Education Services (ACCESS) is a specialist research and training consultancy dedicated to advancing equitable practices in education and health and were commissioned to carry out this research on behalf of the above partners. ACCESS combines academic rigour with practical insights to address the needs of underrepresented and seldom-heard groups in a range of settings. With extensive expertise in conducting mixed-methods research and a background in Higher Education, ACCESS ensured that this research was both thorough and inclusive. Led by Dr Elizabeth Spruin (Head of Learning and Development) and Dr Amanda Carr (Director), the team were supported by Research Assistants Sharon Good and Kirstin Holsey.

02. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the educational experiences of students from Armed Forces families. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strengths, challenges, and support needs of this cohort, capturing both the breadth and depth of their experience. This approach was informed by existing literature and guided by ethical principles set out in the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics.

FRAMEWORK FOR INQUIRY

The study adopted an asset-based and collaborative approach, framing the experiences of students from Armed Forces families as sources of strength as well as recognising their challenges and the systemic barriers they may face in accessing and participating in HE. By incorporating collaboration and engagement with both students and HE professionals and stakeholders, including a Project Advisory Group[7], the research aimed to ensure that the voices of participants and those with direct experience informed the findings and recommendations of the research. Our methodology also applied an intersectional lens, acknowledging that students from Armed Forces families navigate multiple identities and share experiences with other groups, such as care-experienced students or those from low-income backgrounds and first-generation university attendees.

RESEARCH APPROACH

We adopted a three-strand approach to exploring the experiences of students from Armed Forces families in HE. By combining existing literature and evidence with new data, this approach aimed to address key gaps in understanding and provide a holistic view of the strengths, challenges, and barriers experienced by this student group. The three strands of the research were:

- Rapid evidence review
- Secondary data analysis
- Primary data collection and analysis

RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW

The first strand of the research involved a rapid evidence review of existing literature that focused on *students from Armed Forces families* in HE and post-16 education in the UK. This review aimed to identify key themes, trends, and gaps in the current body of knowledge while providing a foundation for the subsequent phases of the research.

Relevant research was identified using a systematic approach to literature searching, primarily through Google Scholar. Search terms included *Service children*, *students from Armed Forces families*, AND *higher education* AND *UK*. There were no restrictions on publication year. The review drew from peer-reviewed academic articles, institutional reports, and policy documents to ensure a broad and inclusive scope.

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Building on the findings from the rapid evidence review, we gathered a number of sources of secondary data to further understand the experiences of students from Armed Forces families and to identify gaps in institutional practices. The secondary data analysis drew on several strands of publicly available data including:

- NSS Data Analysis: Review of feedback collected from students from Armed Forces families on their student experiences from 2022–2024
- Widening Access Agreements (WAAs): Strategic analysis of over 166 institutional plans from HEIs across the UK to assess commitments to widening participation for students from Armed Forces families.
- Audit of the Armed Forces Covenant Pledges: Examination of institutional pledges made by HEIs in England, Scotland, and Wales.
- UCAS Data Analysis: Review of information collected by UCAS about applications to UK universities from 2022–2024

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7 See Appendix 1 for a list of the organisations that were represented on our Advisory Panel.

PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

Our primary research engaged students as well as HE stakeholders and staff from HEIs. We provided a number of ways for participants to take part, including online surveys, interviews and focus groups.

ONLINE SURVEYS

Two bespoke surveys were developed:

- Student Survey: Targeted at students from Armed Forces families, this survey explored educational experiences, challenges, and perceptions of institutional support.

- Staff Survey: Directed at HE professionals working with UK HEIs, this survey examined institutional practices, support strategies, and staff perspectives on the needs of students from Armed Forces families.

The surveys included closed and open-ended questions and were disseminated through HE networks, Armed Forces charities, and social media channels. The surveys were live from 15 April to 1 November 2024 and resulted in 250 responses: 200 from students and 50 from HE stakeholders.

FOCUS GROUPS

Seven focus groups were run over the same timeline and engaged 30 students from Armed Forces families to share their experiences. Participants were drawn from a diverse range of HEIs across all four nations, ensuring representation from students with varied experiences and military backgrounds.

Focus group discussions were structured around a number of themes including:

- General university experiences, including strengths and barriers.

- Support mechanisms during critical points of the student lifecycle.

- Experiences of specific gaps in support.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

20 HE professionals participated in one-to-one or small group interviews, providing insights into institutional practices, strategies, and areas for improvement. These stakeholders were recruited from admissions, student support, academic and widening participation teams within universities as well as professionals from national organisations connected to HE. Interview topics focused on:

- Perceived strengths and needs of students from Armed Forces families.

- Effectiveness of current support mechanisms.

- Recommendations for policy and practice development.

SAMPLING STRATEGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

The research employed a targeted and diverse sampling strategy to ensure representation across the HE landscape. HEIs were selected to include a mix of research-intensive universities, teaching-led institutions, and specialist providers. Recruitment for interviews and focus groups targeted HEIs with commitments to the Armed Forces Covenant and explicit references to students from Armed Forces families in their WAAs.

PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

Participants were recruited across multiple engagement types, including surveys, interviews and focus groups. The participant breakdown is as follows:

- **Students:** 230 students from Armed Forces families (80% from England, 11% from Scotland, 8% from Wales, 1% from Northern Ireland).

- **HE Stakeholders:** 70 professionals, representing roles in student support, widening participation, and academic departments, alongside representatives from five national bodies involved in HE and military-linked support (77% from England, 14% from Scotland, 6% from Wales, 3% from Northern Ireland).

- **HEIs:** Students and staff together represented 73 HEIs from across the UK (82% from England, 11% from Scotland, 6% from Wales, 1% from Northern Ireland).

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TABLE 1

HEIs and participants from each of the four nations

Participants (% row total)	NATION				
	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

STUDENT PROFILE

Nearly three-quarters of the students who participated (74%) were aged between 18 and 23 years old and were predominantly enrolled on undergraduate degree programmes. The remaining 26% comprised of older students, with 9% aged 30 or older. Among these, 8% of the total sample were pursuing postgraduate studies. The majority of participants (92%) were studying full-time, while a notable minority (8%) enrolled part-time.

REPRESENTATION AND DIVERSITY

Sampling also captured participation from all four branches of the military, encompassing a diverse range of parental ranks from junior enlisted personnel to senior officers (See Figures 1 and 2). Targeted outreach further ensured representation from rural, urban, and remote university contexts and a diverse range of HE stakeholders from various roles and settings. This ensured a wide breath of perspectives and representation from across the HE sector (Figures 3 and 4).
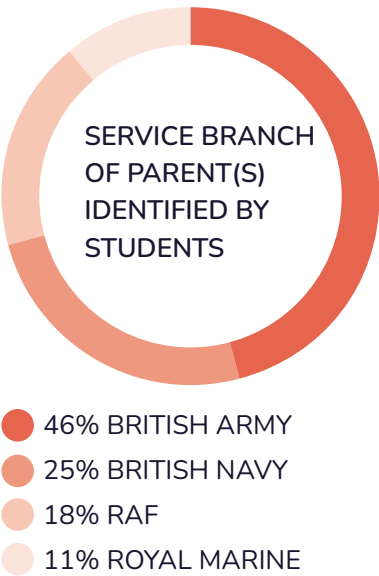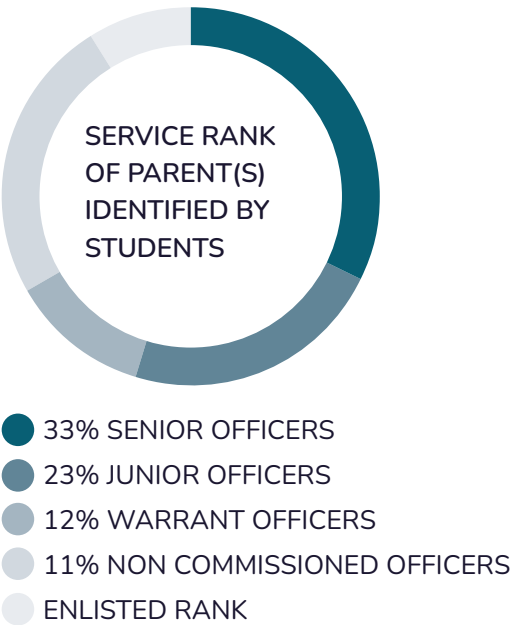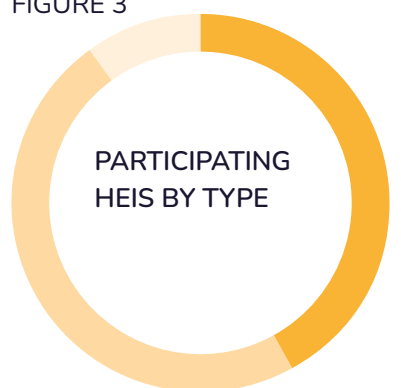
FIGURE 1

SERVICE BRANCH OF PARENT(S) IDENTIFIED BY STUDENTS

- 46% BRITISH ARMY
- 25% BRITISH NAVY
- 18% RAF
- 11% ROYAL MARINE

FIGURE 2

SERVICE RANK OF PARENT(S) IDENTIFIED BY STUDENTS

- 33% SENIOR OFFICERS
- 23% JUNIOR OFFICERS
- 12% WARRANT OFFICERS
- 11% NON COMMISSIONED OFFICERS
- ENLISTED RANK

FIGURE 3

PARTICIPATING
HEIS BY TYPE

- 42%- RESEARCH-FOCUSED
- 48% TEACHING-FOCUSED
- 10% SPECIALIST

FIGURE 4

PARTICIPATING
HE STAKEHOLDER
DEPARTMENTS

- 40% WIDENING ACCESS & PARTICIPATION
- 12% OUTREACH, RECRUITMENT & ADMISSIONS
- 18% STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES
- 11% ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS
- 9% STUDENT FUNDING & FINANCE
- 10% CAREER & EMPLOYABILTY

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards by following the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics and undergoing an internal ethical approval process before fieldwork took place. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets explaining the purpose of the research and their role in the study, ensuring they could make an informed decision about their participation. Explicit consent, either written or verbal, was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement.

To protect confidentiality, all data were anonymised and securely stored in compliance with UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty, ensuring their autonomy throughout the research process. Ethical approval for the study was granted by ACCESS's Ethics Panel before the commencement of fieldwork.

ANALYSIS

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups and open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically by

8 Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

the ACCESS research team. For interviews, some sessions were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed, while others relied on detailed handwritten notes. The data was collated and analysed as a whole dataset using Thematic Analysis[8], a method well-suited to identifying nuanced patterns and themes in participant experiences. By merging all qualitative data into a single dataset, we were able to identify overarching themes that capture patterns and insights consistent across all sources. This inductive approach allows themes to emerge directly from the data, ensuring findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, the analysis involved:

- Familiarisation with data.
- Generating initial codes.
- Searching for themes.
- Reviewing themes.
- Defining and naming themes.
- Writing up findings.

Quantitative data from surveys and secondary sources were analysed using descriptive statistics, providing additional context to qualitative findings. Verbatim quotes are included to illustrate themes and ground the analysis in the lived experiences of participants.

03. RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW

This chapter synthesises the limited but growing body of research on the experiences of students from Armed Forces families in HE. By reviewing published work, it outlines what is known about this cohort of students and the unique factors shaping their educational journeys. In addition to identifying the strengths they bring and the barriers they face, the review highlights gaps in the evidence base, including a persistent lack of data.

STRENGTHS OF STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES

Research highlights that students from Armed Forces families bring unique strengths to HE which are shaped by their upbringing in military families.[9] Strong social skills, adaptability, and resilience are frequently cited by students from Armed Forces families as traits developed through exposure to diverse environments and frequent relocations. These attributes support their ability to navigate new environments and relationships effectively, enhancing their potential for academic and social success in HE.

Independence, responsibility, and organisational skills are also identified as significant strengths, that can prepare students from Armed Forces families for self-directed learning and personal development required within an HE environment.[10] Such characteristics align with a growing emphasis on asset-based approaches, which recognise students' strengths rather than solely focusing on mitigating challenges.[11]

However, the diversity and heterogeneity of experiences within this cohort mean that not all students from Armed Forces families identify these strengths. For example,

military life can have varying impacts depending on the parents' service type, rank, and deployment frequency.[12] This variation underscores the need for tailored institutional support that not only recognises the unique attributes of individual students but also accommodates the wide range of circumstances and challenges they may face.[13]

EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS IN HE

In previous studies, students from Armed Forces families have reported challenges affecting their sense of belonging and academic performance in HE. The absence of a close-knit military community, combined with the impact of frequent relocations, can disrupt relationships that are forming and intensify feelings of disconnection.[14] These challenges may persist or even heighten during the second year of university, a time when most students are expected to have established stable social networks and routines. For students from Armed Forces families, the mismatch between these expectations and their ongoing difficulties in forming lasting connections can exacerbate their sense of isolation. This finding highlights the importance of extending social and academic support beyond the initial transition to HE. Such findings highlight the need for HE providers to foster community-building initiatives and ensure extended social support.[15]

Disrupted education during primary and secondary school often creates curriculum gaps for students from Armed Forces families, particularly in subjects where sequential learning is critical, such as maths and science.[16] These challenges can carry forward into HE, affecting academic performance. In addition, the emotional and social demands of caregiving responsibilities, often taken on during parental deployment, can have lasting impacts, underscoring the need for targeted mental health interventions and institutional flexibility.[17]

9 Chappell, A., McHugh, E., & Ince, C. (2025). 'Grown Up' Children from 'Armed Forces Families' – reflections on experiences of childhood and education. Brunel University London.; Ince et al. (2021)

10 McCullouch & Hall (2016)

11 Lawrence, K. (2021). Young People from Armed Forces Families: Post-16 Education and Training. Towards a National Strategy for service Children's Post-16 Success. Winchester: University of Winchester, Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance.

12 Atherton & Satchell (2023)

13 Granada & Mulcahy (2022)

14 Rogers (2023); Ince et al. (2021)

15 Rogers (2023)

16 McCullouch & Hall (2016)

17 Atherton & Satchell (2023)

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND PROGRESSION

Students from Armed Forces families face a range of barriers to participation and progression in HE, many of which stem from systemic issues in identifying and tracking this cohort. Unlike other target groups, these students are not consistently identified or monitored in education after the age of 16. Without effective identification, it becomes challenging for HE providers to develop tailored support strategies which has resulted in a lack of targeted interventions and underrepresentation in institutional access initiatives.[18]

Regional disparities further compound these barriers. Military families are often concentrated in rural or isolated areas, where access to outreach programmes and HE institutions may be limited. For example, geographical isolation may inhibit aspirations as families stationed in remote areas may have limited access to HE opportunities locally.[19] Such disparities, combined with frequent relocations during formative educational years, can leave students from Armed Forces families less likely to develop the aspirations or academic preparedness necessary for HE participation.[20]

Mental health challenges also play a significant role in hindering the success of students from Armed Forces families in HE. Deployment-related stress, including prolonged absences of a parent and the anxiety of their safety, is a recurrent theme in the literature. These experiences, often coupled with caregiving responsibilities during parental deployment, can result in emotional strain that continues to affect students into their HE journey. Despite their demonstrated resilience, students from Armed Forces families frequently face ongoing challenges related to mental health and wellbeing, including difficulties with anxiety, stress, and maintaining focus on academic tasks.[21]

FUNDING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial constraints are a critical barrier to participation and success in HE for students from Armed Forces families. The Service Pupil Premium (SPP) in England, which provides targeted financial support to address the unique challenges faced by Service children in primary and secondary education, ends after Year 11. This leaves no specific funding mechanisms to support their transition to, or success in, HE.[22] In the devolved nations, financial support for service children also varies[23]. Northern Ireland and Scotland do not provide direct funding. However, in Scotland Service children fall under the GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) framework which provides holistic, coordinated support. In Wales, service children are supported by the Supporting Service Children in Education in Wales Fund, providing resource at the school level. However, none of these schemes extend beyond compulsory education to address the financial challenges of HE.

While general financial aid, such as tuition and maintenance loans, is available across the UK, international research indicates that military families exhibit higher levels of risk for incurring financial debt[24], which can deter students from Armed Forces families from pursuing HE. In addition, families with lower incomes may struggle to provide the financial resources needed for university-related expenses which also limits access and retention opportunities for these students.[25]

These financial pressures are particularly acute for mature students from Armed Forces families, who may lack family support and often have to balance additional responsibilities, such as childcare or work, alongside their studies. The absence of targeted financial support mechanisms in HE further exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for this cohort to overcome socio-economic and structural barriers.

18 McCullouch, J., Hall, M., & Ellis, S. (2018). The Education of Children from Military Families: Identity and Agency. Educational Futures, 9, 4-27.

19 McCullouch & Hall (2016)

20 Atherton & Satchell (2023)

21 Chappell et al. (2025)

22 Dobson, L. (2021). Armed Forces Students Post-16: Focus Group Report. Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance.

23 Department for Education (2024). Service Pupil Premium: further information. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-service-pupil-premium/service-pupil-premium-spp-information-sheet#devolved-uk-nations

24 Robson, S., Andrews, J., Friedman, E., et al (2023). Understanding the financial well-being of military families. RAND Corporation.

25 McCullouch & Hall (2018)

Although the devolved nations employ distinct approaches to funding in HE, none currently offer financial initiatives specifically tailored to students from Armed Forces families. For example, Scotland provides free tuition for Scottish-domiciled students, while England, Wales, and Northern Ireland regulate fees and provide loans through national schemes, as illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Funding and Financial Support from each of the Four Nations

NATION	REGULATOR	KEY FEATURES OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION	FEE STRUCTURE
ENGLAND	Office for Students (OfS)	Focus on institutional Access and Participation Plans (APPs) and the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR).	Regulated capped fees. Tuition and maintenance loans via the Student Loans Company (SLC).
SCOTLAND	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)	Focus on regional initiatives, contextualised admissions, and articulation pathways. Outcome Agreements (OAs) outline commitments.	No tuition fees for Scottish-domiciled students, funded through the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).
WALES	Medr: Commission for Tertiary Education and Research	Reaching Wider Programme prioritises collaborative partnerships for disadvantaged groups. Fee and Access Plans are required annually.	Regulated capped fees. Tuition and maintenance loans via Student Finance Wales (SFW).
NORTHERN IRELAND	Department for the Economy (DfE)	"Access to Success" strategy addresses geographic and attainment gaps. Institution-specific Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs).	Regulated, capped fees. Tuition and maintenance loans via Student Finance Northern Ireland (SFNI).

THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN

04. SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

This section of the findings presents the key insights from our secondary data analysis, drawing on UCAS and NSS datasets, institutional WAAs, and Armed Forces Covenant pledges.

UCAS DATA

This analysis draws on UCAS data from two application cycles: 2023 and 2024. The 2023 UCAS dataset represents the first complete cycle of data collected on students from Armed Forces families[26], marking a significant milestone in tracking their higher education pathways. It offers the first comprehensive snapshot of application trends for students from Armed Forces families for the 2023 admissions year[27], providing a crucial foundation for understanding their progression. At the time of writing this report, the 2024 UCAS application cycle was still in progress. The data reviewed for this period therefore reflects interim applicant releases[28], offering an early indication of trends for the 2024 admissions year and broader insights into targeted support strategies.

The 2023 data reveals that there were 20,075 applications in this year from students from Armed Forces families. With an 80% acceptance rate, these students accounted for 3.3% of the total number of UK university acceptances. The 2023 data further highlights the intersectional challenges faced by this cohort. Students from Armed Forces families were more likely to report disabilities, with 19.7% identifying as disabled compared to 14.3% of their peers. Similarly, mental health conditions were reported by 10% of students from Armed Forces families compared to 7.9% seen in other applicants. In addition, students from Armed Forces families travelled further to attend university than their peers. The average journey time for students from Armed Forces families was 77 minutes, compared to 57 minutes for non-military peers. This may reflect the geographical dispersion

of military families and the rural or remote locations of many bases, adding a further dimension to the challenges of accessibility.

Early trends in the 2024 UCAS cycle indicate a slight increase in applicant numbers and acceptances with students from Armed Forces families now representing 3.7% of UK university population which equates to approximately 18,000 students. Growth in numbers is a likely outcome as awareness grows and applicants feel more comfortable disclosing information about their military backgrounds. These numbers also suggest that for the 2024 admissions year, students from Armed Forces families are comparable to other moderately-sized widening participation groups including applicants reporting.

NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY (NSS) DATA

The NSS is an annual survey inviting nearly half a million final-year students each year across the UK to provide feedback on their experiences in HE. As a key component of the quality assurance framework in HE, it provides valuable insights into student satisfaction that are used to shape improvements across universities and colleges.[29] The survey evaluates student satisfaction across seven key features of the student experience: Teaching Quality, Learning Opportunities, Assessment and Feedback, Academic Support, Organisation and Management, Learning Resources, and Student Voice.

NSS data for students from Armed Forces families has been available for two academic cycles (2022/23 and 2023/24), offering early insights into the university experiences of this group of students compared to their peers. While these findings highlight areas of satisfaction, they also reveal widening disparities in key metrics critical to engagement and support.

As shown in Table 3, across both years students from Armed Forces families rated their experiences less favourably

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26 See UCAS (2023). UCAS Undergraduate applicant releases for 2023 cycle. Available at: https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-applicant-releases-2023-cycle

27 See UCAS (2024). Fair Access Snapshot: Students from UK Armed Forces Families for full insights and analysis of the 2023 application cycle.

28 See UCAS (2024). UCAS Undergraduate applicant releases for 2024 cycle. Available at: https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-applicant-releases-2024-cycle

29 National Student Survey (2024). About the NSS. Available at: https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about-the-nss

than the national benchmark in the areas of Student Voice and Organisation and Management. More specifically, in 2023, scores for Student Voice and Organisation and Management were 1.1 and 1.0 percentage points below the national benchmark, respectively. By 2024, these gaps widened further with Student Voice falling 2.2 percentage points below the national benchmark and Organisation and Management showing a 1.5 percentage point gap. Although absolute scores for Organisation and Management improved slightly for students from Armed Forces families, the faster rate of increase in the national average led to greater relative shortfall.

Satisfaction ratings for Learning Opportunities and Learning Resources also declined in 2024, with scores 0.7 and 0.8 percentage points below the benchmarks, respectively. While these differences represent a drop from previous years, they are relatively small and do not yet indicate any emerging challenges in these areas. However, these are areas to review in future years.

Despite these areas of lower satisfaction, students from Armed Forces families consistently scored close to or slightly above national benchmarks in a number of other areas including Academic Support, Assessment and Feedback, and Teaching on My Course across both years in scope. For example, in 2024, students from Armed Forces families rated Academic Support 0.5 percentage points above the national benchmark and Teaching on My Course just 0.2 percentage points lower. These relatively stable scores suggest that students from Armed Forces families perceive teaching quality and academic support positively and in line with the general student population.

Of note, the areas that these data trends highlight are more challenging for students from Armed Forces families are those critical to engagement and overall satisfaction, particularly in relation to Student Voice and Organisation and Management. These metrics reflect the extent to which students feel heard, valued, and supported within their institutions, and are key elements in fostering a sense of belonging to the university community. This data suggests that students from Armed Forces families feel their voices and experiences are heard and acted upon less positively compared to their peers, highlighting an important area for targeted intervention.

TABLE 3

NSS results by theme for students from Armed Forces families vs national benchmarks (2023, 2024)

THEME	STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES SCORE (%)		NATIONAL BENCHMARK (%)		DIFFERENCE (PPT)	
	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024
STUDENT VOICE	70.2	70.3	71.3	72.5	-1.1	-2.2
ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT	71.5	72.2	72.5	73.7	-1.0	-1.5
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	80.9	80.9	80.5	81.6	0.4	-0.7
LEARNING RESOURCES	86.5	86	86.5	86.7	0.5	-0.8
TEACHING ON MY COURSE	85.6	85.2	85.0	85.0	0.6	0.2
ACADEMIC SUPPORT	83.3	85.9	82.7	85.4	0.6	0.5
ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK	77.8	76.8	77.8	76.4	1.0	0.4

WIDENING ACCESS AGREEMENTS (WAAS)

Widening access to higher education, also known as widening participation, is a strategy to increase the number of people from underrepresented groups who are able to participate in higher education. WAAs provide details of the strategies and interventions that HEIs will make to improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress within HE. The structure, regulation, and focus of WAAs vary across the devolved nations of the UK, reflecting differences in policy frameworks and funding structures (see Table 2). To understand how students from Armed Forces families are represented in these agreements, we reviewed all 166 publicly available WAAs from HEIs across the UK[30]. The review also sought to determine whether institutions outlined tailored support for this cohort within their WAAs. The findings revealed that only 24% of HEIs explicitly referenced these students as a priority group. This indicates that the majority of providers in the UK are not routinely identifying students from Armed Forces families as a distinct group within their widening access and participation strategies.

🔴🔴 *Only 24% of HEIs explicitly referenced [Students from Armed Forces families] as a priority group."*

ARMED FORCES COVENANT

There are currently 166 HEIs in the UK, 91 of which (55%) have signed the Armed Forces Covenant, committing to support members of the Armed Forces community. This marks a substantial increase since 2019, when only 57 institutions had signed the Covenant[31] However, our analysis of each institution's bespoke pledge shows that the majority of pledges made are non-specific and primarily focused on serving members of the Armed Forces, veterans or military spouses. Only 11% (10 out of 91) of HEIs explicitly make reference to students from Armed Forces or military families in their bespoke pledges. By comparison, 88% of institutions included specific commitments to veterans, and 76% referenced military spouses. Notably, we found that all the HEIs that made bespoke pledges for students from Armed Forces families also identified this cohort within their widening access agreements.

These findings highlight a concerning gap in representing students from Armed Forces families as a distinct focus in key HEI strategies. With greater attention and resources more often directed toward other Armed Forces-affiliated groups, such as veterans or spouses, students from Armed-Forces families are rarely prioritised. Importantly, those institutions that do identify this cohort tend to do so consistently across key strategy documents, such as widening access agreements and bespoke Armed Forces Covenant pledges. This highlights a best practice model that could be adopted more broadly across the sector to ensure consistent recognition and support for this group.

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30 Access and Participation Plans (England), Outcome Agreements (Scotland), Widening Access and Participation Plans (Northern Ireland) and Fee and Access Plans (Wales)

31 Department for Education (2019). Universities urged to boost support for armed forces. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-urged-to-boost-support-for-armed-forces

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

05. PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents our primary research findings drawn from a triangulated analysis of data collected through the surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students from Armed Forces families and HE stakeholders and staff. The findings examine the strengths of this student population, their specific educational needs, and the barriers they face. Together, these insights provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of students from Armed Forces families and identify key areas where targeted support within HE institutions could drive meaningful improvements.

The findings are organised into three key areas: strengths, needs, and barriers, with main themes and sub-themes identified within each category.

STRENGTHS OF STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES IN HE

The students who took part in this study consistently identified a range of strengths they feel they bring to HE that have been shaped directly by their unique experiences and upbringing in military families. Stakeholders also recognised these strengths and highlighted their positive influence on the students' experiences within the university environment. However, both groups noted that these attributes are often underappreciated within institutions and across the sector, reflecting a broader lack of awareness about the distinctive characteristics and contributions of this cohort.

I am not sure the strengths of these students are being maximised in any different way than the strengths of other students are maximised."
HE Stakeholder, Academic (England)

Despite this, the students themselves along with key members of staff who are familiar with the cohort, identified four key strengths that these students bring to HE: Independence and Adaptability, Social Skills, Discipline and Focus, and (in their own words) Resilience and Perseverance.

INDEPENDENCE AND ADAPTABILITY

Students and stakeholders alike identified independence and adaptability as defining characteristics of this student group. These traits were attributed to the responsibilities that students from Armed Forces families often assumed from an early age such as managing household tasks, supporting siblings, and adjusting to frequent school transitions. Participants frequently reflected on how this independence had prepared them well for university.

My upbringing helped prepare me for being away from home and family for long periods of time. It made me more independently minded and helped me cope with living away from home. I feel like this is a strength most service children like myself have, and is also reinforced by my parents, you have to be independent and self-sufficient when you grow up in a military family."
Student (England)

Participants also explained that frequent relocations had developed their ability to adapt more easily to new environments. In our sample, 1 in 5 students reported that they had relocated at least three times during their school years. These transitions required them to navigate new curricula, form friendships, and manage uncertainty. Reflecting on these experiences, many participants recognised these challenges as being formative in shaping their independence as adults.

When I was younger, every time we moved, in a way, it sharpened my ability to adjust to changing circumstances and helped to reinforce a strong sense of self-sufficiency. Now, as an adult, I feel I can adapt to new situations and manage a lot of stuff on my own."
Student (England)

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

It was also felt by many students that these experiences uniquely equip them to navigate the challenges of adapting to university life. Participants consistently noted how their ability to settle into new environments had provided them with a distinct advantage during the transition to university over some of their peers.

Being able to settle in a new place quickly and adapt to a new environment is definitely an advantage. It's like another posting for me, just without the rest of my family. I am not overly phased or burdened by the worries that a lot of other students have, I've done this all before - ten times over."
Student (Scotland)

Stakeholders also observed that while a lot of students often struggle with adapting to the new academic and social environments of university, with increased expectations and independence, students from Armed Forces families tend to be better prepared in these areas.

Service children become independent very early and are often extremely adaptable to new situations. So for them, transitioning into university is often not something that is overly challenging, but for most students, that is one of the hardest aspects to adjust to."
HE stakeholder, Widening Access and Participation (Scotland)

SOCIAL SKILLS

Our student participants frequently credited their military upbringing with fostering strong social skills and cultural awareness. Many explained that frequent relocations and exposure to diverse communities and cultures have enabled them to connect with people from a wide range of backgrounds.

Moving a lot when I was younger made me good at socialising and making friends from different backgrounds. It's made me more open to new cultures and ways of thinking, and less scared of meeting new people."
Student (England)

Participants also highlighted how their heightened cultural awareness enhanced their ability to collaborate and interact effectively with others in the university context.

I learnt at a very early age about valuing different perspectives and the importance of learning from and about others, this has enabled me to interact more collaboratively across cultural boundaries and in diverse environments like university."
Student (England)

Previous research supports these findings[32] which indicate that the mobility typical of military life can help students from Armed Forces families develop social adaptability, build friendships quickly, and gain broader experiences than many of their peers, all skills highly valued within a HE context.

I moved around a lot as a kid, and because of that I think I can relate to people and have good social skills, so I tend to make new friends quickly."
Student (Wales)

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

DISCIPLINE AND FOCUS

Participants frequently described how their military upbringing had instilled a strong sense of discipline and focus. From a young age, many reported they had learned the importance of self-management, responsibility and staying committed to tasks, even in the face of challenges. These qualities were seen as deeply rooted in the values-driven ethos of military life and were reinforced by the examples set by parents.

Being disciplined, organised and focused are valuable skills I learnt growing up on a military base and from my parents, exposure to this has helped build my capacity to be goal focused and disciplined."
Student (England)

Our fieldwork findings highlighted the crucial role these skills play in academic success. For example, participants noted how their disciplined approach to their studies helped them balance academic responsibilities, manage their time effectively, and meet the wider demands of university life.

Coming from an armed forces family has helped me at university by instilling discipline, commitment, focus and self-motivation. These qualities have undoubtedly benefited me in managing my coursework, navigating challenges, working in groups settings and staying committed to my personal goals while at university."
Student (Scotland)

These attributes were also recognised by HE stakeholders, who highlighted their value within the university context. Stakeholders noted that students from Armed Forces families often demonstrate a structured and organised approach to their studies, which helps them remain focused and motivated to achieve their academic goals.

Service children often bring a level of structure that's evident in how they approach their studies. They are often disciplined in organising their time and managing their coursework. This not only sets a positive example for their peers, but also ensures they stay focused on their course loads and assignments."
HE Stakeholder, Academic Department (England)

32 Berg, S. (2014). Revolving doors: The impact of multiple school transitions on military children. The Professional Counselor, 4(3), 103-113.

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

RESILIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

"Resilience" consistently emerged as the most valued character trait identified by students from Armed Forces families when describing themselves. However, while resilience was highlighted as a key strength, participants also acknowledged its complexities, noting that it often developed out of necessity rather than choice. This raised questions about whether the emphasis on resilience might sometimes overlook the need for additional support.

Participants frequently described how experiences related to military life, such as parental deployment and frequent relocations, required them to adapt and manage the emotional impact of change which had led to them developing a resilient nature.

I moved around a lot when I was younger and had to take on responsibilities when my dad was deployed. Those experiences taught me how to be self-reliant, strong willed and resilient."
Student (Scotland)

This resilience was also noted as being instrumental in helping students navigate academic pressures and address challenges effectively at university.

I'm quite resilient and can deal with the unknown which has helped me adapt to university more easily than my friends. I feel I can see the 'bigger picture' and can be pragmatic when balancing my studies and other priorities."
Student (Scotland)

HE stakeholders echoed these sentiments, frequently identifying resilience as a defining characteristic of students from Armed Forces families. They emphasised that this cohort displayed greater resilience compared to other students.

Compared to other students, they are more resilient and independent in the university environment."
HE Stakeholder, Student Support Services (Wales)

However, participants also reflected on the complexities of resilience and questioned whether it always had a positive impact. For many, this trait often developed as a response to circumstances beyond their control, which could obscure an underlying need for support.

Even if we find things difficult, we learn to just get on with it because you have no other choice."
Student (England)

This aligns with research suggesting that resilience in students from Armed Forces families often arises from coping mechanisms developed to navigate adversity[33]. While resilience can be a strength, participants also acknowledged potential drawbacks, such as a reluctance to seek help when needed.

There are some things I do struggle with. The main thing for me is asking for help and wanting to accept it. As a child you didn't ask for help. I am only starting to realise at university that it is okay to ask for help."
Student (Wales)

Overall, while resilience was widely recognised as a key trait, some participants felt that perseverance and a "just get on with it" mindset better encapsulated their experiences.

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

33 McCullouch, Hall & Ellis (2018)

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

NEEDS OF STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES IN HE

Alongside their strengths, our findings also identified several educational needs associated with the distinct circumstances of being from an Armed Forces family. While the extent of these needs varied significantly depending on experiences of parental deployment and the degree of family mobility, our research highlighted three core areas of support that students from Armed Forces families may need within an HE environment, including academic, pastoral and practical.

ACADEMIC NEEDS

This section identifies two main areas of academic need that students from Armed Forces families identified: reasonable adjustments and targeted career guidance. These areas address both the immediate challenges faced during their studies and the broader, long-term needs related to career preparation and progression.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Frequent family separations and the stress associated with parental deployment create a wide range of unique challenges for students from Armed Forces families in HE.[34] Our findings revealed significant variation in the level of support students experienced across institutions. We noted that many students who felt well-supported were often enrolled in HEIs that had made specific reference to this student cohort within their Armed Forces Covenant pledges and identified them within their WAAs. These students reported receiving effective accommodations, such as flexible deadlines, which allowed them to manage academic responsibilities during times of family-related stress.

❝ *I found the university very supportive when my father was deployed, they provided flexibility in deadlines during this time."*
Student (England)

However, other students reported a lack of flexibility and understanding from their institutions about how their circumstances may impact their studies. These students emphasised the need for more tailored support and consistent recognition of their particular circumstances.

❝ *I asked for help regarding a potential upcoming deployment of my dad that would affect my last few assignments and me being able to finish my degree, but the university was very unhelpful. There needs to be more consideration and support for these types of circumstances, similar to other students who may need additional support sometimes."*
Student (England)

34 Lawrence (2021)

Participants also highlighted the absence of contextual considerations during the university application process. Frequent relocations were often cited as a barrier that had disrupted their schooling and limited their ability to achieve their full academic potential at school. The lack of consideration of this during the application process left many feeling disadvantage when applying to university compared to other groups whose unique circumstances are recognised and supported.

🗩🗩 *Universities don't really understand the challenges we face. When I was applying, there was no acknowledgment of the disruption in my schooling, I moved twice during those years and that had a huge impact. 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)

These experiences highlight the need for admissions processes to adopt more inclusive practices that account for the specific challenges faced by students from Armed Forces families.

TARGETED CAREER GUIDANCE

The students in our sample pursued a wide range of university courses across 13 broad academic disciplines, reflecting their diverse interests and aspirations (see Table 4). Nearly half of the sample (46%) were the first in their family to attend university, with this proportion highest among students whose parents held junior ranks in the Armed Forces (56%). By comparison, students with parents in senior ranks (e.g., senior officers and higher command), were less likely to be first-generation university attendees. This is lower than national UK average, which indicate that 66% of graduates are first-generation university attendees[35], and reflects the wider socio-economic disparities associated with rank for students from Armed Forces families.

TABLE 4

Academic disciplines of students from Armed Forces families

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE	% OF SAMPLE
SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING	23%
ARTS AND HUMANITIES	15%
BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT	12%
HEALTH AND MEDICINE	11%
LAW AND CRIMINOLOGY	8%
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND POLITICS	8%
EDUCATION	7%
AGRICULTURE & ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES	6%
PSYCHOLOGY	5%
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION	4%
PERFORMING ARTS	1%

Despite their diverse academic pathways, participants often found exploring career options challenging due to limited exposure to opportunities outside of the military. Many noted that disruptions to their education and a lack of tailored career guidance left them feeling underprepared for life beyond university.

🗩🗩 *Being a military kid, especially living on base, you don't really get exposed to that many careers outside the military, for my parents, that was all they knew."* Student (Scotland)

35 Coombs, H. (2022). First-in-family students (HEPI Report 146). Higher Education Policy Institute. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/First-in-Family-Students.pdf

Participants also highlighted difficulties translating their unique experiences, such as frequent mobility and parental deployment, into employable skills. Stakeholders noted that while these experiences develop a number of strengths, students often struggle to articulate them effectively in CVs or interviews.

Experiences with mobility and parental deployment often foster resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. Service children may struggle however to articulate these as strengths in their CV or during a job interview."
HE Stakeholder, Student Support Services (England)

This challenge was compounded by a lack of targeted career support at universities. Stakeholders emphasised that many university career services lacked awareness of the specific experiences of students from Armed Forces families which leaves gaps in the guidance they provide.

The one thing that's missing across the board is career support. Service children sometimes struggle to know how to construct their CV because they might have gaps in education or other things that are specific to their experiences, but they are unaware of their relevance and struggle to frame these in a professional context."
HE Stakeholder, Careers and Employability (Wales)

PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Parents were frequently identified as a strong influence in shaping career aspirations. For some, this influence encouraged exploration beyond the military, driven by a desire to take up opportunities they themselves had not experienced.

My parents always wanted me to go to university and to have opportunities they didn't have when they joined the military. For them, education was the path to a better future."
Student (England)

However, HE stakeholders noted that parental perspectives on career could sometimes limit aspirations of students from Armed Forces families. For example, military life was often framed as either a stable career option or a stepping stone to broader opportunities which shapes how students from Armed Forces families approach their career choices.

There are a lot of parents who joined the military because they had limited options at the time, so they are eager for their children to explore opportunities and careers they didn't have. But equally, there are a lot of parents who see military life as something that offers a stable career path and security in an uncertain economic climate."
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access and Participation (Wales)

PRACTICAL NEEDS

Students from Armed Forces families face unique practical challenges during their time at university, shaped by family mobility associated with military life. Two key areas emerged as particularly significant: accommodation and communication about support. These challenges often contribute to a sense of instability and hinder students from accessing the resources they need. Addressing them will require more tailored interventions that acknowledge and understand the distinct experiences of this cohort.

ACCOMMODATION

Mobility, combined with parental deployment, was consistently identified as an ongoing challenge for students from Armed Forces families at university. Previous research highlights the adverse impact of mobility on the educational success of these students[36], and our findings indicate that these challenges persist in the context of HE. Unlike their experiences during primary and secondary school, where families relocated together, university students often face the unique challenge of being left behind as their families relocate without them. This separation during key moments of their university journey often creates feelings of instability and uncertainty.

My family has relocated twice while I have been at university. Having my family move in the middle of a semester and being separated during that time has been a huge challenge, its sometimes difficult to cope with that."
Student (England)

My family have moved house several times since I have been at university and I don't always feel like I have somewhere to call home if I have never been there before. University is not home but neither is a random unknown house so it can be difficult."
Student (England)

In addition to the emotional toll, students highlighted the practical challenges associated with mobility, particularly the lack of flexible support with accommodation while at university. One specific issue arises during periods when families have relocated while students are required to vacate their university accommodation, typically over the summer and holiday periods. Unlike many of their peers, students from Armed Forces families often lack a stable home base to store their belongings.

You tend to move out of student accommodation over the summer, most of my friends move their things home during that period as there is nowhere to store it usually on campus. But as a Service child, if your parents are relocating at the same time, you don't have anywhere to store your things. During one summer I had to store my things at several friends' houses because my parents didn't have a home at the time."
Student (England)

Participants compared their situation to that of international students, who are often offered enhanced accommodation options, such as 12-month contracts or storage facilities, to address similar challenges. However, no equivalent provision tends to be available for students from Armed Forces families, despite comparable needs. Stakeholders acknowledged this gap, reinforcing the inequity in accommodation support.

International students for example are provided with storage options over the summer. Many of them do not have local residence to store their belongings, making it impractical to transport items home. There are no similar provisions offered for service children, despite their distinct and often comparable challenges."
HE Stakeholder, Student Funding and Finance (England)

36 Hall, M., McCullouch, J., & Lawrence, K. (2022). Service children in education: a review of the literature from five countries. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 24(1), 53-85.

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

This lack of support during family relocations exacerbates the pressures students already face. Participants emphasised how unstable housing and the absence of financial assistance for moving or storage added strain to their university experience.

🗨 *There's a lot of strain from not having stable family housing. It just adds more pressure to what's already a challenging situation."*
Student (England)

Existing literature corroborates these findings, highlighting that housing instability can negatively affect educational attainment, emotional well-being, and overall engagement in university life[37]. Addressing these unmet needs requires universities to recognise the unique mobility challenges faced by students from Armed Forces families and implement targeted support, such as year-round housing contracts, summer storage options, and financial assistance for relocation expenses.

COMMUNICATION ABOUT SUPPORT

A recurring theme across participants was the limited awareness that students from Armed Forces families had of the specific resources or support systems available at their universities. Many students were unaware of targeted support and cited a lack of clear communication from their institutions. This was also acknowledged by stakeholders, who recognised that universities often fail to identify students from Armed Forces families on enrolment, which then makes it difficult to track the cohort and provide tailored information or support.

🗨 *Service children are often not identified at enrolment, so universities struggle to know who these students are and how to provide information about the available support."*
HE Stakeholders, Outreach, Recruitment and Admissions (Northern Ireland)

As a result, many existing support systems remain underused by students from Armed Forces families. Some participants described feeling isolated or unsupported, despite available support. Many felt this was due to poor communication and a lack of institutional awareness about their background.

🗨 *I have only just been made aware of our Armed Forces Network, I am in my 2nd year of university and I found out through a friend. There definitely needs to be clearer information on any extra available support. We should be made aware of these during induction or reorientation events."*
Student (England)

The absence of targeted outreach and support was particularly significant during key moments such as induction and reorientation. Participants suggested that more proactive communication from universities could help bridge this gap, ensuring students are aware of the support systems available from the outset.

Another barrier to accessing support was tied to the resilient mindset often adopted by students from Armed Forces families, as discussed above. Participants described how the tendency to *"just get on with it"* sometimes discouraged them from seeking help, even when it was needed.

🗨 *Making information convenient to find and reaching out to Service children, even if we don't need the support, knowing that support is there and how to access it if needed, that is really beneficial."*
Student (England)

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37 McCullouch & Hall (2016)

PASTORAL NEEDS

Two key needs identified in this research are fostering a sense of belonging and providing mental health and well-being support. Students from Armed Forces families face distinct challenges that can affect their emotional well-being, mental health, and ability to feel connected within the university community.

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING SUPPORT

Parental deployment was consistently identified by students as having a significant impact on their emotional wellbeing and academic performance whilst at university. While many students from Armed Forces families can readily adapt to periods of separation and are accustomed to the challenges of parental absence, our findings suggest that the emotional burden often spills over into their life at university. Balancing their studies alongside the stress of parental deployment emerged as a key challenge for many.

There is a lot of stress, anxiety and emotional issues related to my family moving around so much. Managing university alongside this is hard sometimes because it impacts my motivation and makes it harder to keep up with my coursework."
Student (Wales)

Previous research supports these findings, highlighting the negative impact of deployment-related stress on educational performance, particularly during post-16 education[38]. Students who performed well in secondary school despite these challenges may find themselves struggling at university without the necessary support systems in place.

While some participants reported feeling well-supported during periods of parental deployment, a significant number described a lack of emotional and academic support during this time. Many emphasised the need for more targeted provision to help students from Armed Forces families cope with these unique challenges.

There needs to be more support and understanding for these things, similar to students with childcare responsibilities or additional needs, to me, that is an additional need, there should be more emotional support for when service children go through parent deployment."
Student (England)

Stakeholders also acknowledged the impact of parental deployment on students' mental health and engagement, and recognised how it can hinder their focus and overall academic progress.

Students I have dealt with from armed forces families generally have additional wellbeing and support needs during times of parental deployment."
HE Stakeholder, Student Support Services (Northern Ireland)

SENSE OF BELONGING

Students from Armed Forces families often face challenges in developing a sense of belonging within the university community. Our research shows that these students score lower on NSS themes critical for fostering a sense of belonging. Qualitative data further highlights this as a significant need, with many students reporting feelings of isolation after leaving the close-knit and supportive communities in which they grew up.

While military culture provides a strong sense of identity, it is also defined by frequent relocations which can foster instability and disconnection. We heard from participants that these experiences often make it difficult for students from Armed Forces families to integrate socially and form lasting connections at university. Although their adaptability and strong social skills help them establish initial relationships, sustaining meaningful, long-term friendships can be more difficult.

38 Granada & Mulcahy (2022); McCullouch, Hall & Ellis (2018)

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

Participants reflected on the ongoing effects of mobility and parental deployment, coupled with the transitional nature of their upbringing which can hinder their ability to build a lasting sense of attachment to their university community. Many participants reflected on how the constant change they experienced growing up shaped their approach to relationships as adults.

🗨️ *Growing up, everything was always temporary, where I lived and went to school, the friends I made, even my dad being home, they were never permanent fixtures in my life, that was just the norm. Now that I am at university, I feel like those experiences have made it difficult for me to build lasting connections and feel as though I belong."*
Student (England)

Existing literature supports these findings, emphasising the emotional strain of frequent transitions and their impact on students sense of belonging[39]. Feelings of isolation and being misunderstood by peers who cannot relate to their experiences were commonly reported in our research, further deepening their sense of disconnection.

🗨️ *I often feel like I am the only one with parents in the military, very few can relate to my experiences of constant relocation and parental deployment. My friends don't really understand what that is like and can't relate to how that feels – its isolating and so I do often struggle with feeling accepted."*
Student (England)

BARRIERS FACED BY STUDENTS FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES IN HE

Students from Armed Forces families encounter several systemic barriers in HE that can limit their access to support and hinder their ability to fully engage with university life. While these students face unique personal challenges, as discussed throughout this report, these difficulties are often compounded by structural issues embedded within the HE system. These barriers affect multiple stages of their university experience, from application through to completion, further impacting their overall experience.

Our findings identified four primary barriers affecting students from Armed Forces families, drawn from both student experiences and stakeholder insights:

- Data and identification
- Lack of strategic planning
- Financial structures and resources
- Lack of awareness of the experiences and needs of students from Armed Forces families

Although these barriers were commonly reported, the findings also revealed significant variation in the types and extent of challenges faced across different HEIs. Both students and stakeholders emphasised that these barriers often intersect, compounding difficulties and creating unique challenges for students' engagement and success in HE.

🗨️ *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. Their experiences create a blend of practical and social barriers that intensify their struggles and introduce a degree of instability that other groups may not experience in the same way."*
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access and Participation (England)

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39 Chappell et al. (2025; Granada & Mulcahy (2022).

DATA AND IDENTIFICATION

A lack of robust data and clear identification processes emerged as a fundamental barrier for students from Armed Forces families in HE. Only 25% of stakeholders in our research indicated that their institutions identified students from Armed Forces families at enrolment, despite this information now being available via UCAS applications. Among those that do identify students from Armed Forces families, only 10% reported collecting and reviewing data on this group, with many citing issues with internal student record systems that do not easily allow the inclusion of new data categories.

The main barrier is identifying this student population and flagging them on our student record system. Students are not identified at enrolment and data collected via UCAS is not actively shared with us, so there is no way of capturing them."
HE Stakeholder, Outreach, Recruitment and Admissions (England)

The lack of data and effective systems prevents universities from identifying the specific needs of this student group or monitoring their progress. Many stakeholders noted that the limited awareness of the cohort reflects broader institutional priorities, where students Armed Forces families are overlooked amid competing demands.

Similar to other universities, this student population has only recently been on our radar since the OfS report that this is an underrepresented group. We are still in the process of identifying the specific needs of these students."
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access and Participation (England)

LACK OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

The absence of comprehensive institutional data further hampers universities' ability to engage in strategic planning tailored to the needs of students from Armed Forces families. Without reliable mechanisms to identify this cohort, universities struggle to develop targeted policies or interventions, leaving the support agenda reliant on individuals who take a particular interest in this group rather than on institutional strategy.

Without institutional mechanisms to identify Service children, universities are not able to collect data, develop strategic plans or policies. This means that the agenda is often driven by people with an interest in Service children rather than it being strategically driven by the university."
HE Stakeholder, Academic Department (Wales)

Secondary data analysis revealed that 76% of HEIs made no reference to students from Armed Forces families in their WAAs. Furthermore, among the HEIs that have signed the Armed Forces Covenant, 89% have no bespoke pledges to support this group. Stakeholders emphasised that the lack of strategic planning for this group reflects broader systemic issues, including limited institutional awareness of their unique circumstances and their student profile.

Strategic planning ensures awareness of Service children as a student group across leadership, management, and student-facing staff. Without it, many are unaware of this student population."
HE Stakeholders, Widening Access and Participation (Scotland)

FINANCIAL STRUCTURES AND RESOURCES

Stakeholders consistently noted the complexity of student finance for this group. Students' family locations and financial circumstances often deviate from standard cases which can lead to errors in processing student loan applications for this group. One notable issue is the misclassification of students from Armed Forces families as international students when their parents are stationed abroad. This can result in higher tuition fees and restricted access to funding. We heard from stakeholders with responsibility for student finance of cases where structural errors in the finance system had led to significant delays or deferrals to starting university while finance issues were resolved, and in some cases withdrawal from the process altogether.

🗨️ *The one thing that's missing across the board is financial support. Service children sometimes face additional costs linked to mobility and family relocation, but there are no targeted policies to help with these challenges."*
HE Stakeholder, Student Finance and Funding (Wales)

Financial barriers were also consistently reported by students and stakeholders. Unlike other underrepresented groups, students from Armed Forces families often lack access to specific financial support schemes, such as bursaries or scholarships tailored to their unique circumstances. Participants highlighted challenges related to the costs of relocation, temporary accommodation, and summer storage during family moves, as well as the inflexibility of student finance structures.

🗨️ *I only receive the bare minimum student finance maintenance loan due to how much my dad earns from the navy, but my dad has to finance me and my sister at uni, instead of 9k maintenance loan I get 4.2k, I should be eligible for a special needs extra amount but due to his income I'm instantly rejected from it."*
Student (England)

LACK OF AWARENESS

The lack of clear identification processes and strategic planning contributes to a general lack of awareness among university staff about the experiences and needs of students from Armed Forces families. We heard from many stakeholders that university staff were unfamiliar with this student population including a limited understanding of their challenges and strengths.

🗨️ *We don't know their needs, we don't know if they are different from other student groups, we know very little at this stage."*
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access and Participation (Northern Ireland)

Participants emphasised the need for targeted training and resources to build institutional knowledge within HEIs and improve staff and institutional understanding of this group. This includes raising awareness about the challenges they face such as frequent relocations, emotional strain during parental deployment, as well as the broader impact of military family life on academic performance and engagement.

🗨️ *One aspect is increasing awareness among faculty and staff about the challenges specific to this demographic, such as the impact of frequent relocations on academic continuity. Providing more targeted training and resources for faculty members to better understand and accommodate the needs of these students could enhance their overall experience."*
HE Stakeholder, Academic Department (Scotland)

Students themselves also commented on the limited awareness among staff, and indeed fellow peers, describing how a lack of understanding affected their university experiences.

🔴🔴 *There is ongoing anxiety about my parents safety when they are deployed and there are few who understand that feeling. There needs to be more understanding for those things and the impact these could have on my engagement and motivation."*
Student (England)

These findings underscore the distinctive strengths, needs, and barriers experienced by students from Armed Forces families in HE. While their resilience, adaptability, and independence equip them with valuable skills for navigating university life, systemic barriers and unmet needs highlight the necessity for targeted interventions. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from HEIs to build inclusive environments, enhance institutional awareness, and deliver tailored support. The next chapter presents actionable priorities for university practice and sector-wide recommendations, offering a framework for driving meaningful and sustainable improvements for this underrepresented cohort of students.

THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

06. PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This final chapter builds on the key findings outlined in the previous section, translating the evidence from the research into actional priorities for universities and broader sector-wide recommendations.

The first part of this chapter focuses on institutional priorities, firmly rooted in the strengths, needs, and barriers identified throughout the research. These priorities offer practical recommendations for HEIs, outlining targeted interventions, inclusive practices, and actionable steps to address the specific challenges faced by students from Armed Forces families.

The second part of this chapter sets out further sector-wide recommendations, aimed at addressing systemic issues and fostering a consistent, coordinated approach to supporting students from Armed Forces families in HE across the UK.

PRIORITIES FOR UNIVERSITY PRACTICE

The priorities for university practice are drawn directly from the research findings and illustrated with best practice examples, showcasing effective approaches identified throughout this research. These priorities are organised into four key areas that address the unique needs and challenges of students from Armed Forces families:

1. Adopting a university-wide approach
2. Enhancing student success
3. Increasing staff awareness
4. Fostering a sense of belonging

A critical element underpinning these priorities is the **integration of the student voice**, which is recognised as a cornerstone of effective practice. Actively incorporating the perspectives and experiences of students from Armed Forces families ensure that university policies and initiatives are relevant, equitable, and supportive. This aligns with sector-wide efforts to advance student-centred teaching, learning, and inclusivity, and addresses the findings related specifically to students from Armed Forces families in relation to engagement and NSS ratings.

It is further recommended that these priorities be translated into clear principles of practice that inform the development of a Toolkit for HE. These principles should be developed, tested, and refined to ensure they provide a strong foundation for effective and sustainable institutional support.

ADOPTING A UNIVERSITY-WIDE APPROACH

A university-wide approach is essential for embedding awareness, inclusion, and support for students from Armed Forces families across all levels of an institution. This distinct cohort brings significant strengths to HE including resilience, adaptability, and independence, but also faces unique challenges shaped by military life. Frequent relocations, disrupted education, and the emotional strains of parental deployment necessitate tailored institutional strategies.

However, our findings reveal that many HEIs lack effective mechanisms to identify and monitor students from Armed Forces families which limits their ability to provide targeted support. Universities need to integrate the experiences of these students into institutional policies and practices, including them in widening access agreements and enabling the mechanisms to monitor their progress. Strong leadership commitment is essential for embedding these approaches into institutional culture and ensuring coordinated support across faculties and departments.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Leadership-driven strategy	Senior leaders should actively prioritise students from Armed Forces families in strategic initiatives and policies. Their inclusion must be central to decision-making processes and long-term planning to ensure meaningful and sustainable change.
Identification and tracking	Develop robust mechanisms to identify students from Armed Forces families during enrolment, using UCAS application data and integrating this information into internal student record systems. This enables institutions to monitor progress and tailor interventions effectively.
Strengthen commitments through the Armed Forces Covenant	Sign the Armed Forces Covenant and revise generic pledges to include bespoke commitments addressing the needs of students from Armed Forces families.
Contextual admissions policies	Implement contextual admissions policies that account for the impact of frequent relocations and disrupted schooling on academic performance. These adjustments should mirror those provided to other underrepresented groups.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Leadership commitment: One university that had identified students from Armed Forces families as a priority group within their Access and Participation Plan (APP), noted how this was driving institutional change from the top down with senior management embedding them into strategic frameworks.

We now have senior management on board more recently which has led to the changes we made to our APPs."
HE stakeholder, Widening Access & Participation (England)

Identification mechanisms: Some HEIs have introduced specific questions during enrolment to identify Armed Forces community members within local processes, ensuring that tailored communication and early support is available from the outset.

As part of our registration process, we ask students if they are part of the Armed Forces community, including if they are a Service child, veteran, spouse, etc. We then use that information to get in touch about any support they might need."
HE Stakeholder, Outreach, Recruitment & Admissions (Scotland)

Bespoke Armed Forces Covenant pledges: Universities that have moved away from generic pledges to include targeted commitments for students from Armed Forces families are ensuring their needs are met.

The Covenant we originally signed just had generic promises for all Armed Forces students. We revised this recently to ensure we had bespoke pledges for the different Armed Forces groups to better support all our Armed Forces students, including students from Armed Forces families."
HE stakeholder, Widening Access & Participation (England)

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

Contextual admissions policies: Some universities now account for disrupted schooling and frequent relocations during their admissions process, by integrating categories for Service children from UCAS applications to ensure these students are recognised and their experiences considered by admissions.

🗨🗨 *We've integrated a category for Service children in our UCAS application form, allowing these students to be recognised right from the start. This ensures that the challenges they face are acknowledged and consideration during the admissions process."*
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access & Participation (England)

ENHANCE STUDENT SUCCESS

Enhancing the success of students from Armed Forces families in HE requires inclusive and flexible support systems that address their unique challenges, while also recognising and maximising their strengths. Tailored academic, pastoral, and practical interventions can help these students' overcome barriers, achieve their goals and thrive in their university journeys.

Students from Armed Forces families often bring resilience, adaptability, and independence – qualities that can serve as powerful assets in HE. However, our findings reveal significant barriers that can also make the university journey a challenging one. These include disrupted education, emotional stress from parental deployment, frequent relocations, and limited access to targeted career and academic support.

Many HEIs currently lack systems to mitigate these barriers and maximise the unique strengths of this cohort. To ensure these experiences do not impact negatively on student outcomes, universities should implement flexible academic adjustments, targeted mental health and well-being support, and bespoke career guidance to empower students from Armed Forces families to reach their full potential. Aligning these interventions with institutional equality and diversity goals will ensure that these students are supported in navigating the unique pressures of HE.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Reasonable academic adjustments	Develop systems for tailored academic adjustments, such as flexible deadlines and alternative assessments, for students affected by parental deployment or mobility.
Dedicated well-being initiatives	Enhance well-being provision to address emotional challenges linked to family mobility and deployment through counselling and targeted mental health support.
Clear communication and resource awareness	Embed information about available support at enrolment and throughout the student journey to ensure students from Armed Forces families are fully aware of the dedicated resources they can access.
Improved financial advice and equity	Provide targeted financial guidance, ensuring students have up-to-date information about available funding options tailored to their unique needs.
Focused career support	Develop career services that enable students from Armed Force families to articulate their unique experiences and strengths, including workshops on CV writing, interview preparation, and leveraging transferable skills to enhance employability.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Reasonable academic adjustments: Recognising the impact of military life on academic timelines, one university implemented policies allowing flexible deadlines during parental deployment. This approach acknowledges students' unique circumstances and provides support to help balance academic responsibilities with military-related challenges.

Service children are provided with flexibility around assignments during and leading up to parental deployment, similar to other students with extenuating circumstances."
HE Stakeholder, Student Support Services (Wales)

Dedicated well-being initiatives: One institution has partnered with an Armed Forces charity to offer counselling services tailored to the needs of students from Armed Forces families. This initiative helps address the unique emotional challenges of military life, supporting both academic and emotional well-being.

We get to have a certain number of sessions with counsellors. These have been particularly helpful in addressing the unique challenges we may face."
Student (England)

Clear communication and resource awareness: One university developed a comprehensive handbook for students from Armed Forces families, distributed at enrolment. This guide provides detailed information on academic adjustments, practical support, financial aid, and employability resources. By embedding this information early, the institution ensures that students from Armed Forces families are aware of the support available to them, allowing them to make informed decisions and access help as needed.

We developed a handbook for Service children in HE, it provides all the information on academic adjustments, practical support, student services, financial aid, and employability resources, along with guidance on navigating university life."
HE Stakeholder, Outreach, Recruitment & Admissions (England)

Improved financial advice and equity: The student finance team at one HEI works closely with the Student Loans Company to align funding information with the specific needs of students from Armed Forces families. This collaboration ensures advisers are up-to-date on funding options, enabling them to provide accurate and timely guidance.

We work closely with Student Finance Wales to ensure our student finance advisors are briefed and updated on funding support for Service children, helping us to incorporate information and better support on student finance for our students and specifically our Service children."
HE Stakeholder, Student Funding & Finance (Wales)

Focused career support: The career service at one institution has developed specialised workshops to help students from Armed Forces families translate their unique experiences into employable skills. These workshops included CV writing, interview preparation, and highlighted the transferable skills gained from military family life. By offering these focused sessions, the service empowers students from Armed Forces families to confidently present their strengths to potential employers, increasing their employability and career prospects.

Our Armed Forces Champion organises workshops specifically for the Armed Forces community, focusing on CV building, addressing educational gaps and leveraging their unique experiences."
HE Stakeholder, Student Support Services (England)

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

INCREASE STAFF AWARENESS

Enhancing staff awareness about the experiences and needs of students from Armed Forces families is essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive university environment. Equipping staff with the knowledge, training, and resources to understand and address the unique challenges faced by this cohort ensures consistent and meaningful support across institutions.

A lack of awareness among university staff about the circumstances and needs of students from Armed Forces families was a recurring theme in this research. Many staff were unfamiliar with the term "Service child" and unaware of the distinctive challenges these students face. Levels of awareness varied significantly across HEIs, with institutions demonstrating greater awareness typically incorporating students from Armed Forces families into their WAA and/or committing to bespoke actions within their Armed Forces Covenant pledges. Conversely, institutions without formal frameworks for addressing the needs of this group showed far less awareness, leaving significant gaps in support.

Without adequate knowledge, staff may miss opportunities to provide meaningful support or misinterpret the behaviours and needs of students from Armed Forces families. Providing training, accessible resources and structured support systems ensures that staff are equipped to respond appropriately and inclusively, creating an environment where students feel understood, supported, and empowered to succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Provide comprehensive resources for staff	Develop and distribute accessible resources that equip academic and professional services staff with the knowledge and strategies to support students from Armed Forces families effectively. Consistent access to these materials ensures that support is uniformly available across all departments.
Establish an institutional lead for students from Armed Forces families	Appoint a designated staff member as the lead for students from Armed Forces families, with this responsibility formally integrated into their workload and recognised as a key institutional role. This lead should provide expert guidance, promote awareness across the institution, and serve as a primary point of contact for both students and staff.
Develop collaborative partnerships and share good practice	Build networks with other institutions to share ideas, strategies, and best practices, fostering a culture of collaboration and inclusion to support students from Armed Forces families more effectively.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Comprehensive resources for staff: One university has created an online resource pack to guide staff in recognising and supporting students from Armed Forces families. The pack includes information on their experiences, challenges, and strategies for referring them to relevant services. This centralised resource ensures staff are equipped to provide informed and consistent support.

🔴🔴 *We have an Armed Forces webpage, it's a 'one-stop-shop' for staff, providing information on Service children and actionable advice, making it easier for staff to understand and address the needs of Service children."*
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access and Participation (England)

University lead for students from Armed Forces families: Several institutions have appointed Armed Forces Champions to act as advocates and liaisons for students and staff connected to the Armed Forces community. These Champions play a vital role in ensuring students from Armed Forces families receive tailored support and are included in institutional strategies.

🔴🔴 *Our Armed Forces Champion is a key point of contact for Service children, helping them access the resources they need and advocating for their inclusion in institutional policies."*
HE Stakeholder, Student Support Services (Scotland)

Collaborative partnerships and sharing of good practice: The ADVANCE Network in Scotland exemplifies cross-sector collaboration, connecting Armed Forces Champions across HEIs to share best practices and advocate for students from Armed Forces families. This initiative offers targeted support, such as guidance on university applications and financial resources, while fostering inclusion at a national level.

🔴🔴 *The ADVANCE Network provides a platform for sharing best practice across institutions, connecting Armed Forces Champions, and ensuring Service children are recognised and supported."*
HE Stakeholder, Widening Access & Participation (Scotland)

FOSTER A SENSE OF BELONGING

Creating a sense of belonging is crucial for Students from Armed Forces families to thrive in HE. This principle emphasises the importance of inclusive environments, peer networks, and tailored initiatives that strengthen students' connection to their academic and social communities, reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing overall engagement.

While many students from Armed Forces families possess strong social skills and adaptability, these traits are often counterbalanced by challenges in forming deep, long-term relationships. The sense of impermanence stemming from frequent relocation and disrupted connections during childhood can hinder their integration into university life, impacting their well-being and academic success.

Fostering a sense of belonging is critical not only for reducing feelings of isolation but also for strengthening connections within the university and building the resilience needed for students to engage fully in university life. This not only benefits students from Armed Forces families but also contributes to a more inclusive and cohesive campus culture, aligning with institutional priorities around diversity and student success.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Service children's networks	Proactively facilitate peer support groups or networks to create opportunities for students from Armed Forces families to connect, share experiences, and build lasting relationships.
Inclusive induction and orientation	Incorporate tailored sessions for students from Armed Forces families during induction and orientation programmes. These sessions should provide targeted information about navigating university life and accessing relevant support services that align with the strengths, needs and challenges identified for this group of students.
Representation and advocacy	Enable students from Armed Forces families to actively participate in student forums and advisory groups, ensuring their voices help shape university policies and initiatives.

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Service children's Network: One university has facilitated the creation of a dedicated peer network for students from Armed Forces families. The network offers regular meetups, online forums, and opportunities for mutual support. This network also works closely with the Armed Forces Champion within the institution to ensure student feedback is regularly incorporated into practice.

Our peer network has been a great way for Service children to connect, share their experiences, and feel part of a community."
HE Stakeholder, Academic Department (England)

Inclusive induction and orientation: Another university developed induction sessions specifically for students from Armed Forces families. These sessions introduced support services and fostered connections among peers with similar experiences, easing the transition into university life.

The induction made a huge difference. I met other students like me and learned about the services that could help."
Student (Scotland)

Representation and advocacy: A student union introduced a dedicated representative for students from Armed Forces families representative role, ensuring their unique needs and perspectives are represented in university governance and decision-making processes.

Having a representative means our voices are heard, and we can contribute to changes that affect us directly."
Student (England)

THRIVING LIVES FOR SERVICE CHILDREN

SECTOR-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the priorities for university practice, the following sector-wide recommendations are designed to complement the institutional actions outlined above. While HEIs play a critical role in supporting students from Armed Forces families, addressing the broader systemic barriers faced by this student group requires action across the HE sector. These recommendations are therefore aimed at policymakers, student finance systems, and Armed Forces stakeholders.

IMPROVED FINANCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Financial barriers remain a significant challenge for students from Armed Forces families in HE. Complexities in student finance applications, rigid eligibility criteria, and a lack of tailored financial support exacerbate these challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Streamline the financial application process	Policymakers and the SLC should introduce an 'Armed Forces family' flag in applications to ensure accurate assessment for tuition fees and funding.
Enhance training for HEI finance teams	Sector-wide training for university finance teams should be mandated within institutions addressing the lack of contextual awareness and enabling proactive support for students from Armed Forces families navigating the financial system.
Create bespoke scholarships and bursaries	Develop long-term reforms, such as specific scholarships or bursaries tailored to students from Armed Forces families, aligning with the support available to other underrepresented groups.

STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION WITH ARMED FORCES STAKEHOLDERS

Collaboration between HEIs and Armed Forces stakeholders is crucial for establishing comprehensive and effective support systems for students in HE. These partnerships should focus on transitional support, counselling services, pre-university workshops, and career development initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Establish a sector wide network	Create a formal network involving HEIs, Armed Forces charities, local authorities, and employers to promote collaboration and resource sharing. This network would facilitate a consistent and effective approach to supporting students from Armed Forces families across the sector.

INCLUSION IN WIDENING ACCESS AGREEMENTS

Despite recognition of students from Armed Forces families as an underrepresented group within HE, they are still often excluded from equity and widening participation strategies. This lack of inclusion limits awareness and recognition of this cohort, resulting in gaps in support and engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Mandate inclusion in WAAs	HE regulators should require HEIs to include students from Armed Forces families as a priority group in their WAAs and other relevant frameworks, to ensure their unique needs are systematically recognised and addressed.
Commit to annual reporting	HEIs should commit to reporting on enrolment, retention, and attainment of students from Armed Forces families annually. This data will provide the accountability needed to evaluate progress and drive improvement.

DATA COLLECTION AND SHARING

The recent introduction of a UCAS application question identifying students from Armed Forces families marks a significant step forward in addressing long-standing data gaps for this cohort. However, further action is required to ensure that these students are consistently identified and supported throughout their educational journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Develop a sector-wide framework	Standardise the identification of students from Armed Forces families across HEIs by integrating UCAS application data with enrolment processes to ensure accurate tracking from enrolment through to graduation and beyond.
Strengthen data-sharing mechanisms	Facilitate better collaboration between schools, colleges, universities, and student finance systems to support the continuity of support for students from Armed Forces families at every stage of their education.

LAUNCH NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

The lack of awareness about the unique challenges and contributions of students from Armed Forces families remains a barrier to effective support across the sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Develop collaborative campaigns	Partnerships between HEIs, Armed Forces stakeholders, and organisations such as the SCiP Alliance should create national campaigns that build understanding and recognition of students from Armed Forces families.
Increase visibility of this cohort	Targeted campaigns should foster a supportive ecosystem for these students in HE and beyond, ensuring their unique experiences are acknowledged and addressed.

BROADEN ARMED FORCES COVENANT COMMITMENTS

This research has highlighted that HEIs often focus their Armed Forces Covenant commitments on serving personnel and veterans, frequently overlooking the needs of the wider Service family network, including students from Armed Forces families.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Join the Armed Forces Covenant	All HEIs should join the Armed Forces Covenant and those that have explicitly extend their commitments to address the needs of students from Armed Forces families.
Include bespoke pledges for students	Ensure pledges include comprehensive support for this cohort, considering their unique circumstances alongside other members of the Armed Forces community in institutional policies and initiatives.
Strengthen guidance on bespoke pledges	The Armed Forces Covenant Trust should provide clearer guidance to organisations signing the Covenant, explicitly encouraging them to consider and address the needs of various members of the Armed Forces community, including Service Children.

Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

07. LIMITATIONS

While this research provides valuable insights into the experiences of students from Armed Forces families in HE across the UK, it is important to acknowledge a number of limitations that may have influenced the findings and their generalisability.

UNEVEN REGIONAL PARTICIPATION

Despite efforts to ensure representation across all regions of the UK, participation levels varied with stronger engagement from institutions and students in England and Scotland compared to Wales and Northern Ireland. This uneven distribution may affect the transferability of findings to all regions of the UK. In particular, the research faced challenges in engaging students and HE staff based in Northern Ireland. This limitation may have resulted in the underrepresentation of unique regional experiences, policies, or challenges affecting students from Armed Forces families in different contexts across the UK.

SELECTION BIAS AND SAMPLE SIZE

As participation in this research was voluntary, the findings may reflect a selection bias with respondents more likely to be individuals who are actively engaged or have strong opinions about their experiences. In addition, we know that some students are reluctant to identify as members of the Armed Forces community due to the politically and socially sensitive nature of this identity in certain contexts. This likely contributes to an underrepresentation of the true number and diversity of students from Armed Forces families. While the study employed a robust mixed-methods approach, the number of student participants was relatively modest. This may further limit the breadth of perspectives captured, particularly from diverse subgroups such as mature students, postgraduate students, or those attending smaller or specialised HEIs. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with an awareness of these constraints on representation and diversity.

LACK OF COMPARATIVE AND LONGITUDINAL DATA

While the research highlights key barriers and strengths for students from Armed Forces families, it does not include direct comparisons with other underrepresented groups in HE, which could have provided additional context. Moreover, the systematic collection of data on this cohort is relatively recent, having been introduced only in the last two years. This restricts the ability to analyse longer-term trends, outcomes, or patterns over time for students from Armed Forces families.

IMPLICATIONS OF LIMITATIONS

While these limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings, the research offers valuable evidence and actionable recommendations for improving the experiences and outcomes of students from Armed Forces families in HE. Addressing these limitations in future studies, such as increasing regional representation, exploring longitudinal outcomes, and engaging with a broader range of institutions and participants, would further enhance understanding and inform sector-wide strategies.

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Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

APPENDIX 1: ADVISORY PANEL MEMBERSHIP

An advisory panel was convened to provide expert guidance and support throughout the research process, bringing together members with both lived and professional experience of supporting Service children in HE. The panel met three times during the first phase of the project, offering valuable feedback on the research design and emerging findings.

The group comprised of 16 members, including professionals from the following organisations:

- Army Families Federation
- Brunel University London
- Arts University Bournemouth
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Heriott Watt University
- Ministry of Defence - Armed Forces Families and Safeguarding
- Naval Families Federation
- Northumbria University
- Oxford Brookes University
- Swansea University
- University of Winchester