

FUTURE FOCUS 2024/25

Finding the service pupil voice through co-design

**A report into findings from a widening
participation co-design project**



Introduction

What is Study Higher and why do we work with service pupils?

Study Higher is part of a national widening access to higher education (HE) programme called Uni Connect. Working within the region of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Swindon, we give impartial advice and guidance to young people who are underrepresented in HE. Study Higher is led by Oxford Brookes University and also collaborates with the University of Oxford, the University of Reading, and Buckinghamshire New University.

Service pupils (or service children; or young people from Armed Forces families) are one of these underrepresented groups. The Service Children's Progression (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". Service pupil education and HE progression can be adversely affected by aspects of military life, such as mobility and deployment. The Office for Students deems service pupils to be an at-risk group when it comes to equality of opportunity. Study Higher facilitates outreach activities specifically for service pupils through its Future Focus programme.



Project aims

There is a lack of research into the voice and experiences of service pupils, which has an impact on building meaningful outreach work with this group. Study Higher wanted to engage the voices of service pupils within our region through a new, pilot project. We wanted to:

- Gather the voices and experiences of secondary service pupils within the Study Higher region.
- Find out how pupils relate to their own identities, lives and education.
- Create HE outreach content in conjunction with service pupils and based on their own experiences, wants and needs.

Study Higher's co-design project foregrounds the service pupil voice. The project aims to prioritise their perspectives of their own experiences over adult interpretations, therefore building stronger connections and informing more tailored, holistic outreach to meet their needs.

Project structure

Based on our aims, Study Higher set up the co-design project during the academic year 2024/25. We created a project with two parts:

Part 1

KS3/4 pupils used creative methods to express their intersecting identities as young people from Armed Forces families and young people more broadly.

Part 2

Using insights from Part 1, we aim to work with service pupils in further education (FE) to co-create a HE resource for younger pupils – designed *for* service pupils, *by* service pupils.

So far, we have completed Part 1 of the project. Whilst this is not a formal research project, we have gained insight and interesting findings which we present in this report.

Background to the project

Who did we work with?

We facilitated four workshops in four secondary schools across the Study Higher region that had previously engaged with our Future Focus programme. We worked with 54 service pupils aged between 12-15.

3 Year 8s **21** Year 9s **28** Year 10s **2** Year 11s

In terms of gender, 27 pupils identified as male; 25 pupils as female; one pupil as 'non-binary or other'; and data from one pupil was not collected.

Our role as widening participation practitioners

We acknowledge the impact of the following on the project:

- Practitioners are not service children and therefore lack lived experience.
- Certain factors may have influenced or limited pupil expression, such as the presence of adults (Study Higher and school staff); the presence of peers; the school setting; and, whilst they were carefully planned, the structure of the activities.
- The themes in this report are the interpretations of Study Higher staff as widening participation practitioners, and no formal data analysis was conducted.

This report

This report outlines our approach to Part 1 of the co-design project that took place during the academic year 2024/25. Although we have conducted research, this is not a formal, academic research project but instead an outreach initiative. We present key findings from Part 1 and make two main conclusions, before outlining recommendations and next steps for the project.

Project process

Research into service pupil voice, co-creation and creative methods



Project design and deciding the target age groups of service pupils



Reaching out to schools to gather interest in facilitating workshops

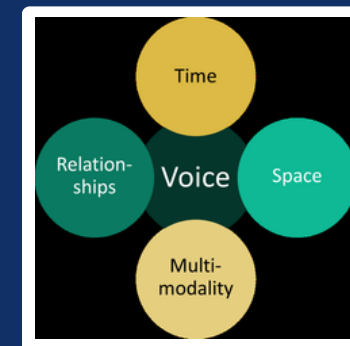


Facilitating the workshops in schools in spring 2025



Collating and analysing the findings

We drew on research by [Dr Claire Lee](#) (Oxford Brookes University) on rethinking adult engagement with the service pupil voice. This includes a four-part framework for facilitating meaningful, ethical interactions centred around the young person.



[Framework](#) for children's and young people's 'voice' activities, Dr Claire Lee.¹

We considered multi-modality particularly important for co-design and therefore researched methods that young people may find effective to express their thoughts. We did not wish to rely solely on verbal or written expression as firstly, there is a risk that concepts can be framed by an adult perspective; and secondly, young people may lack the vocabulary to articulate their thoughts. Our research led us to decide to use different creative methods.

To inform the entire project, we researched co-creation principles and models such as the [Lundy model of child participation](#)² and [Hart's ladder of participation](#)³. Finally, we also drew on academic research on service pupils' educational barriers and progression to HE.

Part 1 of the project - workshops and methods

Co-design workshops

Two Access and Outreach Officers facilitated the workshops in schools. Workshops lasted approximately 1.5 hours and had between 10 and 16 service pupils in attendance. Our target year groups were Years 9 and 10.

To ensure that the young people understood the project's purpose and felt comfortable to express themselves, we firstly built rapport and explained the purpose of the project through an interactive activity. Second, we co-created a group agreement with the pupils to establish peer respect. Through a considered workshop structure, we aimed to establish an environment where the service pupils felt they could safely share their identities.

The table to the right summarises the creative methods we used, which we explained to the young people at the beginning of the workshop. In order to have some consistent data across the workshops, all pupils took part in the Mentimeter and graffiti wall. Other activities were optional to allow pupils some freedom in how they wished to express themselves. We encouraged the young people to engage with the creative methods by expressing their intersecting identities as both young people from an Armed Forces families and young people more broadly.



Creative methods

This table summarises the creative methods we used during the workshops for Part 1 of the co-design project.

Mentimeter

Pupils answered quiz-style questions on their phones about topics such as school and their free time. We asked all pupils to take part in this activity.

Graffiti wall

Pupils added artwork and words to express what it is like to be a young person from an Armed Forces family. We asked all pupils to take part in this activity.

Ballot box

Pupils could add anonymous notes with their opinions on 'What do you want adults to know about you, as a young person from a military family?'. Optional activity.

Blob tree

Pupils chose a prompt word (e.g. school) and coloured in/annotated a 'blob person' on a template to best describe their related experiences. Optional activity.

Comic strip

Pupils drew a story board of a day in their life when they will be either a) 18 or b) in 2035. Optional activity.

Voice note

Pupils recorded voice notes for their Year 7 selves. This could be interpreted widely but we gave some examples of topics. Optional activity.

Findings - key themes from the workshops

Study Higher analysed the findings, categorising the insights that the young people shared via the creative activities. We then grouped these into four main themes.

THEME 1 - CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

The young people described the central role of family and friendships in their identities and lives. Pupils connected over their military experiences - a positive outcome of creating space for them to express their identities and voices.

Family and pets

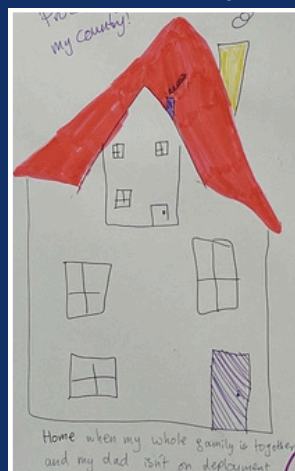
The young people frequently mentioned family and pets, which play a central role in their lives and their military family identity. Pets were always referred to fondly, perhaps symbolising stability but also providing emotional support.

There were several references to 'home'. One young person distinguished between 'house' and 'home', with the latter being when their serving parent is present. This highlights the impact of different living situations and the emotional effect of parental absence.

Family appeared so central that several young people expressed a desire to have their own families in future, most often revealed through the comic strip activity.



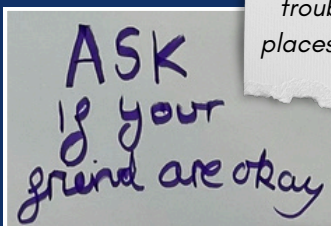
Graffiti wall



Friendships

Friendships were also central to the identities that the service pupils expressed. Friendships frequently featured alongside mobility: saying goodbye to friends and making friends in new locations, which can be difficult. However, references were not always in relation to mobility, highlighting the important role of quality friendships in their broader teenage identities.

The young people - particularly girls - mentioned the emotional support that friends provide and the desire to reciprocate such support. This suggests a close connection between friendships and wellbeing, both generally and in the context of the challenges of military life.



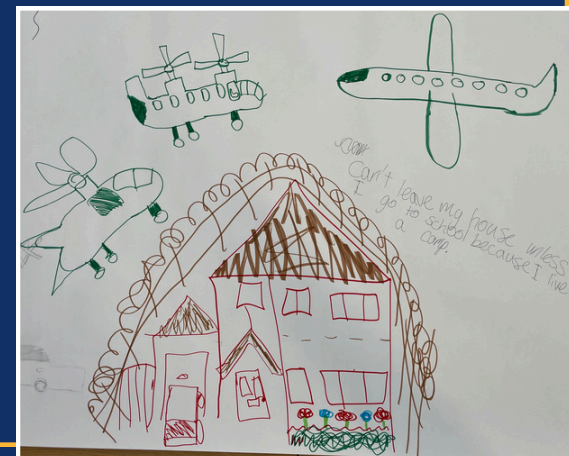
Graffiti wall

Armed Forces children have trouble making friends in new places if they move around a lot.
-Ballot box

We have a new group of friends...
And you can tell - it's very very strong, it's very very lovely.
-Voice note

Engagement in military life

We observed that the young people connected during the workshops through shared experiences of military life. They demonstrated their strong connection with military life through, for example, frequent and detailed drawings of chinooks and other military equipment. Foreign countries and maps featured regularly, highlighting the role of mobility in their lives but also some excitement related to experiencing a new place and culture. However, several young people mentioned challenging practical factors, such as issues with military housing and plug sockets abroad, which highlight the range of possible experiences. These points demonstrate the value of hearing the service pupil voice in their terms - both so adults can understand and so the young people can build their own connections.



Graffiti wall

Findings - key themes from the workshops

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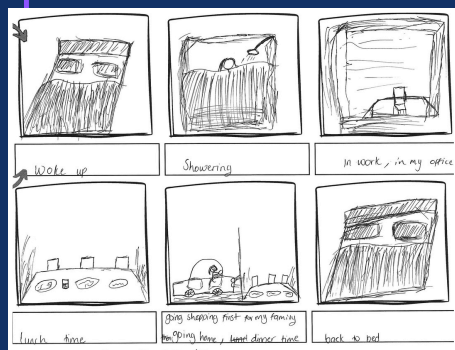
THEME 2 - ADAPTATION

Mobility and change

Unsurprisingly, relocating to new places and schools as a result of military life (mobility) featured prominently. This included moves to different countries due to postings. Young people generally demonstrated strong connections and positive associations with their experiences abroad, for example by drawing the Cyprus flower and images of sun and sea.

However, change was not only limited to mobility, but could be a parent moving out, weekending, or parents having new jobs. This range demonstrates the complexity of the service pupil experience and the many ways in which they must adapt, even within the same physical location.

We observed that young people frequently depicted daily routines in comic strips, perhaps suggesting a desire for consistency in future.



Comic strip and graffiti wall



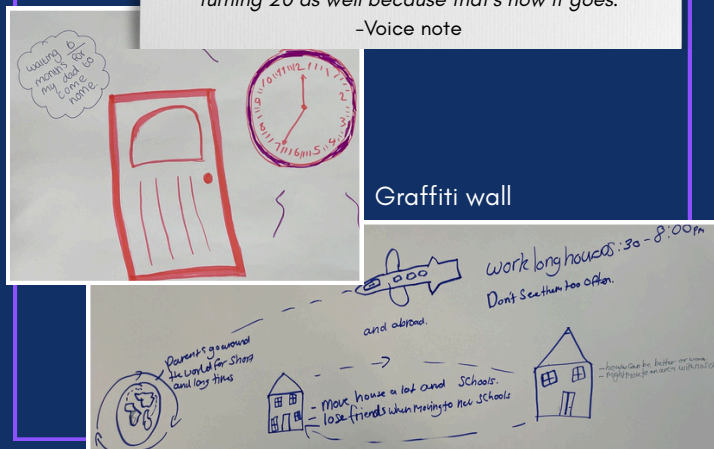
Parental absence

Pupils described experiences of parental absence – especially deployment but also, for example, long working hours, highlighting the diversity of military life. They expressed much awareness of and emotion towards absence, for example counting down the days until their parent comes home and drawings of globes to show physical separation. This heightened awareness and sense of waiting highlights how profoundly the pupils feel parental absence.

Parents sometimes missed special events (e.g. birthdays), which evokes sadness combined with acceptance of this as a norm.

Dad wasn't here for [my] 10th birthday, wasn't here for the 15th [birthday] either. It seems to be an every five year occurrence. He probably won't be here when I'm turning 20 as well because that's how it goes.

-Voice note



Graffiti wall

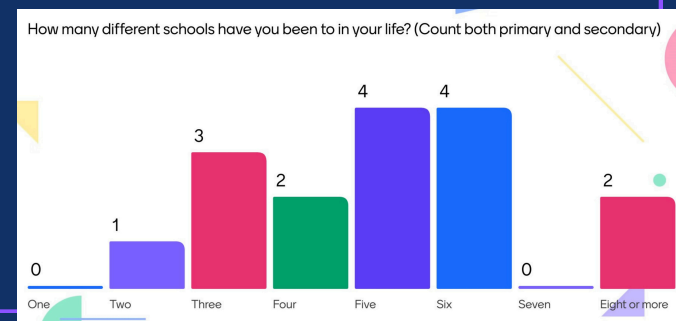
The young people expressed adaptation in many senses: physical, emotional and psychological. They frequently described mobility and deployment, but the variety of changes highlight the diversity of experiences associated with military life.

School and learning

A Mentimeter poll found that some service pupils have moved schools six, seven and even eight or more times, requiring adaptation in many senses, from curriculum to friendships. However, as this change was mentioned less frequently than location moves or parental absence, it suggests that the latter are more prominent in the service pupil experience.

Pupils expressed both positive feelings towards school (e.g. feeling motivated) and negative (e.g. boring). We observed more negative experiences and challenges related to school, including navigating GCSE pressure and lacking motivation. However, such experiences may also emphasise their broader young person identities: they are navigating change, new scenarios and potential disengagement in much the same way as civilian young people.

Mentimeter poll



Findings - key themes from the workshops

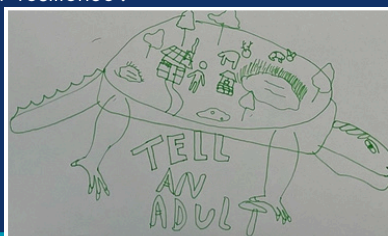
Study Higher analysed the findings, categorising the insights that the young people shared via the creative activities. We then grouped these into four main themes.

THEME 3 - INNER SELF AND EMOTIONS

Emotionally challenging experiences

The young people expressed a variety of emotions and shared experiences that were emotionally challenging - both related to military life (e.g. deployment, concerns about serving parents) but also outside of the military (e.g. friendship issues). Several mentioned mental health explicitly, suggesting that awareness of it and good wellbeing are important to them in their broader young person identities, but also that military life can affect mental health. Several pupils expressed opinions that it is better to share problems rather than bottling them up, demonstrating emotional intelligence. We observed, however, that no pupil used the terms 'resilient' or 'resilience'.

I'd really like if more people were aware of mental health struggles.
-Ballot box



Graffiti wall

Teenage life

We encouraged pupils to express their broader identities as young people during workshop activities. They shared the importance and enjoyment of hobbies, music, pop culture and video games with enthusiasm, suggesting the strong role of such interests in identity formation, as would also be expected with civilian teenagers. The young people's enthusiasm suggests that they wish others to perceive them as much more than only service pupils. These interests may also provide stability and support during challenging aspects of military life.

Bruno Mars	Beyonce
Bonde do Brazil	Beautiful liar
Runaway baby	ego
No town funk	You're rather die young
Plataine	One night only
Old and crazy	Margina girl
Marry you	Crazy in love
Abs	Energy
Runway baby	
Spago	

Graffiti wall and blob tree

Step one: My prompt word for this Blob Tree is
hobbies

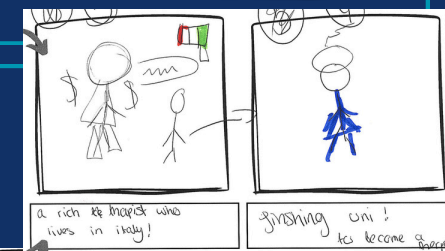
Step two: Colour in, circle or shade the blob on the tree which best represents how you feel about this subject, topic, or word.

Step three: I chose this blob because
I feel like I've been getting better & better in reading & that I'm excelling.

Behaviour

Young people explicitly and implicitly told us that deployment can affect their mood and behaviour. For example, one young person wanted adults to understand that their lived experience can cause changes in their behaviour (see below), suggesting that adult understanding is sometimes lacking. We observed that pupils' behaviour during the workshops was respectful of shared experiences, as well as open to sharing feelings and identities. Therefore, young people seemed to value this opportunity, highlighting a benefit of listening to their voices.

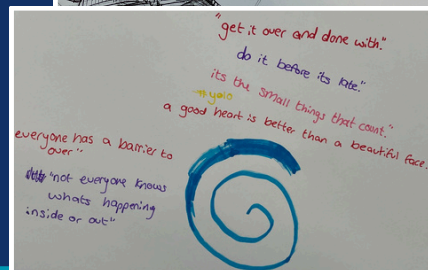
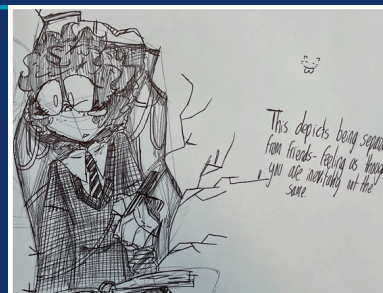
I wish adults understood that our parents being away or deployed affects my behaviour and my moods so I might act off!
-Ballot box



Inner self

The pupils exhibited much self-reflection and self-awareness, linking to our observations of emotional maturity. We did not expect this finding, given that discussion of service pupil identity often revolves around external factors, such as deployment and mobility. We noticed a contrast in experiences with their inner selves: on one hand, expressions of the importance of self-belief and 'you only live once'; and on the other, lower self-esteem, such as feeling different from others. A young person can hold these ideas at the same time, which emphasises the complexity of their lived experience as a service pupil and a young person more broadly. Generally, we observed that the young people engaged with the creative methods, suggesting that they enabled freedom of expression of identity and the inner self.

Graffiti wall



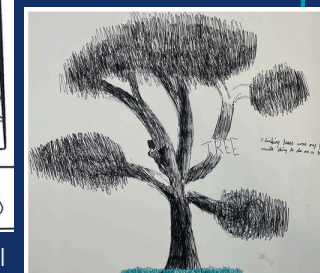
Personal development and future self

Internal drive and the desire to achieve and grow as individuals featured regularly, highlighting that the service pupils have ambitions, even if these are not yet clearly defined. For example, the comic strips showed desires for future jobs and wealth, and several young people drew trees on the graffiti wall to symbolise individual growth. This appears to demonstrate a strong sense of aspiration and desire for personal development. Perhaps an interesting omission is that no young people shared a desire to enter the military (although we cannot, of course, be certain).



Graffiti wall

Comic strip (left & above)



Findings - key themes from the workshops

Study Higher analysed the findings, categorising the insights that the young people shared via the creative activities. We then grouped these into four main themes.

THEME 4 - TRANSPARENCY, AGENCY & ASSUMPTIONS

Service pupils shared that they lacked knowledge around parental deployment but nonetheless demonstrated agency and positivity. They value being listened to and shared beliefs that military children can be “over-glorified” by adults.

Lack of full knowledge

Young people highlighted a lack of knowledge surrounding their parent’s deployment, including when, where, for how long, and the parent’s role. Whilst uncertainty can evoke an emotional response (e.g. frustration), to a certain extent the pupils accepted it. Pupils expressed mixed feelings, with some acknowledging that not possessing the full details of deployment can be better for emotional wellbeing because thinking of their parent at war, for example, can be distressing. Their ‘not knowing’ could therefore form part of a coping strategy.

By expressing themselves in the workshops, the service pupils demonstrated a desire to be transparent and have ownership of their narratives, indicating agency despite a lack of knowledge regarding deployment.

The packages that you get when a parent is deployed can seem not as sufficient because it's like you get a teddy bear when your mum goes to war.

-Ballot box

You always kind of know that your parents have like, you know, been to war, but it's like, doesn't really register does it ... You think of it as like “yeah she just went, she stayed in a room and it was like 40 degrees” or whatever ... it's quite - not great for the, the mind to under- register that. Er, but, I mean, you move on.

-Voice note

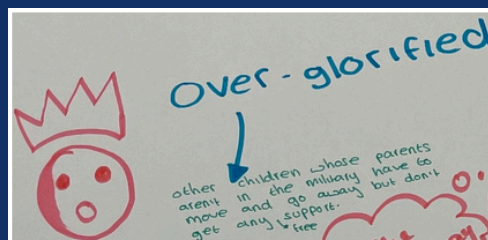
Sometimes the deployment/“war” doesn't really affect me because we're not told so when people say I'm so brave it just feels like they're buttering me up.

-Ballot box

Focus and over-glorification

Feelings of being ‘pigeonholed’ as a military child appeared several times, accompanied by two clear sentiments. First, that they could be “over-glorified” and receive more support compared to non-service pupils, which some service pupils consider unfair. Second, that because of a young person’s military identity, adults can have certain expectations of what they should experience, and how they should feel and behave. Such expectations do not necessarily match a young person’s lived experience. This sentiment not only evoked a sense of discomfort amongst the young people but can also cause them to self-censor feelings and identities if they do not correspond with adult expectations.

Graffiti wall



The school treats us like we are high in the sky ... like, we are better than everyone, which isn't really fair I don't think, I feel like it's just different, you know.

-Voice note

Sometimes when you get loads of attention for being a military kid it sometimes makes you feel that you can't be anything other than what their [sic.] saying.

-Ballot box

Positivity and embracing imperfections

The young people frequently demonstrated positive outlooks and a capacity to embrace imperfections, despite factors such as lacking knowledge about deployment. They displayed humour, a desire to have fun, gratitude, life satisfaction, and contentment with the status quo. These attitudes link strongly with the pupils’ inner sense of self, capacity to self-reflect, and internal drive - indeed, there was positivity towards personal achievements. They are aware that circumstances are not always ideal and they are capable of taking action to make change.

One pupil told us that being a service child is “not as bad as some people think”. It implies that people can hold negative assumptions about military life and is therefore a reminder for adults to avoid a deficit model of the service pupil experience.



Step three: I chose this blob because it's not all the way at the top as those still need to achieve but happy with where I am and have still done well.

Blob tree about ‘my achievements’

We have to be grateful for what we have, always take moments in your life to reflect and appreciate what you have.

-Ballot box

It's not as bad as some people think.

-Ballot box

Conclusions

From our findings we developed two key strands of thought to take forward into future outreach work.

THE NUANCE OF MILITARY LIFE

The identities and experiences that the young people expressed during the workshops are diverse, complex and nuanced. We saw this through, for example, opposing ideas and feelings that a young person can hold simultaneously:

- Self-belief vs. self-doubt.
- Military children being 'over-glorified' vs. the feeling that receiving a care package when your Mum goes to war is not enough.
- The difficult practical aspects of mobility vs. the excitement of living abroad.
- Sadness around parental absence vs. acceptance of it as a norm.

Therefore, it can be inaccurate to determine that aspects of a service pupil's life are simply 'good' or 'bad'. It is important that adults do not make assumptions about their lived experience but instead find ways to make their voices heard.

Just as with civilian young people, the lives of service pupils are complex and their identities intricate. The military is central to their lives but so are many other aspects. From their identities as young people outside of a military context, we learnt that they have fulfilling friendships, hobbies, connections with pop culture, and much more.

We believe that it is important to:

- Consider the individual first and foremost, including outside of the military context.
- Be aware of binary conceptions of 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of a service pupil's experience, as these are often much more nuanced and can intersect to have a different effect.
- Engage the service pupil voice to enhance understanding, especially of the nuances of military life.

In the context of access to HE, such approaches can broaden practitioner awareness and build stronger connections with service pupils through greater understanding. They also provide a foundation to a more holistic approach to supporting the needs of service pupils.

AGENCY, NOT RESILIENCE

Service pupils are often labelled 'resilient'. However, during the workshops the young people did not explicitly mention 'resilience'. Whilst they exhibited behaviours that adults may label as such, we suggest that it is an adult term applied to a young person's context and therefore favouring our interpretation over theirs.

Rather than 'resilience', a focus on 'agency' may be a more positive and productive approach. Whilst the young people did not explicitly use this term either, they do possess agency, which empowers them. For example, service pupils may lack context of their serving parent's deployment, but they demonstrate autonomy and maturity in their own narratives and self-awareness, and connect with each other over shared understanding. They demonstrate understanding of the power of friendships; their personal ambitions and aspirations; how they manage challenges such as deployment and mobility; and adult assumptions about their identities.

We believe that it is important to:

- Focus on agency and what service pupils *do* or *could* have control over.
 - This is especially important in further education (FE) when decisions can have long-term effects (e.g. subject choices leading to the desired path).
- Listen to their own narratives and desires. Young people value having their voices heard and this will increase awareness and avoid assumptions.
- Be aware of the risks of the 'resilience' label, for example:
 - Impeding other expression from young people.
 - Restricting our open-mindedness to the effects of lived experience as a result of assuming that young people will be resilient and 'get through it'.
- Utilise the power of connections that service pupils can make with each other.

By focusing instead on agency rather than resilience, we can work collaboratively with service pupils to empower them. In the context of access to HE, agency does not necessarily look like a clear pathway at age 18 but an ability to build skills and conduct research into options. Practitioners can provide the scaffolding to support autonomy and help them make informed decisions. This support will be even more effective combined with an understanding of the nuance of military life.

The future of the project

Next steps for Study Higher

A challenge that Study Higher experienced with the co-design project was facilitating Part 2 due to difficulties engaging FE learners. This challenge is not surprising. Research shows (e.g. the SCiP Alliance report, *Diversity Meets Complexity*⁴) that there is a national challenge in engaging service pupils in FE. For instance, there is no nationwide tracking system for service pupils aged 16-19 and, even where service pupils are identified, there are a lack of resources and funding to support them.

However, in 2025/26 we aim to work with FE learners to begin Part 2 of the project and co-create a HE resource for service pupils, by service pupils.

Study Higher will disseminate the findings and progress of the project so far with schools, colleges, higher education institutions and other stakeholders.

Feedback and discussion

Study Higher welcomes questions and discussion about this project – please contact Rosanna Mills at r.mills@brookes.ac.uk. To find out more about Study Higher and its outreach programmes, visit studyhigher.ac.uk.



Acknowledgements

Study Higher wishes to thank the four secondary schools that took part in our co-design project for their enthusiasm and contributions. This includes the staff members who arranged for the workshops to take place and the 54 service pupils who participated.

How practitioners and educators can use this report

There are several ways in which outreach practitioners, education professionals, schools, HEIs and other stakeholders can engage with this report and use its findings to inform their own work with young people from Armed Forces families. For example:

- Using creative methods to give voice to service pupils.
 - Creative methods are suitable for both primary and secondary students.
 - Using such methods in conjunction with the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* fifth principle, 'Children are heard'.
- Using the report to enhance teacher, staff, practitioner and adult awareness of the service pupil experience.
- Using the findings alongside research to inform access to HE programmes and outreach interventions.
- When the toolkit is finalised, using the findings alongside the HE Thriving Lives Toolkit (in development by the *SCiP Alliance*).

References

- ¹ Lee, C. (2024) 'A 4-part framework for meaningful, ethical and impactful children's and young people's 'voice' activities', SCiP Alliance Annual Conference, Cardiff 2024. Available at: schools.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/2024voiceframeworkresource.pdf
- ² Lundy, L. (2007) Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6)(6), 927-942.
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- ⁴ Granada, A. & Mulcahy, E. (2022) *Diversity Meets Complexity: Supporting Armed Forces Young People to Thrive in Post-16 Education*, SCiP Alliance. Available at: scipalliance.org/research/diversity-meets-complexity-supporting-armed-forces-young-people-to-thrive-in-post-16-education