

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions: the Value of the University Armed Service Units

This concluding chapter turns to the wider issues raised by the empirical data provided in the preceding chapters, flagging them up for wider debate and discussion. These issues are as follows: the reach and representation of the USUs across the higher education sector; equalities issues, political debate and access to information about the USUs; the comparability of USU and other extracurricular student activities; the USUs and recruitment to the UK armed forces; knowledge of the USUs within the higher education sector; knowledge of USUs amongst employers and reflections on researching the USUs.

7.1 The reach of the university armed service units across higher education

It was noted in Chapter 1 and at various points in the presentation of empirical data in subsequent chapters, that the USUs as a whole have good levels of reach across the higher education sector. By this, we mean that access to USU activities is potentially available to students attending the majority of the UK's universities. This is evident, for example, in the lists of participating universities contributing formally to each of the service units (see section 1.2) and the representation in practice indicated by the presence of respondents to our survey (see Appendix 5). However, this reach is very uneven in that some units have a far higher number of students from some universities than others in the same catchment area. We

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have also noted the dominance in representation amongst students from Russell Group universities, and have suggested that in turn this reflects two issues. The first is the patterns of basing and university association, many of which are of very long standing: for some students, it is simply easier in practical terms to attend a USU, and those tend to be Russell Group university students because of these basing patterns. The second is the differential access to information about the USUs across universities, reflecting both recruitment efforts by the units and the extent to which individual units may or may not be enabled to recruit in particular universities (and we return to this below).

In terms of the uneven reach of USUs, it became apparent during the course of this research that there may be wider issues that follow from this, including questions about the effects of unequal access to USU participation on the make-up of the units and thus the USU experience for those participating, and a question about the limited diversity (particularly social diversity) of USUs because of this. Put simply, we would raise the question as to whether USU participation is an elite activity, and if it is, whether that is acceptable to universities, the armed forces and the student body. We should also note that the remit for the research underpinning this book did not include the requirement to adjudicate on the level and geographical spread of USU provision, and USU reach across the sector. Nonetheless, it would appear that the uneven reach of USUs is not just a question of availability or otherwise of the experience to the student population, but is also a question about the reasons for and possible mechanisms to address this issue of uneven reach. Also pertinent to note here is the fact that whilst the higher education sector in the UK has expanded and diversified over the past two decades, levels of USU provision have remained broadly static.

7.2 Equalities, politics and access to information about university armed service units

The mechanisms which USUs use for recruitment amongst the student body, the utility of particular recruitment strategies such as Freshers' Fairs and similar, and the politics of USU recruitment on campus have all been noted in this book. The presence or absence of a USU recruitment stall at Student Union events is, of course, a matter entirely for Student Unions. Student Unions may wish to avoid USU representation as part of a wider move to disassociate that union and student body from military organisations or phenomena, in turn as part of a wider political critique of militarism and militarisation. In doing so, however, they may be denying their members access to the resources provided by USUs. These may be resources to which students may not otherwise have access, such as adventurous training or experience of leadership training. We have also noted how different groups have differential access to information about the USUs pre-university and on arrival. Those with knowledge of USUs

have a choice of participation. Those without that knowledge are denied the choice, and thus access to the resources that USUs provide.

There are, however, two wider issues to which this limit to student access to information speaks. The first, following an established liberal feminist argument about the causes and perpetuation of gender inequalities, is that restrictions on access to information are more likely to impact on the proportion of women joining USUs than men, given that women are more likely to arrive at university without prior knowledge of the units, and are therefore more likely to be reliant on events such as Freshers' Fairs for information about those units. The restriction of recruitment opportunities may, quite simply, have a disproportionate effect on women as a group, and in turn help to perpetuate existing gender inequalities within the British armed forces.⁶⁷ We recognise of course that the question of gender and military participation is a complex one. We would also argue, however, that issues around women's military participation are an essential component of broader debates about what, exactly, civil society wants its armed forces to be, and do.⁶⁸ The participation of women in USUs is part of that debate. These arguments could also be made about social class.

The second issue to note here concerns the politics of militarism and militarisation on campus. We should note here our arguments made elsewhere about the necessity of engagement with military organisations in order to develop informed critique of the more abstract issue of militarism, militarisation, its causes and its consequences.⁶⁹ As researchers and lecturers working in the field of critical military studies, we are adamant both that the question of the military presence, via USUs on campus, is an appropriate focus for student political debate, and also that this debate needs to be an informed one, structured around evidence and observation rather than supposition and speculation. Exposure to USUs, what they do and what they might represent, would seem to us to be necessary as a means of developing a more informed political debate about military-university links.

7.3 The comparability of university armed service units and other extracurricular student activities

As should be clear from the empirical detail provided in this book, students, graduates and unit COs share the view that the USU experience provides for

⁶⁷ For an overview of the politics of gender and the contemporary British Army, see: **Woodward, R.** and **Winter, T.** (2007). *Sexing the Soldier*. London: Routledge; **Woodward, R.** and **Duncanson, C.** Gender divisions of labour in the contemporary UK armed forces. *New Strategist*. (in press).

⁶⁸ See **Duncanson, C.** and **Woodward, R.** Regendering the military: theorising women's military participation. *Security Dialogue* (in press).

⁶⁹ See **Rech, M. F., Bos, D., Jenkins, K. N., Williams, A.** and **Woodward, R.** (2015). Geography, military geography and critical military studies. *Critical Military Studies*, 1 (1), 47–60.

students both opportunities to undertake specific activities, and a context in which these activities can be used to develop transferable skills which may enhance student employability. We have also noted at a number of points that the USUs are not the only student activity which may facilitate this. This research did not set out to compare the USU experience against other activities in terms of the generation of skills and employability or of levels of student enthusiasm and enjoyment. We would note that this remains an open question at this point in time. Establishing a methodology rigorous enough to capture reliable data on student comparisons between activities would be challenging, not least because of the enormous range of student activities for potential comparison and the difficulties of determining which of these would be appropriate comparators.

However, we would also note the distinctiveness and specificity of the USU experience as a student extracurricular activity. Part of this lies with the range of activities undertaken, from military and adventurous training through to sporting and social activities, and thus the range of potential skills development opportunities that this then provides. Part of this also lies in the combination of those activities, such as the organisation and planning required to initiate a particular adventurous training activity, which in turn may be physically testing, mentally challenging and require significant team interaction. The distinctiveness of the USU experience seems evident.

The military context for USUs is significant here, in terms of the specificity of certain types of skills development, particularly leadership. We have noted throughout this book the emphasis which is placed on the USU experience for leadership development, something widely recognised by student participants. Understandings of what leadership might constitute are significant here. Implicitly framing some discussions of leadership was the idea that conceptualisations of leadership in both military and corporate employment contexts are one and the same, hence the transferability of leadership skills between the two. It is pertinent to note, however, that this is just one of many ways of understanding leadership which reflects a specific understanding of hierarchy and power structures within an organisation. Drilling down to explore exactly what leadership might constitute in different working environments, and how this may or may not correlate with military conceptualisations of leadership, was beyond the scope of this research. However, given the significance of the idea of leadership as a transferable skill developed through USU experience, its presence in graduate skills frameworks, the emphasis on it in employment contexts, and yet the existence of different models for understanding what it is and how it works, this would suggest that closer consideration of leadership as a transferable skill would be valuable. In turn, the comparability of models of leadership development in different student activities may be informative to discussions about the specificity or otherwise of the USU experience for students.

7.4 The university armed service units and recruitment to the UK armed forces

The USUs serve an important recruitment function for the UK armed forces, both Regulars and Reserves. The degree to which the service units emphasise this varies between them, and has also varied over time. We were able to assess the significance of the USU experience in shaping student decisions about whether or not to join the armed forces, either Regular or Reserve. This research deliberately did not attempt to assess the views of those who pursued a full-time career with the armed forces about the utility of a USU experience, and we would flag this up as an area of possible future research which may be of interest to the armed forces, and in particular to those charged with officer training. What we were able to assess was the significance of the USU experience in terms of recruitment to the Reserves, and we note the strong relationship here. We have two observations to emphasise here, noting that we do so because of the significance of the Reserves to current debates on the future structure and composition of, in particular, the British Army.

The first follows from discussions with graduates about why, despite having considered the possibility, individuals did not ultimately pursue participation with the Reserves following graduation. This is partly because the idea simply slipped down an individual's list of priorities. It is also partly because of the challenges of combining Reserves participation with employment. Reserves participation requires time commitment. It also rests on a certain amount of locational stability. It is recognised that in the first two to three years after leaving university, graduates may be busy negotiating the challenges of finding and performing a job, moving location, engaging in new social and personal relationships and exploring new leisure activities. It is a time of enormous change. It may not be an appropriate time to consider, in addition to all these challenges, participation in the Reserves, however much an individual may have enjoyed USU participation and might wish to take it forward to the Reserves. It could be suggested that the responsibility for retaining and pursuing an interest in the Reserves, for those inspired to do so by their USU activities, rests solely with the individual and it is their responsibility to initiate Reserves participation when they are ready to do so following transitions from university. Conversely, we would argue that significant responsibility here rests with the armed forces themselves. The mechanisms for maintaining contact and encouraging interest may be varied, and marketing and relationship maintenance strategies may need to be handled carefully. There is some evidence that strategies for keeping potential Reservists 'warm' and in contact are being pursued in the present. Our point here is to note the significance of former USU participants as a potential recruitment pool for the Reserves, and thus part of the potential value of the USUs for the armed forces.

The second observation here is about the direct recruitment of reservists from amongst the student body. We are neither advocating nor cautioning against the targeting of students for Reserves recruitment. This is properly an issue for the armed forces and for students as individuals, capable as adults of making an informed decision about their military participation. What we would note, however, is the care with which recruitment on campus needs to be planned and managed in view of potential central university and Student Union concerns about military engagement with the student body. The challenges of operational deployment aside, it is clear that student participation in the Reserves (as opposed to USUs) can be undertaken and can be relatively unproblematic if academic and military commitments can be coordinated. Following the completion of our data collection, we were provided with evidence of one university that had set up a Reserves troop for student members, and we ourselves have on occasion taught serving reservists. We suggest that the real challenge for the armed forces lies in managing engagement with this potential pool of recruits.

7.5 Knowledge of the university armed service units within the higher education sector

We have noted at various points in this book the presence and absence of knowledge and understanding of USUs within the higher education sector. This seems to us to be a significant issue, given what we have already noted about the utility of the USU experience to students who wish to participate for degree progression, the potential correspondence between university objectives for graduate employability and the value of the USU experience in assisting individuals to develop this, and our point about the necessity for debates about the military-university relationship to be informed by evidence and observation rather than by supposition and speculation.

In terms of levels of knowledge of USUs amongst academic staff, we would suggest that, were USUs or universities keen for greater levels of knowledge and awareness in this group, then student advocacy would be the best means to achieve this. This is partly because of the sheer quantity of information which is passed down to academic staff on a daily basis through university hierarchies, and the efficient mechanisms most academics use for very quickly filtering out information which they feel is of no direct relevance to them through the use of the 'delete' button on email systems and the paper recycling bin. Students are the best advocates because it is through personal contact that the communication of student experience is best achieved. Any academic who has had tutorial or pastoral responsibilities and who talks to their students will recognise this. This is quite apart from the opportunities which many students have (and take) on some degree programmes where USU experience might be included as a legitimate discussion point in an educational context, such as a tutorial,

seminar or lecture. We would suggest therefore, that if low levels of knowledge about USUs are thought to be problematic, that student participants have a distinct and valuable role to play in disseminating wider information in an informal way in educational contexts.

In terms of levels of knowledge of USUs within universities central administrations, and at the senior executive level, we note both the great range of levels of this and the role of MECs in facilitating this. We note also the issue of MEC membership and university representation on MECs as significant to both the flow of factual information and the development of initiatives involving USU and university collaboration. The decision on whether to engage with USUs, and how to do so, is one for senior university management. Such decisions need to be made on the basis of available information (and this book may be one such source). We note also the role pro-active individuals can (and quite evidently do) play in both providing information and developing relationships such that senior university management can take an informed view of the utility or otherwise of the USUs to their university. We note that this takes time, that it has to happen over periods of time, and that this may pose issues because of continuity and change within unit leadership, MEC membership and changing responsibilities and job remits within universities. Although it may be the responsibility of the service units to initiate and maintain knowledge dissemination across universities, it is certainly the responsibility of universities to have awareness of the USUs, given their responsibilities and duty of care towards students.

7.6 Knowledge of university armed service units amongst employers

We have noted in this book student and graduate perceptions of the levels of employer knowledge and understanding of USUs, the transferable skills which USU participation may or may not develop in individuals and the utility of those skills for student employability. We have also noted in passing the point that some employers in some sectors may be more or less favourably inclined towards evidence of employee experience derived from USU participation. We note that this reflects a much bigger and more abstract debate about civil-military relations, attitudes towards defence and military activities and attitudes towards the armed forces, much of which is beyond our scope for discussion here.

Responsibility for communicating the value of the USU experience in terms of employability rests with individual employees, as we have seen. There is an additional point to make here, however, about the responsibility that lies with the armed forces themselves for communicating the transferability of skills derived in military contexts. This is something to which attention is being given in defence circles, as a matter of policy and practice (for example,

through the work of the organisation SaBRE⁷⁰), as a matter for direct intervention (for example, through the work of third sector and private recruitment companies specialising in support of ex-forces employees in the civilian labour market, or the brokering of employment for ex-forces employees) and as a matter of communication more generally. On the evidence presented in this book, it would appear that the transmission of information about the potential utility of USU-derived skills may be part of that bigger picture of communication. Although there is no direct link between skills developed through USU participation and skills developed through full military participation, it may be that emergent activities around communication about the latter within the labour market may assist in the communication of the former. We would also note that examples of good practice already exist at the level of some MECs and individuals in developing their own strategies for communication about value of USU-derived skills to employers and businesses in their locality. There may be further research to be done to establish an evidence base around such practices.

7.7 Researching the university armed service units

As was noted in the acknowledgements and in Chapter 1, whilst the research underpinning this book was conducted independently from the MoD and armed forces in that it was funded by the ESRC and conducted solely by academics working within higher education, that research benefitted considerably from communication and liaison with individuals and groups working across the defence community.

We draw two key learning points from the experience of doing this research. As we note elsewhere, we are strong advocates of the necessity for military research, particularly research identifying as ‘critical’ in social science terms, to engage directly with the organisations and institutions which are the focus of empirical exploration, practical critique and critical conceptualisation.⁷¹ Our view on this is shaped also by our knowledge from across the social sciences, arts and humanities, about how and why academics might engage with the military, and what this might facilitate in academic research and writing.⁷² Our experience of researching the USUs has reinforced this view on the necessity for researchers of military phenomena to engage directly with military personnel and institutions, particularly where the intention is informed critique.

⁷⁰ Further details about SaBRE are available at: <http://www.sabre.mod.uk/>

⁷¹ See **Rech M. F., Bos D., Jenkins K. N., Williams A. J. and Woodward R.** (2015). Geography, military geography and critical military studies. *Critical Military Studies*, 1 (1), 47–60.

⁷² See **Williams, J., Jenkins, K. N., Rech, M. and Woodward, R.** (Eds.). (2016). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Military Research Methods*. London: Ashgate.

Second, and following from this, we note that the relationship between academic researchers and their respondents is a two-way street. We are very aware that our research respondents, and a wider group of people within the armed forces and with whom we have discussed the research, have in turn had critical and challenging questions to pose of us and our conceptualisation of the phenomenon under investigation, just as we have had of them and theirs. Furthermore, we are also very aware that the process of conducting this research, particularly the element involving interviews and conversations with serving members of the armed forces, has gone on to provoke debates and exchanges quite separate from the research. Research participants are never passive respondents; the process of engaging in interactional research involving interviews is widely recognised as both productive of analytic insights on data as well as the data itself, and provocative of further thought, commentary and action about the phenomenon under investigation on the part of the research participant. So it has been with this research. We have no way of knowing what the likely effects of this process of interaction might have been, or may be in the future. We hope, however, that the research process itself and any researcher effects in turn have some value in ongoing debates about the value of the USUs.