

The Value of the
University
Armed
Service
Units



The Value of **USUs** About this Research



Research on the value of the university armed service units was conducted at Newcastle University from 2012–15, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This research explored the value, specifically in non-financial terms, of the University Royal Naval Units, the Officer Training Corps and the University Air Squadrons – referred to collectively as the University Service Units or USUs. The research focused on the value of the units to five very different groups:

- students participating in the units
- graduates from units who had not pursued full-time careers in the armed forces
- the armed forces – the Royal Navy, British Army and the Royal Air Force
- the universities from which student participants are drawn
- employers and the graduate labour market

Data on these groups' understandings of the value of the USUs was collected using a quantitative survey and qualitative research interviews.

The full report on research findings is published and available free:



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The Value of **USUs** to... Participating Students



- 90% of student participants rated their overall experience as mostly **positive or better**.
- **Freshers' Fairs** and similar events aimed at new students continue to be significant for recruitment. Over a quarter (29%) of students first find out about the existence of the units through such events.
- **Student motivations** for joining a USU include an interest in the military (81%), adventurous training opportunities (76%), the challenge (70%), gaining transferable skills (63%) and CV enhancement (58%). Students are paid for their participation, but this was a motivation for joining for under half (44%).
- There are clear differences between men and women in terms of motivations for joining.
- 58% of students thought their USU participation had **helped them progress** through their university degree.
- Students thought their USU experience developed their transferable (graduate-level) skills to a greater extent than their degree programmes. For example, 25% reported that their **communication skills** had developed way beyond their expectations through their USU participation, compared with 7% making the same evaluation of their degree.
- 90% thought that being in a USU would help them get a graduate job. Training received through USUs in **transferable skills** was cited as the key reason, along with opportunities offered by USUs for demonstrating and using those skills.



The Value of **USUs** to... Graduates



- Graduates of USUs saw their value resting largely with the personal benefits they accrued on the basis of their experience. Although not always used, those who noted USU participation in job applications thought it brought something **distinctive to their profile** in competitive graduate recruitment contexts.
- Transferable skills gained through USU participation, particularly in **leadership, team-working, communication and self-organisation**, were most commonly cited as benefits. Being able to demonstrate competency in these in job applications was considered particularly beneficial.
- Explicit use of USU experience in **job applications and interviews**, and reference to it in employment contexts, was not uniform. The direct referencing of USU experience was highly contingent on context (e.g. type of job, type of employer).
- USU experience was often directly relevant for those working in defence-related sectors, although this was variable and incidental. Graduates also noted how wider understanding of military cultures and modes of operation might sometimes **help in job performance**, although this was specific to context.
- Graduates recognise the **advocacy function** they may be able to perform for the armed forces because of their USU experience, but are cautious about the extent to which they can claim expertise about defence and military matters.
- The personal friendships developed through USUs are frequently maintained through life, and the **social aspects** of USUs were highly valued.





The Value of **USUs** to...

The Armed Forces

- The USUs have a clear recruitment function for the armed forces, even though this may not always be an explicit part of units' missions. About one quarter of URNU participants, one third of OTC and nearly half of UAS students state an intention to join the regular armed forces on graduation. A further 12% of URNU, 9% of OTC, 13% of UAS students were considering an **armed forces career as regulars** because of their USU experience, having previously not entertained the idea.
- The USUs are significant for recruitment to the Reserves. 16% of URNU, 16% of OTC and 8% of UAS students said that they were considering **joining the Reserves** (rather than the Regular armed forces). Graduates and commanding officers recognise the continuity that Reserves participation represents for students who had enjoyed their USU experience but were not contemplating a full-time armed forces career. The possibility of Reserves participation figures prominently in student comments about their possible post-graduation involvement with the armed forces.
- Current students, graduates, and commanding officers all agree that the units provide an **invaluable opportunity** for individuals to test out the possibility of pursuing a career in the armed forces before making a firm commitment. That students may use their USU experience to decide against an armed forces career is seen as a very positive aspect of the USUs.
- The USUs are significant for the **wider public visibility** of the armed forces; the availability of students for deployment in public events was particularly beneficial for the armed forces.
- Graduates and commanding officers recognise that because of student involvement, the units are **self-servicing** to a degree, and perceive this as minimising the costs to the defence budgets of the units.



The Value of **USUs** to... Universities



- Students attending universities across the higher education sector participate in the USUs. Although the units have higher levels of participation from older, more established universities, there is evidence of increasing participation from the newer (post-1992) universities and specialist institutions. Unit commanding officers are enthusiastic about **widening diversity** of participation across the sector.

- Levels of knowledge and understanding about what the USUs are and what they do tend to be low across the sector. It appears that few university administrative officers have **knowledge of the units**, although recognise their potential value to students when discussed.
- **Knowledge about USUs** tends to be very low amongst academic staff, although student participants themselves do much to raise awareness through discussions with their tutors and lecturers.
- The USUs attract, and are able to accommodate, a very small proportion of the total student population. This may explain the relative **lack of engagement** by universities with the USUs.
- Military Education Committees (MECs) show **diverse models of operation**. In some cases, the role of a MEC is unclear. The most effective MECs have a clear idea of their remit, and comprise a membership able to communicate directly with higher levels of university management.





The Value of **USUs** to...

Employers & Employment



- 90% of USU participants thought that being in a USU would help with getting a **graduate job**.
- Graduates observed that employers frequently appeared not to have knowledge of USUs sufficient to understand the utility of the experience for the civilian workplace. The translation of USU experience into evidence of **competency in the job application** process was therefore necessary, and could not be assumed.
- Graduates were aware that caution was often needed in the **presentation of USU experience** in job applications, given potential antipathy amongst some employers towards military-focused activities.
- Students and graduates are aware that highlighting USU participation in job applications might be read negatively by an employer as an indication of their having a **preference for an armed forces career**.
- Some unit commanding officers have been **very pro-active in communicating** with employers in their geographical area something of the value of the USU experience in shaping the employability of USU participants.



The Research Team:

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