National Audit Office

BRIEFING FOR THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS
DEFENCE COMMITTEE

APRIL 2013

The education of Service personnel: findings of a National Audit Office consultation

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The education of Service personnel: findings of a National Audit Office consultation

Briefing for the House of Commons
Defence Committee

April 2013

This memorandum has been prepared to help inform the House of Commons Defence Committee's inquiry into the education of Service personnel, its fourth in a series looking at the Armed Forces Covenant.

Contents

This review was conducted by Diana Brady, Natalie Low and Nigel Vinson under the direction of Lee Summerfield.

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Summary

Background

1 This memorandum has been prepared to help inform the House of Commons Defence Committee's inquiry into the education of Service personnel, its fourth in a series looking at the Armed Forces Covenant.

2 The Armed Forces Covenant was published in May 2011 and sets out the relationship between the nation, the state and the Armed Forces. The Covenant sets out that Service personnel can expect to receive appropriate training and education and, in particular, the opportunity to gain qualifications relevant to civilian employment.

The NAO consultation

3 This memorandum is based on an online consultation of Armed Forces personnel (and their families) carried out by the National Audit Office. The purpose of the consultation was to gain insight, using a web-based questionnaire, into how the Covenant is working 'on the ground' through first-hand experiences and views. The consultation provides an illustrative (rather than representative) picture of Service education experiences.

4 There were 227 respondents to the consultation, which was carried out during February 2013. Of these, 165 (73 per cent) identified themselves as members of the regular Armed Forces and 53 (23 per cent) as family members of serving personnel. Although the online consultation was open to all Service personnel and their families, 64 per cent (106) of Armed Forces respondents were officers and 27 per cent (45) were non-commissioned officers, contrasting sharply with the profile in the Armed Forces in general. Only 8 per cent (14 respondents) came from lower ranks. The consultation does not, therefore, cover the education experiences of this group.

Key findings from the consultation

Personal experiences and views of service education

5 Most (82 per cent) of the 165 Service personnel taking part in the consultation had obtained or studied for some kind of qualification since joining the Armed Forces. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents had obtained or studied for post-graduate degrees and certificates and 31 per cent for vocational qualifications.

6 Most respondents were positive about the education they had received while in service, with respondents rating it as 'very good' (23 per cent) or 'fairly good' (45 per cent). The 93 respondents who had obtained or studied for degree-level or higher qualifications while in service were more positive, with 32 per cent rating education in service as 'very good' (compared with 11 per cent of the 71 respondents studying for qualifications below degree-level only or no qualifications). Of the 42 respondents who said they had received basic skills education on joining, 31 per cent rated this as 'very good' and 57 per cent as 'fairly good'.

Transferability and accreditation

7 Most Service personnel respondents had studied for a civilian qualification while in service (81 per cent overall). However, there were mixed views about how transferable these qualifications were to future civilian employment. Of the 165 Service respondents, 46 per cent thought these were completely or mostly transferable, 36 per cent partly transferable and 13 per cent not transferable at all. The proportion rating qualifications as completely or mostly transferable was particularly high among the 93 respondents who had obtained and studied for degree-level or higher qualifications while in service (62 per cent).

8 Respondents' key concerns were that qualifications obtained in service were:

- too military focused, and not understood or recognised by civilian employers. This applied to their skills and experiences, as well as formal qualifications, which some felt were outdated compared to civilian requirements; and
- not always accredited to civilian qualification frameworks. In some cases, respondents had to 'top up' such qualifications to ensure they were transferable.

Armed Forces support for education

9 Service personnel can receive financial assistance towards education courses under the Standard Learning Credits or Enhanced Learning Credits schemes (see paragraphs 2.9 and 2.10 for a full description). Forty-eight per cent of respondents had made use of their Standard Learning Credits, while 19 per cent had used their Enhanced Learning Credits.

10 Of the 77 respondents taking degree-level and higher courses while in service, 71 per cent had been fully sponsored by the Armed Forces.

11 Although many respondents had received direct support for their education, Service personnel expressed concern that:

- in practice there were time and funding restrictions on the study opportunities Service personnel could take up, with a perceived need for more formal time off to study, for example through day release; and
- there was an underlying lack of consistent support for Service personnel to undertake or apply for further education that was not formally mandated.

Part One

Introduction

Background

1.1 In 2012 the House of Commons Defence Committee announced a new inquiry into the provision of education for Service personnel, its fourth in a series of inquiries looking at the Armed Forces Covenant.[1] The inquiry will report in 2013.

1.2 The Armed Forces Covenant was published in May 2011 and sets out the relationship between the nation, the state and the Armed Forces. An underlying principle is that the Armed Forces' community should not be disadvantaged compared with other citizens. The Covenant has particular applicability in a number of fields, for example healthcare and housing. With respect to education, the Covenant sets out that:

> ''Service personnel should expect to receive appropriate training and education for both personal and professional development, including the opportunity to gain nationally recognised civilian qualifications, in order to support them through their Service career and to prepare them for life after leaving the Service.''

1.3 To help inform the Committee's inquiry, the National Audit Office carried out an online consultation aimed primarily at serving Armed Forces personnel to gain insight into how the Covenant is working 'on the ground' through the first-hand experiences of education by Service personnel and their families. The findings are illustrative of different individuals' experiences rather than fully representative of the wider population of Service personnel and the families.

The consultation and who responded

1.4 The online consultation was open to serving members of the regular Armed Forces, as well as their spouses/partners and family members, and was publicised through a number of avenues including the Families Federations and British Forces Broadcasting Services. Respondents completed a web-based questionnaire, which was accessible through the National Audit Office website. The consultation was carried out from 5 February to 28 February 2013. See Appendix One for a full description of the methodology.

1 The first two inquiries were: Defence Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2010-12, *The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 1: Military Casualties*, HC 762; and Defence Committee, Second Report of Session 2012-13, *The Armed Forces Covenants in Action? Part 2: Accommodation*, HC 331. The third inquiry is running in parallel to this inquiry and is examining the education of children of Service personnel.

1.5 There were 227 respondents to the consultation, of whom 165 (73 per cent) identified themselves as members of the regular Armed Forces and 53 (23 per cent) as family members of serving personnel. The remaining nine respondents (4 per cent) came from other groups, such as Reservists or veterans.

1.6 Of the 165 Service personnel respondents, 106 (64 per cent) said they were officers and 45 (27 per cent) were non-commissioned officers. This is in sharp contrast to the profile of the Armed Forces in general (**Figure 1**), and means that the consultation does not reflect the education experiences of ranks below non-commissioned officer. The majority of respondents served in the Army, with the profile of individual services broadly in line with the overall Service population.

1.7 Forty-one per cent (67) of Service respondents had served for 20 years or more, while only 3 per cent (five respondents) had served for less than five years (Appendix Two, Figure 6). The highest qualification held by Service personnel respondents before joining the Armed Forces was, most commonly, a degree (32 per cent), GCSEs or equivalent (31 per cent) or A/AS levels (15 per cent).

Figure 1
Comparison of consultation profile with Armed Forces overall

	Consultation respondents (%)	Armed Forces overall (%)
Army	66	58
Navy	16	15
Royal Marines	1	4
Royal Air Force	17	22
Officers	64	17
Other ranks	36	83
of whom		
Non-commissioned officers	27	n/a
Lower ranks	9	n/a

NOTES

1 Consultation profile based on 165 respondents who identified themselves as being in the regular Armed Forces.

2 In the consultation, officers comprise those identifying themselves as commissioned officers; other ranks comprise those identifying themselves as non-commissioned officers or ranks below this.

3 Percentages sum to 100 per cent (+ or -1 per cent, due to rounding).

Source: National Audit Office consultation and MOD Armed Forces Personnel Statistics, www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=1&thiscontent=10&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2013-02-06&disText=2012&from=listing&topDate=2013-02-06, accessed 2 February 2013

Part Two

Key findings from the consultation

2.1 This part details the key findings of the consultation, specifically:

- personal experiences and views of in-service education obtained by Service personnel responding to the consultation;
- their views on the transferability and accreditation of qualifications obtained in service;
- their experiences and views of education support received from the Armed Forces; and
- views and experiences of family members of Service personnel.

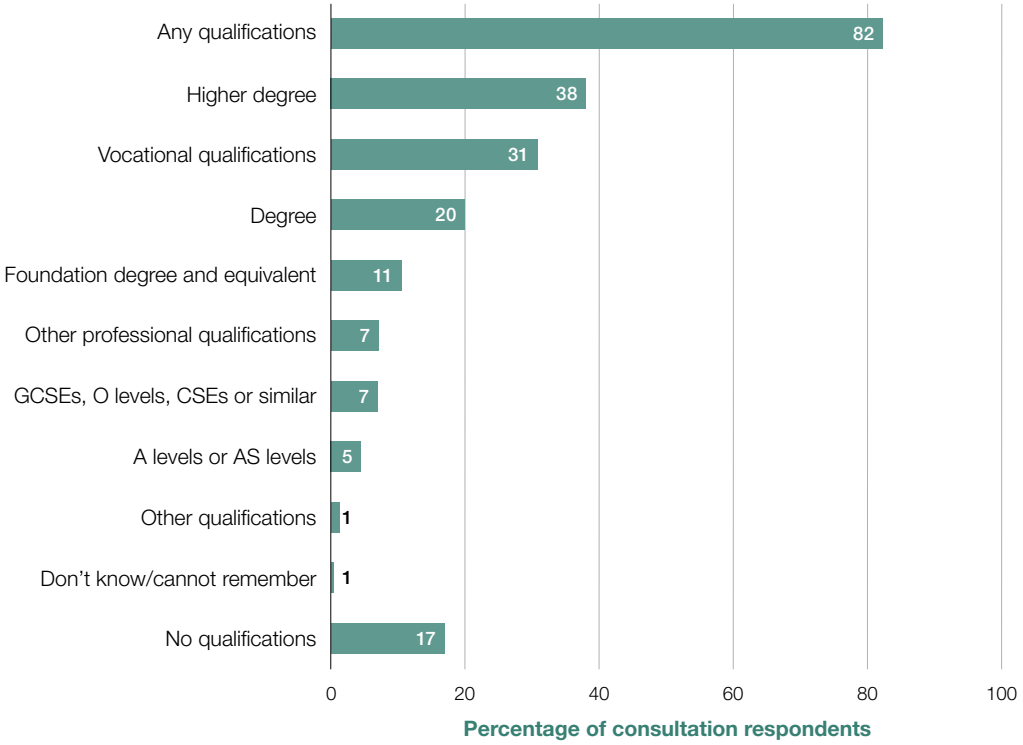
Experiences and views of education received in service

2.2 The majority (82 per cent) of the 165 Service personnel respondents had obtained or studied for some kind of qualification since joining the Armed Forces[2] (**Figure 2**). The qualifications varied from vocational to professional qualifications, and as high as higher degrees. Thirty-eight per cent had obtained or studied for post-graduate degrees and certificates, with officers most likely to do this. Of the 106 officers, 51 per cent (54) said this compared with 4 per cent (2) of the 45 non-commissioned officers. Thirty-one per cent of respondents had obtained or studied for vocational qualifications of some sort. This was the most common type of qualification mentioned by non-commissioned officers – 51 per cent (or 23 out of 45) of non-commissioned officers said this compared with 20 per cent (or 21 out of 106) of officers. However, respondents had also studied for degrees (20 per cent), foundation degrees or equivalent (11 per cent), GCSEs or equivalent (7 per cent) and a wide range of professional and management qualifications (7 per cent) while in service.

2 The proportion of respondents studying for qualifications was not related to Service, rank or education level on joining, but, as might be expected, did increase with length of service (particularly for those with more than ten years' service).

Figure 2

Percentage of respondents obtaining or studying for qualifications since joining the Armed Forces



NOTE

1 Percentages sum to more than 100 per cent as respondents could study more than one type of qualification.

Source: National Audit Office consultation. Number of respondents = 165

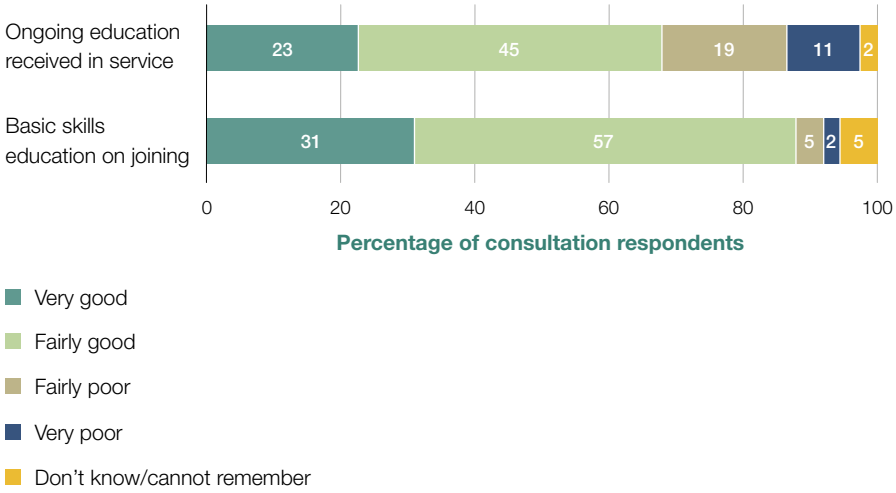
2.3 The majority of respondents rated the overall quality of education they received as good (**Figure 3** overleaf) – 23 per cent (38) of Service respondents thought it was 'very good' and 45 per cent (75) 'fairly good'.[3] However, 19 per cent (31) rated it as 'fairly poor' and 11 per cent (18) as 'very poor'.

2.4 The 93 respondents who had obtained or studied for a degree-level or higher qualification while in service rated education more positively: 32 per cent (30 respondents) rated education in service as 'very good' (compared with 11 per cent (8) of the 71 respondents who had studied for qualifications below degree-level only, or no qualifications). Of the 42 respondents who had received basic skills education on joining, 31 per cent (13) rated this as 'very good' and 57 per cent (24) as 'fairly good'.

3 Ratings of the overall quality of education did not vary significantly by Service, rank or length of service.

Figure 3

Respondents' views on quality of basic skills education on joining and education received while in service



NOTE

1 Percentages sum to 100 per cent (+ or -1 per cent, due to rounding).

Source: National Audit Office consultation. Number of respondents rating basic skills education on joining = 42; number rating education while in service = 165

Transferability and accreditation

2.5 A key commitment of the Armed Forces Covenant is to providing Service personnel with the opportunity to obtain nationally recognised qualifications that will be transferable to future civilian employment. Eighty one per cent (131) of all respondents[4] had obtained or studied for a civilian qualification, and a further four per cent said they had the opportunity to study for one.

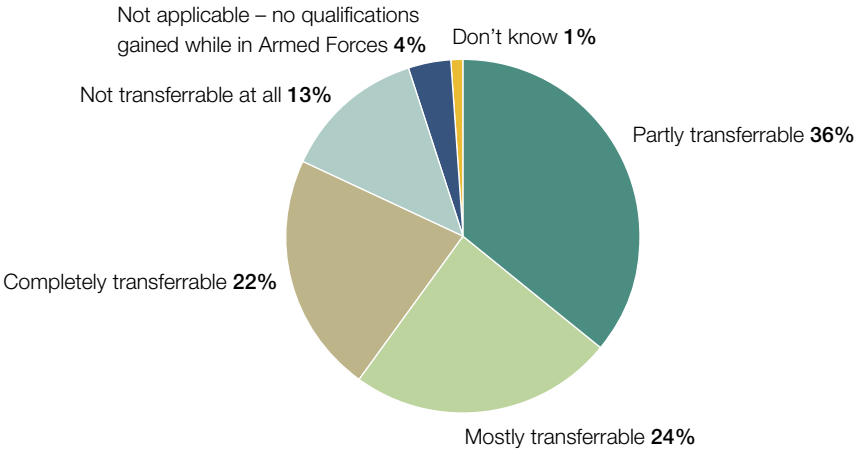
2.6 Not all respondents, however, felt that the qualifications they obtained would be transferable (**Figure 4**). Of the 165 Service respondents, 46 per cent (76) thought the qualifications were completely or mostly transferable and 36 per cent (59) thought they were partly transferable. However, 13 per cent (21) felt that they were not transferable at all. Respondents obtaining or studying for a degree-level or higher qualifications were more likely than other respondents to feel their qualifications were transferable (62 per cent (58 out of 93) rated them completely or mostly transferable, compared with 25 per cent of respondents (18 out of 71) who had obtained or studied for qualifications below degree-level only, or no qualifications).[5]

4 Of the 136 respondents studying for any type of qualification (civilian or military), 98 per cent said that at least one of these was a civilian qualification.

5 As for overall ratings of quality of education, ratings of transferability did not vary significantly by Service, rank or length of service.

Figure 4

Respondents' views on transferability of qualifications to civilian employment



Source: National Audit Office consultation. Number of respondents rating transferability =165

2.7 Concerns about transferability and accreditation of qualifications gained while in Service was one of two dominant themes in respondents' comments,[6] and was the most common issue raised overall. Four main concerns about this issue were raised by respondents, which have been illustrated using quotes by respondents that were typical of the comments made. Respondents voiced concerns that:

- **even if accredited – the qualifications they obtained were too militarily focused**, and either not understood or recognised by, or not relevant to, civilian employers. This applied to skills and experiences as well as formal qualifications.

  "Too much reliance on NVQs which do not appear to read across with a great degree of credibility to civilian employers. It continues to be very difficult to translate military competences into credible civilian qualifications." Army, commissioned officer

  "Specialised training within specialised niches of the Armed Forces equates to an accumulation in certificates and qualifications that are neither recognised by the outside employment sector or are of a nature that cannot be revealed; how many employers want someone qualified in 'interrogation'?" Army, non-commissioned officer

  "The qualifications offered or which are available to non-technical trades are dated and carry no real weight outside the service for example, LCGI, GCGI,[7] etc." Royal Navy, non-commissioned officer

6 Based on analysis of comments made to questions covering respondents' main concerns about the education of Service personnel (130 comments), how their experiences of education could have been improved (129 comments) and how their education could be improved to help the transition to civilian employment (17 comments).

7 These refer to City and Guild Awards in Leadership and Management.

- **some qualifications are not accredited to civilian qualification frameworks.** In some cases, respondents had to 'top up' such qualifications to ensure they are transferable. Some commented on the need for the Armed Forces to allocate resources and time to allow for accreditation to be carried out or 'back date' accreditation as relevant qualifications they had obtained in the past were not formally accredited at the time:

  > "Of the education we receive and then actually use, whilst it is very good, there is limited recognition/understanding of that outside of the military as civilian qualifications aren't awarded. We should resource Defence's own Awarding organisation sufficiently to enable all courses to be accredited on the National Qualification Framework so that they mean something to future employers."
  > Army, commissioned officer

- **difficulties could arise because of wider differences between civilian and military employment**, and how these are viewed, rather than a lack of accreditation per se.

  > "I'm confident that the education I've received in the Army is 'transferable' and since a couple of the higher-level qualifications are civilian university qualifications, I'm content with their 'validity' in civilian terms. What is needed is to change the stereotyped images that civilians have of us in the Army, for example, that we lead/manage by shouting orders all the time."
  > Army, commissioned officer

- **there are some perceived disincentives to the Armed Forces providing transferable training:** firstly concerns about retention of staff and secondly pressures on costs.

  > "There is a limit to the qualifications that the Armed Forces will give because they deem that if you achieve a Degree from your Training and work you will leave the next day. The Armed Forces is more focused on retention than the person they are trying to retain."
  > Royal Navy, other rank

  > "Many courses are provided on the cheap without any form of matching civilian qualification."
  > Army, non-commissioned officer

2.8 Some respondents felt that amending the Learning Credits schemes (see paragraphs 2.9 and 2.10), which provide financial assistance for further study, could help overcome these issues. In particular, two respondents felt that relaxing the requirement that Learning Credits Schemes could only be used for education with a direct benefit to the Service (while personnel were still serving) could help personnel seek out training that was more applicable to future civilian employment. Another suggested that the rules for Enhanced Learning Credit could be changed so that it could be used for more than one course up to the funding limit.

Armed Forces support for education

2.9 Many respondents had received direct support from the Armed Forces to pursue their education. Service personnel can receive financial assistance towards education courses under both the Standard Learning Credits or Enhanced Learning Credits schemes. The Standard scheme provides financial support throughout a Service person's career for multiple, small-scale learning activities. Personnel on eligible courses (those leading to a nationally recognised qualification, with substantial development value and directly benefiting the Service) can claim 80 per cent of fees up to a current maximum of £175 per financial year. Of the 165 Service respondents, 48 per cent had made use of some or all of their Standard Learning Credits.

2.10 Enhanced Learning Credits complement the Standard scheme by providing larger-scale financial support to full-time members of the Armed Forces for higher-level learning (broadly A level or equivalent and above), subject to certain qualifying criteria. Enhanced Learning Credits are available during service and for up to ten years afterwards. Eligible personnel can claim up to 80 per cent of a course value, subject to a maximum of £3,000 or £6,000, which is dependent on length of service. Of the 165 respondents, 19 per cent (32) had used their Enhanced Learning Credits.

2.11 Of the 77 respondents that had or were studying for degrees or higher degrees while in service, 71 per cent (55) had been sponsored fully by the Armed Forces, with 14 per cent (11) partly sponsored. This might include help obtained under the Enhanced Learning Credits scheme.

2.12 Despite the financial support received by Service personnel for education, in their more detailed comments respondents raised concerns about practical restrictions on the opportunities to study and the priority given to education in service.[8] Three key issues were identified, which have been illustrated using quotes by respondents that were typical of the comments made. Respondents were concerned that:

- **Service personnel were not given enough time to undertake study outside of their work roles.** Respondents felt that having more formal time off to study, for example through day release or undertaking full-time courses, would be helpful.

  > "The workload is quite demanding at the moment with the redundancies and gapped posts and it is about to get worse. Some personnel are working extra hours so they do not want to commit to any extra education because they do not have much spare time."
  > Army, non-commissioned officer

  > "It's a case of they say the opportunity is there as there are courses available, but service commitments sometimes override those especially as a rating."
  > Royal Navy, other rank

8 Based on analysis of comments made to questions covering respondents' main concerns about the education of Service personnel (130 comments) and how their experiences of education could have been improved (129 comments).

- **funding issues had restricted their opportunities for further study.** These included an overall lack of funding for courses or study as well as specific issues such as a need to simplify the funding so that providers were paid directly or problems with courses finishing after the financial year end not being funded.
- **there was a lack of consistent support for Service personnel to undertake or apply for further education that was not formally mandated.** There was a perceived need for better information about the courses that were on offer and that the system is too fragmented and incoherent for individuals:

> "The culture within the Army is not very good at encouraging learning – encouraging the Army to become an organisation which actively encourages and values FE and HE is an area for improvement."
> Army, commissioned officer

> "Education is not deemed a priority by an army that is undermanned and overcommitted. If the CofC were serious they would make education a higher priority."
> Army, commissioned officer

Views of spouses and partners

2.13 The consultation was also open to family members of Service personnel to comment on the Service education received by their relative. Fifty-three spouses or partners of Service personnel took part. Of these, 79 per cent said that their spouse/partner was in the Army, 13 per cent in the RAF and 8 per cent in the Royal Navy. Reflecting the profile of Service respondents, three-quarters (77 per cent) said their spouses/partners were commissioned officers.

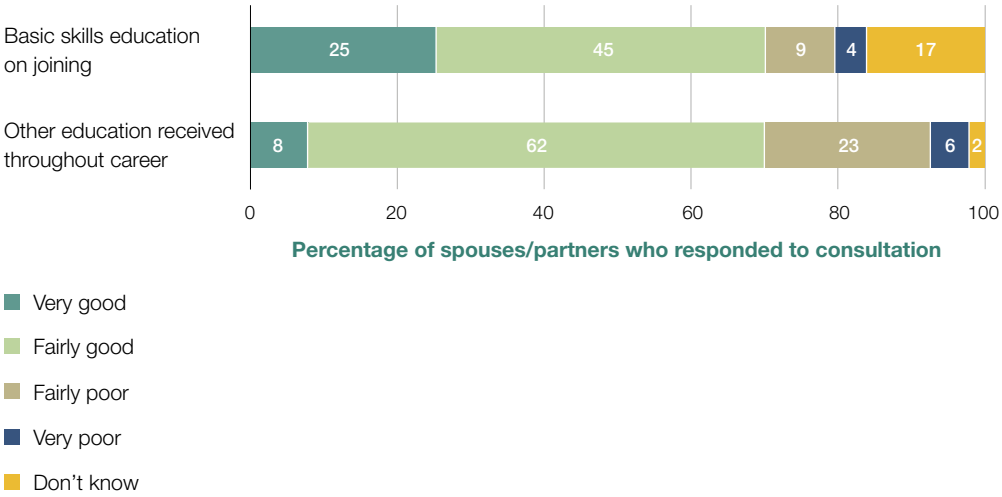
2.14 Most spouses/partners who responded to the consultation were positive about the quality of Service education (**Figure 5**): 8 per cent rated education provided throughout service as 'very good' and 62 per cent as 'fairly good'. The equivalent figures for basic skills education received on joining were 25 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.

2.15 Spouses/partners also had mixed feelings about how transferable qualifications were to civilian employment – while 38 per cent said they were completely or mostly transferable, 49 per cent felt they were partly transferable and 13 per cent not transferable at all.

2.16 The main concerns raised by spouses/partners were similar to those already described, principally around the transferability of qualifications to civilian employment and the need for more time and support to courses and study.

Figure 5

Spouses'/partners' views on quality of basic skills education on joining and education received throughout service



NOTE

1 Percentages sum to 100 per cent (+ or -1 per cent, due to rounding).

Source: National Audit Office consultation. Number of spouses/partners rating basic skills education = 53; number rating other education = 53

2.17 One additional issue mentioned was the need to support spouses and partners. As the wife of a commissioned officer in the Army described:

> "Training and support should be provided to Military wives (and partners) as well. It is very hard to complete any form of course or training as a military wife when required to move house every two years. I have recently completed [a qualification] by distance learning, I would have preferred to study at an institution where I could meet tutors face to face."

Appendix One

Methodology

The online consultation

1 Together with Defence Committee staff, and with input from the Ministry of Defence and the Families Federations, the National Audit Office developed an online questionnaire that sought views on: individuals' concerns about the education of Service personnel; the education/qualifications individuals had received while in Service (including basic skills education and qualifications obtained); the quality of education provided; and resettlement and the transferability of qualifications. A limited number of questions were also available for spouses/partners and family members of Service personnel. The questionnaire included a mix of open and closed questions.

2 The questionnaire was programmed using SNAP survey software. A weblink directed respondents to a page on the NAO website with information about the consultations and links to the survey questionnaires.

3 The consultation was open to serving members of the regular Armed Forces, as well as their spouses/partners and family members. As the weblink was publicly available, it was also possible for other groups (for example, Reservists or veterans) to take part and questions were included for such groups to identify in what capacity they were participating. All returns were anonymous and it was not possible to check the credentials of those responding.

4 Defence Committee staff facilitated publicity of the consultation and weblink through a number of avenues including the Families Federations, British Forces Broadcasting Services and websites such as the Army Rumour Service. These sources were encouraged to publicise the weblinks directly and send them out to other contacts.

5 The consultation was open from 5 February to 28 February 2013. There were 227 respondents, including 165 who identified themselves as serving personnel and 53 spouses/partners. The other respondents included veterans and Reservists.

6 By its nature, the consultation sample is self-selecting and is unlikely to be representative of any wider population. We checked the profile of respondents who were Service personnel to see how they compared with the wider population, in terms of which Service they were in and their rank. Responses to the consultation were primarily from commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers and therefore include very few representatives from all ranks of serving personnel.

7 Responses for structured questions were analysed using the statistical analysis package SPSS. No analyses are shown based on numbers less than 30. In looking at findings for different groups, we used tests of statistical significance to ensure we only highlighted differences that were unlikely to be due to chance fluctuations. (We used Pearson's chi-square test to test the differences between groups and only highlight results that are significant at the 5 per cent level). Open comments were analysed using Excel spreadsheets. For each question, a coding framework of broad themes was developed based on initial responses, which was then applied to all answers. Quotes used in the text of the report were selected based on this analysis to be illustrative of comments categorised under that theme.

Appendix Two

Sample profile

Figure 6
Profile of consultation respondents

	Consultation (%)
Length of service	
Under 5 years	3
5–10 years	19
11–15 years	20
16–19 years	17
20 years or more	41
Highest qualification before joining	
Higher degree	9
Degree or equivalent	32
A/AS levels or equivalent	15
GCSE or equivalent	31
Vocational qualifications	4
Other qualification	6
No qualifications	3
Don't know/cannot remember	1

NOTES

1 Consultation profile based on 165 respondents who identified themselves as being in the regular Armed Forces.

2 In the consultation, officers comprise those identifying themselves as commissioned officers; other ranks comprise those identifying themselves as NCOs or ranks below this.

3 Percentages sum to 100 per cent (+ or -1 per cent, due to rounding).

Source: National Audit Office consultation and MOD Armed Forces Personnel Statistics, http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=1&thiscontent=10&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2013-02-06&disText=2012&from=listing&topDate=2013-02-06, accessed 2 February 2013

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