

## CHAPTER 6

# The Universities and the University Armed Service Units

In this chapter, we draw on interviews with representatives from universities to explore university perceptions of the value of the USUs. The analysis is also informed by observations from our interviews with COs about the USU-university relationship, and draws also on the research team's collective and considerable experience of working in higher education and engaging with issues around the USU-university nexus. Further details of the methodology used are given in Chapter 2. Note that in this element of the research, the intention was to generate indicative rather than comprehensive data, hence the small sample of interviewees.

### 6.1 Knowledge of the university armed service units within universities

It was apparent from the start of the research which underpins this book that levels of knowledge about the USUs vary enormously across the higher education sector. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the reach of the USUs is uneven across the sector; although roughly three quarters of all the member institutions of Universities UK have students participating in units, the proportions from each institution vary. We have also noted the very small size of the total USU population in relation to the overall UK student population. As this chapter will show, levels of understanding about USUs can be very low indeed within the sector,

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and it is important to note at the outset that it is to the credit our interviewees working in senior administrative posts within institutions that they were able to grasp very clearly the issues pertaining to student unit participation, despite professing to have very little knowledge about the units at the outset.

We approached five institutions in a region where we knew students participated in all three service units, asking the academic registrar or equivalent for an interview to discuss issues around USU-university relationship. Academic registrars were approached because these individuals tend to have institutional responsibility for administration and oversight of student services, teaching quality, student progress and careers. Their roles often include a lot more than this, but given the evidence that had emerged from the student survey and the graduate interviews about the value of the USU experience, particularly for transferable skills and employability, we were interested in whether those responsible for these aspects of university education within institutions were alert to these issues. Alternative interviewees could also have included Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans or an equivalent with senior responsibility for strategic direction of student employability and skills agendas. However, we considered academic registrars to be better placed because of their to-day-to-day working knowledge of the ways in which various aspects of the student-orientated administrative services work together (or otherwise) within an institution. We deliberately chose not to interview representatives from MECs because we wanted to get a sense of baseline levels of knowledge in institutions from those in senior administrative positions.

Five academic registrars or equivalent were approached for an interview. One declined our request. This individual stated that he was not aware of his institution's engagement with the armed forces, let alone the USUs, and felt he would not be able to comment at all on the value of the USUs. This was despite the presence of students from this particular university participating in two of the service units, and representation from that university on the local MEC. Four others agreed to interview, although in one case we had to convince the individual concerned that there might be value in research terms to their participation, despite this individual's concerns that they knew very little about the USUs.

This concern about lack of knowledge came through in all the interviews; one respondent said at the outset that 'as far as I am aware, [our university] doesn't have [a unit], and if we do it isn't anything to do with me'. Another was aware of the units from a previous job at a different university in the region, but had not realised that the same unit drew from different universities across the region. This individual had made an effort, prior to the interview, to find out a bit about her current university's role and relationship with the local units, but found little information available. The third interviewee was aware of the units because in a previous role in marketing and student recruitment that university had used information about the units for marketing purposes. The fourth interviewee had been aware of the OTC because of a discussion in their

administrative department about representation on an MEC, but had not been aware of the UAS or URNU. None of our interviewees had had USU experience themselves at university, although one had a close relative who had been in the OTC as a student so knew something about the units from that, and one mentioned having been vaguely aware of the OTC whilst themselves a student, because of a friend's involvement.

## 6.2 University armed service units-university communication and liaison

All the individuals we interviewed worked in universities that we knew were represented on the regional MEC. As we have already noted (see Chapter 1), MECs constitute the formal mechanism for managing the USU-university relationship, and many exist under university statute. It is very unusual for universities to make commitments to USUs or provide support beyond the structures of the MEC. Interviewees all said that they were vaguely aware of their MEC, but had no direct experience of seeing it mentioned in any of the administrative committees on which they sat; we gained a sense that the links between MECs and the university administration were not particularly visible.

Given this, it was instructive to assess the points at which central university administration had awareness of the USUs. Because the universities in question were all represented on an MEC, in theory those representatives had a role in reporting back from that MEC and liaising as required over specific issues arising from MEC discussions. In practice, this was not so simple. One registrar was quite frank about the lack of feedback received from their MEC, and thus their own lack of information about how this reporting relationship worked, noting that 'if anyone were to [provide feedback], I would have thought it would have been to me, so I just wonder whether it is particularly well linked in'.

There was uncertainty about what MECs actually did, and thus what information feedback or liaison requirements might actually contribute, and in turn what action or response a university might offer, and from which part of the administration. Although Vice Chancellors and other very senior academic staff with strategic responsibilities were often formally members of an MEC, in practice it was recognised that they did not attend meetings (not least because of time commitments). Note that this might not be the case in all institutions and MECs, and we know of instances (particularly in smaller institutions) where very senior academic staff are active members of their local MEC and are thus able to bring to their university at an executive level any insights or action points developed at MEC level. Given that universities were represented on MECs by named individuals, there were questions about why particular individuals might be nominated for this task. The point was raised by respondents that those who represented the university might be selected to do so on the basis of their military knowledge and engagement (and indeed

availability), rather than because their institutional responsibilities or positioning within administrative structures are such that they would be well placed as a conduit for communications within that structure. It was also the case that a number of individuals within a university administration, with different areas of responsibility, might all have remits which touched upon issues raised at MECs about the USUs. So, for example, the individual responsible for liaising with students over Freshers' Fairs and similar events might work in a different part of the administration to those with responsibility for the student careers service. Similarly, those with responsibility for the development of the value-added schemes that many universities are using to provide recognition for student extracurricular activities (usually for employability purposes) may work quite separately to those responsible for the development of graduate and transferable skills within degree programmes.

One respondent noted how she had often been a little ambivalent about the MEC, about 'what it actually was doing [...] to some extent it was just showing solidarity as much as anything else'. There might have been instances where negotiations around individual student issues were discussed (for example, facilitating student management of competing commitments around assessments and USU activities), but this respondent considered that the key function of the MEC was the maintenance of high-level relationships between the university and the armed forces. This is an illuminating observation, because one of the original purposes of MECs was to provide a liaison and assistance function through which students' academic and military commitments (including military commitments which were compulsory) could be managed. From discussion with respondents (and certainly in our own experience<sup>66</sup>), this practical function of MECs seems quite minimal under current university administrative arrangements for student progression and pastoral care, perhaps even negligible.

If the utility of MECs is indeed in the development and maintenance of a high-level relationship, the seniority and area of responsibility for university representatives is important. It was clear from other discussions that where MEC representation was provided by senior management, this certainly gave the impression of enhancing the flow of information between the units and university. Equally, we heard of MEC representation by individuals (both academics and administrative staff) who clearly were very proactive within their own institutions in terms of disseminating information about USUs and (quite crucially) taking forward initiatives around military-university relations for consideration at their universities at senior levels. It is not, therefore, just a question of seniority, but rather about a combination of area of responsibility coupled with proactivity in establishing communications and the flow of information into a university at the appropriate level. Equally, we heard criticisms of

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<sup>66</sup> Two of the authors of this book have served on their local Military Education Committee, both for two three-year terms.

MECs as quasi-social clubs with little power and responsibility (or enthusiasm and drive) to use their role to develop military-university relationships, and where university representation was dominated by individuals quite distant from key university administrative and academic structures.

### 6.3 Perceptions of the value of university armed service units to students

#### 6.3.1 *Skills*

It was clear from discussions with the registrars that they could see value in USU participation to the students attending from their university. The list of factors providing value mirrored very closely that provided by students themselves, and by graduates (note that these interviewees had not been briefed on the research findings prior to interview). Factors included the skills students developed to enhance their employability, particularly skills transferable to the workplace and notable on a CV such as time management, team-working, adaptability and negotiation skills. Personal development, resilience and independence were also mentioned. The USUs were seen as providing friendship, fun and social opportunities, a sense of camaraderie and opportunities for travel. Getting paid for participation was noted as useful in a context of high student fees and levels of student debt. It was noted by one interviewee that there was a direct correspondence between the skills the university wished to inculcate in its students, and those developed through the USU experience.

When asked to consider why students might join a unit, the skills development component was seen as key, particularly in the development of skills which might not be an explicit part of a degree programme, or which could be developed in a different way to those developed on a degree programme. The point was made, for example, that the practice of leadership in a peer group of students might be different to that practiced in a military context.

The type of skills developed in a USU might be slightly different to those developed on a degree programme; for example, as well as opportunities for leadership development, there may be opportunities for developing self-confidence and facing challenges that would not occur on a degree programme. There might be opportunities in a military context to be more assertive about achievements than in an academic context. But the point was also made that some skills, such as self-reliance, making judgements, being decisive, organising and planning, and understanding a bigger picture, would also be developed through other extracurricular activities, and that an individual student would not have to join a USU to have the opportunity to develop those skills, which could be achievable through other means. Students organised many activities themselves: one interviewee noted how in their university there was active encouragement by the university for students to do so, and

thus for students to have insight into how organisation, team-working and leadership skills developed through clubs and societies could be instrumental in skills development.

As to whether the skills a student developed through their USU experience might help a student with their degree programme, the consensus from our interviewees was that it probably did, but that this would be very hard to quantify. Skills might be applied in different contexts in a degree programme, although some skills were seen as having direct application. Primarily, students had to be able to manage their experience and generate their own motivation. There was always the risk that USU or other activities could provide a distraction. The USU experience was seen as possibly, but probably not directly, of help to a student in terms of progression through their degree programme.

The appeal of the experience to students who might wish to pursue a career in the armed forces was also noted. One interviewee noted that the type of experience offered by a USU might be more appealing to a particular model of student (that is, a direct entrant from school, attending university away from home), and that it would not therefore appeal across a diverse student body, particularly to mature students.

### 6.3.2. *Employability*

Our respondents were asked whether they thought USU participation made students more employable. Responses indicated that whilst it was hoped that this would be the case, it was the responsibility of the students to make that link and case. Careers services were significant in this regard, and there was discussion about how difficult students sometimes find the task of articulating the applicability of skills to employment situations, whatever the points of origin of those skills. The USU experience certainly might give a student more to talk about at interview or mention on a CV, but the student would have to be able to articulate the value of that experience. The USU experience might show greater life experience which might be seen as enhancing their employability, but again, there were many things that students did which showed this. Indeed, the USU experience was comparable to any other student activity which enhanced employability: the onus was on the student to make the case for the skills developed to have application in an employment context. It probably helped with employability (including the transition to the workplace through familiarity with structure, hierarchy and organisational norms), like many other activities.

### 6.3.3. *Students and Reserves deployment*

We discussed the issues around the deployment of students as reservists. This was a hypothetical discussion as students are Category B reservists and are not eligible for deployment. We are not aware of any plans within the MoD or

armed forces to change this. However, it was a pertinent question to ask, given the fact that the question had been raised as part of wider debates about the expansion of the Reserves, and the fact that OTR training produces officers capable of commissioning into the Army Reserve.

The deployment of students as reservists was, it was thought, potentially possible but in practice very problematic. Students are usually expected to progress through their degree programme in regular stages. Exceptions are students who go on placement elsewhere (usually for a year) as part of their degree programme, and students who have to suspend their studies for medical or personal reasons. These interruptions can be managed administratively, but are recognised as presenting challenges for students. These challenges were seen as applicable in the hypothetical case of student Reserves deployment, compounded by specific factors around military deployment. The timing and duration of a deployment could mean suspension of studies for one or two whole years; the nature of degree programmes is such that learning is sequential, structured by progression through terms, semesters and academic years, and it is virtually impossible for students to drop out and then back in to degree programmes apart from at specific points in that programme. There might be financial implications on return if a student was unable to return directly to university and resume their studies. There may be practical effects in terms of housing. There may be emotional effects in terms of the disruption to peer support networks, quite apart from any emotional effects incurred by the deployment itself. Degree programmes can, and do, change over time, and this could affect a student returner. The consensus was that although in theory deployment with the Reserves could be managed, in practice it would not be in the best interests of students to deploy because of the dislocations which would follow. It would not be impossible, but would certainly be both educationally disruptive and expensive.

#### **6.4 The benefits to universities of the university armed service units**

We posed the question to our interviewees about the value their university might get from having the link to the USUs. The value was seen to be primarily to the students, and even those interviewees who considered that they had no knowledge of the units articulated very clearly how, in their view, students might benefit from USU participation, and thus how an institution would in turn benefit by facilitating this for students. The enhanced employability of that institution's graduates, particularly through the development of the transferable skills outlined above, were key here: the employability of graduates is one measure by which universities are evaluated (particularly by prospective students using Key Information Sets to decide which universities to apply to), and so where the USU experience was complimentary to the university's mission,

then this would be valuable to that university, by definition. The idea was also explored around the fact that engagement with USUs might be seen as part of a university's civic engagement role.

Two further issues were raised by interviewees. The first concerned the question of how a university might be perceived in terms of its promotion of the USUs, for example in its prospectus or web-based marketing literature. The individuals who raised this point were adamant that although the university could and should provide information on opportunities available to students, which would include USUs, they had to avoid being perceived to be promoting specific activities, and particularly if such promotion was seen to be preferential. Essentially, the work of the university was to provide opportunities and information on those opportunities available at that institution, and leave it to students to decide whether or not to take up those activities.

The second issue raised concerned the question of the sensitivity around military-university links. Respondents had differing views on this, reflecting their understandings of their recruitment markets, particularly internationally. For one university, it was thought that there might be issues for international students from countries and contexts with very different attitudes towards military forces, and that it might not be a 'smart selling point' if the university were to portray itself as having strong military ties. In another (very different) university, the perception was that promotion of such links was less of an issue and there had been no issues with international student recruitment at that university (the institution in question had a long tradition of USU presence). In the words of that university representative, 'it's not come to my attention in any way, which suggests it's not problematic in any way at all'. At that university, in any case, the provision of information about USU opportunities was seen as being the responsibility of student organisations rather than the university, which focused its marketing on the academic opportunities available.

Respondents were also asked about the value to the USUs of their relationship with the university. This was seen as lying primarily with the access to students and thus USU recruits that the USU-university relationship facilitated, and that in turn this might provide a source of high-calibre graduates for entry into the armed forces. One respondent discussed how the Army, in particular, had a good relationship with the careers advisory service in that university and would ultimately benefit from the careers development work that the university conducted with its students. Given the social diversity of many universities, the recruitment to USUs and possibly the armed forces from this diverse pool was also thought to be of benefit. Beyond the interviews, we also learned of instances where the value of the USU to the university was either recognised and had practical expression (for example, through the provision of secretarial support for a unit, paid for by that unit but provided and supported through the university), or appeared not to be recognised (for example through reluctance of central university administration and senior academic management to provide support for the local MEC).

Finally, the point was made that there may be value to both USUs and to universities in terms of the links which the relationship could develop in terms of academic research. This echoed a point also raised by the COs. What was absent from any comments by our interviewees was an indication of awareness of existing involvement by the armed forces in occasional staff or student learning activities. COs had mentioned this, and we were aware of such events taking place in at least three of the universities whose representatives we spoke to. Respondents, however, did not raise the topic, suggesting a lack of awareness of such activities.

## 6.5 Conclusions: the value of the university armed service units to universities

In conclusion there are two points to make about the value of the USUs to the universities. The first is to note the lack of knowledge and understanding about the USUs within universities. Although we did not survey academic staff in order to assess this in a rigorous fashion (although such an exercise would not be difficult to undertake), we know from experience and anecdotal evidence that knowledge levels are low, or that knowledge is potentially quite inaccurate. That said, we also know of countless instances where student participants themselves have, in effect, worked as ambassadors for the USUs and the opportunities they offer through student contact with academic staff. The knowledge base is also uneven within university administrative structures, and at the highest levels of senior management. What seems evident to us is that institutional attitudes towards the USUs, which are properly the concern of individual universities, seem in some cases poorly informed about the nature of the USUs. This, we suggest, is not particularly unusual across the sector.

The second point to make is about the most appropriate mechanisms for developing informed debate and decision-making about USUs within universities. We have already noted the role of MECs as a conduit for information and a mechanism for developing university-USU links. At best (and we have come across many examples of this), MECs can provide a forum for the exchange of information and the development of initiatives, particularly where university and USU objectives are clearly aligned, such as around the employability agenda. Through appropriate individuals, a conduit can exist for the flow of information to appropriate points within university administrative systems and senior management levels, and this can help with specific initiatives. At worst, MECs can exist in a bubble beyond the purview of central university administration, with little or no discernible effect or value. The decision on how best to use MECs is one for senior university management. We would suggest, on the basis of evidence collected through this research, that some universities may be missing significant opportunities to make the most of their MECs. That said, our strong sense from the interviews conducted with individuals who were

concerned that they knew little or nothing about the USUs, was that they could quite readily imagine what those opportunities might be. Above all else, they indicated that they had no difficulties in imagining what the value of the USU experience might be to students, and to the university, within the parameters outlined above.