

## **Introduction to higher education for Service children**

What is the point of going to University? Why should I saddle myself with significant debt, when there are no guarantees of getting a job that pays more than what others without a degree could secure?

These are some of the very sensible questions that students today are asking themselves as they consider what to do after completing school. Of course, it is not all about how much money you ultimately earn, however there are a range of official and non-official estimates of how much more a graduate would earn over a lifetime, compared with a non-graduate. These tend to suggest that the average female graduate would earn on average around £250,000 more in a lifetime, with male graduates earning around £170,000 more. As with all averages, there are a number of factors which influence individual circumstances and it has to be recognised that some will financially benefit more from their degree than others.

I am sure these are the questions which are floating around the minds of our students from military families. It is unclear to what extent they influence the statistic produced by the University of Winchester, which highlights that of all military students who hold the necessary grades for admission, as a proportion 40% less students from military families go to university than their non-military peers (who hold the necessary grades).

While young people should make their own decisions about what they do after school, it is also important that they are making these decisions from an informed perspective. We are not entirely sure why 40% less students from military backgrounds go onto further study after school, but it is clear that universities are missing out on a wealth of unique experiences and skills that the typical student from a military home can bring.

This statistic has been taken seriously by the Higher Education sector, with the Office for Students (OFS) formally recognising students from military families as an under-represented group. This means that Universities must demonstrate how they are actively seeking to increase their participation in HE, success in HE, their progression from Universities and the affordability of studies.

Universities are currently spending approximately 27% of their income to support underrepresented groups to achieve in their studies, which include;

- **outreach activities** for people with the potential to succeed in higher education (e.g. forming and sustaining links with communities and employers; mentoring to help potential students improve their GCSE and A level grades; or summer schools offering a taste of university life to children who may not have a family background in higher education)
- **student success activities to help students stay on course and achieve their full potential (e.g. induction programmes to help students settle into university life; pastoral and study skills support; or mentoring to improve employability)**
- **progression** activities to support disadvantaged students as they prepare to go on to their chosen career or postgraduate study (e.g. internships; help with interview skills; or mentoring by graduates involved in the professions)
- **bursaries, scholarships and fee waivers** (discounts) for lower income students and other under-represented groups.

Therefore, where an individual feels able to, there is a lot to be said for highlighting to university admissions offices that a student is from a military family. This can be done within the personal

statement, in the section relating to Parents' occupation. Within the broader personal statement, a student can also write about the experiences and skills they have accumulated as a result of their military background.

Taking mobility as an example. It is the normal course of things to speak about the fact that military students move around a lot as a potential source of educational disadvantage. However, in writing a personal statement, students can speak about the high level skills they have had to develop to thrive in any context or location. As a military student, you have developed incredibly advanced social skills to be accepted into a broad range of friendship groups, negotiated your way through a myriad of different teaching styles and curriculums and have successfully adapted to the broad range of cultures and values expressed in different schools and locations. Yet, you have demonstrated incredible resilience and managed these enormous transitions to a level where you are being considered for a university place.

The deployment of a parent away from the family home is an experience that most military families are required to contend with. While normal for the military community, it should not be forgotten that this too is something which can demonstrate how you as a student respond to change and to challenging circumstances. As a child of a military family who have gone through such an experience, you will have been required to manage emotions and fears about your deployed parent and maintained your academic progress, whilst taking on additional responsibilities to support your mum or dad at home. This demonstrates considerable character, high levels of self-management and significant maturity.

For those students from a military background who have accompanied serving parents on overseas assignments, there are an even broader range of experiences which can be included within a personal statement. A student in this category will inevitably have lived in a very different cultural context and have needed to demonstrate considerable adaptability to succeed. You may have also experienced the education of the particular nation you were resident in and will therefore have the benefit of a broader curriculum knowledge than most other UK students applying for a university place. In short, students who have experienced first-hand an overseas assignment will see the world from a range of perspectives and be more likely to apply these perspectives to their university experiences and within their studies.

Alongside their Personal Statement, a student can ask their school or college to submit an undergraduate reference, which can outline any contextual information regarding the impact military life has had on a student's education experience. This may involve highlighting the high levels of mobility experienced during education and any impact the deployment of a parent has had on their education and life. This can result in a contextualised offer (lower offer), which reflects the student's individual circumstances and experiences leading up to higher education.

I hope that this is useful information and demonstrates the desire of the FE/HE sectors to attract and support children from military families. However, this article is not necessarily written to influence an increase in the numbers applying for university. What I hope is taken from this is that higher education is a relevant option to be considered if you are from a military family.

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