



Mind the gap

Education for minors
in the British armed
forces

CHILD SOLDIERS
INTERNATIONAL

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in the British armed forces

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Child Soldiers International (formerly the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers) is an international human rights research and advocacy organization. Child Soldiers International seeks to end and prevent the military recruitment and use in hostilities of child soldiers (boys and girls below the age of 18), and other human rights abuses resulting from their association with armed forces or groups. It seeks the release of child soldiers from armed forces or groups, promotes their successful return to civilian life and accountability for those who recruit and use them. Child Soldiers International promotes global adherence to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

www.child-soldiers.org

Who are child soldiers?

Child Soldiers International considers the term child soldier to be equivalent to the following description of children associated with armed forces or groups:

A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking, or has taken, a direct part in hostilities.

Source: Paris Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups, UNICEF, February 2007.

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“If anyone asks me now, I tell them to stay in college. Go to uni. Get a proper education. Loads of people sign up thinking they’ll get qualifications but it’s the wrong way to do it. I got nothing out of the army. Nothing. It’s the wrong way.”

Extract from a Child Soldiers International interview with ex-soldier and teenage recruit.

Executive summary

The minimum recruitment age for the British armed forces – 16 years – is one of the lowest in the world. The Ministry of Defence has traditionally justified recruiting from this age group by asserting that 16 years reflects the minimum statutory school leaving age.

However, as a result of successive governments' policies to increase upper secondary education participation rates, over recent decades the number of young people leaving education and entering employment before the age of 18 has decreased significantly. Today, only a very small percentage of young people leave education at 16 (six per cent in 2009/2010). Apart from the Ministry of Defence, the only other institution which seeks to attract and retain this age group is the education system itself. It is with schools and colleges, not other employers, that the Ministry of Defence directly competes to recruit young people.

The Ministry of Defence has argued that it offers good training and education opportunities to young people. It currently spends at least three times as much on Phase One training for minors than on equivalent training for adults. However, examination of the education on offer at the army's two Junior Entry "colleges" – the Army Foundation College Harrogate and the Army Technical Foundation College Winchester – reveals that the provision is extremely limited. Academic subjects cover only English, maths and Information Technology (IT) and only lead to low level qualifications described as "fundamentally flawed" by the Wolf Report, an expert review of vocational education commissioned by the Department for Education in March 2011. Training and education focus largely on specialised military skills of very limited transferable value to civilian employment. Furthermore, army personnel can undertake additional courses of instruction only if they agree to extend their minimum service period beyond the term of their original enlistment agreement. This additional service period in the army could be up to six years. As a result, the combined academic and vocational opportunities cannot be regarded as being in keeping with the recommendations of the Wolf Report.

The combination of limited academic qualifications and excessive professional specialisation at an early age has seriously detrimental consequences for recruits' long term employment prospects. The Royal British Legion has found unemployment rates among ex-Service personnel aged 18 – 49 to be twice the national average for the same civilian age group. Their lack of training and skills was cited as a reason for this. The average infantry recruit who enlisted as a minor will leave the army within ten years, with some 40 years of working life still ahead of them. Good qualifications and transferable skills are therefore essential for their long term employment prospects.

The large majority of recruits who enlist as minors are drawn from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Traditionally, the armed forces were considered an effective path of social mobility out of such social exclusion. Yet this is no longer the case today, as the education provided by the Ministry of Defence to young armed forces recruits increasingly fails to meet the modern standards of education (in both quantity and quality) expected for all young people. As a result it narrows rather than broadens their future opportunities, and compounds rather than alleviates long term disadvantage.

This report concludes that the impact of recruitment below the age of 18 opens up a number of gaps that have long term significance, not only for the armed forces but also for the young people that they recruit. At a time of considerable downsizing of the army in particular, the large gap between the cost of training minors (who cannot be deployed operationally) and adults (who can) is difficult to sustain. But perhaps the most significant cost is in the detrimental impact that the gaps identified have on the future prospects of minors recruited by our armed forces. In particular:

- The gap between the educational attainment of those that are recruited below the age of 18 and those that stay on at school until they are 18;
- The gap between the future employment prospects of those recruited below the age of 18 and those who stay on in mainstream education;
- The gap between government policies on social mobility through the acquisition of, among other things, widely marketable skills, and the limited set of skills and qualifications, most with no obvious transferability, that are actually on offer to young people being recruited below the age of 18.

In the circumstances, phasing out of the recruitment of minors – as we move towards 18 as the new compulsory education participation age in the UK – will not only bring the UK into line with the growing international consensus towards 18 as the minimum age for all forms of armed forces recruitment, it will also significantly reduce Ministry of Defence expenditure on Phase One training. Most importantly, perhaps, it will ensure that government strategies on education and social mobility are implemented consistently across all departments, to the benefit of all young people irrespective of their future career path.

Introduction

In March 2011, Child Soldiers International¹ published the report “Catch 16–22: Recruitment and retention of minors in the British armed forces”, which questioned the UK’s maintenance of 16 years as the minimum recruitment age for the armed forces. The report highlighted how UK policy was at odds with standard international practice and national legal principles on protection of minors. It showed that terms of service for minors were unduly complex, restrictive and more onerous than those for adults. The report also noted that minors were exposed to greater risks than adult recruits in several significant areas, including propensity to suicide and self-harm. Finally, the report revealed that recruits enlisting as minors left the armed forces faster and in much higher numbers than adults (both during and after completion of training) resulting in significant financial loss to the Ministry of Defence.

The Ministry of Defence has continued to argue that its recruitment practices are justified on the grounds that the armed forces, and the army in particular, provide disadvantaged young people with good training and educational opportunities. This short briefing paper examines this claim by evaluating the education and training provided to minors in Phase One army training in light of the recommendations of the independent expert review of vocational education by Professor Alison Wolf (hereinafter “the Wolf Report”), commissioned by the Department for Education and published in March 2011.

This briefing paper is based on data provided by the Ministry of Defence (including statistical data, responses to questions from Members of both Houses of Parliament, and Ministry of Defence publications), the Wolf Report and the Department for Education’s response to this report, the April 2011 government report “Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A strategy for social mobility”, as well as publications by academic sources and military welfare charities.

The report assesses the extent to which the provision of education and skills for young people recruited under the age of 18 is consistent with the changes in government policies on educational skills and social mobility, and what impact that provision has on the future prospects of those young people. In doing so, it identifies a number of gaps that have a significant detrimental impact on their future employability. This in turn forms the evidence base for our latest call for a considered review on the minimum recruitment age into the British armed forces.

¹ At that time known as the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

The youth employment and education market

When challenged on the current minimum recruitment age of 16 years, the Ministry of Defence has repeatedly stated that this age limit “broadly reflects the minimum statutory school leaving age”.² This assertion—whilst technically correct—reflects an outdated perception of today’s youth employment and education markets, in which very few young people actually leave education at 16. According to the March 2011 Wolf Report, whilst twenty or thirty years ago “the large majority of young people were in full time employment by their mid teens”³ today “almost no young people move into full time employment”.⁴ In fact, in 2009 “only 6 per cent of employers recruited any 16 year olds (including apprentices)”.⁵

This is because, as a result of successive governments’ education policies, the upper secondary (age 16 – 18) education participation rate has steadily increased over recent decades. In 2009/2010, 94 per cent of all 16 year olds stayed on in education.⁶ According to the Wolf Report, “virtually everyone stays on post-GCSE, and an overwhelming majority participate to age 18”.⁷ This new reality is reflected in, and will be consolidated by, the increase in compulsory education age to 18 years by 2015.

“It is with schools and colleges, not employers, that the Ministry of Defence directly competes to recruit young people”

In the 2006 report “Recruitment and Retention in the Armed Forces”, the Ministry of Defence noted these trends in education, stating that “the Government is encouraging more young people to enter further and higher education”.⁸ Rather than respond by increasing the armed forces recruitment age, the Ministry of Defence identified this fact as “likely to reduce the numbers available in the traditional school leaver recruiting pool” and labelled it “a risk area to future recruitment performance”.⁹ Indeed, “Education Policy” was itself a heading in the appendix on “Recruiting Challenges”.

Consequently, it is inaccurate for the Ministry of Defence to imply that its recruitment policies reflect ordinary youth employment trends. In particular, the argument it gave to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that it needs to recruit minors “in order to compete in an increasingly competitive employment market” and that “to be unable to recruit from this age group [16 – 18] would mean that high-quality school leavers would settle into other careers and thus be lost to the Services” does not reflect the current reality.¹⁰

Sadly, the assertion that those leaving school at 16 are generally perceived by employers as “high-quality” is not accurate. By definition, where 94 per cent of young people remain in education until at least 18, those who leave school at 16 will have relatively few qualifications. According to the Wolf Report, “employers see those young people (16 or 17) who are looking for employment as likely to be low-achieving...the more young people stay in education, the more employers perceive the remainder as ‘low quality’...so they prefer older applicants”.¹¹ Put simply, the Ministry of Defence is not in competition with civilian employers to recruit minors. Apart from the Ministry of Defence, the only other institution which seeks to attract and retain this age group is the education system itself. It is with schools and colleges, not employers, that the Ministry of Defence directly competes to recruit young people.

2 HC Deb, 2 November 2011, c656W.

3 Professor Alison Wolf, *Review of Vocational Education – the Wolf Report*, (hereinafter, *The Wolf Report*), March 2011, page 24.

4 *The Wolf Report*, page17.

5 *The Wolf Report*, page78.

6 *The Wolf Report*, page51.

7 *The Wolf Report*, page 9.

8 National Audit Office / Ministry of Defence, “Recruitment and Retention in the Armed Forces”, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (Hc 1633-I Session 2005–2006), 3 November 2006, page 54.

9 National Audit Office / Ministry of Defence, “Recruitment and Retention in the Armed Forces”, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (Hc 1633-I Session 2005–2006), 3 November 2006, page 54.

10 Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Consideration of reports submitted by states parties of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CRC/C/OPAC/GBR/1*, (2007), paragraph 18.

11 *The Wolf Report*, page30.

Some have argued that young people who join the armed forces as minors are of a particular social and educational profile likely to drop out of, or fail to achieve in, mainstream education. Consequently, they argue that general education policy and targets are not relevant to them. However, the educational exclusion of a subgroup of young people, who are increasingly isolated as their peers continue in education in ever greater numbers, has lifelong consequences. It is precisely this cohort of youth that the government's April 2011 report on social mobility, "Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers", identified as most in need of encouragement to stay on in education, to arrest and reverse the widening gap in young people's academic attainment and future employment prospects. This report emphasised the role of meaningful post-16 education and training as a fundamental route to enhancing social mobility.

By targeting minors for recruitment, the Ministry of Defence is undermining decades of consistent government wide and cross party initiatives to encourage young people to stay in education until at least age 18. Actively targeting 16–18 year olds for recruitment encourages at-risk young people to leave education earlier than their peers and consequently fail to achieve the same basic standard of education, leaving them permanently disadvantaged in the labour market.

When challenged on its recruitment age policy, the Ministry of Defence has repeatedly claimed that it provides "challenging and constructive education, training and employment opportunities for young people equipping them with valuable and transferable skills".¹² However, this claim is not based on independent evidence. Since 2009 Ofsted has produced three reports on armed forces training, but these have all related to welfare and duty of care issues rather than the substance, quality and suitability of the educational curriculum on offer. There has been no specific review of these areas since the 2005 Adult Learning Inspectorate report into the ICT curriculum at the Army Foundation College Harrogate. As a result, there is no independent, objective evidence base on which the Ministry of Defence can claim that the education it provides to minors is of good quality.

¹² HC Deb, 27 April 2011, c417W.

Education for minors in the armed forces

Comprehensive data on education programs for minors in the armed forces are not publicly available. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence itself does not keep comprehensive records of the qualifications obtained by minors in the armed forces.¹³ This may be due in part to the fact that the Ministry of Defence does not treat minors (all those under the age of 18) as a discrete category and they do not all attend the same training centres or follow the same training programs. Instead, entry into the armed forces is divided between “Junior Entry” (for those aged 16 to 17 and a half) and “Standard Entry” (for age 17 and a half upwards). This makes the gathering of statistical data on minors more complex.

For this reason, this paper focuses exclusively on the educational program on offer at the army’s two “Junior Entry Colleges”. The army recruits far greater numbers of minors than the other two Services combined¹⁴ and the large majority of these (81 per cent) undertake Phase One training at either the Army Foundation College in Harrogate (AFC Harrogate) or the Army Technical Foundation College in Winchester (ATFC Winchester).¹⁵ The educational provision of these institutions therefore accounts for the experience of a large majority of minors in the armed forces as a whole.

Recruitment materials for AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester call them “specialist colleges for school-leavers” and the recruitment brochure is described as a “prospectus”.¹⁶ The brochure claims that recruits will have “the chance to continue and further your education” and gain “skills and qualifications which are transferable to civilian life”. The brochure emphasises that:

“The classroom lessons at the Army colleges help to prepare you for your future; both in the Army and beyond, if you decide to leave. Whatever educational level you are at [you] will come out of the course with qualifications, such as NVQs, that are recognised outside the Army, and will serve you well if you ever decide to enter the civilian job market.”

Notwithstanding the claims set out in the brochure, AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester do not provide young recruits with a range and level of qualifications equivalent to those which they might expect to attain in a mainstream school or college, and which would be directly transferable to civilian employment.

Moreover, the predominant focus on military training means that recruits spend “most of the course” learning basic military skills, including “weapon handling, fieldcraft, camouflage, survival...[how to] handle and shoot the SA80 rifle...drill...march and parade”. This does not provide them with skills which have a clear transferable value to any future civilian employment.

This is particularly the case for AFC Harrogate, which trains recruits specifically for entry into “combat oriented roles”¹⁷ in the Infantry, Royal Armoured Corps, Royal Artillery and some Royal Logistic Corps.¹⁸ Typical roles in these corps are listed as tank crewman, mounted trooper, gunner, radar operator, mortarman, and anti-tank missile operator. These skills, whilst clearly important for a combat related army career, have few, if any, civilian applications.

The academic curriculum at AFC Harrogate is extremely limited, incorporating only Level 1 Functional Skills in English and maths, and a Level 2 Diploma for IT users.¹⁹ It does not offer GCSEs, A-levels, BTECs, HNC

13 HC Deb, 7 June 2011, c7W.

14 *UK Armed Forces—Annual Manning Report 2010/ 2011: Table 7. UK Regular Forces intake by Service and age*, available at www.dasa.mod.uk. In the financial year 2010/2011, the RAF recruited 90 under-18s, the navy recruited 280, and the army recruited 2,400.

15 Between September 2010 and September 2011, 3,745 under-18s commenced Army Phase One training. Of these, 950 (25 per cent) attended ATFC Winchester and 2,114 (56 per cent) AFC Harrogate. See HC Deb, 8 December 2011, c427W and HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c12W.

16 See “Army Colleges” brochure available online at www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/ArmyJuniorE-LowRes.pdf.

17 See “Army Colleges” brochure available online at www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/ArmyJuniorE-LowRes.pdf.

18 The combat-focused nature of these roles is highlighted by the fact that the corps which Harrogate graduates enter have consistently had the highest death and injury rates throughout the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan – HC Deb, 6 December 2010, c2W. Recruits at ATFC Winchester are more likely to train for technical roles which will involve future “trade” training, such as engineering or electronics.

19 These levels are intended to be broadly equivalent to GCSE grade D-G and GCSE grade A*-C respectively, but see the Wolf Report’s assessment of true equivalence below.

or HND qualifications.²⁰ Despite the recruitment brochure's repeated reference to NVQs in the plural, the only NVQ qualification on offer is the IT diploma mentioned above.²¹ Over the 50 week period of the course at AFC Harrogate, recruits spend a total of just five and a half hours a week studying for these qualifications.²²

There is a high pass rate for the three basic courses undertaken by recruits. Of all recruits training at AFC Harrogate between September 2010 and August 2011, 97 per cent passed the Level 1 Literacy qualification and 87 per cent passed Level 1 Numeracy.²³ One hundred per cent of recruits successfully achieved the IT Diploma. However, this figure should be viewed in conjunction with the findings of the Adult Learning Inspectorate review of AFC Harrogate's ICT training program, which noted that some recruits were "not being sufficiently challenged" by the course and that "a significant minority are working at levels below their ability", consequently failing to achieve "their full academic potential".²⁴

Recruits who achieve Level 1 Functional Skills in English and maths during the course "have the additional opportunity" to study them at Level 2. However, between September 2010 and August 2011, just 52 per cent of AFC Harrogate recruits achieved Level 2 Literacy and 49 per cent Level 2 Numeracy.²⁵ Ministry of Defence data does not indicate whether this is because fewer recruits undertake Level 2 courses, or because pass rates are lower. In either case, the figures indicate that there is a lower level of institutional support for recruits embarking on Level 2 study.

Recruits on the (23 week) course at ATFC Winchester study only "functional skills in either [*sic*] numeracy or literacy, along with basic military training".²⁶ They do not undertake the Level 2 IT Diploma, or GCSE, AS level, A level, BTEC, HNC, HND or NVQ qualifications in any subject – the only nationally recognised qualifications studied are Functional Skills.²⁷

The pass rates for recruits undertaking literacy and numeracy courses at ATFC Winchester are very low. Between March and September 2011, the pass rates for recruits taking Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy qualifications were just 48 and 65 per cent respectively. For Level 2 the figures were even lower, with pass rates of 47 per cent for candidates enrolled in the Level 2 Numeracy courses, and just 10 per cent for those undertaking Level 2 Literacy.²⁸

The recruitment brochure emphasises the possibility and benefits of undertaking an "apprenticeship". It states that "all soldiers under training at Harrogate will gain an apprenticeship, as long as they reach the required skills level" and that "your apprenticeship will help set you up for your Army job, and will also be widely respected in the civilian world". It also claims that the apprenticeship programs provide "all kinds of nationally recognised qualifications such as NVQs" and "whether you complete an apprenticeship during your college course or not, you'll have the chance to get NVQs and other qualifications". However, the "apprenticeships" referred to here and elsewhere by the Ministry of Defence refer to the Functional Skills, IT diploma and specific military training mentioned above which, combined, are termed "an army apprenticeship". They are not apprenticeships in the commonly understood meaning of the term, i.e. transferable training leading to a nationally recognised professional qualification in, for example, mechanics, plumbing, carpentry or electronics. The Ministry of Defence has confirmed that vocational training in these areas is not on offer at AFC Harrogate.²⁹

At ATFC Winchester, recruits do not undertake any form of apprenticeship, but the recruitment brochure states that "almost all" ATFC Winchester recruits will do an apprenticeship later, when they pass on to their

"Notwithstanding the claims set out in its recruitment brochure, the army does not provide young recruits with a range and level of qualifications equivalent to those they might expect to attain in mainstream school or college"

20 HC Deb, 18 July 2011, c578W; HC Deb, 19 July 2011, c862W.

21 HC Deb, 30 November 2011, c977W.

22 HC Deb, 18 July 2011, c578W.

23 HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c13W.

24 Adult Learning Inspectorate, *Inspection Report – Army Foundation College*, 28 September 2005, paras.16, 40 and 41. This is the most recent inspection report for AFC Harrogate. There has never been an inspection of the curriculum at ATFC Winchester.

25 HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c13W.

26 HC Deb, 30 November 2011, c976W.

27 HC Deb, 30 November 2011, c966W.

28 HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c13W.

29 HC Deb, 13 September 2011, c1147W.

Phase Two training (undertaken elsewhere). The subject area, level and content of these apprenticeships is not specified, and it is not clear how much of it would be transferable to a non-military career.

The limited priority given to academic education at both AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester is also evident in the low ratio of teachers employed at each institution compared to military training staff. At AFC Harrogate, just 51 of the 379 staff involved in training junior soldiers have qualified teacher status (42 civilian teachers and nine military education and training Service officers). At ATFC Winchester, 150 members of staff are involved in training junior soldiers. Of these, just 3 are military education and training Service officers who are fully qualified teachers, and 4 are civilians who either have qualified teacher status “or are working towards it” (i.e. are as yet not professionally qualified to teach).³⁰

In light of the above, it is clear that the education and training on offer at AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester is predominantly focused on highly specialised military skills, with very limited study for academic or formal qualifications of any sort. This is perhaps not surprising given that, despite the name, both institutions are in fact Phase One army training centres, not sixth form colleges. The academic qualifications on offer are low level, limited in range, and with the exception of the IT Diploma and Level 1 qualifications at AFC Harrogate, have low pass rates.

30 HC Deb, 8 December 2011, c426W.

Recommended standards for vocational education

The purpose of the Wolf Report, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education and published in March 2011, was “to consider how we can improve vocational education for 14 – 19 year olds and thereby promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher level education and training routes”.³¹ The term “vocational education” was defined broadly for the purposes of the report, to incorporate the full range of educational pathways followed by young people in the age group.

The Wolf Report identified a number of areas in which vocational education was failing to provide young people with useful qualifications which would help them find employment or enter higher education, either immediately or in the long term. Amongst the problems identified, two concerns are of particular relevance to the educational curriculum for minors in the armed forces. These are:

- Curricula based around low level and poor quality qualifications which are not valued by employers and do not lead to further education, with insufficient focus on attaining minimum standards in the core subjects of English and maths.
- Early specialisation and occupational training which severely limit young people’s ability to change career path in future, and do not reflect the highly varied nature of youth employment trajectories.

Quality of qualifications

The Wolf Report identified one of the fundamental failings in the vocational education system to be the widespread use of qualifications which were not valued by employers and did not lead on to further levels of study. This was especially significant because formal qualifications are considered particularly important in the British labour market (compared with other countries where candidates’ experience or other skills are sometimes deemed more significant). For these reasons, the Report noted that it was essential for qualifications offered to teenagers post-16 “to be clearly and demonstrably valuable to and valued by employers”.³²

The 2011 government report, “Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A strategy for Social Mobility” echoed this finding. It noted that “Post-16 participation will only have a real impact if all students – regardless of their background and regardless of whether they are following academic or vocational courses – are working towards qualifications that have real, widely recognised value, opening the doors to higher learning and work”.³³

In this regard, the Wolf Report was adamant in its conclusion – reiterated throughout the report – that English and maths GCSEs were “of critical importance for employment”³⁴ as “key indicators of acceptable levels of attainment”.³⁵ In its response to the Wolf Report, the Department for Education recognised that the failure of the “most vulnerable” young people to achieve “critical” GCSE level qualifications “harms their prospects for progressing in education or training and finding a job”.³⁶ A report by Centre for Cities published in November 2011 further supported these findings, noting that there was a strong and obvious correlation between failure to attain GCSE maths and English at grades A* to C and high levels of youth unemployment.³⁷

The Wolf Report concluded that a GCSE at grade A* to C was the only adequate qualification in these subjects for all young people, regardless of future education and career plans. It argued that these qualifications “are fundamental to young people’s employment and education prospects”,³⁸ that it was “the duty of post-16

31 *The Wolf Report*, page 19.

32 *The Wolf Report*, page 70.

33 HM Government, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A strategy for Social Mobility*, April 2011, page 45.

34 *The Wolf Report*, page 32.

35 *The Wolf Report*, page 170.

36 Department for Education, *Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government Response*, page 7.

37 www.centreforcities.org, “Half of all young people in cities are not getting the grades in Maths and English GCSE to get them a job”. Accessed 1/12/2011.

38 *The Wolf Report*, page 8.

education to prioritise them”³⁹ and that no lower level or theoretically “equivalent” level qualification was adequate. In conclusion, one of the Report’s principal recommendations was that:

“Students who are under 19 and do not have GCSE A–C in English and/or Maths should be required, as part of their programme, to pursue a course which either leads directly to these qualifications, or which provide significant progress towards GCSE entry and success (...) Key Skills⁴⁰ should not be considered a suitable qualification in this context”.*⁴¹

Both the Wolf Report and the response by the Department for Education recognised that in a minority of cases young people who had not achieved GCSE English and maths Grade A*–C by age 16 might not be ready to retake their GCSE exams immediately, and would need to undertake other levels of study, such as “Functional Skills”, as a preparatory step. However, these alternative qualifications were only endorsed as a means of progressing towards GCSE qualifications, and not as an alternative to them.

As noted above, however, recruits at AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester only study English and maths at Functional Skills level – GCSEs are not included anywhere in the curriculum so there is no potential for progression. This could be resolved if recruits were required to study GCSE English and maths at later stages of training (i.e. in Phase Two). However, when questioned as to how many recruits undertook GCSE English and/or maths in Phase Two or subsequently, the Ministry of Defence was unable to provide any figures.⁴² As such information is not routinely recorded, it would appear that there is no systematic policy in place to ensure that all army recruits, and those enlisting under the age of 18 in particular, obtain GCSE English and maths qualifications. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence has stated that its aim is only for army personnel to achieve “at least Level 1” qualifications within three years of enlistment⁴³ – a target which, even if achieved, is significantly below the standards recommended by the Wolf Report.

In relation to voluntary study opportunities, it should also be noted that army personnel can only undertake additional courses of instruction (beyond compulsory training) if they agree to extend their minimum service period beyond the terms of their original enlistment agreement.⁴⁴ This additional service period is up to one year for a course of two weeks to three months duration, or up to six years additional service for a course lasting more than three months. As a result, recruits who want to take advantage of any academic courses on offer must choose between committing to up to six years’ additional service in the army (which would be equivalent to doubling the original minimum service period of a 16-year-old recruit) or refusing all additional educational courses. In the latter case recruits retain the right to leave service sooner, but when they leave the army they will be no better qualified than when they joined.

“Functional skills”, which were recently introduced to replace “Key skills”, were singled out for criticism by the Wolf Report. They were described as “conceptually incoherent”,⁴⁵ suffering from “major and fundamental flaws”,⁴⁶ “of highly variable standards”⁴⁷ and “certainly not in themselves an adequate ‘maths and English’ diet for the 16–19 cohort”.⁴⁸

The Functional Skills curriculum was so poorly assessed that Professor Wolf judged as “shocking” the practice of education institutions where students without English and maths GCSE A* to C are “channelled into, or required to take, key or functional skills” instead of being supported to re-sit the GCSE exams, a practice which served “to deny rather than promote the acquisition of good English and maths qualifications”.⁴⁹ Such criticism could equally apply to AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester.

The current academic curricula at AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester offer a bare minimum of qualifications at a very low standard. With the exception of the IT Diploma and Level 1 courses at AFC Harrogate, pass rates are extremely low. The institutions’ failure to provide recruits with the opportunity to gain GCSE qualifications

39 *The Wolf Report*, page 172.

40 Key Skills have recently been replaced by functional skills.

41 *The Wolf Report*, page 15.

42 HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c10W.

43 HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c10W.

44 The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, Regulation 15: *Return of service commitment*.

45 *The Wolf Report*, page 170.

46 *The Wolf Report*, page 170.

47 *The Wolf Report*, page 171.

48 *The Wolf Report*, page 84.

49 *The Wolf Report*, page 82.

in English and maths – which do not appear to be a compulsory part of subsequent stages of training – means that they cannot be assessed as complying with the recommendations of the Wolf Report. When questioned on the steps it would be taking to implement the Report’s recommendations, the Ministry of Defence responded only that it was “committed to the introduction of functional skills”.⁵⁰ There was no indication that the Ministry of Defence intended to improve educational provision to ensure young recruits’ progress from Functional Skills to GCSE qualifications.

On this basis, the assertion by the Ministry of Defence that it provides good educational opportunities to young recruits does not stand up to scrutiny. Young people in the armed forces, including specifically those with low educational attainment, have greatly reduced opportunities to achieve qualifications regarded as “fundamental” than they would have if they remained in mainstream education.

Transferable value

The second fundamental flaw with national vocational education programs as identified by the Wolf Report was excessive early specialisation of vocational curricula and the resulting lack of general, transferable knowledge and skills.

The Report identified the fact that “young people are very likely to change not just jobs but occupations in their first years of employment”⁵¹ and that young people who attain vocational qualifications in one field are very likely to end up working in a totally different area.⁵² For vocational education programs to be of value, therefore, they must be designed in a manner which “take[s] into account the very varied job histories which young people can expect to experience, even in the early years of their working lives”.⁵³ (This pattern of turnover is borne out by the high discharge rate of young people from the armed forces during the early years of their career – see below.)

“Army education is of little transferrable value to the civilian job market”

As a result, the Report found that “young people’s employment patterns imply a need for fairly general, rather than highly specific, vocational qualifications”.⁵⁴ The acquisition of general, transferrable skills and education was identified by the Report as essential in order to allow young people to progress into either continued employment or further education, in both the short term and throughout their lives. Even in relation to formal apprenticeship programs the Report recommended that apprentices should be predominantly engaged in learning “generalisable and transferrable skills”.⁵⁵ This finding was further supported by submissions to the Report from employers’ bodies and the Confederation of British Industry’s (CBI) which emphasised the need for general skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy.⁵⁶

The Department for Education recognised the importance of this principle, noting in its response to the Wolf Report that it was “vital” to ensure that education for 16–18 year olds:

“has the breadth, as well as the depth, to enable them to respond to changes in the jobs market and in their careers over their lifetime. The rapidly changing labour market and the fact that few 16 year olds know exactly what career they will be in at 22 means that learning up to 18 should provide breadth and keep options open alongside specialisation. We need to make sure that every 18 year old has followed a broad programme.”⁵⁷

For these reasons, another principle recommendation of the Wolf Report was that:

“16 – 19 year old students pursuing full time courses of study should not follow a programme which is entirely ‘occupational’ ... Their programmes should also include at least one qualification of substantial size (in terms of teaching time) which offers potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment”.⁵⁸

50 HC Deb, 12 Dec 2011, c470W.

51 *The Wolf Report*, page 36.

52 *The Wolf Report*, page 37.

53 *The Wolf Report*, page 43.

54 *The Wolf Report*, page 74.

55 *The Wolf Report*, page 122.

56 *The Wolf Report*, page 107.

57 Department for Education, *Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government Response*, p.6.

58 *The Wolf Report*, page 115.

In this respect, the Wolf Report explicitly distinguishes between the suitability of specialised training programs for adult versus teenage employees or apprentices. Specialised, job specific training which is necessary for adults in skilled trades to improve their productivity is not a suitable substitute for the general educational needs of minors, as it severely limits their future employment and education options. The Report noted that occupational specific training programs and qualifications:

*“may be appropriate for adults who are in employment or have made definitive decisions about their occupation and job of choice, [but they] should not be the main, let alone the only, type of vocational qualifications offered to 14 –19 year olds in education and training”.*⁵⁹

In conclusion, the Report argues that:

*“all young people should receive a high quality core education which equips them to progress, whether immediately or later, to a very wide range of further study, training and employment... **We have no business, as a society, placing 16 year olds...in tracks which they cannot leave**”.*⁶⁰ (Emphasis in original.)

What is true of vocational education in general is still more pertinent to military training, which is highly specialised and has no direct transferable value to civilian employment. The military skills which constitute “most of the course”⁶¹ at AFC Harrogate and ATFC Winchester – weapons handling, fieldcraft, shooting, etc – clearly have no direct civilian use. Consequently, this military training cannot be interpreted as providing “generalisable and transferable” skills. It is much too specialised to allow for future mobility between jobs, career sectors, or a return to education. When young recruits leave the armed forces, either dropping out of training or in their mid-twenties after a typical ten year career, their employment options are extremely limited if their training and education has been wholly or largely limited to military specific skills. This is a particular risk for the 46 per cent of minors who enlist into the infantry, which entails some of the most combat specific roles and training.⁶²

Judged against these criteria of the Wolf Report, the training offered to minors in the armed forces is inadequate. In contrast, young people who are supported to stay on in mainstream civilian education have the opportunity to undertake training with far greater transferable value. Consequently, they have better long term employment prospects.

⁵⁹ *The Wolf Report*, page 86.

⁶⁰ *The Wolf Report*, page 141.

⁶¹ See “Army Colleges” brochure available online at www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/ArmyJuniorE-LowRes.pdf

⁶² HC Deb, 10 January 2012, c12W.

Long term prospects

It is important to note that concerns about the future civilian employment prospects of minor recruits are far from hypothetical. Recruits who enlist as minors have an extremely high drop out rate from the armed forces and are therefore more likely than adults to need to find alternative civilian employment. In 2010/2011, 27 per cent of minors in initial armed forces training (Phase One and Phase Two) dropped out⁶³ and 36 per cent of all Early Service Leavers⁶⁴ that year had enlisted below the age of 18. Early Service Leavers are known to be at greater risk than longer serving armed forces personnel of experiencing serious difficulties transitioning to civilian life, including greater vulnerability to unemployment (as well as other forms of social exclusion such as homelessness, criminality, and substance misuse).⁶⁵ Ministry of Defence guidelines for resettlement staff recognise minors as a sub-group of Early Service Leavers at especially high risk of such exclusion.⁶⁶

For those who successfully complete initial training, the average length of service for infantry soldiers who enlisted below the age of 18 was 10 years.⁶⁷ Whilst this may seem like a lengthy period given young people's propensity to change job rapidly in their early years of employment, it means that most recruits who enlisted as minors will be seeking alternative civilian employment by the age of 26 or 27, with an entire working lifetime ahead of them. Good qualifications and transferable skills will be essential for their long term employment prospects.

These concerns about young recruits' prospects for successful transfer to civilian life are borne out by an investigation by the Royal British Legion in 2006. They found that the unemployment rate of 18 – 49 year-old ex-Service personnel was double the national unemployment rate for civilians in the same age group (see table below). Significantly, the study found that “lack of training, qualifications or skills is also more of a problem among this age group”.⁶⁸

Unemployment rates among adults of working age (men 16–64, women 16–59), by age:

| | Adult ex-Service Community (UK) Per cent | UK adults* Per cent |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------|
| All of working age | 6 | 5 |
| 16 – 17 | 14 [^] | 26 |
| 18 – 24 | 23 [^] | 12 |
| 25 – 34 | 8 | 4 |
| 35 – 49 | 6 | 3 |
| 50 – 64 (m) / 50 – 59 (f) | 2 | 3 |

Row percentages.

[^] N.B. Low base – treat with caution.

* Source for UK adults: LFS (Summer 2005, not seasonally adjusted).⁶⁹

63 HC Deb, 7 February 2011, c26W. This is a substantially higher drop-out rate than for adult personnel.

64 Early Service Leavers are armed forces personnel discharged within four years of enlisting or who have been compulsorily discharged.

65 Ministry of Defence, *Early Service Leavers: Guidance notes for resettlement Staff*, JSP 575 Issue No: 4. March 2010.

66 Ministry of Defence, *Early Service Leavers: Guidance notes for resettlement Staff*, JSP 575 Issue No: 4. March 2010.

67 HC Deb, 12 September 2011, c1007W.

68 Royal British Legion, *Profiles and Needs: Comparisons between the Ex-Service Community and the UK Population*, 2006. Section 4.9.

69 Royal British Legion, *Profiles and Needs: Comparisons between the Ex-Service Community and the UK Population*, 2006. Section 4.9.

“Most of those who joined at 16 will leave the army in their mid-twenties without the qualifications and training that most civilian employers require”

Conclusions

Ministry of Defence policy on recruitment of minors is at odds with national education policy, government strategies for enhancing social mobility, and standard international practice.

This report has highlighted the numerous gaps stemming from current UK policy on recruitment of minors in the armed forces, especially when it comes to provide them with education and skills for their long term employability. The minimum recruitment age no longer accurately reflects national school leaving age, and although the Ministry of Defence has long justified recruiting minors on the basis of the education and training opportunities it claims to provide, these provisions do not conform to the minimum standards expected for all young people as identified in the Wolf Report. The most effective and least resource intensive way for the Ministry of Defence to comply with overall government strategies on increasing participation in education, raising academic attainment, and enhancing social mobility for disadvantaged young people, would be to phase out the recruitment of minors.

“The MoD spends more than three times as much on training minors as it does for adults”

If recruited from age 18 and above, personnel leaving the armed forces (at any stage in their training or career) would be able to make an easier transition to civilian employment or education, as their options would no longer be limited by excessive early specialisation. Their military training and experience would act as an additional qualification, rather than a substitute for a full basic education (including essential minimum standards in English and maths). This should serve to reduce some of the post service welfare problems faced by many veterans and Early Service Leavers in particular.

Only recruiting candidates who had completed their basic education would reduce the resources expended on remedial skills training for armed forces recruits, thus freeing up time and financial resources for specialised military training. At present, the Ministry of Defence spends more than three times as much per minor undertaking Phase One training at AFC Harrogate as it does for adult recruits at the Army Training Centre Pirbright.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Ministry of Defence could take two and a half adult recruits through Phase One training at Pirbright for the cost of every one minor trained at ATFC Winchester.

As the Ministry of Defence has traditionally justified its minimum recruitment age on the grounds that it correlated with the minimum statutory school leaving age, it would be logical for this phasing out to occur simultaneously with the increase in compulsory education participation age from 16 to 18 phased in by 2015.

⁷⁰ HC Deb, 15 Dec 2011, c866W. Average expenditure per recruit (Junior Entry) on Phase One training at AFC Harrogate is £64,458 and £53,985 at ATFC Winchester. Average expenditure per recruit for Phase One Training Standard Entry (i.e. for adult recruits) is £21,318 at the Army Training Centre Pirbright, £26,992 at the Army Training Regiment Bassingbourn and £26,543 at the Infantry Training Centre Catterick.

CHILD SOLDIERS

INTERNATIONAL