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Their new battlefield: understanding the experiences of UK military students undertaking online Distance Learning Foundation degree programmes.

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Abstract

With greater numbers of serving and veteran United Kingdom (UK) military personnel entering online Higher Education (HE) degree courses as a means to prepare themselves for civilian life, the challenges they face undertaking this transition are not well understood. Whilst other countries around the world have invested huge amounts of time, money and thought into better supporting military personnel undertaking the shift from military community to academia, the UK is falling behind in terms of their support for this unique group of students. The UK military student context remains an under researched area of study and it is important for our UK military students that we improve our understanding of the pedagogical obstacles they face so that courses can be designed that are appropriate for their requirements. The majority of these students are either preparing themselves for civilian life by formalising their military skills into academic qualifications or attempting to better their chances of promotion within their Service by gaining a degree. These extrinsic motivational factors need to be better supported from a social construct aspect by academic delivery organisations.

This thesis seeks to better understand the lived experiences of fifteen UK military students entering and undertaking online Foundation degree (Fd) courses, concentrating on the challenges they face throughout their studies in overcoming the divide between their everyday military lives and academia. The study utilised semi-structured interviews in Microsoft Teams as the research instrument and a combination of Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Communities of Practice (CoP) as the theoretical framework to better understand the often unique learning difficulties faced by this student group. The study highlights cultural and community differences when dealing with academic organisations, challenges with regards academic preparation on the part of some students, and variances in student motivation when faced with several unique obstacles. The thesis concludes that UK academic organisations need to better understand the challenges faced by serving and veteran UK military students to accommodate and support their study needs. There is a lack of knowledge of the UK military community and their requirements, along with a lack of empathy for their situation on the part of some elements of the delivery organisation, which can lead to student isolation and loss of motivation. This combined with a lack of flexibility with

regards course delivery means that too often, online tutors and organisational regulations do not always best support this distinctive group of students when they are faced with evolving worldwide situations that are a constant part of their military lives.

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This thesis is dedicated to all those who have stood by me on this journey. Thank you.

Author's declaration

The content of this thesis is all my own work and has not previously been submitted to any other degree at the University of Staffordshire or any other institution.

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Chapter 1 Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction to the research

This study focuses on United Kingdom (UK) military students and their lived experiences whilst undertaking online Foundation degree (Fd) courses, the challenges they face with such courses and how the interaction of military and academic cultures may impact their progress. This chapter is formed of an initial introduction to the research, an overview of key literature, the professional context and rationale for the study and the intended specific and original contribution to knowledge. The chapter ends with the associated Research Questions and supporting Research Objectives.

The number of UK military students entering online Higher Education (HE) courses has been growing for a number of years and as of 2024, there were around 2,000 UK military students in HE at the Case Study University (CSU) (CSU, 2024). Many of these students are seeking to formalise their military experiences as academic qualifications, either to prepare for civilian life after their military career or with a view to enhancing their academic abilities to support promotion prospects within their respective military organisation. The CSU has a niche position within military circles, holding delivery contracts with the Royal Air Force (RAF) and being one of the main providers of Fd courses and Honours degrees to other military Services. Several Fd courses are delivered that attract either full military sponsorship or reduced rates for UK military personnel with the university in its 14th year of delivery at the time the data was collected. The number of UK military personnel applying for and completing these courses has grown steadily for several years, with around 500 Engineering Fd students on courses at any one time. Full public funding is provided for many RAF students, with students from other Services utilising their Enhanced Learning Credits (ELCs) to fund up to a maximum of 80% of the cost of courses.

The choice of Fd courses for the research is primarily due to the fact that as Course Leader, I have unrestricted access to the content and participants on the courses. The original intent of Fd courses was to more closely integrate the worlds of academia and work (Wilson et al., 2005) and the RAF in particular see this as a suitable means to formalise the work experiences of their staff into academic qualifications. So keen are

they on this route that they have provided funding for 230 students per academic year for the last seven years, with a view to implementing a new contract in the near future. Given the course is undertaken part time alongside their normal working lives, students can take between three to five years to complete the Fd, dependent upon how complex their military role is and their deployment cycle. Successful completion of the Fd allows for progress on to the full Honours degree by completing Level 6. There is a growing intent for all of the UK Armed Forces to have a more professionalised approach to the training of their staff (MoD, 2025) and both British Army and Royal Navy personnel are also choosing to undertake the Fd route to formalise their military skills. Whilst other routes exist, such as the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND), these seem less popular with UK military personnel, perhaps due to the inability to take days away for ‘on campus’ activities generally required on this type of course. The online Fd courses allow the flexibility to study whilst working in a student’s own time.

This distinctive group of students therefore present with questions about how best to support their academic provision on the Fd and this interpretive study seeks to highlight the difficulties faced by not only the students, but also course providers. Courses are delivered entirely online to students who are faced with unique study impediments whilst operating not just in the UK, but also being deployed regularly around the world, often in austere environments. Over the course of my five years teaching on the Fd courses, it became apparent that large numbers of the students had not entered an academic environment since they left mainstream schooling, some many years beforehand. These students often possessed only the basic qualifications required to enter the military, which is four GCSEs for technical trades and no qualifications for other trades. They therefore commenced university with academic qualifications that are often below the normal entry requirements for university, which can lead to a level of additional uncertainty on the part of students with regards the issues they may face during the transition. This often extended period since mainstream schooling presents an interesting and thus far understudied area of research with regards UK military students and highlights topics that can impact student progress in ways that are hereto less than clear. Contractual arrangements for the delivery of the courses to military students at the university preclude the opportunity for traditional face-to-face provision, with students dispersed around the

world and often engaged on operational deployments, so all Engineering courses are delivered entirely online using Blackboard Ultra as the delivery medium.

1.2 Professional Context and Rationale for the study

I served for 36 years in the RAF, leaving in 2013 as a Squadron Warrant Officer responsible for standards of discipline, morale, and welfare across my squadron. From 2019 to 2024, I was the Course Leader for the five online Fd courses that are delivered to both serving UK military students and veterans. In addition, I previously studied for a distance learning master's degree with another UK organisation, whilst deployed permanently overseas on attachment to a foreign Air Force and with minimal resources. During this period, I struggled with the tutor/student connection and considered leaving my studies due to what I felt was a strained relationship, both in terms of a lack of academic and social support. My own experiences led to an interest in understanding whether this was a one-off issue or an experience suffered by other UK military students. Given the time period at which I had these issues, which was from 2002 to 2005, dial-up connectivity and availability of a suitable virtual learning environment formed part of the problem. However, there was also strained relationships with several civilian tutors who appeared not to understand the challenges I was facing at that time. The answer for me was to find my own way through to successful completion of the degree, which masked many of the problems I suffered at the time.

Due to my own experiences, I therefore consider myself to be in a unique *insider/outsider* position (Dwyer and Corbin, 2009; Bukamal, 2022) to complete this research and I have first-hand experience of the challenges associated with studying whilst serving in the military both in the UK and whilst deployed. I was eager to better understand these issues from an academic perspective and with a view to the provision of courses that are designed to meet UK military student needs. I have a strong desire to fill the gap in literature relating to the successful delivery of online Fd courses to UK military students, whilst also providing the best lived experience possible to this unique cohort of students. Areas that needed to be examined more thoroughly in the UK context included: the perceived lack of academic preparedness in some UK military students, the poorly understood cultural differences between UK

military students and civilian staff, along with a better appreciation of the student's lived experience.

Maintaining reflexivity throughout the research was absolutely key to ensuring that I constantly critiqued, judged and assessed how my own positionality had the potential to impact the research before, during and after the study had been completed. The effect that my own experiences would have on the research findings, as a consequence of my bias assumptions and values, shaped the research throughout. The prospect of influencing my understanding of the findings and perhaps manipulating the research process (Bukamal, 2022; Jamieson et al., 2023) raised the possibility of affecting the way in which the world of the participants was seen and understood. As Bukamal (2022) states, this introspective lens allowed the possibility that my own experiences may manipulate analysis of the data. Indeed, as Folkes (2023, p.1302) argues, it remained an ongoing possibility that my own positionality would "*fluctuate throughout the research as the researcher interacts with the theoretical, analytical and methodological approaches taken during the research.*" It remained an ongoing battle throughout the research to ensure that I utilised my own military and online learning experiences, but not to the detriment of the research findings or to influence the research participants. Notwithstanding this, and whilst reflexivity is important to qualitative research, there are some criticisms that describe it as a self-indulgent practice (Finlay, 2002), and one that threatens to mask the truth of the research findings. Personally, I see my positionality as a particular strength for this research and I believe it allowed me to see the research through a lens whereby the participants could *open up* (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) far more than they would with a non-military person. As Dwyer and Buckle (Ibid.) suggest, I perhaps occupied the *space between* the UK military students and the academic delivery team.

Previous studies around inclusivity within HE have focussed on what could be described as exclusive social groups (Cohen et al., 2018; Belanger et al., 2021) but where military students are included, the attention has been very much focussed on the experiences of military personnel from outside of the UK. It is key therefore that the UK gap in the literature is filled so that any unique issues faced by UK military personnel studying Fd courses are considered. Without that additional emphasis, it could be argued that the delivery of Fd courses in the UK is not focussed enough to

support the unique requirements of this specific cohort of students. It was therefore an aim of this study to expand knowledge about how HE organisations may need to adapt pedagogically and culturally to deliver online Fd courses that are sensitive to the requirements of UK military students (Section 1.6.3). The challenges of studying at university are well documented (Read et al., 2003; Munro, 2011; Ilonga et al., 2020) and requires students to undertake not simply a higher level of study but to also situate themselves, often for the first time, within an academic environment. Whilst more commonly this is a physical environment, in the case of UK military students at the CSU, this is an online community that is very different to their normal daily livesMany of these UK military students have been out of mainstream education for several years and whilst they may possess a wealth of experience and military skills, their transition into academia may leave them devoid of the required academic skills to quickly become independent learners. The Literature Review (Section 1.3) demonstrates that there has been insufficient research applied to the issues associated with UK military students transitioning to HE and particularly online Fd courses, which means there is uncertainty regarding the way in which their unique circumstances may unfold within this unfamiliar environment.

Whilst studying online and dealing with the daily demands of life can be challenging (Gillett-Swan, 2017), the work-life balance of UK military students pose a unique set of challenges. I am mindful of the often-unique difficulties that face our military personnel and indeed, I remain security cleared so have a unique insight into their world. This insight allowed me further clarity regarding their study challenges, which include regular periods of separation, often on dangerous deployments and in areas where regular communications are extremely restricted for lengthy periods of time. Against that backdrop, the CSU has seen growing numbers of UK military students applying for online courses that are advertised as being suitable for military personnel who are studying whilst working. It would therefore appear key that delivery organisations take into account the experiences that affect students to provide the very best possible course design. However, my experience as a Course Leader also tells me that the inherent motivation and confidence of UK military students is not always transferred successfully to their academic studies. Oftentimes, confident military personnel become entirely the opposite when faced with a piece of academic writing or something similar of an academic nature, which might be viewed as a crisis of

confidence in some instances and not something they have had to deal with before in their professional careers.

To fully understand and prepare for the research study, a pilot study was completed as part of the early methodological design for this study, which utilised the questions found in Appendix A. This highlighted issues with lack of academic preparedness on the part of UK military students for study at degree level, a feeling of separation from their everyday community and challenges in communicating with civilian tutors, all of which helped to validate the need for the research. The pilot study also showed that UK military students undertaking online degree courses at the CSU face cultural challenges whilst studying. Some of this is attributed to what they would describe as a loss of common purpose and the fact that their military duties can impact their ability to perform well on the course. This research therefore seeks to provide further knowledge to better inform HE delivery organisations that are often unaware of the unique circumstances faced by UK military personnel. This uncertainty regarding UK military students on the part of the CSU does nothing to quell the fears of students who are already nervous about their transition into a new social context. The pilot study helped to finalise the methodological approach for the main study and is discussed within Chapter 2 of this thesis.

1.3 Literature Review Introduction

Much of the current research on the transition of military students into HE is focussed on United States (US) military personnel and there is a shortage of literature regarding the challenges and experiences of UK military students. However, the research focus in the UK around military personnel has been directed towards Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Hatch et al., 2013; Leightley et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2020), or the transition of military personnel into civilian life (Binks and Cambridge, 2018; Smith et al., 2018; Derefinko et al., 2019). These are of course very important areas of research, but an initial pilot study (Section 2.2.1) has highlighted several challenges for UK military students entering online HE courses that is also a key focus area. There are growing numbers of UK military personnel serving fewer years than has historically been the case (Ministry of Defence, 2024) and with more of these personnel entering online HE courses in preparation for civilian life, it is important that the difficulties

associated with the provision of such courses is reviewed, in terms of meeting the specific requirements of the UK military community.

Previous literature in the US, albeit with greater focus on the transition of US military personnel into civilian life (Kirchner et al., 2014; Jenner, 2019; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020; Barry, 2021), has highlighted differences between military and academic culture (Howe and Shpeer, 2019; Camacho et al., 2021). These differences are examined as part of this study to better understand the lived experience of UK military students undertaking online degree courses and how they are impacted. Previous studies in the US have highlighted issues with lack of academic preparedness (Lim et al., 2018) and feelings of detachment from their military environment (Barry et al., 2021). Additionally, these students are navigating their university experience with less structure than they are accustomed to (Camacho et al., 2021) and often have communication issues when dealing with their civilian tutors. This may simply be indicative of the cultural differences (Howe and Shpeer, 2021) or perhaps related to language differences between military and civilian organisations. These cultural aspects are a focus of the study by Lim et al. (2018, p.292), who found that university staff are more likely to "*be equipped with the cultural knowledge that is embedded within the university environment*". This is described by Howe and Shpeer (2019) as *cultural framing* in their study of the communication challenges faced by US veterans entering HE. It is key to better understand the UK perspective and so, this clash of cultures is a feature of this UK-based study, with a particular emphasis on the contrasts between the UK military and academic communities. Previous studies have also shown that military students often have very different life experiences than their civilian counterparts and tutors (Camacho et al., 2021), with the former perhaps having been exposed to combat situations.

Previous studies have also found issues with student commitment and successful completion rates as the distance learning student also has to support themselves in employment (Munro, 2011). There are several barriers in studying outside of working hours, not least finding study time in the evenings and during weekends and studies have shown this can lead to conflicts with family and other commitments (Booth et al., 2021). These studies often associate students with feelings of alienation and isolation with regards their online status (Belanger et al., 2021), which can impact negatively

on their motivation to study. Therefore, the relationship between civilian tutors and UK military students during online delivery is key and formed an important part of this study. In particular, how this relationship manifests itself with regards to students finding strategies to navigate this lack of preparation and fulfil their studies. Earlier studies have highlighted the difficulties faced by non-UK military students engaging with their studies in HE environments, including the tendency for students to *self-silence* (Howe and Shpeer, 2019) as they felt the tutor was in the position of power and that it was not their place to question what was being taught. This may seem somewhat alien in modern society but there are perhaps military traits and behaviours at play that are quite different to those found in civilian life (Ziencik, 2020). Although the Covid pandemic has allowed different avenues of research around online learning to emerge, it has long been recognised that online learning presents challenges to both students and staff (Garrison et al., 2003; Anderson, 2004). There appears to be no evidence of studies that have specifically focussed on the difficulties of UK military students as they look to complete online degree level courses whilst continuing to work in challenging roles. Given the gaps in the literature highlighted above, it was key to utilise a search methodology that covered all aspects of the research. The literature search strings used in this study are located in Appendix B, with the applied criteria for selection/deselection of the articles detailed in Appendix C. The searches utilised a variety of academic search engines, including Google Scholar, the Staffordshire University library and other scholarly sources. Whilst the individual terms described in Appendix B located several peer-reviewed papers, it was interesting to note that there appeared to be no individual papers that cover the terms “Communities of Practice (*CoP)*”, “*DL in HE*”, “*military*” or “*military students*” combined.

1.3.1 Professional Military Education in the UK and US

There is a stark difference in the way in which Professional Military Education (PME) is viewed in the UK versus the US (Watson, 2007; Hawkshaw and O’Neil, 2020), with the US having a rich and proud history (Watson, 2007) of maintaining education across all of its military ranks. This continues to be enacted across the wealth of delivery institutions in the US, including but not limited to the United States Air Force Academy (bachelor’s degrees for US Air Force officers), the Air Academy (PME offering graduate degrees and advanced leadership courses amongst others), the United States Military

Academy (West Point) and the United States Naval Academy (US Navy). The UK, on the other hand, have tended to focus more on the military education of its officer cadre, with ‘other rank’ training being centred on Phase 1 (recruit training) and Phase 2 (technical training) at the respective Service training establishments. As Cable et al. (2021) suggest, this has led to UK HE institutions targeting mostly non-commissioned ranks with academic awards that are suited to academic formalisation of their military skills and experiences. The Fd award is therefore seen by many institutions as the most appropriate to achieve this aim and it also allows military students to utilise their ELCs to finance 80% of the cost.

In the UK, PME tends to be a subset of university-level education (Powell and Townley, 2025) that takes place within military colleges and academies, often as part of a wider course that includes the advancement of military skills. The US on the other hand, seek to educate their personnel across the life of their military careers, not simply within a promotion course. With the addition of considerable public investment post 9/11 (Benbow and Lee, 2022), there is a growing number of enlisted personnel seeking to enhance their education through sponsored opportunities. The US Air Force for example, offer those who join with a high school diploma the opportunity to build credits towards an Associate degree (Air University, 2025), which means they can undergo technical skills training, whilst at the same time expanding their education. This approach offers the additional benefit of leveraging these technical skills as US military personnel transition into civilian life, which meets the need to grow the engineering sector workforce within the wider US (Main et al., 2025). With full funding for tuition, housing and supplies (Benbow and Lee, 2022), along with the opportunity to attend a wide choice of civilian institutions, this presents a unique opportunity for US students. This kind of support, along with the relationship of Service skills to education, is simply not present in the UK armed forces and for the non-commissioned cadre, it is often left to the individual to make educational choices regarding their future. Ultimately, PME in the US is comprehensively thought out and consists of extremely well supported academic programmes and training that are designed to support all US military personnel throughout their careers and into civilian life. The study of military professionalism within the British Army by Hawkshaw and O’Neil (2020) suggests we have some way to go in the UK to catch up. Whatever the future for PME within the UK military, it seems sensible that close links with civilian institutions

is key to harnessing the power of the relationship between civilian and military minds (Corum, 2012). The remainder of this chapter looks at three key areas from a literature perspective: Academic Preparedness, Self Determination Theory and Communities of Practice.

1.4 Academic Preparedness

Like their US counterparts, UK military students commencing online degree courses are likely to be nervous about the challenges associated with the move from their closeknit camaraderie of their military units into academia (Kirchner et al., 2014), and perhaps more so those who left mainstream school some years before. To ease the student's sense of trepidation, several organisations have started to deliver self-paced online preparation courses (Abdous, 2019; Annetts et al., 2019) that are designed to increase a student's confidence and preparedness for online learning at HE level. The study by Abdous (2019) focussed specifically on a US university that had utilised distance learning since the mid-1980s and analysed how online orientation courses could be used to reduce the misconceptions associated with online learning (Ibid.). Such orientation courses are widely viewed as being the most proactive and effective means to increase a student's confidence and ability to perform well during their studies (Ibid.). Whilst preparedness is clearly not the only factor with regards a student's success or otherwise undertaking online courses, this and previous experience of online learning are key factors. For students who have no prior online study experience and for whom it has been some time since mainstream schooling, then an online preparation course has been found to be useful in terms of reducing their anxiety levels (Ibid.).

When one combines the transition from the military community to academia with a lack of academic preparedness, it is perhaps easier to understand how some UK military students may struggle with their studies. Mishra (2020) highlights the importance of social networks, which includes personal/working networks and learning communities, in the success of students studying HE courses. Of particular importance in the study was the support of others in the community who provided "*information-related social capital*" (p.12), which enabled other students to achieve success by fostering support from others who were ahead in their studies. This involved direct study support as well

as knowledge about how to navigate the systems of the university. Transition into university can be exciting but challenging and students need to make sense of their new surroundings, which can be psychologically demanding (Cage et al., 2021), a situation that many students describe as losing their "*former identities and social networks*" (Ibid., p.1077). This is perhaps more demanding in the online learning context, which can be quite dissimilar to the traditional classroom delivery and offers up several challenges that are unique to this pedagogical approach (Salmon, 2012). From a UK military student perspective, this presents several challenges that are exacerbated by the change of social network and in some cases, their lack of recent academic exposure.

1.5 Self Determination Theory

Motivational factors are key for UK military students as they try to pursue success, which for the context of this study is deemed to be successful completion of their Fd and the translation of their military experiences into academic qualifications. Studies by Ryan and Deci (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2024) have developed the Self Determination Theory (SDT) and have concentrated on two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. In essence, this relates to a person doing something because it is inherently enjoyable (intrinsic) as opposed to doing something because it leads to an independent result (extrinsic). One might compare the two as one UK military student completing their studies purely from a personal like of the subject or desire to study, as opposed to another student being driven to complete their studies purely from a desire to use the outcome for promotion within their respective Service. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the value of experience and outcome can be very different when an individual is behaving for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons. However, whilst one might argue that from an educational perspective, intrinsic motivation is better from a teaching perspective, SDT suggests that there are some forms of extrinsic motivation that represent "*active, agentic states"* (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.55). SDT suggests that everyone possesses three common needs – *autonomy* (feeling self-reliant), *competence* (feeling effective) and *relatedness* (feeling connected) – that make them engage or not (Chiu, 2022). Ryan and Deci (2006) maintain that autonomy is a fundamental human need and that the benefits of SDT-related research in many contexts has proved beneficial. From an online pedagogical perspective, Chiu (2022)

suggests that tutors should provide personalised support and allow flexibility in terms of the learning activities to maximise the engagement and potential success of the student. Ellis and Bliuc (2019), in their study of engagement within HE, agree that good levels of motivation lead to greater engagement but they caution that not every theory translates from the classroom approach to online learning and that online learning is more often a strategic choice for some student groups.

SDT is also concerned with the social and environmental factors that promote rather than deter a person's levels of motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). As a consequence, Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), was developed, which recognises factors that may impact and produce variability in levels of intrinsic motivation (Ibid.). Ryan and Deci suggest that both the home and classroom environments have the potential to be a major impact on a person's motivational levels (Ibid.) and that positively supporting encouraging behaviours is essential to drive self-determined or self-regulating behaviour. As Ellis and Bliuc (2019, p.15) suggest, "*if the online experience is perceived to be 'over there' and secondary to the experience in class*", then it is likely that students will become disenchanted and demotivated.

There are often complex reasons for non-completion by online students (Delnoij et al., 2020; Farrell and Bunton, 2020) and frequently, the very reasons they used to choose online learning can be the same reasons they struggle or do not complete their studies. Previous studies have highlighted cultural, structural and social reasons why online students fail to complete their studies but there is a gap in the literature with regards to UK military students. Much of the current literature concentrates on the US, where societal treatment of serving personnel and veterans is very different to the UK (Section 1.3.1). If UK based organisations are to successfully deliver online degree courses and maintain high levels of successful completions, it is important to fill this gap. The rates of attrition for US military personnel undertaking online degree courses remains high (Jenner, 2019; Deshpande, 2021), within a society that that has a more proactive support for its military personnel (Cable et al., 2021), so the challenges for the UK cannot be underestimated.

1.6 Communities of Practice

1.6.1 Theory

The feeling of Community of Practice (CoP) is strong within the worldwide military environment (Schulte et al., 2020; Rosendo, 2022) and although much of the military organisational construct would be considered by those outside of the military to be a very formal hierarchal structure, there is also a great deal of informal learning that takes place within their ranks. This is no different within the UK military, where following the completion of formal basic and technical training, learning becomes more of a social process (Rosendo, 2022), whereby less experienced personnel learn by association with other, more experienced members of the organisation.

A CoP was originally defined as:

> *A group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly* (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

A more recent description (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p.11) uses the phrase:

> *Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.*

The seminal work of Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) has long been credited with the concept of CoP, suggesting that gaining knowledge is not a standalone process, but is instead, predominantly a social process involving engagement with learned others in a community. Lave and Wenger (1991) state that the primary mechanism by which newcomers learn in a CoP is via *legitimate peripheral participation*. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) suggest that unless a group interact and learn together, they would not be considered a CoP. The authors further argue that three elements are necessary for a CoP to exist and only by developing *domain*, *community* and *practice* in parallel can a CoP be cultivated. *Domain* is considered to be an area of knowledge that creates common ground and directs learning for the individuals in the community. The term *Community* is the essential social composition of the group, one that encourages collaboration and the

sharing of ideas, with *Practice* being seen as the shared goal and the focus around which the community grows. Other authors (Wilson et al., 2020, p.40) have suggested that these views that are a direct criticism of traditional learning theories which propose that the student is considered a "*receptacle of taught knowledge*."

Citing his earlier work with Jean Lave, Wenger-Trayner *(*Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, online) states that studies of apprenticeship show that there is a "more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place with *journeymen* and *more advanced apprentices*." In effect, the community acts as a living curriculum for the new student, perhaps an interesting similarity with the way in which UK military organisations operate. For example, Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023) utilises the concept of *capability* when defining the characteristics of a CoP, a phrase synonymous with military units. There is also reference to the way in which training within a CoP is not a single time bound event, but instead "*loops over time*" (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p.16), another facet that relates to UK military training. There are potential opportunities presented by the utilisation of CoPs within the UK military as students transition to online learning within a university environment, suggesting that research around work-related CoPs would benefit from further analysis.

Borup et al. (2020) suggest that students require two forms of community support mechanisms, namely the support provided by the course itself and the other being that provided by the personal and military support network of the student. This latter support is important and can range from associations formed before studies began, including those associated with their close military network, and can also include relationships that have formed during the delivery of the course. The authors (Ibid.) argue that a greater understanding of both the student's work and personal support communities allows the potential for tutors to design and teach courses that are better suited to the student's needs. Although their study is primarily focussed on early years schooling, the authors also completed several studies around maturing learners in HE that showed how improved engagement with the academic community could be helpful to older learners (Ibid.). There is an assumption throughout any study however, that the students have the ability to engage independently with their online courses, which is an area that will be discussed in greater detail in section 1.7. The study by Borup et al. (2020) does however highlight that research around the importance of communities for influencing student engagement is lacking. This thesis looks to

address this sparsity of information and aims to provide further clarity around this important subject area with regards UK military students.

With regards the application of CoPs within the academic environment, it has been suggested that issues relating to the balance of power between tutor and student, along with the challenges associated with simply finding the time to work through how such interactions would work in a modern university environment have curtailed any meaningful change (Pyrko et al., 2019). Indeed, Nicolini et al. (2022) point out that little traction has been achieved with regards the way in which CoPs have played out in academic institutions when compared to their use as a managerial tool in non-academic organisations. This is perhaps an indication of the difference between the use of CoPs for business gain versus the view of academic tutors who may fear emancipatory 'loss of power' as they become guide/facilitator instead of the more traditional lecturer. Schulte et al. (2020, p.153) argue that the practice of CoPs is generally characterised through tension, stating that CoPs "*drive learning and change, whilst formal systems are more focussed on stable execution and control*." Much of the literature would agree with this view but there has been work in a military context outside of the UK, with a study around the German Armed Forces and how the interaction was managed between their formal hierarchal structure and a CoP. Amongst other findings, the study found that much of the success in this instance was due to leadership being *dynamic* enough to deal with the changing face of relations between any CoP and formal hierarchy. With many UK military students opting to study online as it better suits their operational tempo at work, managing their relational bond with the delivery university is a challenge when they rarely if ever visit the actual campus. It would seem to be particularly important that a sense of fitting in for a student with their university has to be developed through their experiences and culture on their course. For UK military personnel, this sense of *belonging* is tangible and key for their study success.

1.6.2 Context in HE

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) state that there are a number of characteristics that make CoPs a good fit for managing knowledge within educational organisations, including: *autonomy for students, student-orientation, informality and crossing boundaries*. However, these are also characteristics that make them difficult

for more traditional hierarchal organisations, such as the university sector, in terms of the flexibility required to engage with UK military students and make the most of their already well-formed communities. It could be argued that this risks the organisation losing their position of *power* and instead, placing greater reliance upon the military CoP when organising the current and ongoing study needs of the students. However, there is a lack of real world application using this lens, whereby the tutor becomes simply a guide to learning, a view supported by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015). They state that from this viewpoint, the university should not be the privileged centre of learning, but instead, should be in the service of individuals who are learning in their own real world reality.

CoPs have long been discussed and has perhaps most readily been adopted in business with a view to sharing knowledge as a critical asset that can be managed for strategic purposes (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Its implementation into the HE context, has however proved more challenging. Brew (2012) suggests that the concept of CoP can be incorporated into HE, with students and staff engaging in legitimate peripheral participation, moving towards a concept whereby teaching is more student-focussed. This approach also suggests that knowledge is no longer simply objective but instead concentrates on knowledge as a process of construction (Ibid.). By her own admission, this would be considered to be a radical shift in HE, with a changed relationship between tutor and student, where the student has "*something valuable to contribute as well as to learn*" (Brew, 2012, p.114). Although Brew's research is focussed on the relationship between research and teaching, such a shift in relationship also presents a challenge for the traditional approach taken at university (Brew, 2012). Wilson et al. (2020) approached the subject of CoP within the HE environment but from the perspective of academic colleagues learning from each other to enhance teaching ability, suggesting this could be the most effective use of CoP within the UK HE environment. At the time of writing (2024), UK universities face challenges from reduced funding and perhaps more fundamentally, a societal shift away from the younger generation necessarily entering HE in the numbers they once were (Office for Students, 2024). Quality of delivery and feedback from national surveys have therefore become more important than ever before, so the opportunity for younger tutors to learn from their more experienced colleagues would seem a sensible approach to enhancing knowledge. However, as the Wilson et al. (2020)

study suggests, whilst younger tutors are more likely to engage in CoPs for this purpose, their senior colleagues are less likely to participate. The study found that more senior tutors were likely to be busier than their younger colleagues, perhaps in research roles, meaning they were less likely to engage in CoPs. Additionally, any change to the status quo may be viewed as a further threat to the more senior personnel. From a teaching perspective, this finding is relevant and involves the complex dynamic between research and teaching. It also raises questions about the challenges associated with course delivery and specifically, what impact this lack of cohesiveness between teaching colleagues may have on course delivery standards. Although a single study within a UK university, this apparent lack of community spirit within the teaching fraternity begs questions about the impact this may have on courses that are delivered to UK military students on Fd courses within the UK.

1.6.3 Military Culture and Community

The cultural clash between military values and university culture has been actively researched in the US (Kirchner et al., 2014; Koenig et al., 2014; Howe and Shpeer, 2019; Kirchner and Pepper, 2020) but there is a lack of literature from a UK perspective. More specifically, the organisational construct that UK military students face in their working environments, when compared to the social construct of the university where they perhaps lose the common purpose they are accustomed to, is not well understood. A better understanding about whether UK military students communicate and behave differently with tutors than their civilian counterparts, and whether their military organisational culture is a trigger for this, needs to be examined more thoroughly. The study by Howe and Shpeer (2019, p.203) utilised in-depth interviews with US military veterans on the communication issues they faced within a university setting, referencing "*cultural framing, perspective taking and self-silencing"* as key aspects that may affect military students in a predominantly civilian university cultural setting. Cultural framing related to civilian and military cultures interacting, but with each not really being able to easily understand the other from an experience perspective and through the lens of language. The jargon-rich language of the military is sometimes not well understood by the civilian organisation but additionally, the authors describe the military culture as "*conservative and value-laden"* and the university culture as "*more liberal and logic-laden*" (Howe and Shpeer, 2019, p.207).

Perspective taking related to the fact that everyone has their own experiences of life and it is key that this is taken into account before judging others. For example, someone who has little life experience has a different threshold for what is challenging than someone who has perhaps been involved in conflicts around the world (Camacho et al., 2021). So, when one views this from the perspective of a military person versus a civilian, their views could be very different. In terms of self-silencing, their study showed that every student interviewed felt a need to stay silent when faced with challenges in their studies, for one of three reasons: it was not their concern, they felt their arguments would be unsuitable, or they feared they would be penalised. Other studies (Kirchner et al., 2014) have also found that military students feel the tutor is in charge and it is not their place to challenge this position given their previous military experiences. Their structured and disciplined environment, which is very different from academia, means they may fear reprisals for challenging authority.

Individuals join the military as they often seek a sense of fitting in with a group of like-minded individuals or community (Ziencik, 2020; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Although not specifically referring to a military community, McMillan and Chavis (1986, p.9) define a community as having a "*sense of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met by their commitment together*."

In military terms, this may be better aligned with the term *camaraderie*, which is key to military service (Kirchner et al., 2014). Boundaries are also key to military culture and define 'who is in and who is out', often only recognisable by those who serve and extending to veterans who can frequently be recognised by others long after they have left the Service. McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe this as *group intimacy,* a very tangible thing for military personnel. The picture is one of a group of individuals who are closely bonded in like-minded ventures, endeavours that mean a great deal to them and connect them together, often for life. Belonging and being accepted are absolutely key in their working lives and as Shepherd et al. (2021) state, life in the military creates a culture that is very unlike civilian.

The study by Shepherd et al. (2021) is US based and discusses how US military personnel have to adapt to new social environments when they transition to civilian life, often losing the *total institution* style of life they have become accustomed to during

their service. This military socialisation means that personnel are bound in ways that do not always affiliate with civilian life and could readily be viewed as a military CoP. Military life is often structured and rigid, with strict constraints on behaviour, and personnel tend to fall back on order and structure when challenged (Shepherd et al., 2021), with in-group members being legitimised and noticeably detached from outsiders (Rosendo, 2022). That said, oftentimes military personnel learn 'on the job' and outside of the more rigid confines of a classroom, a process that Lave and Wenger (1991, p.29) term "*legitimate peripheral participation*" or learning as situated activity. This post classroom engagement within the military community takes them from 'trained but not experienced' to actually learning how to be a military person. When viewed in the context of online Fd courses in the UK, where students are expected to become self-sufficient learners, they may struggle to get the leadership, control and camaraderie they are accustomed to in their everyday lives, which may impact their sense of retaining a common and shared purpose. The work of Professor Jean Lave perhaps best encapsulates the style of learning that is favoured by UK military students and Professor Nigel Rapport summarised this during her honorary doctoral award at St Andrews university:

> "Learning is a social process and individuals learn best when participants share a common identity and goals. They do this in the middle of their lives, whilst doing other everyday things, alongside people with whom we identify."
>
> Rapport (2015)

To support adjustment to a new environment, Shepherd et al. (2021, p.598) propose that "*the use of veterans within the organisation may help newcomers to understand the often subtle and implicit norms*…". There is extensive research in the US around the value of culture within the military community and Koenig et al. (2014) focus on this area as a key aspect of ensuring that a military student's transition into HE in the US has the best possible chance of success. They describe culture as "the shared values, perspectives and routine, but often taken for granted, practices within a community" (Ibid., p.415). This distinct military culture requires further analysis from the UK perspective and particularly whether UK military students do indeed struggle with certain aspects of their studies from the perspective of their military identity versus their student identity.

1.6.4 Military Student Community

Given the shortage of literature around the transition of UK military students into online Fd courses, much of the research is focussed on the US. Generally speaking, behaviour in the military results from an organisational construct and not a social one – unlike civilians, there is no choice for military personnel other than to follow the rules of their organisation and the transition to academic can be stressful (Jenner, 2019; Ziencik, 2020; Camacho et al., 2021). Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless-service, honesty and integrity can all be linked to Service values, whatever Service the student belongs to. Howe and Shpeer (2019) use the terms 'military culture' and 'university culture' within their study and regard the military student entering university as a culture shock. They argue that military students are assessing their tutors through their military lens and when they do not receive direct and clear communication, they may diverge from the norms of the university expectations and fall back on their own communities and other support mechanisms. A further study by Cox (2019) highlights the fact that service personnel may struggle to form a self-identity outside of their Service boundaries, especially with academic staff.

The study by Camacho et al. (2021) highlighted several factors associated with US military personnel transitioning from the military into engineering education at the HE level. The study focussed on the strategies employed by the students as they utilised their military skills and training to better their chances of success on their courses. Looking to find what approaches were utilised in the transition to their new social contexts, the study found that success in university depended in no small part upon the participant's ability to balance additional commitments, family obligations and ongoing responsibilities. Whilst all students at university face challenges in meeting their study requirements alongside their personal lives, the challenges of the military student are driven by military rules and regulations, which cannot simply be ignored. There was also evidence that those students who had studied beyond the basic requirements (by UK comparison, up to and including GCSEs), found university study easier and actively utilised other factors that set them apart from the 'traditional' university entrant. These factors included being generally older, perhaps more mature, possessing greater breadth of networks and leadership skills from their military training/experience. Effectively, what set them apart was having higher levels of self-

efficacy, a desire to ‘achieve the mission’, which in this case was the successful completion of their studies. So, despite the differences between a structured military life and the “*relatively fluid set of guidelines*” (Camacho et al., 2021, p.2) they encountered at university, successful students were able to successfully compete with their civilian peers. The findings of the Cox (2019) study align with other US military related studies in that military students often utilise their leadership, flexibility and adaptability skills developed from military experiences, to be successful in their studies.

There are suggestions that because military personnel are accustomed to moving regularly, be that on posting or operational deployment, they should be better placed to deal with the change entering HE. However, as the Kirchner et al. (2014, p.13) study points out, this particular transition may become the "*most significant barrier students face and impact the quality of the education they receive*". Losing the sense of cohesiveness and interdependency synonymous with military life can be a real sense of loss to a military student and create what might be considered a crisis of confidence. The authors argue (Ibid.) that the use of a *mentor* with some military experience would be helpful to military students, generally speaking the utilisation of a fellow student that is ahead in terms of their educational journey on the course.

1.6.5 Resilience/Motivation of UK military students during online study

Based upon my time as the Course Leader for the online Fd courses, the majority of UK military students enter online Fd courses to either formalise their military experiences into something recognisable for the civilian job market or to better their chances of promotion within their Service. Whilst serving in the military, personnel learn patience, discipline and have a wide range of technical skills (Camacho et al., 2021) that can support their transition and development within the world of HE. Military personnel have been described as highly adaptable (Ibid.) with high levels of resilience, developed through military training and experiences of operational deployments. In addition to their team-related strengths, military personnel have high levels of motivation (Cable et al., 2021; Camacho et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) along with strong personal and team-related skills, one of the key tenets of being trained as a military person. However, not all military personnel are the same, so their experience in HE can depend upon a number of factors, not least their ability to

manage external obligations alongside their studies. Price (2023) suggests that resilience is key to dealing with the challenges associated with study at this level. She also suggests that acquiring resilience is associated with training and having to deal with problems on a regular basis, something that military personnel are more accustomed to. Ziencik (2020) however, points out in her US focussed study, that the two environments are very different and can cause major issues for military personnel. Her study argues that HE encourages student self-sufficiency and working individually, which contrasts to life in the military where a focus on collective effort is more prevalent. Crucially, the study also found many military personnel were poorly informed regarding the issues they may face within HE and that transition advice, along with peer support would have improved their academic journey (Ziencik, 2020).

A further study by Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021, p.2) suggests that (US) military training reflects parts of behaviourism theory where training approaches are: "*learning by rote, drills and lecture style delivery with the student as a passive recipient and the instructor as the authority figure.*" This matches the research of Vogel-Walcutt et al. (2013) who found that education organisations focus on setting continuous, progressive goals for students, whereas military training sets specific and definite goals on trainees that are underpinned by the 'learn by rote' approach. The Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021) study argues that the student is the recipient of new knowledge from a learned 'other' in a position of power. It also highlighted that US military personnel held mixed views about the difficulties faced during their HE studies, with some reflecting that they had to change their behaviours in the academic environment, whilst others suggested that their military experiences made it easier for them to adapt. Within the UK context, it will be interesting to see how age and military experiences affect the study experience as it has been some years since the withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, so some younger UK military students on courses have not been so affected by the steady deployments to kinetic environments. That said, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia and emerging global challenges has the potential to increase the workload of many UK military personnel for the foreseeable future with increased deployment regularity and therefore, study interruptions are likely to remain extant.

Military personnel develop a bond with their peers whilst serving (often for life) and this bond may feel lacking when they transition from a shared cohesiveness to an environment such as HE where autonomy is more prevalent (Kirchner et al., 2014).

This sense of loss can feel enormous (Ibid.) and so the transition process is key if organisations are to prepare their UK military students for successful completion of their studies on Fd courses. Kirchner et al. (2014) argue for a 'Building Support Program' for military personnel across all levels of the academic delivery, and not simply from the teaching elements of the course, but also to involve administration and regulatory bodies from the organisation. Military students can be considered a 'special' group of students and they require their somewhat singular requirements to be taken into account in the delivery of their courses. However, the literature is very much focussed on US efforts to support their military students and there is currently a shortage of literature focussed on the wider UK military students support mechanisms. One exception is the study by Cable et al. (2021) who focus on what they describe as 'veteran friendly higher education' for both Canadian and UK military personnel. Their study also highlights the dichotomy whereby military personnel can struggle to thrive in HE but at the same time, their professional experiences from the military can nevertheless enable them to successfully complete their studies (Ibid.). Their study highlights that further research is required in the UK context and further underpins the fact that UK military students face a "*duality of challenge*" (p.47) in terms of culture shift and identity with regards their shift from military to academic communities. The lack of recognised military student support mechanisms within UK organisations (Cable et al., 2021) is emphasised, along with the lack of peer support from other military students that are more advanced in their studies. The study recognises that this type of support is lacking in UK online courses and that its inclusion is likely to enhance UK military online degree courses. Recognising the cultural differences between the US and the UK, the study also suggests an advisory committee is required at national level to best offer advice on policy and regulations for this unique group of students.

Given that military personnel struggle with the transition from military life into academia (Macer, 2018; Cable et al., 2021), it is important that they receive support at various stages of their studies. Globally, there is an increased workload and reduced manning for many UK Armed Forces personnel (Ministry of Defence, 2024) and along with the cultural challenges they face, online studying can be difficult to manage. It may be argued that such workloads hinder the formation of the learning communities required for these students to be successful in their online degree studies.

1.7 Online Learning

This thesis is not focussed on the merits or otherwise of online learning, but as the Fd courses being studied are of an online nature, it would be remiss not to include some key research regarding online degree courses. One key area of research, suggested by Garrison (2016), includes the construct of shared metacognition or collaborative education, with students taking command of their learning within a community. In essence, the tutor shapes the learning and the students take more control for their own learning, constructing their own meaning and a shared understanding (Garrison, 2022). Garrison suggests that whilst there is clearly an individual element to learning, there is also a reliance on learning in a shared environment through collaboration with others, where meaningful learning is completed through communication (Ibid.). Garrison describes metacognition as "*an awareness of one's learning"* and "*a process of creating meaning and understanding associated with self and others*" (Ibid. p.8). Annand (2019) however, suggests that Garrison's view of collaborative learning designs is flawed and that such ideas are characterised by "*the presence of one expert and many novices*…" (p.8). Annand also suggests that this can lead to the perception that the peer-to-peer delivery of material is inferior as opposed to tutor-student interactions. However, the study by Cable et al. (2021) suggests that military personnel are more accustomed to a non-academic style peer-peer support approach to teaching once they have completed their basic military training. This collaborative learning approach or scaffolding as Salmon (2012) refers to it, has links to the community style approach favoured in military circles (Cable et al., 2021). The study by Drysdale et al. (2022), where a comparison is made between online peer support and face-to-face support, also suggests that support in an online environment can be just as successful as that provided by face-to-face support. This additional scaffolding would suggest that such peer or mentor assistance could be effective in the online courses undertaken by the UK military students.

Cleveland-Innes and Hawryluk (2023) support Garrison and also highlight the importance of community with regards online learning, suggesting that student engagement and motivation are of benefit as these are not formed using the same approach as more traditional courses. Using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, they suggest whilst tutors remain in a leadership role, they should

deconstruct the ‘standard’ approach to teaching and reform it to suit the online delivery methodology. In their study, the term ‘teaching presence’ as opposed to ‘teacher presence*’* is used to subtly change the dynamic in an attempt to try and strengthen the development of a sense of community in the students. This however does fly in the face of other studies mentioned earlier that argue lecturers may fear the loss of power associated with such a move (Nicolini et al., 2022). A study of medical students undertaking online training during the Covid pandemic (Dost et al., 2020) suggests that the loss of face-to-face teaching has the potential to be less engaging for students and presents them with fewer opportunities to ask questions.

The course material for the online UK military Fd courses is delivered using Blackboard Ultra but UK military personnel are unable to access this system on their military devices or systems, with military firewalls preventing access at all times, so have to utilise a personal device to study. Ilonga et al. (2020) suggest that online learning is one of the most effective ways for students to realise their HE ambitions but accept that some organisations have struggled with its implementation. Their study highlighted that some students feel they suffer discrimination when compared to their on-campus peers through a lack of face-to-face online activity when compared to campus based support. Examples of this, albeit during the Covid pandemic, include groups such as medical students who require particular student-patient requirements (Mian and Khan, 2020) and therefore, online learning does not necessarily meet their need to develop the examination and soft skills required later in their careers. A study by Pacansky-Brock et al. (2020) supports this view and proposes that courses need to be ‘*humanized*’ in order to “*provide a pathway towards a more equitable future for the success of all students*” (p.2). Whilst Lave and Wenger (1991) did not specifically discuss online CoPs, they did refer to the use of chat rooms and discussion groups. In his later work, Wenger-Trayner (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) suggests that whilst technology allows the use of virtual CoPs, the technology itself is not the answer to forming a successful CoP and that the online space is not necessarily the community unless the social aspect is managed by the online tutor. Indeed, it is suggested that technologies can sometimes detract from the social process of developing a community (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). The delivery of online Fd courses to UK military students is perhaps one example where the current design of courses is not well understood and there is little significant

representation for UK military students within any UK HE professional body. Indeed, the Armed Forces Covenant, which acknowledges that anyone who has served their country should be supported in society, offers no support within HE.

Despite the challenges, many UK military students see online learning as an opportunity to acquire academic qualifications that will reinforce their chances of employment after they leave the military as many civilian organisations do not understand their military credentials. As Cooper et al. (2018, p.165) suggest, this "military cultural capital" does not always transfer easily to the civilian workplace. In addition, others are reinforcing their position to gain promotion within the military, a form of extrinsic motivation, and as Ferrer et al. (2022) suggest, this could mean that the acquisition of the qualification supersedes the pure concept of knowledge and skills development. It is incumbent therefore, on the tutor, to ensure that online material is not only suitable for UK military students but also that it is *attractive* to them and that it promotes a desire to learn. However, too many organisations have not fared well in understanding the distinctive needs of online learning and simply design and deliver material online in the same manner as their face-to-face sessions on campus (Ferrer et al., 2022). Every point of contact with the student adds or subtracts value from the online learning experience and this includes all of the pre-study material or delivery. Teaching material has to remain relevant and updated throughout the course, so the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is not simply a place to 'dump' outdated or unmonitored teaching material. Instead, time needs to be given to designing approaches such as thought-provoking discussion forums and tutor engagement at the point at which students require it (Salmon, 2012), along with taking onboard practical advice about how to teach online effectively (Gregory and Salmon, 2013). Such approaches can only enhance the experience for online Fd students, thereby building their competence on the courses, making them feel more related to the material and building their autonomy as students. Without such approaches, the increase in numbers being taught online and the associated massification of teaching (Salmon and Asgari, 2019) presents problems for all HE organisations. However, many universities have limited budgets for enhancing what many might consider their key role, which is how best to deliver education (Ibid.). This does little to combat what Koenig et al. (2014) refer to as *reverse culture shock* and although their research primarily refers to military veterans reintegrating into society post-deployment, which

includes transitioning into educational environments, these same "*unanticipated adjustment difficulties and unmet expectations…*" (p.415) are of interest from a UK military student perspective.

1.8 Proposed Specific and Original Contribution to Knowledge

There is an absence of research and knowledge around the academic journey of UK military students undertaking online Foundation degree (Fd) courses, especially regarding the challenges they face in successfully completing their studies. Whilst the US and other parts of the world have continued research apace across the military student academic journey, the UK has failed to maintain momentum in this important research area. US-based research has found that the military community often have to alter behaviours (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) to accommodate the transition to HE, whilst at the same time undergoing feelings of neglect and frustration (Kirchner et al., 2014). With regards the UK context, there is a strong sense of kinship (Woodward and Jenkings, 2011) across the UK military community, both within each Service and across Service boundaries, indeed the success of the UK military for many decades has been built upon these very strengths. However, in academic circles within the UK, there would appear to be a deficit of knowledge regarding these strengths and abilities, which have the potential to be harnessed in the academic community to benefit military student progress. Utilisation of UK military community strengths with regards moving towards a more student-focussed approach to online delivery (Brew, 2012; Wilson et al., 2020) requires further research as it may be viewed as a paradigm shift from tutors being seen as the sole arbiter of knowledge. However, the likely benefits in terms of meeting the learning expectations of UK military students should not be underestimated, especially with regards better utilisation of their tight and well-formed CoPs.

The use of CoP has become common in areas of educational research (Roos and Palmér 2015) and has long been used in a number of differing environments, although less so within the UK HE environment and to this date, not through the lens of the UK military Fd community. There is merit in developing research around the improvement of online Fd course design and delivery to this unique group of students. There are challenges associated with their academic preparedness and especially so with those in the group who are entering academia after having been away from

mainstream schooling for many years. Notwithstanding this, their culture, robust bonds and strong internal CoPs have the potential to be utilised more efficiently to close the gap between military and academic communities. UK military personnel have solid intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors for wishing to study and if this can be harnessed through a combination of CoP theory, along with elements of SDT theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), I believe there is an opportunity to produce better online Fd courses for this student cohort. In addition, a better understanding about whether UK military students communicate and behave differently with tutors than their civilian counterparts, and whether their military organisational culture is a trigger for this, needs to be examined more thoroughly.

Elements of both CoP and SDT theories require further research in the domain of UK military students undertaking online Fd courses, not simply because of the associated benefits of meeting the UK Armed Forces Covenant (Gov.uk., 2025) but because it is the right thing to do for our military students. This research has the potential to benefit the military personnel of our nation and from a delivery organisation perspective, it makes absolute business sense to deliver courses that are fit for purpose for this extremely important group of students. Many lessons have been learned in the US military context but these need to be developed from the UK military student perspective. Although the primary focus in this study is about a wider appreciation of the use of CoP and SDT with regards UK military students undertaking online Fd courses, it has to be stated that there are broader issues at play here. Direct veteran support within universities and across the UK is required, along with more latitude and adjustment of support where required in times of regular deployments. Alongside these changes, the introduction of organisational policies that are supportive of military students (Cable et al., 2021), need to be incorporated into any future research.

1.9 Research Questions, Aims and Objectives

The introduction of the Foundation degree (Fd) approach in the UK in 2000 had the intention of offering an extra route for people to acquire an intermediate HE qualification (Craig, 2009). With the initial intention of workplace involvement and widening participation, this is perhaps less obvious in the current educational delivery and with the online Fd delivery to UK military students, there is little or no direct involvement from military organisations in the design of courses. The lived experience of UK military students undertaking online Fd courses is not well understood and there is a deficit of knowledge within the academic community about the cultural 'norms' of the UK military community and how best to deliver courses that meet their needs. Issues surrounding cultural framing, a lack of academic preparedness for online degree courses, a lack of suitable scaffolding and insufficient knowledge regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the UK military community when set against the academic background have the potential to lead to a lack of clarity regarding course design and delivery. Although a great many studies have been carried out in the US context, there is a gap in the literature regarding the UK military student community and how best to deal with their transition into HE within the UK. The number of UK military students entering HE at the CSU is growing, especially associated with the RAF contract to deliver Fd courses that has also attracted other units within the UK military at Fd level, Top Up degrees and masters courses. With growing numbers of UK military personnel leaving their respective Service (Ministry of Defence, 2024), there is growing demand for these courses so it makes eminent sense, both pedagogically and from a business standpoint, to better understand the unique needs of UK military students. It cannot be assumed that UK military students face the same challenges experienced by their US military peers, so this study seeks to fill the gap in literature. Given the relatively small size of the UK military forces and their constant overstretch on worldwide military operations, UK military students face unique challenges in their studies, so this gap in the literature simply cannot be ignored.

The intention of this study is to examine the lived experiences of UK military students undertaking online Fd courses within the UK-based CSU. It utilises CoP and SDT theories to better understand the challenges faced by this unique groups of students, specifically whether the community-orientated strengths and motivational factors of

UK military students can be better utilised in course design and delivery of online degree courses. The research questions and objectives for the study are stated in Table 1.1 below and were developed over the taught element of the course.

Table 1.1 - Research Questions and supporting Research Objectives

Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
How academically prepared are UK military students for a Distance Learning Fd programme?	What impact does the age and military experience of the student have on their motivational factors and own perceived abilities to successfully complete their Fd?	What are the experiences of UK military students throughout the first semesters on the MoD DL Fd programme?
Sub Question What is the relationship between the time since the student left mainstream schooling and their experiences on the course?	**Sub Questions** Is there a difference in the lived experience on the course between students who are preparing to leave the military and those who are remaining in the organisation? How do motivational factors impact the lived experience on courses?	**Sub Question** How do the student's military and personal support networks affect their experiences on the course and chances of success? How supported do students feel from a learning and pastoral perspective?
Linked Research Objectives	**Linked Research Objectives**	**Linked Research Objectives**
Evaluate the academic preparedness of UK military students for the MoD DL Fd programme.	Explore the professional and personal factors that affect the experiences of UK military students on the MoD DL Fd courses. Explore the motivational factors affecting UK military students during their transition into HE.	Examine the lived experiences of UK military students joining the MoD DL Fd courses and throughout the first semesters of the course. Examine the relationship between the student's military and personal CoPs and the impact on their lived experience of the course.

Chapter 2 Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Research Design Introduction

This study examines the lived experiences of UK military students who are undertaking online Fd courses within a UK-based university and utilises CoP and SDT to frame the research and to improve understanding of the challenges faced by this unique group of students. The study focussed specifically on the academic preparedness of the group, the impact of their studies on their motivation and their overall experiences throughout the course. In particular, the study examined whether their military community-orientated strengths, along with their intrinsic/extrinsic motivations for study, could be better utilised in the design and delivery of their online degree courses. There was an additional focus on the communication aspects of the courses and in particular, the interaction at the boundaries of practice between military students and civilian tutors. As Rosendo (2022) suggests, military personnel are not always aware of the culture-specific characteristics of communication when they transition into academia, whilst civilian tutors may also not be aware of the *language* used by UK military personnel. My experience as the Course Leader for the five degree profiles led me to observe several issues with regards the experiences of UK military students over a period of five years. Their less than optimal academic preparation for the courses, along with observed changes in their motivation as they encountered difficulties with their studies, led to a desire on my part to better understand their journey. The research questions and objectives for the study (Section 1.9, Table 1.1) were designed as a consequence of these observations and in relation to a gap in the literature. Whilst the online nature of the courses added further complexities in terms of access to participants, security clearances and location for example, this also helped to shape the design of the study.

As the focus of the study is on the lived experience, phenomenology was chosen as the research methodology, utilising semi-structured interviews as the research method to gather data. The use of phenomenology as a research methodology is not without its challenges (Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen and van Manen, 2021; Stolz, 2023) and much of the early foundational writing by Husserl and Heidegger is difficult to read and understand (van Manen and van Manen, 2021). Indeed, the philosophical debate

around what counts as phenomenological research often leads to further confusion, with some authors (Stolz, 2023) arguing that this can limit legitimate use of this methodology. Outside of the philosophical debate however, it has been suggested that the utilisation of a pragmatic approach to phenomenology and the application of "phenomenological tools" (Ibid., p.831) allows opportunities to unearth new research insights. To apply these tools, means to not simply transcribe the experiences of the participants but instead, "unravel or uncover what remains hidden or concealed" (Ibid., p.1071), which can then allow us to make sense of the lived experience.

2.1.1 The use of Phenomenology in this Study

Work by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty is considered to have had a major impact on the origin and development of phenomenology (van Manen and van Manen, 2021). Whilst a broader landscape of phenomenology exists, the main body of research with regards phenomenological approaches is centred on *transcendental* (descriptive) and *hermeneutic* (interpretive) phenomenology. It is also worth making clear that phenomenology is about the science or study of phenomena, but importantly, it is concerned with "*how* phenomena appear and not simply *what* they are" (Zahavi, 2018, p.9). A fundamental phenomenological task is to analyse the way in which individuals experience *things* in a more granular fashion and to represent the way in which they are interrelated (Zahavi, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology, as suggested by Husserl, means that the observer must separate themselves from the world and reach the transcendental state of being bias-free (Neubauer et al., 2019). To achieve this, Husserl adopted the concept of epoché, which refers to the bracketing or suspension of one's own beliefs and assumptions (Zahavi, 2018) when carrying out the study. This is not to suggest that one can completely deny one's own beliefs entirely, but instead to put them aside in the short term to allow the opportunity for a stronger understanding of the phenomenon. Husserl suggested a series of reductions to achieve this transcendental state (Neubauer, 2019), involving firstly an examination of the participants' experiences, followed by a distillation of all their experiences into a unified *essence* of their experience.

The work of Martin Heidegger led to a shift from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology towards more of an ontological focus (Neubauer, 2019), with human beings as *actors* in the world and therefore focusing on the relationship between them

and their *lifeworld* (Ibid.). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a move away from the descriptive, to an interpretive view of the lifeworld of participants and means that the researcher must remain cognisant of the impact that previous experiences of participants has on their lived experience, but also of their own background and lived experiences. The observer is therefore no longer bias free but is able to understand the phenomenon by interpretive means, at the same time reflecting on their own experiences (Ibid.). There is a shift away from the epoché as advocated so strongly by Husserl (Stolz, 2023) and the past experiences of the researcher now become valuable assets to the study. The researcher openly recognises and accepts their preconceptions and utilises these during the analysis of the data. Spiegelberg (1975) was an early exponent of *doing phenomenology on the things* (van Manen and van Manen, 2021), as opposed to simply writing about the theoretical explorations of phenomenology. This thesis takes a pragmatic approach to phenomenology and sought to add to the practical aspects of phenomenology by unearthing the true meanings behind the lived experiences of UK military students. In my view, too much emphasis on the philosophical foundations of phenomenology would have limited my ability to uncover the rich insights from this group of participants.

As stated by Larsen and Adu (2021), whilst there are many versions of phenomenology in diverse and complex fields, developing scholars have an imaginative space and chance to make phenomenology their own. I was also drawn to Cresswell and Poth's (2016, p.57) description of a phenomenological study as something that "*describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon*." Given the lack of clarity regarding the lived experiences of UK military students undertaking online degree courses, the intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of that phenomenon. The absolute key, as suggested by Zahavi (2018), is to better understand the interrelationship between the object and the subject, which in this case was the interrelationship between the study experiences and the participants.

Neubauer et al. (2019) suggest that phenomenology is not just about providing a descriptive account of the lived experience but instead providing a fuller and richer account of this experience by better understanding the interrelationships in the data. In essence, phenomenological research looks to define a phenomenon by studying it from the viewpoint of those who have experienced it, looking at both *what* was

experienced and *how* it was experienced by the participants. As an ex-serviceman studying the lived experiences of serving or veteran UK military students, I felt unable to detach myself from the world I was researching given my long military service and so dismissed the transcendental approach to phenomenology. Additionally, from an epistemological perspective, I could not be bias free and as such, felt able to use my own experiences to interpret the research findings. Indeed, I was driven to utilise these experiences to better inform and understand the findings from my insider/outsider position (Section 2.1.2).

Although the use of phenomenology was selected for the study, other approaches were considered as part of the methodological considerations for the research, which included alternative research approaches of a qualitative nature, such as ethnography and case study (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

Ethnographic study – although there are cultural elements to this study, it was not possible to spend the time required to become embedded within the group. Spending time within the field (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Creswell and Creswell, 2017) would have been impossible to achieve effectively given the dispersed nature of the participants. In addition, there were security implications with some of the group that would have been beyond my own security clearance. Ultimately, it was felt that an ethnographic study would not necessarily have captured the essence of what was intended in this study due to the courses being entirely online.

Case Study – this approach could have been utilised in this study but the focus of case study research is not predominantly on the individual and their stories (Creswell et al., 2007) but instead on the individual case selected to understand the issue. Therefore, in terms of this study, I felt that the case study was not sufficiently focussed enough on the lived experiences of the participants and whilst the use of semi-structured interviews may have yielded interesting or unusual issues, I did not feel that this approach would have allowed me to gain a better understanding of what the participants had in common (Ibid.). In addition, as Stake (1995) suggests, a case study approach would have involved collecting data using a variety of collection procedures and over a sustained period of time. The multiple sources of data required, such as interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell and Báez, 2020) were simply not viable in this research study given the logistical and security constraints.

The philosophical approach to this research is shown in Figure 2.1 and utilised the Saunders et al. (2009) 'onion' model to show how the research transitioned from the philosophical ideas, through both ontological and epistemological perspectives, and into the design instrument. The original model was adapted in terms of the terminology utilised across the layers, to reflect my own approach to the study. The research questions developed and were shaped by the philosophical approach and also informed the choice of the research strategy and my collection technique (Saunders et al., 2009). The rest of this chapter comprises further detail on the Research Design, how the Data Generation (Section 2.2) was approached and how the Data Analysis (Section 2.3) was completed. The chapter has been approached using Figure 2.1 as a guide and is written from out to in following the onion model.

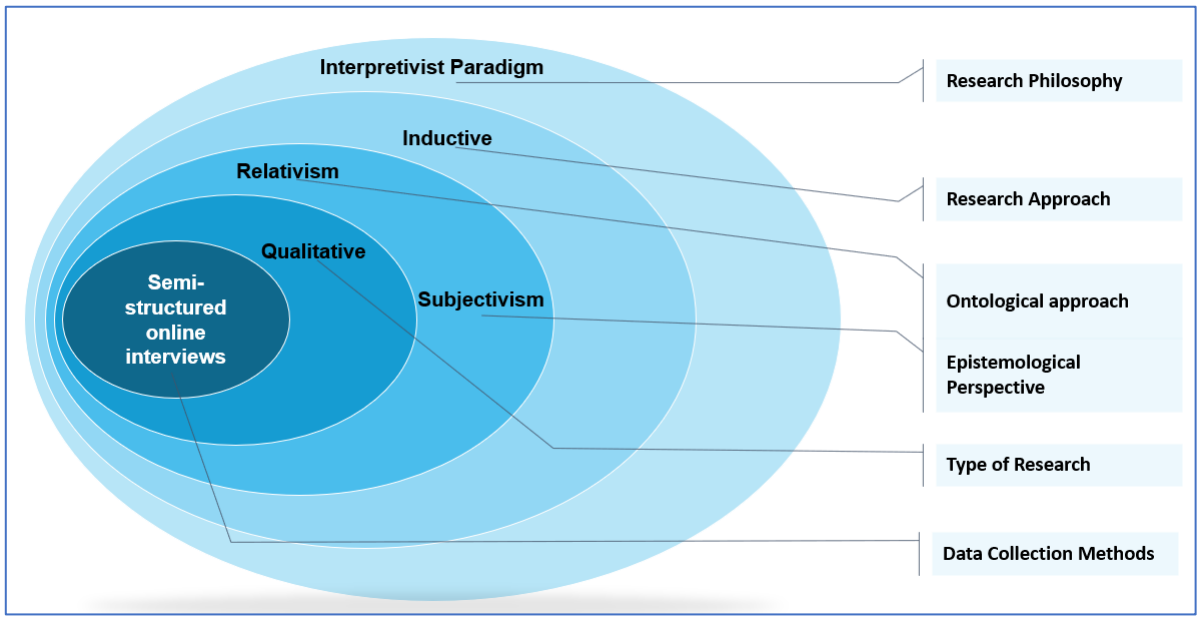

Figure 2.1 - Research Design, adapted from Saunders et al. (2009)

2.1.2 Insider/Outsider Positionality

Considering myself to be an *insider/outsider* researcher, I remained cognisant that my positionality had the potential to influence the research. As Merriam et al. (2001) suggest, *positionality*, *power* and *representation* are key themes when considering the insider/outsider debate. Whilst my own thoughts were related to improved knowledge of the participant's lived experiences with a view to the provision of more-informed

course delivery, it was always possible that the participants' views differed to my own and this may have impacted their openness during the data capture. For example, whilst my own positionality was one of veteran having previously studied online, it was always a possibility that participants viewed me as someone in a position of power (Course Leader) and someone who effectively had their future in my hands. Representation also raised issues regarding balance; on the one hand, my previous military service allowed me insider knowledge (Merriam et al., 2021) but this had to be balanced against any tendency to place my own views over those of the participants.

Whilst there were benefits to being considered an insider by the research participants, not least from an acceptance perspective (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), there were also possible impediments to the research process. If the participants viewed me as an insider, it meant that I had to ensure the participants explained their individual experience fully and not assume my familiarity with military life would enable me to understand their perspective clearly, either through the language utilised or the use of military idiom. My own military and online educational experiences also raised the potential to influence the research (Ibid.), making my own assumptions as opposed to analysing the actual research findings. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p.60) suggest, "holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness…", in the same way that "not being in a group does not denote complete difference." Dwyer and Buckle (2009) refer to the '*space between'*, which they suggest is noting the ways in which we are the same but also the ways in which we are different from our research participants. Brown (2023) suggests that being an *insider* researcher can be a positive thing as the insider experience offers a sizable starting point for the research itself. Bukamal (2022, p.331) suggests that the "shifting positionality" of insider/outsider researchers can offer value for other researchers who are conducting comparative educational research. In this research study, there was a need to balance my 36 years in the UK military against my position as the Course Leader for the team that delivers online degree courses to current UK military students. These dynamic and changing positions were major influences on the methodological decisions made during the research design. These decisions were based upon my own positionality and the fact that I was conducting research in between two differing cultural contexts (Bukamal, 2022). Throughout the research, it was absolutely essential to remain cognisant of the fact that I brought with me my own views of the world. As Braun and Clarke (2022,

p.10) state, a researcher is a "*situated, insight-bringing, integral component of the analysis*." Therefore, as the research involved a subjective view of the in-depth factors (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020) associated with the UK military student lived experience, the interpretivist paradigm was appropriate and utilised for this study.

2.1.3 Interpretivist Paradigm

It is theoretically understood that a research study looking to grasp life through lens of others would be viewed as the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Research of a qualitative nature is about studying and better understanding the meanings that people assign to a community or individual problem (Ibid.) and therefore, a qualitative approach aligned with the Interpretivist paradigm was considered best suited to this study of UK military students. Individuals construct their own view of the world based upon their social construct and experiences (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017) so it was important to understand how the transition to academic life impacted the shift to academia. This was also essential as it helped to drive the methodology for the study and subsequently, the way in which the research questions were formed. This paradigm approach suggests that reality is experienced differently by everyone (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020) but one of the benefits of this is that I was able to utilise my own views that were shaped by in-depth experiences to deeply grasp the socio-cultural contexts in which the UK military students were operating. The findings from this study did therefore allow for the possibility that the research findings could be utilised in other delivery organisations for the design and delivery of similar courses.

2.1.4 Ontological and Epistemological Approach

Interpretivism as a paradigm assumes that the lived experience is subjective and can differ between individuals (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020), so it is therefore key that the interrelationships between the epistemological and ontological approaches connected with this paradigm are aligned when designing the research. As Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) propose, a paradigm consists of the basic convictions, viewpoints and assumptions that guide the overall approach to research, shaping how questions are asked, data are collected, and conclusions are drawn. From an ontological

perspective, which explores the nature of existence, relativism relates to the interpretivist paradigm, where reality is viewed through reflection of the meanings in relation to having an understanding of the community setting (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). This aligned with the research in that the study tried to better understand the realities of UK military students in their study journey whilst set against the backdrop of their daily military lives and interaction with the academic environment. The epistemological perspective on the research, which seeks to understand how individuals come to know things, was subjectivism and this describes the position whereby individuals are unable to be detached from their knowledge (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Therefore, individuals have to decipher and make meaning of their surroundings, both in their daily lives and when faced with new challenges (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). As a result, the ontological and epistemological approaches were aligned for the study, which sought to better understand the participant's lived experiences.

The truths that an individual experiences are influenced by their environment (Neubauer et al., 2019; Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2020) and as described above, hermeneutic phenomenology looks to better understand these "deeper layers of human experience" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.94). The real key to a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, however, is the interpretation of the lived experiences. Given the current dearth of UK research in the area of UK military students entering HE, this interpretation is limited and especially from authors that have the military knowledge and experience to appreciate the challenges faced by this group of students. Given my own previous military and online learning experiences, I am arguably well placed to write on this subject area, although it is acknowledged that there were potential predeterminations on my part. However, this insider role was viewed more from a position of strength and not a hindrance to the research findings, in that the participants were more likely to be more open with me and there was potentially more depth to the gathered data (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Brown, 2023). Indeed, in this instance, my own subjectivity became a key part of the analysis activity as the study focussed on the lived experience of participants with whom I was well versed, both from a military background perspective and an online learner viewpoint.

2.1.5 Theoretical Framework

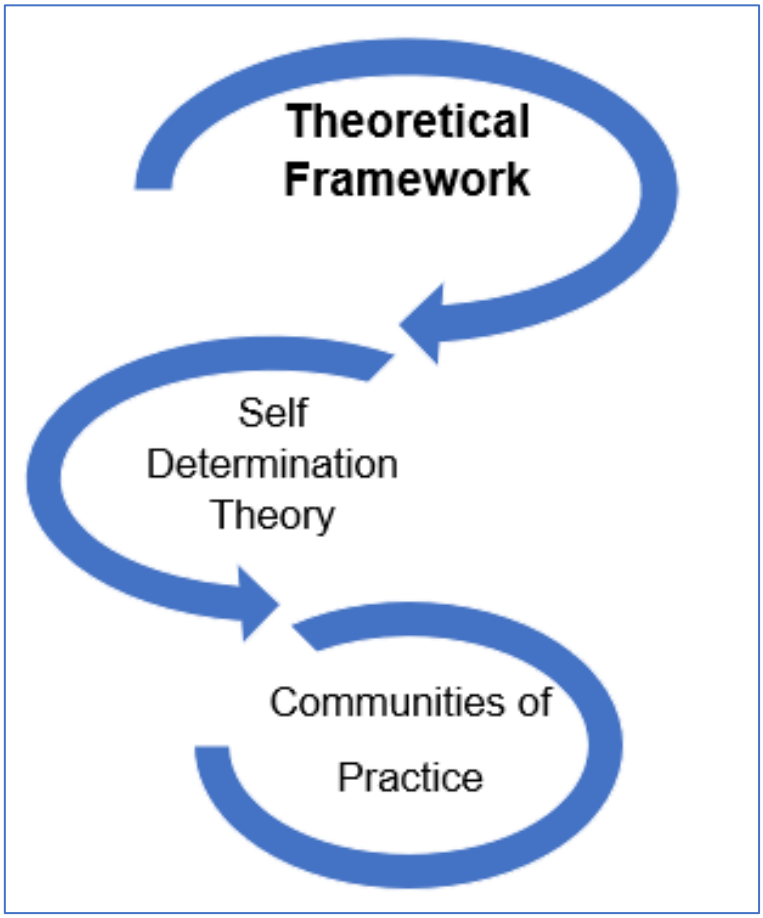

Figure 2.2 - Theoretical Framework

As shown in Figure 2.2, this study employed both SDT and CoP as the theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of UK military students entering and undertaking online degree courses. Whilst there has been research completed using these theories on an individual basis across many different fields of research, there does not appear to be any research where both theories are specifically combined into a single study. In this UK-based study, I am struck by the way in which the UK military community harnesses their '*can do'* attitude and team-related capabilities to pursue their studies when faced with a great deal of personal and work-related adversity. I felt that if course teams were able to tap into this community dynamic, whilst at the same time harnessing the strong intrinsic and extrinsic motivational influences of these students, there was potential to produce courses that are better suited to this cohort of students. The combination of CoP and SDT theories have, in my view, the potential

to be utilised very effectively and were worthy of further investigation in the context of this study. Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as a situated activity revolving around a practice they refer to as *legitimate peripheral participation*. As stated earlier, the community spirit is very strong within the UK military and much of the learning takes place within this community setting and outside of any formal training. This researcher believes there is potential to utilise this community strength within the delivery of online degree courses, where too often as the Course Leader on the team that delivers the online degrees, I witnessed students being treated as single entities on modules without harnessing their predisposed desire to work as a team.

As Ryan and Deci (2019) suggest, SDT began as a narrowly focussed theory on intrinsic motivation but has grown over the years and has now been utilised across many topics and expanded to cover both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Whilst several studies have utilised SDT in US military circles (Raabe et al., 2020; Knevelsrud et al., 2023), there is a lack of literature with regards the UK military environment. The focus of this research was to make use of both CoP and SDT within the UK military context and specifically within the field of online degree courses. It was proposed that by harnessing the common purpose mindset of the UK military students, along with their community-related tendencies and strong motivational levels, that online degree courses could be better supported. A clearer understanding of the military community strengths in the context of course delivery, along with a better comprehension of how their natural motivation levels could be transferred to their academic studies, has the potential to enhance course delivery to all UK military students within the academic environment. In summary, this study aimed to explore whether the theories of CoP and SDT could be utilised in terms of UK military students undertaking online degree courses to better support their studies. In addition, the study investigated whether it would be possible to combine the two theories in a unique learning environment that has hitherto lacked detailed research. Conceptually, the link between the theoretical and conceptual frameworks is shown in Figure 2.3, with the latter being discussed in Section 2.1.6.

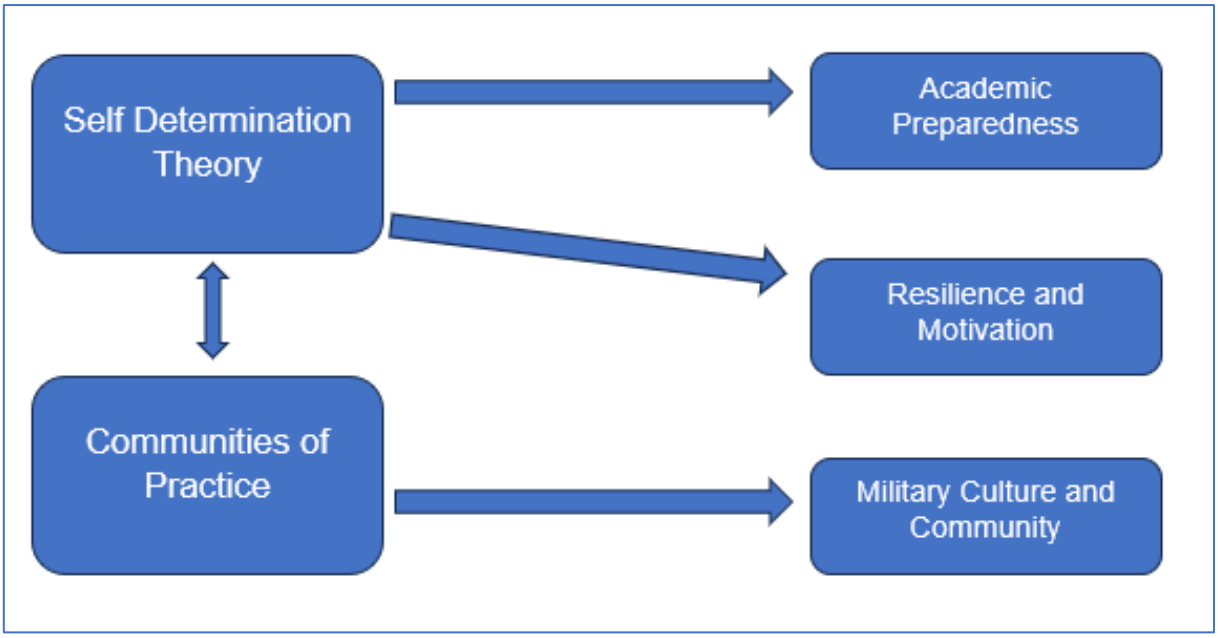

Figure 2.3 - Relationship of Theoretical Framework to Conceptual Framework

2.1.6 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provides a structured, often graphic, representation of the key concepts and ideas within a research study, acting as a blueprint by clarifying the scope and expected relationships between variables. Ravitch and Riggan (2016) describe a conceptual framework as the way in which all of the elements of a research process are linked together. So, in essence, the research questions and the methods need to align to the reasons for the study and the approach taken. Varpio et al. (2020) offer perhaps a slightly more defined opinion on conceptual frameworks in that they suggest the intention of the conceptual framework is to provide responses to two questions: why the research is valuable and what impacts the findings will make. I accept that the conceptual framework for this research has developed over time and that it has been adjusted as data from the study has altered my understanding of the phenomenon I was studying (Varpio et al., 2020).

Figure 2.4 outlines the conceptual framework for this study and the linkage between the individual elements: Academic Preparedness, Resilience and Motivation, Military Culture and Community. When one considers the fact that many of the students entering online degree courses are not as academically prepared as they might be (Section 1.4), their resilience and motivation has the potential to wane quickly. It was

proposed that the strengths of the UK military culture and community spirit was not being employed to its best effect in their studies and this study effectively sought to address the dichotomous relationship between confident skilled UK military personnel entering academia and potentially becoming underconfident and disillusioned students.

Figure 2.4 - Conceptual Framework for the Study

2.1.7 The choice of Qualitative Research

Choosing the correct research approach is problematic for early stage researchers (Mulisa, 2022) and oftentimes, the literature can appear to be confusing and misleading. Positivist research is often presented statistically and leans towards the use of scientific operations, being characterised by the use of testing hypotheses, theories and measuring cause-effect relationships (Ibid.). As the study focussed on the lived experience, a positivist approach was not thought to be suitable. Interpretivist research is described by Aspers and Corte (2019) as an activity that increases understanding of a phenomenon by getting closer to it. Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggest it is research where the enquirer makes knowledge claims utilising one or more of a variety of strategies (including phenomenology) and develops themes from the data. In summary, qualitative research is a term that encompasses a variety of

techniques to investigate phenomena in the genuine setting (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021). The intent of this research was a study of the lived experiences of a group of UK military students and as such, was qualitative in nature and there was no intent to measure or test hypotheses.

From an ontological perspective, the positivist view that there is a measurable worldview or that there is an objective reality (Mulisa, 2022) does not fit with a study of the socially constructed lived experiences of this group of students. My own informed view, based upon my military experience and as a Course Leader, is that the educational reality differs for UK military students and that they have a different lived experience to on-campus students or even other non-military students that undertake their studies via DL. As Mulisa (2022, p.120) states, “reality is influenced by context” and the main drive for this exploratory research was to better understand the behaviours, observations and opinions of UK military students undertaking online degree courses whilst faced with real challenges in their professional roles. Qualitative research was therefore considered to be the most beneficial approach to understanding the context in which these experiences are played out. From a research instrument perspective, the use of the semi-structured interview was regarded as being the best method and the reasons for this choice are described in Section 2.1.8.

2.1.8 Research Instrument- Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews using Microsoft Teams were utilised as the research instrument for this study for a number of reasons. Given the security implications for some participants due to role and location, along with the very real geographic implications of gaining face-to-face access to participants who were spread all over the world, online interviewing presented the best opportunity to gather data. As Saarijarvi and Bratt (2021) suggest, the online interview compares very favourably with face-to-face interviews and with a good internet connection, few issues should be expected. One thing to guard against however, is ensuring that nobody else is in the room, which could be an influencing factor (Ibid.). This was checked prior to the interviews started and with the participant’s permission, the interviews were recorded and a transcript of the interviews downloaded following the interviews for analysis

purposes. This approach had previously been trialled during a pilot study and as a consequence, the original research questions (Appendix A) had been amended due to a lack of flow in some areas of these early interviews.

Other approaches to data gathering were considered but dismissed for a number of reasons: the use of group meetings were considered but the fact that the students never visited the CSU, along with their dispersed locations around the UK and the world, negated any opportunity to get groups into the same location and offered them further flexibility to engage with the study. Whilst I could have potentially organised an online group discussion, I had concerns given the military hierarchal structure, that there may be participants holding positions of power or roles that could not be discussed in a group setting (Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). I also decided that even had this been possible, then such discussions may have led to ethical issues about personal records in a group setting (BERA, 2018[1]). Additionally, given the hierarchal structure of the UK military, I was concerned that there could have been further issues with regards personnel with lower rank being uncomfortable about sharing their experiences in front of more senior personnel. Formal structured interviews were also considered but were rejected due to concerns about the lack of flexibility and my belief that participants would find the interview too rigid and feel they could not speak about anything outside of the questions asked. Such an approach may have felt too hierarchal to a number of participants and although that is the environment they usually operate in, I wanted the participants to be open and honest. The use of individual semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to have a discussion with the individuals and foster a situation that invited them to speak openly and honestly (Oplatka, 2018).

The questions utilised during the semi-structured interviews were of an emergent nature (Creswell and Creswell, 2017), with no absolute fixed order, and were amended in terms of their flow as required to follow new insights as the participants responded to questions. This aligns with a reflective, interpretive approach and as Ruslin et al. (2022) suggest, semi-structured interviews provide greater flexibility, allowing for new questions to be used as a result of what the participants may raise during the interview. As Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) suggest, this latitude to avoid scripted

[1] This research was completed at a point before the issue of the 2024 BERA guidelines.

dialogue allows for greater freedom in the interview process. The questions focussed directly on the academic preparedness of the participants, along with their motivational factors and lived experiences, all of which were directly related to the Research Questions and Objectives.

The interviews were recorded as I was concerned that handwritten notes may produce poorly documented transcripts and that this would lead to poor-quality data (Rutakumwa et al., 2020) along with difficulties associated with managing note taking and interviewing at the same time, which impacts listening ability. The recordings produced a transcript of the exchange that added validity to the data and although further details are provided in Section 2.3, any obvious errors in the text were removed. These included any clear duplication of text in the transcript, verbal pauses such as '"ah", "um" and coughs' and more importantly, any security related statements. The transcripts were subsequently coded and analysed but nothing of importance was removed as it was key that the data was viewed as being reliable and validated (Yin, 2018). Information sheets (Appendix D) were provided and permission gained for the gathering of data from the interviews was obtained (Appendix E). Detail of the research instrument questions (Appendix F) was explained before the interviews started, along with the expected timeline for the semi-structured interview.

2.1.9 Study Participants

There are five degree profiles in the Fd course range, which include Aeronautical Systems, Mechanical Systems, Electronics and Telecommunications Systems, Engineering Management and General Engineering. Participants were randomly chosen for the research by the Course Director for MoD DL courses to avoid researcher bias and he used a purposive approach to select the participants:

- 15 participants were chosen for the study.
- A participant group was selected from each of the 5 Fd courses, with an initial intent to select 3 students from each of the courses. However, given the very low numbers of UK military students who enrol in the Engineering Management Fd profile, fewer students were available and therefore, additional students were chosen from other profiles.

- 11 of the participants were still serving, with the remaining 4 having left the military and being classified as veterans.

- Of the serving personnel, 9 were male and 2 were female.

- Of the veterans, 2 were male and 2 were female.

- The participants had to have completed at least the first three modules on their respective course, which it was felt allowed them sufficient time to form an opinion on their lived experience of the course.

    - New starters on the courses generally undertake only one module per semester and therefore, this equated to around one year on the course.

- At the time of the study, none of the participants were being taught by me, although all had been in the first semester of their course.

Fifteen participants allowed for a good range from the five degree course profiles, with 11 males and 4 females interviewed – this percentage of females (circa 36%) is higher than the current female to male ratio in the UK Regular Forces, which stands at 11.7% (Parliament, House of Commons, 2024). Defining the correct number of participants for any study is challenging, not least from the practicality perspective of simply finding sufficient and willing participants (Baker and Edwards, 2012). In this study, it proved extremely difficult to find even fifteen willing participants from a potential research population of over 500 students, perhaps an indication of the increased workloads for many in the face of an increase in deployment regularity for the fast jet and rotary fleets. The request for volunteers from the Course Director (sent via email) received very low feedback numbers, which was disappointing. The intent was that the fifteen participants would fully inform the responses to the research questions but as Baker and Edwards (2012) suggest, qualitative researchers may not really recognise how much data to collect in advance of the study. Baker and Edwards (2012) argue that qualitative researchers often find commonality or repetition in the participants responses, therefore indicating that further interviews would be unnecessary. Given the time it took to organise and carry out the fifteen interviews, the time element could

not be underestimated and ultimately, this research was exploratory in nature and therefore, a compromise in terms of the participant numbers had to be made in this instance. That said, the later interviews did not yield any important new insights and therefore, this indicated a potential for data saturation. The distinctive nature of the participants involved in the study, along with the course delivery methodology, was of paramount importance to this study and the findings provided rich and informative data from the fifteen semi-structured interviews. It could be suggested that reliability is an issue with semi-structured interviews as the interviewer could interpret the responses based upon their own frame of reference or experiences (Saunders et al., 2009). There could also be interviewee bias as they may be unwilling to discuss the full details of their experiences or perhaps be unable to release some details surrounding their particular personal or work-related circumstances (Ibid.). The subject of reliability is discussed in greater detail with regards this study in section 2.1.10.

2.1.10 Reliability and Validity

As Cresswell and Creswell (2017) state, reliability is not straightforward in qualitative research as the outcomes from a qualitative study cannot necessarily be applied to other situations. It is key however, that the validity of the research findings are in no doubt to the reader, a feat that a number of researchers have admitted is extremely difficult to accomplish (Lincoln et al., 2011; Rose and Johnson, 2020). In the first instance, the trustworthiness of the findings are related to the methodological strategies utilised in the research (Noble and Smith, 2015), which includes demonstrating a clear process map and including rich and unbiased verbatim descriptions of participant accounts. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) contend that the credibility of the research and its findings focuses particularly on the data generation stage of the qualitative research study - in particular, they suggest that the data generation needs to address whether the data is complete and if it provides information relating to what is being investigated. Details regarding the data generation and analysis for this study can be found in sections 2.2 and 2.3 respectively but a visual representation of the research paradigm, methodological approach, theoretical framework, conceptual framework and the research questions is shown at Figure 2.5.

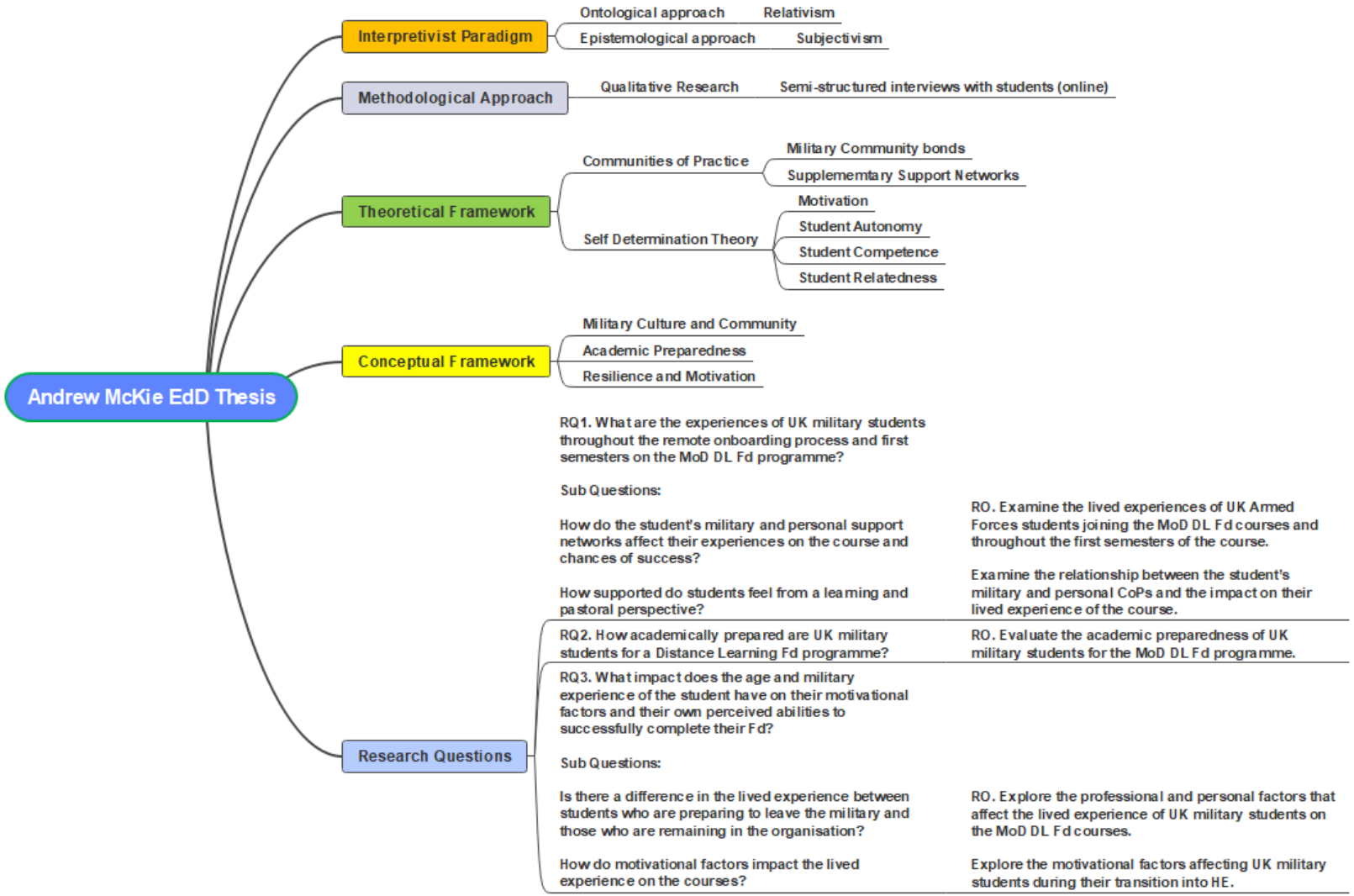

Figure 2.5 - Link between Theoretical Framework, Conceptual Framework and the Research Questions

2.1.11 Participant Validation

This study presented with some complicated and dynamic circumstances and it is accepted that the findings may relate specifically to the fifteen individuals interviewed in this study, who were from a wide range of UK military students on the degree courses. However, whilst I would expect similar findings with other groups of UK military students in a future study, there will no doubt be some issues that are personal, unique or perhaps Service-related to the individuals as might be experienced with any study of this type. The validity of the findings were related to what Creswell and Creswell (2017) refer to as *member checking* and *time in the field*. Rowlands (2021) refers to this as Interviewee Transcript Review (ITR) but I have utilised the term *participant validation* in this thesis as it allowed me to correct errors and provide a full record of the research process (Lindheim, 2022). All transcripts were checked by the participant following the interview and it was agreed by all parties that they were an honest reflection of the interview and could be used in full. This participant validation approach has a number of additional benefits and the potential to address ethical concerns (Lindheim, 2022): firstly, the participants are fully engaged in the process, the findings are transparent and participants are able to reflect on and develop their previously expressed views in the interview. Secondly, the process goes some way to addressing and perhaps minimising any power related issues between the participants and myself (Ibid.). Ultimately, it provides an approach that goes some way to ensuring the trustworthiness of the data from the study (Ibid.).

2.1.12 Ethical issues

Throughout the research, continual consideration was given to my role as Course Leader for the Fd programme and the influence this could have on the research findings. There was potential for me to have an influence on the research being part of the team that decided the academic futures of UK military students at the university awards boards. Having served in the UK military for 36 years and studied as an online student when serving, this further served to remind me to remain cognisant of my potentially conflicting roles throughout the research. My own ontological beliefs presented the possibility throughout to influence how I conducted the research, along with having the potential to affect the results from the data gathered (Holmes, 2020). I

therefore remained transparent throughout the research with regards my own opinions and as Holmes (Ibid., p.2) suggests, “I disclosed myself fully throughout the research, understanding the impact that I could have on it.”

Given there were fifteen participants in the study, it was unlikely that all the experiences were going to be of a positive nature. There were inherent positions of power between the participants and me and these needed to be fully understood by those engaged with the research. My own positionality was made clear in the Information Sheets (Appendix D) that were provided to the participants in advance of the study, and it was also made very transparent that my focus was not simply to influence the experiences of the participant within the course (Head, 2020). Instead, the research focussed on their lived experiences, along with the wider academic and administrative aspects of the course, to improving the design and delivery of the courses where required. As Head (Ibid.) suggests, it is key that any issues that arise during the research are dealt with as they arise.

There were several legitimate ethical concerns throughout the research and these included ensuring that the data was anonymised and that confidentiality was ensured for the participants. As stated, all participants were fully informed of the study intent via Information sheets (Appendix D) and were also asked to sign Consent Forms (Appendix E) before commencement of the study. It was key that whilst I remained aware of these concerns, I also remained detached and reflexive throughout. Such issues have the potential to be traumatic for all parties, be that from the perspective of the researcher who is invested in the study, or the participants because it potentially raises personal issues that can influence everyday lives. Ethical approval for the research was requested through the University Ethics Committee and after some initial minor issues regarding terminology that was considered leading in the interview questions, approval was granted by the Committee in August 2023 (Appendix G).

2.2 Data Generation

2.2.1 Influence of the Pilot Study

Having justified semi-structured interviews as the research instrument (Section 2.1.8), it was vital to ensure that the questions used in the interviews supported the requirements of the primary research questions and objectives for the study. The intended questions were trialled in an earlier pilot study (Appendix A) and it had been found that whilst certain aspects of the interviews had worked well, other parts were not as successful. In particular, specific words in the questions or phraseology had the tendency to be leading and caused the participants to answer in a way that felt directed to me, which did not allow for freedom of speech on their part. As Ruslin et al. (2022) suggest, knowledge is situated and so the purpose of the interview is not for the researcher to lend their own views in the responses, but instead for the participant's views to be brought into focus. Another key area of the earlier trial interviews was centred on what Mahat-Shamir et al. (2021, p.85) refer to as the phase before the interview, where "there is much small talk…" This proved to be a really important rapport building phase to develop for the later interviews as it allowed the participants to further relax and a degree of reassurance and trust to be developed. This pre-interview phase really cemented their openness with me during the interviews and the early questions included those that the participant could answer easily, including such questions as "Can you please tell me a little about yourself, your background etc.." Rabionet (2011, p.564) regards this early stage of the interview process as being one of the most important, suggesting that it establishes rapport and "elicits reflection and truthful comments from the interviewee."

Additional issues from the earlier pilot study related to the sequencing of the questions where the interviews did not flow as expected and this needed to be adapted for the actual study. This adaption allowed for a better flow of the interview as well as ensuring that the interview met the requirements of the primary research questions for the study. In their methodological reflection of qualitative research instruments, Ruslin et al. (2022) contend, the role of the interviewer within a qualitative research study is to ensure that the lens through which they contextualise the responses are appropriate to the study. In the case of the main study, the questions used were open-ended and

follow-up questions (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021) were utilised if a participant either expressed a view worth further investigation, or their body language indicated something that was worth pursuing.

The pilot study also highlighted a tendency on my part to interrupt participants as they were answering questions, along with a propensity for me to insert words or meanings on the transcripts instead of utilising the actual responses given. Given my own positionality and that I had my own views on the findings of the study, there was a constant battle to guard against this tendency to influence responses and I had to remain reflexive at all times, ensuring that I did not unconsciously assert my power over the interviewee. Given the very real likelihood of the participants having varied professional and personal backgrounds, this precludes a standardised approach to interviews and allows for a varied set of views and experiences to be expressed. In any research, however, one cannot ignore how the researcher's personal motivations led them to the study, which has an impact on the theoretical and methodological decisions made (Folkes, 2023), which was a challenge for me throughout the research process.

2.2.2 Main Study Semi-Structured Interviews

The research study semi-structured interviews were carried out and recorded with the permission of the participants using Microsoft Teams software and shared with them via the same software for verification purposes (the software allows for all participants to view and download both transcript and recording). The software produced a mp.4 video of the interview, along with a downloadable transcript in Microsoft Word format. The choice to record the interviews was made as it allowed me to be more in the moment for the actual interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). Given all participants (including myself) were either serving or veteran UK military personnel, there was an expectation that all parties would be relaxed and comfortable with the process as we were all from the same military community, which proved to be the case. There was also the additional advantage of being able to see the participants during the video call, which allowed for the opportunity of being able to observe non-verbal reactions (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021; Ruslin et al., 2022). This was generally limited to any visual cues exhibited from the upper half of the participant's bodies but still proved key in the breakdown of the responses during the semi-

structured interviews as several non-verbal cues were observed, which allowed for follow-up questions to be asked of the participant.

A set of personal notes was used for the interview process as it provided an outline for the main topics and although it was not stuck to rigidly, all questions were covered but in an order that related to the responses of the participants. The length of the interviews was between 25 and 40 minutes and without exception, all participants were engaged fully with the interview process. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised by the candour and willingness of the participants, who openly conveyed their desire to support the research study. From a validity perspective, the responses confirmed consistency across the fifteen interviews, which enabled an opportunity to gain a clear overall idea of the lived experience to be developed.

Although the use of semi-structured interviews as the research instrument was adopted to allow greater latitude to explore the participant's lived experiences, it remains important that there is a framework to follow (Ruslin et al., 2022). The purpose of the interview needs to be made clear (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021) and then a more formal plan set out to capture the required data. The questions therefore were based around the primary research questions and objectives, namely the academic preparedness of the participant for the course, their lived experiences and the motivational factors associated with the age and military experience of the participants. Prior to the main study (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021), no formal training was completed for the interview process but the pilot study proved immensely useful and resulted in the final questions that can be found in Appendix F.

2.2.3 Data Storage

From an ethical perspective, it was key that the data gathered from the interviews was treated appropriately (BERA, 2018), which includes the right to privacy. Following the interviews, all recordings and transcripts were downloaded and stored on my university secure OneDrive area, which is only accessible by me and is password protected. This was made clear to the participants before the interviews commenced and information was included in the Information Sheet (Appendix D), along with their permissions (Appendix E). As the interviews were carried out in Microsoft Teams, all participants also had access to both recordings and transcripts from the software chat

window. To further secure their details, all participant details were anonymised following the interviews and their real names do not appear in this work - instead, false names are utilised and only I am aware of their real details. Each participant is unsighted with regards to others that participated in the study and legal requirements have been met with regards the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (BERA, 2018). Notwithstanding this, this procedural approach to data storage is simply that and I felt it of paramount importance that from an ethical perspective, there also needed to be an ongoing reflexive and human response (Husband, 2020) during the interviews. There was an ongoing dialogue within the interviews when it was felt that either something personal or security related was discussed. In these cases, the transcripts would have been cleansed of those details but in all cases, the participants were happy for me to include everything that was said and so, all transcripts are a full version of the interviews with no redacted material.

2.3 Data Analysis

2.3.1 Data Analysis Introduction

The data analysis sections are organised in terms of how I initially approached the process (Section 2.3.2), showing how the initial codes emerged and were subsequently amended with further data analysis, then how the final themes for the study emerged. The section concludes with a worked example (Section 2.3.3) and discussion around the difficulties I faced during the data analysis phase (Section 2.3.4). Given the use of phenomenology in this study, it should be noted that although the use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was contemplated, it was dismissed due to its non-alignment to the intent of this study. IPA is more focused on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2021), which is subtly different to what this study was seeking to achieve. Although phenomenological in its approach, this study sought to understand the lived experience of the participants, thereby looking to better understand how these experiences could be utilised in course design and delivery.

2.3.2 Data Analysis Approach

As an early career researcher, I had no experience of analysing academic data and the choice of method for doing so was a difficult one to make. My early research on the subject brought me to the work of Lester et al. (2020) and their 7-phase approach, which they developed from Lochmiller and Lester (2017). This approach to analysis provides a useful commencement point for new qualitative researchers, with a relatively easy to understand process for developing themes from initial categories and codes. Lester et al. (2020, p.98) describe qualitative data analysis as a "nonlinear, iterative process" and this is good advice for the new researcher. Their approach is straightforward from a process perspective and their work appears to provide a useful starting point. However, perhaps the most defined method for conducting analysis in recent years is provided by the work of Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2021a; Braun and Clarke, 2021b; Braun and Clarke, 2022) who offer a 6-step process and it was this approach that I adopted. Thematic Analysis (TA) is described as accessible and flexible by Braun and Clarke (2021a), which seems particularly suited to an early career researcher and perhaps offers an easier entry to analysing data for the first time. The flexibility of TA means it is best described as a method and not a definitive approach to data analysis, which proved useful to an early researcher such as me (Ibid).

In terms of the choice of method for the TA, I found the process from Braun and Clarke to be straightforward and relatively easy to adopt. Having downloaded the transcripts, I was able to read through all of them several times and return to them regularly looking for new insights (step 1), whilst at the same time, viewing the video recordings alongside each transcript. This allowed me to generate the initial codes (step 2) and using this approach, it allowed me to generate potential codes that were relevant to my research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Appendix H provides a list of the initial codes that were highlighted from the initial analysis of the data across fifteen transcripts and recordings, along with some notes that summarise the issues. More explicit details are described in Chapter 3, where the findings are described in greater detail, and these findings are then analysed in Chapter 4.

These initial codes were then reviewed and analysed specifically for what Braun and Clarke (2021) describe as *inductive* (data-driven) or *deductive* (researcher-driven)

data. Principally, this is where the data was implicit from the transcript or recording (inductive), or where I was able to deduce meaning based upon my own experiences (deductive). It is however key that the data was reviewed constantly (even some months after the interviews had taken place), as researcher reflexivity needed to be guarded against constantly and further insights may be found. As Braun and Clarke (2021, p.13) suggest, the researcher needs to "turn their own lens back on themselves, to recognise and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research…" Additionally, less obvious ideas are often found during this process of constant review and I was therefore able to refine the list and combine some of the initial codes, resulting in the following refined coding list in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 - Refined Coding List

Final Code	Notes
Work life / Study balance Subset: work location and time	This code has a subset of 'work location', which whilst an interesting finding, raises a number of problems for the study and is discussed in further detail below.
Communities of Practice within the UK military environment	Ten of the fifteen participants struggled with the transition to academia, especially around the lack of support, loss of structure in terms of their daily lives and also a perceived loss of identity. This still feels at the heart of the study and particularly with the lived experience. However, there is a subtle change of direction within this theme, as it was felt that communities within the military would be a better descriptor as opposed to either military CoP or simply CoP. Given the dispersed nature of the participants and their frequent postings

	and/or deployments, many of them had formed their own support groups, which they relied upon within both their personal and working lives.
Time in the military and since leaving school	This had both negative and positive connotations in the study: those who had spent longer in the military had therefore been out of mainstream school for longer. However, this was balanced by their wider support networks, both from a personal and work-related perspective. One or two of the younger participants felt less troubled by this aspect and were more accustomed to the classroom environment. In addition, they were more accustomed to the online environment, having experienced it throughout the pandemic era. All of the participants had experienced this same exposure to online learning but the two younger participants were more content with the online approach.
Anxiousness about study	Some participants related their levels of anxiety to not having studied for some time, whilst others suggested that entering an academic environment that was very different to their military lives caused them more anxiety.
Tutor interaction and support	There were mixed views on this theme, with some participants happier than others. All participants however

	discussed tutor interaction and module design at some point in their interview.
Self-confidence in the academic environment	Many participants stated that they did not feel their confidence in the workplace necessarily translated to the academic environment.

Step 3 of the Braun and Clarke approach was utilised to generate the initial themes, which were then reviewed in step 4. The term *generate* is used deliberately and is associated with the move away from the term “searching” as noted by Braun and Clarke (2021, p.78). This involved a move from the micro scale of coding to a more macro level review across the whole data set, looking for “connections and alliances that might develop into broader patterns of meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.76). This aligns with the phenomenological approach to the study and highlighted some interesting areas associated with the study research questions, with the initial themes listed in Appendix I.

During step 4 (theme review), it was noted that whilst ‘work location’ is a major impact on this study, I do not have any influence with regards the choice of students who enter the programme. Unlike the standard university application process where a student applies for a course, for the majority of UK military students, the various military organisations decide who enter the courses. In these cases, the university allocation is made by the respective military Service along with the cost of the course. As a consequence, a ‘return of service’ expected from the student. Additionally, students posted to certain military units have a greater operational tempo than other students (some for example support UK special forces), which has a major impact on their ability to study regularly as they are often not allowed to take personal devices with them on deployment. In essence then, some potential UK military students are penalised due to their work location, which can adversely affect their study opportunities and negatively affect their potential ability to succeed in academic courses. Therefore, the use of the theme ‘work location’ is beyond the scope of this research study and will not be used directly as part of the analysis.

When considering the themes of *UK military CoP* and *Support Networks*, it was decided that, whilst they share common ground, it was important to separate the idea of military CoP from other support networks and therefore, both themes have been retained. However, further thoughts led to the idea that UK military CoP does not fully describe what was found in the data. Instead, it was decided that a better term would be CoP within the UK military as this better describes the fact that the participants utilised several communities within their own spheres.

There are therefore three themes (Table 2.2) that will be discussed as part of the analysis and these have been organised in a manner that reflects the logic of the participant's study journey. The research findings around these will be reviewed in greater detail in Chapter 3 and subsequently discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 2.2 - Final Themes generated from the data set

Theme Number	Theme
No. 1	**Preparation for study within a HE environment.**
	Sub-theme: Motivation
	Sub-theme: Self-confidence and anxiety
No. 2	**Tutor Support**
No. 3	**Communities of Practice within the UK military**
	Sub-theme: family support networks

2.3.3 Worked example- moving from Codes to Themes

Table 2.3 shows a worked example of TA from the transcripts, moving from the original data set to coding ideas and eventually producing the sub-theme *Family support networks*. As can be seen, this is an iterative process that involves deep analysis of the data.

Table 2.3 - Worked example of Theme development

Steps	Description
Step 1: Familiarising yourself with the Data	There are several examples where participants have raised issues regarding the support (often lack of) from the course teams. In one instance, a participant raised learning issues and stated they had not received support “for 4 months”. In this instance, they turned to their partner for assistance and described her support as “super helpful”. Other participants described how they spoke to others on the course who are close friends and ahead in their studies, looking for support. They also described how they have “great support” from their wives who have previously completed degree level studies. Other participants described how they cope using their children as support, setting examples to others. Participants also described how they used their military support network, using others as sounding boards and rekindling old military links to study together at times and setting challenges for each other.

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes	**Lack of tutor support** **Lack of regular communication with tutor** **Support from partners (personal)** **Setting an example to children** **Workplace support** **Group support**
Step 3: Searching for Themes	A perception of lack of tutor support and/or communication in the DL modules was common throughout the interviews. As a result, many of the participants resorted to finding other ways to find their path through the study programme, including support from family and work colleagues. The choice depended upon whether their partners had any experience with academia (previous degrees etc.) and if not, many participants sought advice from colleagues at work, formed support groups with other students or used other personal support networks. However, even partners without academic experience proved useful sounding boards. The initial idea was to have several themes, including personal network and work-related network. However, there is a key element here that involves UK military students not being able to communicate effectively with civilian tutors when required,

	which requires investigation. In this instance, it is believed that this may involve factors associated with military communities and civilian communities, namely the boundaries as they interact. It was therefore decided to separate the themes of Military CoP and Personal Support Networks. It was also noted that despite a number of participants being out of mainstream school for many years, some participants were able to successfully utilise their wider networks to support their studies. This related to both the support they received from military colleagues and personal networks.
Step 4: Reviewing Themes	Having looked at the data regarding the use of support networks, it was decided to separate them into the two themes as shown above: Military CoP (this theme later changed) and Personal Support Networks. On analysing the reasons for the formation of support networks, it was initially intended that this theme would subsume the tutor related issues that had been discussed in the data set, namely 'tutor communications', 'tutor interaction' and 'course design'. However, this was discounted and these have now formed a separate theme entitled 'Tutor Support'. There is overlap with ideas around military CoPs and also tutor support, which had the potential to blur the issues around support networks. It was therefore decided that both

	Military Community of Practice and Tutor Support require separate theme allocation
Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes	The theme was initially named 'Support Networks' to reflect that the participants utilised many forms of support network to support their studies, both personal and work-related. However, after a great deal of thought and further analysis of the data set, it was decided to have *Family support networks* as a sub-theme of *Communities of Practice within the UK military*.
Step 6: Producing the Report	This thesis will reflect several examples associated with this theme.

2.3.4 Data Analysis Issues

Data analysis from the data was not without its issues and as Lester et al. (2020) suggest, even learning to think like a qualitative researcher is a real challenge for a new researcher. There are many papers that discuss the use of TA (Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Lester et al., 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2023) but the new researcher is often faced with the confusing myriad of descriptions surrounding the use of paradigms, ontological and epistemological positions, methodologies and methods. Whilst key to good research, none of this does very much to assist in learning how to analyse data. The use of TA for analysing data is not linked to a particular paradigm and can be utilised instead to highlight the social, cultural and specific context that influence the lived experiences of a specific group (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The development of themes to highlight significant understandings that are directed towards answering the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006) is at the very heart of this data analysis method and the three themes associated with this study meet that aim.

The time taken to analyse the transcripts should not be underestimated and although the interviews were generally around 40 minutes in length, the time taken to transcribe and analyse them was far longer. As Saunders et al. (2009) suggests, it can take up to ten hours simply to transcribe a one hour transcript. The analysis was completed

manually, which in this case means without the use of specialist software other than Microsoft Word and Excel to record the codes and themes. Chapter 3 of the thesis focuses on the research findings in greater detail and these findings are analysed around the primary themes and sub-themes listed in Table 2.2.

Other issues faced in this phase of the study included access to the participants who were all busy UK military personnel. Given the study took place during the first year of the invasion of Ukraine, I had limited opportunity to revisit the participants for any clarity required on the detail of their responses. Several of the participants were later deployed on various operational commitments due to the nature of the invasion outcomes, which further limited my opportunities. The interviews took place from November 2023 to March 2024 and had taken a lot of effort and planning to set up successfully. In addition, I had made the decision to retire from working during the study, which placed further restrictions, albeit self-induced, on my ability to revisit participants.

Despite the issues around data analysis, the data gathered offered a rich overview of the lived experiences of fifteen UK military students undertaking online degree courses. The findings offer a number of rich examples of their journey and these will be described in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 Research Findings

3.1 Introduction and Overview to Research Findings

This chapter presents the findings emerging through the themes identified in the interrogation of the data from the study and these data are organised into three overarching themes. The first theme is Preparation for study within a HE environment, which also includes sub-themes of Motivation and Self-confidence and anxiety. The second theme is Tutor Support and the final theme is Communities of Practice within the UK military, which also has a sub-theme of family support networks. These themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 2.2 and have been listed in what is considered to be a logical order that follows the timeline of participants considering and then entering study, along with the challenges they encountered with online Foundation degree (Fd) study. This study was set against the backdrop of the UK military student community and looked to better understand how their personal and work-related Communities of Practice (CoP) supported and influenced their studies. The study also utilised Self-Determination Theory, in particular Relatedness, Competence and Autonomy, to frame the students' lived experiences on the course. I have provided summary details of all the participants in Appendix J where all names have been anonymised and only anonymised forenames have been included in this chapter. The exploration of these findings will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

3.2 Preparation for study within a HE environment

Of the fifteen participants, thirteen had served in the UK military for more than a decade, with another having served for nine years and the final participant having served for five years. All fifteen participants in the study had the opinion that having served in the UK military, along with being older and more mature at the commencement of their studies, significantly improved their ability to succeed in distance learning. All of them believed that their life experience, greater focus, and self-discipline gained within their military career contributed to their success, which they felt might not have been the case if they were younger. One participant made a specific comment related to age and maturity and his belief that he would not have done so well in his studies had he entered university at an earlier age:

> *I don't think I would have done half as well had I actually gone to uni, so I think for me being this sort of age and maturity with the experience I've got, it was fine.* **Jay**

Other participants linked this concept of age and maturity to being better motivated as a more mature individual. Motivation as a sub-theme is covered in Section 3.2.1:

> *So I was the definition of a mature student being in my mid to late 30s by the time I was starting and that's actually why I said earlier that I don't know whether I would have done as well as an 18 year old in uni and certain absolutely not in distance learning because you rely so much on your own self-motivation.* **Damien**

Another finding in the study that resonated was that participants felt they did not wish to get into the debt associated with study through a traditional university. Therefore, part of their preparation for study at HE was related specifically to consideration of the potential debt that could be avoided studying whilst serving in the UK military. One of the benefits of serving in the UK military is that individuals have the opportunity to utilise either free funding through the Service-sponsored Fd (generally the RAF only) or their Enhanced Learning Credits Administration Services (ELCAS) funding. This proved to be a key factor in their choice to study for the online degree, which differs from the opportunities generally available to younger civilian students, and it allows greater financial security for the UK military students as well as the opportunity for employer support. One participant spoke of this consideration, capturing what it meant to have access to this funding stream but also to have some life experience before studying, which she felt made her career choices easier:

> *Do you know you haven't got to go and get in 30 grand worth of debt on their degree that actually you don't really know what you're gonna follow up in your career path. You know you can go and find your career and then you can do this later on in life. I didn't want to waste the opportunity of having you know it paid for me. Where else, can you say that you paid nothing, you know and you get a foundation degree?* **Beatrice**

Studying later in life allowed the participants to prepare for civilian life, formalise their military experience and were strong extrinsic motivational influences. The practicality of extrinsic motivational factors such as free or funded education were also quickly assimilated and accepted by the students.

In preparation for their studies, there was an expectation on the part of participants that their military skill sets, such as discipline and self-reliance, would assist them to navigate their studies. One participant stated:

> *I think if I wasn't a serviceman and I was doing say like I was just a normal person working, say network rail or something, that I probably would have given up by now.* **Billy**

Another participant, having spent fifteen years in the RAF, related her thoughts regarding the relatedness between her drive to succeed in her studies and her time spent in the UK military.

> *I would certainly say I've become more driven the longer I've served and the further I've gotten in my career.* **Elizabeth**

Furthermore, participants spoke positively of the value they expected future employers would place on the skills associated with the acquisition of academic awards that can formalise the oftentimes difficult to validate military experiences and skills. In addition, they felt more able as a mature student to accommodate their studies alongside very busy roles. One veteran participant related her thoughts around this subject area:

> *Being able to work under military capacity as a senior NCO busy on, you know, in in my last job we were working maybe like 80 hour, 90 hour weeks to turn to turn work around and to be able to say you work to that capacity and still manage to pull out firsts on every unit that you've done, I think showed them a lot of character and self-drive. And I think a lot of the qualities I think companies are looking for and to be honest, every feedback I've had on every interview is the how impressed companies and organisations are with the self-study for the degree.* **Alice**

The data presented participants who, at the commencement of their studies, felt prepared for their studies and the transition into academia, based upon their military skill set. Five participants felt the transition would not be difficult as they expected the academic environment, specifically the course content, to be similar to what they were accustomed to in their military lives. One participant stated:

> *I think in my head I had it that the way I was writing technical documents in the military was what would be expected on the course, I think.* **Steven**

Others felt that as experienced military people, they would transition into an environment that would not be too dissimilar:

> *Yeah, I mean, I know I've thought my English is good and I can write and I can do all these things, but actually, in hindsight, being on the course it's totally different.* **Elizabeth**

For three participants, the realisation that the academic environment was very different quickly led to feelings of disquiet, unrest and anxiety (covered in Section 3.2.2) that led them to reconsider their approach to their studies:

> *I felt in myself prepared and then when I started the first module I then changed to feeling unprepared. I think it did surprise me what was expected. I think, yeah, I suppose I wasn't prepared.* **Steven**

Three participants openly admitted they were unprepared for their studies and had not really thought through the expectations:

> *I was zero prepared because I thought I don't know what to expect but I don't think I was expecting so much maths and I know that's ridiculous now going on a general engineering degree and expecting not to do maths, but I just didn't foresee the maths and when I left school 17 years prior I wasn't very good at school.* **Beatrice**

These findings highlight the challenges associated with the transition to academia after a period in the UK military, ranging from initial thoughts about feeling prepared to a sudden realisation that the course may be more difficult than initially thought. Three participants felt that academia and their military environments were very different and relied upon different skills sets that they did not possess in their earlier years. One participant stated that they had deliberately left the opportunity to study earlier in their career:

> *Yeah, I didn't think it was the right time to do it, and that's why I've held off for years from doing it, but now it is.* **Patrick**

These findings touch upon a number of important areas related to personal and academic preparation for study within HE alongside trying to balance other life commitments. Participants expressed a sense of being unprepared for certain aspects of the course, which perhaps reflects the gap between their expectations and the realities of academic study, especially when returning to education after a long break. Participants quickly realised that academic standards were different, which may be a common adjustment for those transitioning from a controlled military setting to a more open-ended academic setting. These realisations challenged motivations (Section

3.2.1) for study for some participants, affecting their self-confidence (Section 3.2.2) at times and bringing feelings of anxiousness (Section 3.2.2) for others, which affected elements of their studies.

3.2.1 Motivation

The interviews highlighted both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for the participants' desire to undertake online Foundation degree (Fd) courses, including a desire to improve their CV in preparation for civilian life, to enhance their chances of promotion within their respective Service, setting an example to children and purely for a love of study. Whilst it is true that when people are intrinsically motivated they feel competent and self-determining, only one or two of the participants spoke of being strongly intrinsically motivated reasons for study:

> *So it was always a personal thing for me. I always wanted to do some form of higher education. I do it because I enjoy the experience of studying and I always have I am I enjoy the reading and I enjoy developing certain academic skills.* **Damien**

Whilst pure intrinsic motivation was rare in the participants, although another spoke of wanting to complete study he had attempted some years before. Even then, there were also extrinsic motivational factors involved with his study choices:

> *So it's a lot of civilian work around my work location at <redacted> and I find a lot of crossover between civilian and military work. So that kind of inspired me to progress my education, and I've always wanted to go back and finish what I started.* **Steven**

In these instances, and perhaps more so with Damien, there appeared to be strong intrinsic motivation or desire to study simply for the sake of it, to better themselves and achieve an academic qualification. It raises interesting questions regarding whether the motivation levels of UK military students differ from non-military students given their generally greater life experiences and desire to succeed in life after their military career.

Thirteen of the fifteen participants were motivated by extrinsic reasons and one participant spoke of his personal motivation, but also of wishing to apply for a Commission within the RAF, which requires a Fd:

> *So it's a two fronted approach, first one being I am incredibly personally motivated. And then the other side, which is the objective motivator is the fact that this will make me eligible to continue my career and Commission.* **Liam**

The requirement for participants to be self-motivated in their studies and particularly due to the online delivery of the courses, came through very clearly in this study. Student self-motivation is required in all forms of course delivery but self-regulation and good levels of motivation are arguably even more important in online courses. There were mixed views regarding the benefits of online learning, with six participants suggesting the flexibility of online learning benefited their ability to manage full time working roles. At the same time, however, this was definitely a *new battlefield* for other participants. One participant highlighted not only the individual challenges associated with online learning, but also stated that the medium would not necessarily suit everyone:

> *There's a lot more emphasis on self-discipline as opposed to being in a training environment where you go to class every day. In terms of distance learning, it's great that you can do that whilst doing your job and being at home and having a family, but there's a lot of emphasis on the individual to do the work. I like to think that I've got the ability to sort of self-help and the particular style of learning that comes with distance learning. I was able to adapt to that and I'm quite resourceful. I could go away and find ways to do things and ask for help, whereas that might not necessarily suit everybody, particularly the variety of people I've been through training with for work where with this style of learning might not suit them in the distance side.* **Elizabeth**

Of the participants preparing for civilian life, six specifically stated they wished to formalise their military experiences into academic qualifications that could be understood by civilian organisations:

> *I have a contract for another four years, so that's sort of encompasses my return of service from this as well. And then from then, I think I'm going to look at branching off into civilian world. So I want to have that extra ammunition in the pocket.* **Johnny**

> *Two birds. One stone. Really. Yeah. More strings to the bow. Whether, whether I was staying in or leaving. I just thought it makes me better placed to progress in my career really.* **Charles**

As MoD statistics suggest (Ministry of Defence, 2024), UK military personnel are not remaining in the UK military for as long as previous data suggests, with family

commitments taking priority over military deployments and separation. Therefore, seven of the fifteen participants spoke of hedging their bets for the future:

> *So if it's for betterment of myself, really, and probably with a view of leaving, but not in terms of, oh, I'm leaving shortly, but instead I'm going to get a feather in my cap.* **Luke**

This was an interesting finding as all the participants spoke of the need to gain an academic qualification because they did not feel their military experiences alone would necessarily get them an interview:

> *So for me it was about what could I do to put myself in a better position moving forward. I think leaving the military with just a qualification you get from the military, I don't think is enough to justify employment.* **Alice**

Alice's views were justified by her successful transition into a civilian teaching role some months before the interview took place and she was therefore very passionate about not only the civilian qualification but also the impact that her self-study had on her interview process. Part of her earlier quote is repeated here for emphasis:

> *Every feedback I've had on every interview is the how impressed companies and organisations are with the self-study for the degree.* **Alice**

One participant, a mother with children, suggested that her reason for study was related to setting an example to others in their families, generally for her children:

> *And also my kids, you know, to just tell they haven't got to do the conventional route, you know, come out of school, go get a job. You can do this later on in life.* **Beatrice**

Setting this example came at a cost however, as the same participant spoke of the challenges associated with trying to study an online course whilst raising a family:

> *I think I think also was wow, it's like a bit of bit of guilt with the kids because you do spend so much time away studying and obviously we work full time, you know, so you already away from the kids anyway and then you spend extra time studying.* **Beatrice**

This kind of example setting was rare in the data but perhaps this was due to the lack of mothers in the groups, which numbered two of the four females interviewed, and none of the fathers in the participant group expressed this view. These examples do, however, highlight not only the differences in motivation across the participant group, but also that there are challenges associated with the transition to online learning.

These challenges have the potential to undermine levels of self-confidence and may cause anxiety.

3.2.2 Self-confidence and anxiety

The sense of belonging in the UK military can be challenged when transitioning into the academic environment and the potential loss of self-confidence that is associated with being part of a wider military team. This led to differing levels of anxiety for the participants, which affected them at different stages of the course. One participant spoke specifically of the difficulties associated with the online Fd course and how it affected her self-confidence in particular:

> *At the start of the course, I found it really hard and it was a very steep learning curve. I did think of leaving at one stage.* **Beatrice**

Other participants stated they expected few problems when transitioning into academia and were not particularly anxious at the start:

> *I didn't feel anxious initially. I thought. I think initially I thought, oh, you've got loads of time for each module, but then two or three weeks went by and then, you know, my time management sort of realisation came in. And I was then, yeah, pretty anxious thinking, oh, am I going to have time to get this finished?* **Steven**

This comment suggests perhaps that it would be misleading to think that self-confidence in one environment naturally leads to the same levels of confidence in another. With feelings of anxiousness appearing some weeks after the start of the course, this perhaps relates to issues around support to students as they transition to academic life. In this instance, feelings of anxiety affected the participant's self-confidence in their studies.

Another participant spoke of their expectations of the degree course and how they underestimated what was required, which led to an increase in their anxiety:

> *No, not anxious particularly. I underestimated the value of academic writing. Certainly I think maybe the anxiety came a module or two in for me because I thought I could wing it. And you absolutely can't wing academic writing in a degree.* **Damien**

One participants spoke of how they expected greater support from online tutors in order to work through these challenges, which will be highlighted further in Section 3.3:

> *I would, I would say I was expecting to have more face to face communication on even though it was a distance learning course I thought*. **Steven**

On the other hand, the same participants spoke about how his level of self-confidence from his military experiences almost tripped himself up, along with his lack of understanding of the academic challenges he faced:

> *Yeah, lack of realisation and overconfidence I just thought. Yeah, I can do this and just and head on straight into it. You know, first line, right. Let's get stuck into that, you know, not realising how much content there was at the time.* **Steven**

Five participants stated that they became more anxious when they started to appreciate the scale of their challenge in academia. These levels of anxiousness could be associated with the workload expected on a degree level course but could also be linked to the extended timeframe since mainstream schooling. The realisation that academic studies are somewhat different to their daily military lives was an issue for participants and they spoke of the difficulties associated with a loss of cohesiveness and interdependency when compared with their daily military lives. From their perspective, it seemed sensible to expect support and interaction with tutors to help fill this perceived gap but this was not always forthcoming. Participant levels of self-confidence were challenged by the manner in which some modules were delivered and Section 3.3 highlights the challenges experienced by participants as they lived through this transition.

3.3 Tutor Support

The findings from the study suggest that while distance learning offers the flexibility many need, it can also be isolating, leading to increased anxiety and feelings of disconnection for some students. This key point will be analysed further in Chapter 4 with a view to gaining a better appreciation of the way in which online programmes may differ in terms of their support to students, particularly for the UK military community. What became clear from the study, however, was that although contractually obliged, online learning did not suit all participants and there was an

expectation that tutor support would be better than that experienced. One participant stated that the inability to interact face-to-face caused him issues:

> *The only thing I would say, the only thing I'd say I'd struggled with is, for me personally, it's easier for me to ask questions in person, although I've got emails I can email people, but it's hard for me to sometimes get the exact point across and sometimes it's hard to actually get the meaning across and things.* **Jay**

Participants spoke of the differences in the way in which modules were delivered, with some being well supported and others less clear in their structure:

> *I found that it depends on the modules that some modules were broken down quite well and you have weekly sort of goals and attainments and enable other. Others that were like here's your course, you've got two months to complete it and come back to me. That's the ones that are difficult to engage with.* **Luke**

There were mixed views regarding the way in which some tutors made all of the material available at the start of the semester, with others suggesting they preferred it in piecemeal fashion. This difference in views generally related to those students who were deploying regularly (six of the fifteen), where it was good for them to receive all of the module material before the deployment. The remaining participants were happy to receive the module material piecemeal and preferred regular and targeted elements of material. One participant was very clear regarding the ability to access material before deployments and this speaks to the requirement for UK military students to be able to manage their studies alongside their oftentimes deployed roles:

> *If you're on deployment, for example, it's really really useful that you release the package as a oner and people can take that away with them and do it as and when they want.* **Luke**

What was common across the participants was their view of differing standards of course material as they progressed through the course:

> *Yeah, I thought there's been difficulties and I'll certainly say I found discrepancies between the modules certainly earlier on and depending on how good the materials were in some modules.* **Elizabeth**

This view was more explicitly explained by a participant who was quite vehement about the standard of online material he had recently engaged with:

I think we had two lectures and I had to do most of my learning from YouTube videos basically. **Arnold**

Another participant spoke of the need for better structure and guidance in the online delivery:

An instructor, a teacher or a lecturer putting up PowerPoint packs and saying work your way through this content, you've got an exam in four weeks, or your papers due in three months is not good enough. It needs to be better structured in terms of having a weekly lecture or biweekly lecture and having that interaction. **Alice**

The data indicates there was discontent regarding the standard of certain modules, which perhaps suggests either a lack of training on the part of some tutors or a lack of attention to detail regarding the online delivery of modules. This difference in tutor standard was expressed by one participant who expressed concerns regarding standardisation with module support:

Yeah, like I say with that, there are definitely tutors that I know are proactive and you know you can sort of expect an answer within a short space of time, whereas there's definitely modules where I thought I've had a lack of support. **Liam**

Other participants spoke specifically of the lack of tutor support when trying to navigate the details in some modules, focussing on their inability to contact tutors when they needed support:

Again, maybe, depending on who's in charge of that module and getting in contact with them. I've had some people who are, you know, really quick to get back, had questions have been really approachable. And I've had other people that have been not so much. **Elizabeth**

This was not uncommon in the findings, with eight of the participants stating that they experienced communication issues with tutors. One participant expressed this very clearly:

Whereas for this module, yeah, I heard not a peep from anyone. **Patrick**

One participant stated that he had experienced a variety of tutor standards on his course, with some being very good, whilst others were less supportive:

I thought there had been one or two tutors who haven't been as great, to be honest. They were disengaged, uninterested. But they are very much the exception. **Damien**

Examples such as these express an inconsistency in teaching practice and a lack of support from some tutors, which eight of the fifteen participants mentioned at some point in their interviews. This requires further analysis to fully identify the challenges faced not only by the participants but also those associated with delivering online degree courses to this group of students. The gap between military and civilian academic cultures perhaps presents unique challenges, with the possibility of UK military students needing extra support in adapting to academic communication and structures.

There were several comments made by participants that expressed surprise at the lack of tutor support, which in some cases appeared to be quite extreme:

> *Some of them <tutor> I had emailed and I haven't heard back from a couple since November.* **Jay** *(Interview conducted in Feb 24, so a 3 month wait for a response).*

Other participants were even more emotive in their views on this subject when asked about tutor support:

> *Incredibly mixed. I've had some units that have been really, really good and you can see that the lecturer has had the drive to make a good course and I think that always reflects in a good instructor that they've made different resources, they've made multiple PowerPoints or different documents and put the time in and they're really, really beneficial when they cater to every different learning needs. But there have been other units that have been so poor. I would genuinely say I've taught myself that unit and got myself through it with little to no help.* **Alice**

These comments speak not only of tutors that are either *good* or *bad*, but also of the differing standards experienced by students from an online pedagogical perspective. Not all participants however were critical of their tutors and several indicated positive experiences:

> *The vast majority from beginning to end have been brilliant. I've really enjoyed it. So the last one I did, there was a doctor teaching it. So anyway, the guy that delivered it, it just made the whole experience of learning, it was just interesting.* **Damien**

Another participant also spoke positively about the support they had received from one of their tutors and particularly around the point raised earlier regarding the availability of module material at the start of the semester:

> *I just messaged the tutor ahead of time. I said is it possible to get hold of some of the, you know, some of the work ahead of time before they were released, and it was like, yeah, no problem and sent a zip package. And then I could watch the videos and do all the PDFs and stuff offline.* **Luke**

These statements indicate that clear, structured, flexible and engaging content is favoured, with several participants highlighting that varying levels of tutor support had significantly affected their learning experience. This manifested itself in some students having to teach themselves because of what they perceived as a lack of quality support.

Whilst online training became a feature of some military training environments during the covid era, there was a desire on the part of the military to return to face-to-face training as soon as practicable. Maintaining esprit de corps and camaraderie within military organisations is extremely challenging with online training, but it did have the benefit of allowing exposure to online training to some younger students. Liam for example had spent the majority of his early years in the RAF being taught online, having joined just before the Covid era:

> *Obviously it's different being virtual and not in person, which is a new challenge. But again going through that, that COVID era probably helps on board with the sort of virtual learning. Anyway some of the courses that I did for trade were based around virtual environments anyway. So actually I found the transition hasn't been too hard.* **Liam**

Other participants agreed and preferred the versatility of online learning:

> *For me it's distance learning is head and shoulders above classroom learning I like the idea that you can sort of plan your week a little bit and you don't have to cram 15 hours into one day.* **Damien**

Not all of the participants however held the same view and some had mixed view regarding the nature of online learning:

I'll definitely benefit by having someone there right in front of me and be, like, show me this way or show me that way but then also the flexibility of having it distance learning is a massive pro. **Beatrice**

Some participants caveated their comments regarding their positivity about the flexibility of online learning and stated that this was on occasions adversely affected by the standard of delivery:

Personally, I think now I'm older and you have life commitments and a job. I prefer distance learning because you can facilitate time to do that in your own space where you're not having to travel to a course or you're having to commute somewhere or fit it in amongst your working weeks. But I would always cover that with that would only come depending on the standard of the delivery. There's been cases where you know, lecturers are incredibly academic and they're the subject matter expert and they clearly understand what they're talking about, but it doesn't pitch down to someone who's never done it before. **Alice**

Alice's view speaks of knowledgeable tutors struggling to teach at the level required of UK military Fd students and despite having the flexibility of online learning, she felt that this flexibility was negated due to the poor delivery. She clarified her views in greater detail:

Distance learning modules isn't necessarily their <tutor's> day job because they've got face to face students at university and you understand that you can't help but be frustrated with that, well, if you've taken on a distance learning unit, you have a duty as an instructor to make that efficient. And it just felt like it was a hardship for some lecturers. **Alice**

Other participants were less supportive of the online nature of courses, with one participant expressing a desire for increased face-to-face delivery and other discussing the dangers of asynchronous learning:

I sometimes wish we had a bit more face to face, like teaching through it. I think some of the material is good when there's the professor talking over. It is like a PowerPoint slide, but it's got their voice over it or a video explaining going through it step by step rather than just reading through a big block of text or a PowerPoint slide. **Arnold**

I think some of the recorded lectures that I sit through, you know, you might get distracted halfway through and just walk and go and put the kettle on while you're in thinking you've got one ear on it, but you're not paying 100% attention. **Steven**

The findings from the study suggest that the standard of online delivery was mixed, with some tutors being better able to deliver successful online than others. Chapter 4 (Section 4.3) will analyse these findings and in particular, examine the concept of support in greater detail.

Although not a commonly expressed view, one participant argued that the age and experience of UK military students is worth considering in the online context. If the online tutor is there to bridge the perceived support gap for students as they transition into academia, then the younger less experienced military student may not feel able to challenge them as they view them as being more senior than themselves.

> *A service person who's maybe been in three or four years. They'd be like, oh, I've got to go on e-mail a stranger. I'm emailing the right person. How are they gonna be? How are they going to react? Have I worded of the e-mail correctly? Like I said, as you get older, you learn from experience, don't you?* **Patrick**

There did appear to be consensus from the majority of participants that modules required better structure, including weekly lectures, as opposed to a “work your way through the content” approach. This perhaps reflects their military roles where they expect a greater level of structure in their daily lives and seems to indicate a need for greater consistency of experience for UK military students undergoing online Fd courses. Chapter 4 (Section 4.3) will examine this in greater detail but the findings suggest there needs to be greater clarity regarding what online learning looks like for both students and tutors. Ultimately, the lived experiences of the participants was not always what they expected or hoped for and having experienced varying levels of support from tutors, they often resorted to support from other sources in their communities. These levels of support proved far more complex than expected at the start of the study and are shown in Section 3.4.

3.4 Communities of Practice within the UK military

My own study found that both serving and veteran UK military personnel expected the course to be more supporting and inclusive than the reality they experienced. From a cultural perspective, the participants felt themselves to be *separate* from the on-campus students, not simply because they studied online but because they generally had greater and more varied life experiences after several years of military service.

Participants spoke of solitude and a sense of losing their military identity, which added further to their sense of anxiety about their chances of success in their studies. The lack of support felt by participants from online tutors (Section 3.3) led them to fall back on their own communities to fill the perceived gap in support. Luke, one of the participants with more military experience spoke of an example where a younger less experienced individual had approached him directly:

> *I've actually had someone reach out to me a few weeks ago actually. They were just like, I'm just lost. I don't understand where I'm at, so maybe you know before I go to my tutor, can you offer any advice and said, oh, you know, do this and, you know, just go back to this sort of subject and share some papers and things I've found and sort of helped him on the way because sometimes, yeah, they just they were just, well, they're just on their own.* **Luke**

The expectation of greater support from the tutors came as a shock to the participants who were accustomed to greater camaraderie and esprit de corps in their everyday lives. It is important to re-emphasise it here as it appears to be the catalyst for several participants reaching back into their own community support groups. Specific reference was made regarding the expectation that the online learning experience was expected to resemble their daily military lives:

> *Normally you spend your life in work with people that you sort of know and you learn together and I thought you would have the ability to use chat rooms but it is more of a solo effort.* **Luke**

These comments raise questions about why the participants felt forced to turn inwards and seek help from their own military community. Whilst it appears on the surface to highlight the lack of tutor support in some cases, it requires further discussion in Chapter 4, specifically around the term support. Participants found the world of academia a very different experience, both in terms of what they expected and in terms of a comparison with their daily lives. One such example was described by a veteran participant who served in the UK military for eleven years and now works as an engineering surveyor for a worldwide organisation:

> *A lot of people are saying in the army and they, you know, the way that we think the way that we act, the way that we go about stuff and you can see that even from our little group that we made, you know, people that have never even met, never heard*

that before they started this, this degree. We all think the same. We all act the same, you know. **Beatrice**

This commonality of approach and *sameness* was seen across the participant interviews, with a desire to help and be helped by others in the community. This sense of wanting to learn with like-minded others was strong and several further comments were made:

But I was very lucky because my best friends also did the engineering management one which did run alongside. So we did a lot of modules together or just like you know, I did one first and she did it first. And then she knew of two other people from the army, the four of us made the little group so with constantly be asking each other, asking each other do you know what I mean? And that helped, but if I didn't have those other three, having someone that's already done the course would have massively helped. Yeah, there's a guy that's on the exact same module as me. So he's on this module as well, and the dissertation and the two of us are like right by the by the end of December, let's get 1000 words. ***Beatrice***

A sense of camaraderie was common amongst the participants and many spoke of the way in which they planned their studies by speaking to military colleagues about their experiences on the course/modules:

So I've got a friend that's a semester ahead of me. So I do ask him quite a lot of questions. And then also I've got two friends that are on the same semester as me. One's doing the same foundation degree course as me and another one is doing the Mechanical Foundation degree. So we do talk to each other and ask how that we're getting on and how they've found elements and what they've done. **Billy**

Having my own network of people that have done the course or are doing the course has helped an awful lot. Especially I know someone who's six months ahead of me. He works downstairs in the department, he said. Oh, the first semester of Level 5 is how I was just like, oh, great. Here I go. But I can prep myself for that. I know I'm not going to book any holidays or anything that all I like, so I can focus on that part entirely. **Ocean**

Having the ability to speak to close colleagues who were also on the course made it easier for participants to prepare ahead for their future studies, such as the purchase of required study materials:

I bought some books to try and watch study skills. It helps that there's quite a few people in the department that have done that degree or doing a degree on the same scheme. So they've coached me through quite a bit of it as well and told me what to look at, cause I was worried thinking, oh, I've not done education in a while but I prepared myself for it. **Ocean**

These statements highlight the point that UK military students are developing their own communities based around their military contacts as opposed to speaking to tutors or other recognised support mechanisms within the university. It does however highlight potential issues with regards accessibility to these support networks for the younger students in the UK military student network. Whilst those who have left mainstream schooling many years before perhaps have less of an academic advantage, they do however possess wider support networks in general. The opposite is true of course for the younger students in the group and less experience in the military may mean they have not yet established a wide support network.

There was also a wider sense of community across the participants and not simply within their close circle of colleagues. It was clear throughout the interviews that despite the many thousands of personnel across the UK military, the subject of studying the online degree courses was much discussed:

So obviously people have been talking in the service, you know, and they've said, oh yeah, go for that. And they was like, you know, you'll be able to do it. It's obvious there's a lot of work to do, but the stage I was at in life, you know, at the time, it's manageable. So yeah, they did kind of help. Yeah. People in and around me at work. **Charles**

Issues around power within a predominantly hierarchal rank-based structure were also highlighted in the data. This was emphasised by one participant, who expressed the view that more junior personnel may not feel comfortable asking for help from certain elements of their military community. As a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) in a senior role stated, although he has himself looked for and gained support within his military community, there are potential challenges for more junior personnel:

I know people who have done it before, and I've always gonna ask them questions and you always seek help. You mean you don't just wanna do it on your own. But as we were just saying about a lower rank, would they be confident enough to go and ask,

say like a chief or a flight Sergeant? They might just get. No, just do and do it yourself or whatever. They might be scared to ask. **Patrick**

The age and experience levels of the participants selected for the study was varied, with the youngest being around 24 years of age and the eldest being around 50. This equated to additional time spent in the UK military for the older personnel and therefore a far longer period since they left mainstream schooling. However, those with longer military service possessed wider work-related networks built up over their years of service, which they were able to utilise to support their studies. The younger participants generally had smaller work-related networks but had spent less time out of mainstream schooling and were able to cope better with the academic content. This may present a variety of challenges for UK military students and this can be seen when comparing the statements of an older veteran with that of a younger participant:

I think it's been great, but there's been times throughout and I thought I'm not gonna see the end of this. You know, it just feels like it constant on the go, you know? I mean it can feel like the whole world is on top of you. But you know, you get through it, don't you? **Beatrice** (Veteran having served for 11 years and now working as a civilian)

I am 3 to 4 years in, since leaving school, but during my military career a lot of that has been education based. Anyway, I've been on a lot of courses I've not really had a massive gap in between having to take on new information. So for me the gap in formal education is probably about four years, but the actual gap in education is not that long at all. I just found it more natural to take on the information because again, I'm used to the way that education, formal education, instruction, how that works and how it's delivered. **Liam** (Has served in the RAF for around 5 years)

This comparison provides a good example of the differences in approach from those who have lengthier military service (plus several years as a civilian in this instance) and those who are only a few years out of mainstream schooling. It was also apparent however that the more experienced military students were able to adapt quickly and utilise the skills taught at the start of their courses to work through their issues:

Yeah, I found it difficult in the first few semesters, but I think as I've moved through the maybe the level 5 modules, that's when I really took on what I'd learned in that initial module. **Elizabeth**

With the majority of participants having served for ten years or more (almost 30 years in two cases), this was reflected in the findings. Those with lengthier times since

leaving mainstream schooling generally took longer to overcome the difficulties associated with the transition to academia.

Whilst almost all of the participants spoke of the value they placed on their military communities to support their studies, there were some negative connotations raised as one or two participants expressed views that they did not always receive the support they expected from certain elements within their own community. There is no doubt that studying whilst working is a challenge but there is perhaps an expectation on the part of those who take this route that they will be supported by their chain of command. However, in this instance, this was not the case and it is likely that this placed additional pressure on the participant at a time when she would have preferred greater support:

> *I think my military experience was a lot a lack of support from the chain of command, so you know, we talk a lot about in the military of, you know, we support CPD and, you know, making our soldiers better for the future. And the reality was when I got there, the consensus from the top was, you chose to do it so you can fit it in in your own time. So that's a battle when you're already incredibly busy.* **Alice**

These experiences highlight the importance of peer support, adapting to learning environments and the strong levels of support within the UK military culture. All of these points will be discussed in Chapter 4, as well as evaluating these findings in terms of the policy and practice implications. In addition to their military community support, participants were very clear about the importance of their family support networks.

3.4.1 Family support networks

The findings from the study highlight various challenges that individuals experienced throughout their studies and especially in the context of balancing education with military life. Life in the UK military can often be transient, affected by the regular drumbeat of postings but also non-planned events driven by emerging global issues. Each of these has an impact on family life, with military students having to adapt to changes, both at work and within their home lives. Five of the participants illustrated how support from family played a crucial role in their academic journey. In particular,

they spoke of the support they received from wives who had already completed their degrees:

> *Yeah, it should help me stand out, amongst other things. And then the wife's got a degree as well. So it was kind of. She motivated me. She worked hard. She did hers straight from school. She is younger than me, like early 20s, so yeah, she was a motivating factor.* **Charles**

This support proved useful, not simply due to the level being studied, but also because this support came from someone who had experienced the cultural aspects of university life:

> *I think of support from my wife, she's done her masters so she's well versed in university life culture and work requirements and that sort of focused time. And she was quite supportive.* **Luke**

Participants also spoke of support from wives and partners who had not studied at degree level before. This moral support was extremely useful to them and in some instances, kept them going when they might otherwise have dropped out of their studies. For example, Luke and Jay spoke about really important support from their respective partners:

> *I was really struggling with a tutor. For a combination of factors of myself and then we sort of didn't have a lot of communication and connection. Yeah, that I saw here that roadblock and then my wife kind of pushes like you sort of needed that kick up the arse.* **Luke**

> *Uh, she's super helpful. She sat and she read through my dissertation. She was really good at going through it and saying this doesn't make sense, this doesn't work. You you've repeated the same word like 6 times in one stream.* **Jay**

The statements provide some detail around how participants navigate emotional and situational challenges, and how encouragement has the potential to support students with feelings of competence and positive attitudes towards their studies. Despite moments of self-doubt or external obstacles, the drive to succeed is often rooted in personal determination, support from others, and the realisation that they are not alone in facing challenges.

The findings from the study also relate to the difficulties associated with studying for an online Fd when working and managing everyday life, which is difficult for any

student. Given the often challenging nature of military life, these difficulties can be quite extreme in some instances:

> *Balancing being away from home and commuting back to your partner on the weekend and you only get two days at home, you know, and you don't want to be doing that university work at home because that's very precious time that I had. So you're trying to balance cramming it in on top of a 12 or 14 hour day. You know, I would have nights where I would be up till 2, 3, 4 in the morning, quite literally falling asleep at my desk, getting up at 6 and going back to work. Just to get it in because of that lack of support.* **Alice**

Alice's role involved military training that included overnight marches and training under extreme circumstances to prepare soldiers for kinetic environments. Other participants had to balance what might be considered as more *normal* daily circumstances:

> *So yeah, so it's been a little bit more difficult actually because by the time I finish work, there's 1/2 an hour commute to get back home. And then walking the dogs and then saying hello to the wife and cooking food. It doesn't actually leave a lot of time in the day. So then trying to wind down and get my head space right to then do the modules.* **Billy**

Other participants spoke of the particular nuances of military lives, whereby the serving person often lives away from the family and has to commute on a weekly basis, only seeing their family on a weekend:

> *I've mentioned, I've got two young children, one 8 year old and an 11 year old. So for the last three years I've seen them every other weekend. So my time management has been I've only got 2 weekends a month and then some evenings to do my study.* **Steven**

In addition to utilising their family support networks to aid their study, participants also spoke of feeling more able to offer support to other students. In some ways, this eased the sense of not belonging in academia and instead, allowed them to grow their communities of practice with other students:

> *I think the thing that helped me was I met another student doing the same course who was on the same trajectory for a little while on the same units and just to know that you're not the only person struggling.* **Alice**

This propensity to help and be helped by others within the military student community appeared to be strong in the findings and it was clear that community support was effective and valued by other student participants:

> *I'd certainly thought that it was me and maybe I wasn't cut out to learn at that level. When you go through a lot of mixed emotions around that and when you realise that it's not just you that's feeling that, it is beneficial.* **Alice**

It was noted throughout the participant interviews that the current position and location of the individual had the potential for major impacts on the ability of the individual to study successfully. Oftentimes, it was noted that the participant had been moved part way through their studies, to a new location that could either negatively or positively impact their studies. Such moves, which were beyond the control of many participants, had the potential to affect both their support networks and motivation to study. Any such move had the likelihood to either reduce a participants access to their existing support networks, but also to expand it by meeting new sources of support at their new location. Several participants in the study stated that moving part way through their studies to a busier role had affected their motivation and available time to study, but it is fascinating to consider that this process of change may provide them with skills that help them face their new battlefield. This is an interesting finding and perhaps indicates a need to provide greater guidance at organisation level regarding seeking support, which will be analysed further in Chapter 4 (Section 4.5.1).

It was also noted that not all participants had the opportunity to impact these moves, with some younger less experienced individuals being moved part way through their studies. The posting policy is different for all UK military services and is impacted by seniority and world events - for example, less experienced personnel are moved more often to gain wider experience (as opposed to their more senior colleagues who may move less often). Global events also impacted certain individuals more than others:

> *I joined this the foundation program back when I was at Marham and I was working second line* <the term given to support roles that are generally less deployable on operations> *and had a bit more spare time.* **Luke**

The veterans in the study expressed the view that they had greater control over their own destiny in some ways, not having to be impacted by the vagaries of the military posting policies. Beatrice, a veteran of some years, stated:

I was very lucky in my job that I was doing inspections in and because I was based at one site and I could finish my work in very quick time, whilst I was at work and do a lot of my study and I feel like if I wasn't in that sort of role at the time that enabled me to do that would definitely have struggled. **Beatrice**

Two participants clearly expressed the view that their position in their respective Service allowed them the opportunity and the time to complete their studies, but this was often down to luck as opposed to planning on the part of the individual:.

If I was on Squadron, I wouldn't be getting the results I've been getting because it's just too busy and you have no time and at the minute with how trade Group One is. **Ocean**

This statement also alludes to a specific trade group, with some trades being busier than others at certain units, yet another vagary beyond the control of some students. Some participants found themselves posted to support roles that made them less busy than others who were serving on operational squadrons and other busy roles:

But now in a desk based computer based job, it gives you the time and I've sort of agreed with my management that I can do a few hours a week on it in works time. Whereas if I was still physically on a squadron, especially the way it is now, there'll be no time within work's time to do any of this, and that will be done all after work in evenings, especially with two young children. **Patrick**

One participant indicated that they needed to adapt constantly to achieve success in their studies, relating the challenges to increasing workload and increased demand due to global events:

*It's, it's adapting, isn't it? Yeah, the modules have slowed down, but then the work is increased, the actual RAF work is increased <speaking of Ukraine>. So it's it is a bit of a godsend, but then it's also, yeah, it's just thank **** for that.* **Billy**

This association with role and world events was prevalent throughout the study, which often led to increased deployment activity and preparation for more kinetic events around the world:

But in every other modules that says the combination of like the heavy subject at the wrong time, where you've got a lot on or you've got deployment and it's all a bit like always since we're a bit too much quite, it's quite stressful and that's then down to individuals to like myself, start to plan that time into your routine. **Luke**

These examples illustrate how support from family, peers, and mentors plays a crucial role in the academic journey. Despite moments of self-doubt or external obstacles, the drive to succeed is often rooted in personal determination, support from others, and the realisation that they are not alone in facing challenges. The findings also emphasise the substantial part that work environment and job flexibility play in a military service member's ability to balance education with their duties. These insights also suggest that an appreciation on the part of the delivery organisation of the unique challenges faced by UK military students may be a key factor in the student's academic success, which needs to be analysed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

3.5 Chapter Summary

The findings from the study offer a complex and detailed view of the lived experiences of fifteen UK military students during their studies and whilst Chapter 4 will provide deeper analysis, these findings are summarised below using the main headings.

Preparation for study within a HE environment – most of the participants had served in the UK military for some years, with four individuals having left and being classified as veterans. All of the participants expected their military training and experience to translate into a relatively easy transition into the HE environment, which turned out to be more of an issue than they expected. Despite the funding availability for their studies, either through Enhanced Learning Credits or Service funding, participants spoke of difficulties navigating the gap in years since their mainstream schooling. For all but two of the participants, this had been ten or more years and the findings suggest a realisation that behaviour styles would have to change and that academia was very different to their usual military lives. Arguably, there was further security on their part in that they better understand what they wished to study later in life having had some life experience. However, despite this, the findings show varying levels of academic preparedness for the participants and despite their very strong levels of motivation for study, their lived experiences on the course was not always what they expected or hoped for.

Motivation – thirteen of the fifteen participants were extrinsically motivated and were studying to either prepare themselves for civilian life or to enhance their chances of promotion within their respective Service. The remaining two participants were

studying for a love of study and simply to learn new knowledge. All of the participants spoke about the opportunity to formalise their military skills into a recognisable qualification that would be understood by civilian organisations. Despite being highly motivated for their studies, the challenges of online learning, specifically with regards to perceived lack of support from tutors and the lack of online social networks, presented problems for participants and led to issues with self-confidence and anxiety for some.

Self-confidence and anxiety – there was a mix of opinions with regards levels of self-confidence and anxiety from participants. Some were not anxious initially but became more so as they realised the challenges of academic study were either not what they expected or were more challenging than they predicted. The majority of participants were, however, content that their military experiences and skill sets would positively enforce their abilities to successfully face the challenges associated with academic study. One participant spoke of a steep learning curve, whilst another spoke about the differences in culture between the military and academia. Levels of anxiety, solitude and unhappiness increased when faced with perceived lack of tutor support and the associated loss of camaraderie when compared to their daily military lives was tangible for many. Those participants with lengthier periods since mainstream schooling spoke of greater unease when faced with academic study challenges.

Tutor Support – eight of the participants experienced what they perceived to be poor tutor support, with only two speaking positively of their tutor interaction. The non-standardised approach to module design, along with the lack of online social interaction, led to feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction with the course delivery. There were mixed views regarding the release of module material, with some appreciating the modules being released in-toto at the start of the semester, with others preferring a time-released approach. This generally related to a mixture of views between those who worked in deployable roles and those who were working more regular day shift patterns. There were strong views expressed regarding the lack of tutor interaction from a communication perspective, with some participants experiencing lengthy delays in replies to emails. Some participants expressed the view that some tutors, whilst obviously being very knowledgeable, did not have the ability to pass on their knowledge at the level required of Fd students. Participants spoke about the importance of distance learning tutors being actively engaged and available

and when this was not experienced, it manifested itself in some participants having to teach themselves. Having come from a military background, participants expected greater structure and formality with regards their online modules, which perhaps speaks of the differences between the more formal structured military environment and the less formal academic experience. The overarching finding from the data was that most participants found other ways to support their studies, including relying on other students in their communities. The sense of community came through very strongly in the study, with participants speaking of study links with work colleagues, wider networks across their military community and family support networks. This self-reliance will be investigated in Chapter 4 but it can be both a challenge and a strength, depending on the individual's competence and autonomy as a student.

Communities of Practice within the UK military – all of the participants spoke of their reliance on their own communities of practice but these were subtly different to what I expected at the start of the study. Having expected a more simplistic UK military community of practice, the study findings suggest a far more detailed and intricate set of support mechanisms. Every participant spoke of their support networks being formed of groups involving close colleagues, some who were also studying the online Fd and others who had studied previously elsewhere. There appeared to be a dichotomous relationship between the time since mainstream schooling and the time spent in the military, with wider support networks for those participants with longer military service often filling the gaps left by the lack of academic experience. This meant that whilst they were perhaps at a disadvantage with regards their academic experience, support from colleagues was potentially stronger. The opposite is potentially true of course for participants with less military experience, who were perhaps more academically capable having left mainstream school more recently, but they generally possessed less widespread military support networks. The findings indicated that communities within the UK military were a strong influence on the participants and that they readily accessed their own military community (both from close colleagues and their wider military network) to fill the gaps left by what they perceived as lack of tutor support. Many participants faced difficulties in balancing their daily working lives (especially those with active duty commitments) with their academic responsibilities and two participants mentioned that while their work colleagues were supportive, there was little formal backing from their military leadership. The findings

also emphasise the substantial part that work environment and job flexibility play in a military service member's ability to balance education with their duties. The participants express a range of experiences related to the challenges of balancing the demands of military commitments and academic work, including the timing of academic workload and deployments. Several highlighted the struggle of fitting education into an already busy schedule and valued the support of their family units.

Family support networks – as well as their military support networks, many participants spoke about the backing received from members of their family. At times of self-doubt, they felt supported by partners who had studied themselves and recognised the challenges faced from their own experiences. This support proved invaluable to many participants and kept them going when they might otherwise have discontinued their studies. However, whether it was academic support or simply positive words from family members who had not studied at degree level, this supplementary support was essential to a number of the participants and illustrates how support from family, peers, and mentors plays a crucial role in the academic journey. This also illustrates how participants navigate emotional and situational challenges, and how mutual encouragement and collaboration help individuals persevere through difficulties. Despite moments of self-doubt or external obstacles, the drive to succeed is often rooted in personal determination, support from others, and the realisation that they are not alone in facing challenges.

The study presents a wide ranging number of rich and valuable findings with regards the lived experiences of UK military students transitioning into and undertaking study of online Foundation degree courses. Chapter 4 will provide a detailed discussion around these findings and how they can be utilised to provide support to this unique group of students. The discussion will also provide specificity around the term 'support' and additionally, will analyse how these findings relate to online learners within other demographic groups, providing additional contextualisation.

Chapter 4 Research Discussion

4.1 Introduction and Overview of Research Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings raised in the previous chapter, moving beyond mere presentation and analysing them in the context of the research questions and theoretical framework for the study. It also further highlights the use of Salmon's (2012) Five Stage Model and its continuing relevance and appropriateness to online learning. The Chapter follows the same structure as Chapter 3 in terms of its sub-headings, with the chapter summary bringing the discussion together as a whole. The study raises some interesting and complex findings regarding UK military students studying for online Foundation degrees (Fd) within Higher Education (HE), which highlights potential for change at national, institutional and course delivery level for this unique group of students.

4.2 Preparation for study within a HE environment

The age range of the fifteen participants (24 to over 50) meant that there were large differences in the time elapsed since mainstream schooling and the findings show that this impacted some participants with regards their preparation for study in HE. Generally speaking, the older the participant, the more anxious they felt about their transition into academia but this seemed to be based on a lack of knowledge regarding the unknown as opposed to any shortcomings they felt about their own individual abilities as they might be considered experienced and expert professionals in their own field. The study highlighted that all of the participants felt more prepared for study at what they regarded as a more mature point in their lives and initially, all were very strongly motivated for their courses. This resonates with other studies that have found mature students bring qualities of strength, dedication and experience of life to their studies (Heagney and Benson, 2017; Booth et al. 2021) that is not necessarily present in younger students. Such students display high levels of motivation and also present a good investment to universities that recruit them (Ibid.).

In addition to starting their studies later in life, all of the participants felt that their military skills (such as teamwork, leadership, communication, discipline and

adaptability) would prepare them well for their studies, which turned out not to be the case in all instances. These attributes are recognised as typical HE characteristics and, therefore, it is important to better understand why they did or did not transfer. The finding with regards the feelings of UK military students at the start point of their studies aligns with the previous study in the US by Camacho et al. (2021) that also found that military personnel start their studies strongly. In this study, which is UK-based, it was clear however that this initial confidence waned very quickly for five of the participants and that they soon became concerned about their ability to succeed on the course. This aligns with core concepts of SDT and a core psychological need for UK military students, in that their sense of *competence* and *relatedness* were challenged very early in their course Whilst this was unexpected on their part, these challenges are not new and previous US-based studies (Ziencik, 2020; Camacho et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) have also highlighted the need for military students to renegotiate their identities in some form or another when entering HE. Six of the participants in this UK based study expected the academic work would be similar to that experienced in the military environment, which is also reflected in previous US studies (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). The findings therefore indicate a perception from UK military personnel that academia will be similar to their military lives but when faced with the transition, there was a realisation that their behaviour styles would have to change within the new environment.

A further important finding of this study was that this change of behaviour led to confident well skilled military students often having this confidence displaced when faced with the less familiar demands of academic study, and especially so in the first months of their studies. This aligns with the study by Cage et al. (2021, p. 1077) who highlighted the difficulties associated with the transition to university life, describing it as an “acute stressor.” In the early part of their studies, participants spoke of their positive thoughts quickly shifting to self-doubt and anxiety. Their expectation that their military skills would suffice was replaced by a recognition that these skills are not so readily transferable as they thought in the academic context. Based upon the evidence from the interviews, this appears to be a combination of the institutional variances and differences in culture between military and academic environments in the UK, with UK military students struggling to transition from one to the other as easily as they expected.

The often unstructured academic environment in the UK (at least in the eyes of the UK military student) is not as well adjusted to the delivery needs of the UK military students as are their US counterparts for their own military personnel. The support mechanisms for US service people are vast when compared to the UK (Cable et al., 2021) and US-based delivery organisations are often well versed in the needs of military students. UK military students are accustomed to very different daily lives, one of order, discipline and process, which is something that they do not necessarily find when they enter HE and five of the participants spoke about the lack of flexibility regarding the university policies for military students. Based upon these findings of this study, it is clear that becoming comfortable with the transition, the sense of *relatedness* if you will, can take varied amounts of time. This was typically more for older learners to become accustomed to and it was found that at times when their self-confidence waned, maintaining levels of motivation were important factors in this timeframe. The study suggests that it is at this early stage of their studies that the support for UK military students is most needed.

Another key factor in the study was that although the participants felt better prepared for their studies later in life, this was challenged by workplace deployments. In some ways, this is no different from other military students around the world but a particularly significant aspect to this is the reducing size of the UK Forces (Ministry of Defence, 2024). With the growing trend to reduce manpower in favour of greater technology, a feature of UK Defence for many years now, UK military forces are more stretched than ever and this has a major impact on those studying whilst trying to meet their work obligations. The findings touch upon a number of important areas related to academic and personal preparation, including the challenges of balancing education with life commitments (Ziencik, 2020). This study suggests that UK military students may require greater flexibility than is currently provided by delivery organisations, perhaps somewhat more akin to the regulations demonstrated throughout the Covid 19 period. During that time, the increased flexibility regarding submissions allowed for greater success in UK military student circles and especially for those who were attempting to submit assignments whilst serving on deployed operations. This went some way to aligning the needs of busy UK military students with the policy regulations associated with the delivery organisation. It presents an interesting and perhaps understudied area in that UK universities are built upon regulatory structures that guide staff in their

approach to students but perhaps do not always take into account the needs of every student cohort. It raises an interesting debate about the comparison between UK military students who on the one hand, have strict hierarchal structures in their own world but actually require a more flexible approach in terms of submissions that allow them greater flexibility than is normally allowed. At the centre of this argument and based upon the study findings, greater flexibility is necessary on the part of UK universities teaching UK military students who are engaged in professional and often, politically sensitive roles. There appears to be a clash between two cultures and ultimately, the academic environment is a very different experience to the one in which UK military students operate daily. The online approach to learning is generally the most suitable option whilst serving in the military and it is therefore not a choice of convenience, but instead one of necessity. It becomes essential, therefore, that delivery organisations better develop their approach to this cohort of students.

It also needs to be made clear that the journey for most of the participants into HE was completely unlike their civilian peers. Of the fifteen participants, only three had studied at A level prior to their entry into university and with all three, this was some years before. Therefore, I suggest that their entry into the online HE course was a similar experience to the other participants in the study, one fraught with a lack of recent academic experience. Examination of this transition in US studies (Lim et al., 2018; Jenner, 2019) has shown that the transition is laden with difficulties for military students and that failure to support them can lead to an “unsuccessful and turbulent transition” (Lim et al., 2018, p.291).At the academic level, the lack of pre-university preparation qualifications did little to assist their start in the online Fd courses as by their own admission, they were often lacking in the academic skills taught in A Level or college courses. Whilst their military experience provided them some Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) that assisted with the translation of their military experiences (Utting, 2009), this did not always help them in terms of academic writing, referencing and other skills expected at the start of their studies. This study shows that UK military students transitioning into HE may exhibit distinctive characteristics that need to be considered when online courses are delivered. The findings suggest that greater structured support is required, along with organisational flexibility in terms of tutorials (Dost et al. 2020) if their professional requirements are to be met in the UK HE environment. This finding matches those from other studies such as NHS students

during the Covid 19 pandemic, where flexibility in meeting the demands experienced by working students was particularly important. One of the key components of this from a UK military student perspective is to maintain the high levels of motivation that this student cohort already possesses at the commencement of their studies.

4.2.1 Motivation

Only two of the participants were studying for purely intrinsic motivational reasons and Ryan and Deci (Ryan and Deci, 2000; 2006; 2019; 2024; Deci and Ryan, 2013) list the three interconnected needs that form intrinsic motivation as autonomy, competence and relatedness, which was very evident with these two participants. As Deci and Ryan (2013) state, intrinsic motivation is our innate need for competence and self-determination, an ongoing process of looking for and attempting to conquer challenges. However, with thirteen of the fifteen participants studying for extrinsic reasons, maintaining their levels of motivation was also vitally important in terms of them succeeding in completing their studies. The broad spectrum of extrinsic and intrinsic motivational reasons for the study participants demonstrate that self-determination is a quality of individual performance that involves the experience of selection (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Whilst self-determination is integral in intrinsic motivation, it is also evident in some extrinsically motivated behaviour (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2024). From a SDT perspective (Ryan and Deci, 2020), extrinsic motivation can sustain behaviour but only within a supportive social context and in the absence of this, motivation faltered for a number of the study participants. SDT separates extrinsic motivation into four different types (Figure 4.1) and these move from the person feeling the least autonomous to the most autonomous, which is important for this study.

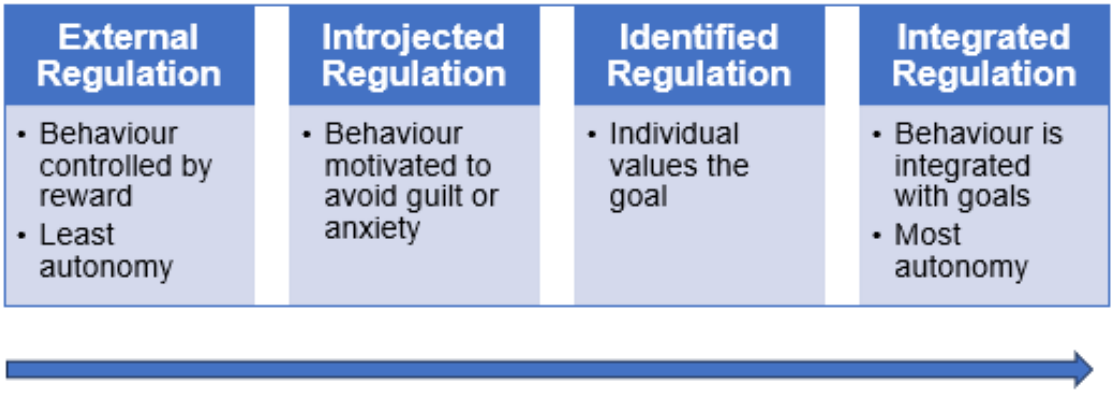

Figure 4.1 - Four types of Extrinsic Motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2020)

Figure 4.1 shows that for extrinsically motivated students, it is critical to maintain a supportive academic environment. Without this, student motivation is likely to wane and especially early on in the course as they are still becoming accustomed to the new environment and undergoing the transition. What this academic support provides, is the potential for UK military students to move quickly into *Identified Regulation* phase and then into *Integrated Regulation*, where they value the outcome and successful completion of the course aligns with their original study intent. Without the right academic support, students are more likely to lose motivation and perhaps leave the course. As Ryan and Deci (2020) suggest, this motivational internalisation is more likely to arise if the student is able to relate to the course and in this instance, it became part of the student's pre-integration into the academic environment.

The idea that our social context has the potential to motivate or demotivate (Ryan and Deci, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2020) is therefore key in this study and whilst student self-motivation is required in all forms of course delivery, good levels of motivation are arguably even more important in online courses (Chiu et al., 2021). Even when students are acting for extrinsic reasons, they are doing so for reasons that are important to them and it is key that they feel supported. One of the fundamental needs to achieve this is autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 1985), the sense of ownership by that person of their own actions in whatever context they are operating within. In the educational setting, the support that a person receives and the social context in which they study is really important to their chances of building this sense of autonomy and becoming self-reliant as a student. The participants in this research struggled with a loss of community spirit during the early part of their student journey,

which led to feelings of isolation (Section 1.3) and also negatively impacted their ability to build autonomy and relatedness to their studies and other students (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 2013; Ryan and Deci, 2000; 2006; 2019; 2020; 2024). The impact for those in this study was to negatively affect motivation, especially in the first semesters of their course, leading to self-doubt and uncertainty on the part of the students regarding their ability to complete their studies. There may be an argument for CoP/Team enabled support networks for UK military students in HE that needs to be explored further (Section 5.4.4). Tutor support is key in any study programme, but in courses that are delivered entirely online, it becomes absolutely essential and especially when students seldom (if ever) visit the campus and the students have little or no choice regarding the approach to learning. Tutor support is specifically discussed in Section 4.3 but it is important to set the scene here with regards the effect it can have on unique groups and their motivation.

Studies in the US have noted that military personnel want to have active participation in their learning (Belanger et al., 2021), a fact that was reiterated in this UK-based research. However, unlike US studies that have described all-encompassing support networks within organisations to achieve this (Koenig et al., 2014; Kirchner and Pepper, 2020; Ziencik, 2020; Cable et al., 2021; Camacho et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021), this was not the case in my own research. Around half of the participants stated that they felt alienated and disconnected from the learning process (Section 3.3), which simply added to a sense that they were not well supported and adversely affected their motivation in the early part of their course. These findings suggest this could be particularly harmful to a group of students for whom teamwork is so profoundly embedded. As Salmon (2012) proposes, the early stages of online learning are absolutely key to students becoming comfortable in their new environment, particularly with regards to motivation and online socialisation. There are simply no UK organisations that cater specifically for the learning needs of UK military students within HE (outside of financial support) and it is possibly unfair to compare this situation with the support mechanisms that are utilised in the much larger US-based universities. UK universities are unlikely to have the funding, personnel, or numbers of military students to make large support mechanisms financially viable, although there is an argument to suggest this approach could counter the cost of the current individualised/formalised approach. That said, it seems sensible to have a

discussion, based upon the study findings, regarding the possible support options available to UK organisations delivering online courses to UK military students to ensure students are supported equitably.

This research found that the basic motivational needs of the UK military students were not always catered for and participants spoke about loss of motivation early in their course due to their perceived lack of tutor support and wider support deficits across the delivery organisation. This challenged their desire to continue with their studies at times and delayed their feelings of relatedness to the course, which in turn delayed their path to student competence and autonomous student positionality (Ryan and Deci, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2020). As a direct result of this, some students were impacted in terms of their self-confidence and became anxious about their potential to successfully complete their course. Section 4.2.2 further examines these aspects of self-confidence and anxiety with regards the findings of this study.

4.2.2 Self-confidence and anxiety

Previous studies in the US have shown that it is not uncommon for military personnel to lack confidence when they enter a new academic environment (Koenig et al., 2014; Ziencik, 2020), despite the fact that they generally display high levels of self-confidence on a daily basis in their military roles. The realisation that academic studies are somewhat different to their daily military lives was an issue for participants in US studies, where feelings of marginalisation, neglect and dissatisfaction were commonplace (Kirchner et al., 2014). Half of the participants in this UK-based study felt poorly supported in their studies, stating that the online course delivery lacked socialisation with other military students (Section 3.3). Believing they would receive greater levels of tutor support in their studies, their levels of self-confidence quickly dropped and as this is intrinsically linked with levels of motivation, this adversely affected a number of the participants who became anxious about their chances of successfully completing the course. This was especially prevalent in participants who had been out of mainstream schooling for many years as they really did expect greater tutor support during the early semesters on the course. Accustomed to learning together and greater camaraderie, the study found that UK military students can lose the bond (Kirchner et al., 2014) that they are very much accustomed to in their daily

lives when they enter academia. The sense of belonging and membership of the UK military brings with it increased resilience (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) and this often brings with it increased self-confidence from being part of the wider team. As UK military personnel transition into the online course, particularly coming from an environment that relies upon team-related skills, tutor support is expected by new students. Indeed, it has been suggested this is critical for the students' engagement and study success (Mishra, 2020). Without this support, there can be an adverse influence on their self-confidence and anxiety levels.

The area in this study that binds these interrelated facets of human condition is student support across the delivery organisation and particularly the support given to students by online tutors. Section 4.3 will outline further granularity regarding the meaning of 'support' in the context of this study and as perceived by the participants. Whilst Cable et al. (2021) propose a variety of initiatives to support UK military students, there is little evidence to suggest this has manifested itself in reality across UK HE organisations and therefore, this unique group of students is treated in the same way as other groups with little or no adjustment for their circumstances. Increased training for online tutors in facilitating online learning communities would seem sensible but often, tutors are recruited for other reasons into an organisation, to improve Research Excellence Framework (REF) bids for example, and online tutoring is seen by many as a simple process. If we are to improve the lot of unique student groups such as the UK military, it is not simply about improving student self-confidence and reducing anxiety levels, but it is also about improving tutor skills in the area of online teaching (Chiu et al., 2021). As Gregory and Salmon (2013) suggest, we need to support online tutors as they move into unfamiliar territory if we are to better support student in their online journey. Additionally, more specific training for the online teaching community regarding the UK military community could be provided, which might enable them to promote teaching methodologies that would better support the military community.

An area that really stands out in US based studies is the level of support given to the military community as a whole, with Federal led initiatives guiding delivery organisations in the provision of supportive courses to military personnel across the US (Cable et al., 2021). Whilst organisations in the UK often sign up for the Armed Forces Covenant (Gov.uk., 2025) and some even receive various awards (the CSU previously held a Silver award in 2023 but this has not been renewed), the impact in

HE appears negligible in terms of support to UK military students (Strachan et al., 2010). This does beg the question regarding whether the Armed Forces Covenant requires a review in relation to support to students studying within HE. The lack of overarching support can and does have a major impact on levels of UK military student self-confidence and anxiety with regards how well supported they feel by the delivery organisation. Of the fifteen participants, only two spoke of receiving wider support from the delivery organisation and this support was specifically related to their learning needs. If we are to treat our military students with an equivalent level of support than that received by traditional students, this support has to become more common across all of the organisation and not simply by the teaching staff. Not doing so places us at risk of alienating UK military students, which not only risks their mental health but does little to enhance the reputation of the organisation. As will be seen in Section 4.3, this support in terms of what was considered acceptable by the study participants was not always forthcoming in ways that suited their needs, which led to a lowering of self-confidence and an increase in their anxiety levels.

4.3 Tutor Support

The term ‘support’ was readily utilised by the study participants and so it is key to provide specificity regarding its use in this study. The findings show that the participants expected a level of tutor support in their studies that included not simply delivery of the module material, but also in terms of support throughout their adjustment to academic life. Participants felt that the medium of online delivery was not best utilised, with little or no online socialisation for some modules, which left them with feelings of solitude and loneliness. Whilst online learning is unlikely to suit everyone, as Salmon (2012) states, it requires hard work on the part of both tutor and student, with online socialisation being one of the primary characteristics to success. The participants also expected wider organisational support at times during their studies, particularly with regards to latitude with assignment submission deadlines when faced with additional military workload at times of global unrest. Ultimately, the findings show a gap between student expectation and provision by the delivery organisation and this did little to increase their relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000) to the course or the delivery organisation. This marginalisation of military personnel has been highlighted in other studies (Cable et al., 2021) and one

of the key reasons for this was that the inclination of the military community to work and learn in teams was not utilised to its best effect by course tutors, perhaps due to the fact that university support systems are generally built around the individual. Kirchner et al. (2014) addresses the support requirements of (US) military students but makes it clear that tutor support is just one aspect of the support requirements, with administration and regulatory support also being required to support their unique needs. Despite the issues, and with the exception of the study by Cable et al. (2021) where it is discussed at a macro level, the idea of additional support for UK military students has not gained any traction in the UK as of the date of this research.

The subject of tutor support was an emotive one in this study, with fifty percent of the participants expressing displeasure with the lack of support they had received from their tutors throughout the course, either in terms of communication issues or poorly explained module material. These levels of frustration have also been discovered on previous studies in the US (Koenig et al., 2014, pp.416-417), where military participants have spoken of the importance of having a “tight-knit social support” and the importance of maintaining “a meaningful rapport with colleagues.” The study findings from this UK-based research suggest this is absolutely key for UK military students and that they struggle more with this lack of responsiveness from module tutors than they do with the level of the course itself. Instead of feeling part of an online community, they suffer with feelings of abandonment and loneliness, which does little to help with the unease they are already experiencing in the new environment. It may also lead to poor academic performance (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). The requirement for online socialisation as suggested by Stage Two in Salmon’s Five Stage Model (2012) (Section 1.7) is missing in most cases, which from the SDT and CoP perspective, fails to promote collaboration and a learning community. This appears to work against student relatedness, slowing down the development of their learner competence and leaving them with feelings that they lack the ability to become autonomous learners within the academic environment. This would appear to be essential for any new student undertaking online learning, irrespective of their background, as without this socialisation process, students are left disconnected from their learning. For UK military students that are already uncomfortable in their new environment, this can be harmful as the camaraderie that they are used to in their daily lives is unlikely to be present and their desire to learn as a group is not catered for.

A major area of concern for around half of the participants and far more crucial in their opinion, were the communication challenges they faced with regards tutor interactions. In Howe and Shpeer's (2019) study of the communication issues between what the authors refer to as the military culture and university culture, several interesting differences in culture arise. One of these is cultural framing or identity, relating to the very different ways in which military personnel act in comparison to the civilian tutors they come into contact with at university, albeit in an online context. My view based upon my experience as a Course Leader for five years is that civilian tutors often have a misconception about their military students and consider them to be self-confident and disciplined individuals who will thrive in the online university environment, leading to an assumption that they do not need the assistance that on-campus students receive. The findings of this study suggest this view may be flawed and that UK military students actually require greater assistance in transitioning to HE than their on-campus peers. Their journey to university is not a standard one, often having not completed A Levels or been in mainstream schooling for many years. They are embedded within a culture that has strict rules and guidelines, none of which are a choice for that individual but instead, are mandatory for the most part. Although they may be self-confident individuals in their workplace, in order to transition to becoming a self-dependant student and being self-confident in the academic environment, they require greater support from tutors and especially in the initial year of their studies. The real importance of communication between military students and their tutors to support this transition has been shown in several previous studies (Koenig et al., 2014; Jenner, 2019; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) and this was entirely supported in this UK-based study. For UK military students, who are accustomed to small scale and specialised training, the transition to a university system that prioritises massification of class sizes and thus limits personal tutor support and guidance, is difficult. Part of the challenge, therefore, is to better understand how to make a mass approach to class sizes work better for students who are more used to small group learning.

A fascinating component of this failure in communication between military students and their tutors was the reluctance of the UK military student to report the issue. None of the participants stated that they had formally reported the issue, none had challenged their tutor directly but nevertheless, around half of the participants expressed their misgivings during the interviews. This ties in with the earlier finding

that there needs to be guidelines for UK military students around what is expected of them in their studies. A key factor here is that they appeared to be more comfortable expressing their feelings with another military related individual (the researcher in this instance) rather than approaching the tutor directly or the wider organisation. This self-silencing (Howe and Shpeer, 2019) stems very much from their military culture in a number of ways: firstly, from a military student perspective, the tutor is in charge and therefore senior to them, which means they are unlikely to challenge them and deference is shown through silence. This example, reflected from their hierarchal military culture, does however limit the development of learner autonomy within the academic context. Autonomy is one of the core elements of SDT (Section 1.5) but the findings of this study suggest its development is hindered as participants felt restricted from expressing their dissatisfaction. This and the lack of facilitation of discussion with tutors further restricts the development of student autonomy. Secondly, military students regard the tutor as the person with the knowledge they are seeking and may feel it is not their place to challenge a tutor's professional approach. As Cable et al. (2021) suggest, perhaps a military student communication strategy is required to set the standards required for communication between student and tutor so that both are better able to understand each other's perspective. That said, UK military students require the support of the whole organisation and not just from the teaching staff. As Belanger et al. (2021) suggest, military students need to know that the whole organisation can be trusted and have a depth of empathy for their unique needs. It may even be advisable to have greater numbers of ex-military personnel on the teaching staff of universities that attract military students. This would at least allow some support from those experienced in the difficulties faced by UK military personnel and perhaps provide career opportunities for those personnel looking to leave the UK military and pursue a career in academia. At the very least, peer-support (Kirchner et al., 2014; Ziencik, 2020; Cable et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) would undoubtedly prove beneficial for UK military students undergoing online degree courses as has been proven on many US studies (Kirchner et al., 2014; Kirchner, 2015; Jenner, 2019; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

Participants spoke of modules being delivered in various ways, some with the material being provided in-toto at the start of the semester and others being drip-fed week by week. There was mixed opinion on these approaches, with some participants

favouring one approach over the other depending upon their role. Those in deployable roles favoured having the material available at the start of the semester so that they could access it and plan for the studies alongside their deployment. Others were less in favour of this approach as they struggled to cope with the material being presented all at once and felt it made it more difficult to plan their studies as they were inundated with the amount of material. Ultimately, module design should be focussed on the needs of the students and as Chiu et al. (2021) state, pedagogical design needs to address a student's motivation, engagement and learning. From my perspective, it would make sense from an educational standpoint to release material in-toto at the commencement of the semester so that students can plan around the requirements of their daily lives and have the tutor manage student issues as they arise. Most studies suggest collaborative learning or learner-centred environments (Chiu et al., 2021; Cleveland-Innes and Hawryluk, 2023), along with the requirement for students to become self-directed in their studies to achieve successful online learning environments. Processes need to be in place to ensure that online socialisation is successful for all online students, whilst at the same time, the tutor should be responsible for ensuring collaborative learning takes place. The ultimate aim of this is to ensure that the student is supported through a journey whereby they are able to become self-confident and able to direct their own learning. This does not need to be an overly complicated process and Figure 4.2 demonstrates how simple a process this can be.

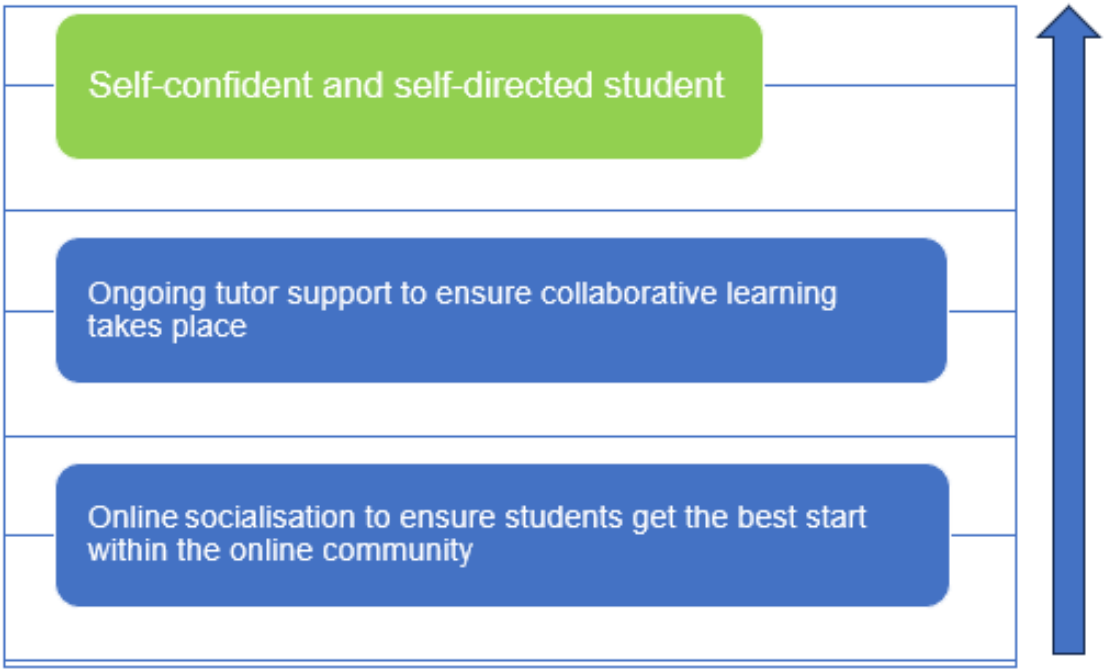

Figure 4.2 – Becoming a self-directed student in online learning

Other studies have emphasised the significance of peer support to students that are studying online, focussing very much on the usefulness of online study sessions organised by tutors. The study by Drysdale et al. (2022) discussed the value of this approach to online students, stating that the sessions were so useful that additional gatherings were requested by a number of the study participants who found them extremely useful for their ongoing studies. They found them welcoming and convenient, allowing them to be virtually together in the absence of the opportunity to physically meet. Although the participants in the UK-based study expressed positive views on such sessions in the first semester of their course during the interviews, these sessions did not always continue throughout their course, thus denying them the opportunity to maintain links with their peers.

The overarching feeling from participants was one of a lack of team spirit and camaraderie in their online courses, with some tutors not supporting them in a manner that they felt was always cognisant of their needs. They had expected greater direct tutor support, both in terms of material understanding but also as a transitioning mature students, and it had come as a surprise not to be supported as they anticipated. UK military education is generally provided in lecture format, with the student being the passive recipient of new information and the trainer providing that information

(Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). This differs from the HE environment, which is usually founded in humanism with an emphasis on andragogy (Ibid.), so the participants expected a more welcoming and involved approach to teaching. The findings suggest a lack of development of team spirit in the courses, which is a challenge for tutors who generally deliver courses in an individualised and competitive HE system. UK military students, who are accustomed to approaches to teaching more associated with CoP (Section 1.6.3), found this approach challenging. The lack of clarity and consistency around what online learning looks like for both UK military student and course tutor discussed in Section 3.3 does little to help either party. Notwithstanding this, and despite their initial loss of motivation and self-confidence, participants spoke of turning inwards to their own military Communities of Practice to fill what they perceived as gaps in support. This is perhaps not surprising given the proclivity of UK military personnel to want to learn and operate together, but what was surprising in this study was the range of communities utilised by the participants (Section 4.4).

4.4 Communities of Practice within the UK military

Military communities around the world have long relied upon their sense of duty, training and community spirit to achieve their aims in their working lives, be that within their home country or whilst on operational deployments. However, their rights and responsibilities as students are unclear to them as they transition into the HE environment. The US military have been supported with regards their educational needs for many years, initially through the 1944 GI Bill, which was revisited post-9/11 (Cable et al., 2021), but the UK has done very little to support their own military personnel in terms of their education. This lack of clarity of student rights and responsibilities, along with a lack of clarity for online tutors about the challenges faced by UK military students, leaves students feeling less than supported. This also ties in with the Armed Forces Covenant appearing weak and less supportive than it needs to be for military students within HE. This military student identity crisis (Kirchner et al., 2014) was experienced by several participants in the transition to HE and as the Cable et al. (2021, p.47) study suggests, this lack of support “risks depriving students of the growth opportunities that access to HE can bring, as well as limiting the prospect for HE institutions to benefit from the experience they bring.” However, the Cable study

differs from this research as it focuses on veterans and does not specifically investigate the challenges associated with studying at HE for serving personnel.

The culture shock associated with entering HE (Koenig et al., 2014; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) is arguably somewhat different for UK military personnel when compared to a traditional student entering straight from mainstream education. Due to their life experiences in the military and time served, UK military students may be considered to be non-traditional students (Ziencik, 2020). Whilst they are equipped with the necessary tools to operate within the military's hierarchical structure (Ibid.), the world of academia is a very different experience. It was found during the study that when participants found support lacking in their studies, they turned inwards for assistance from their own CoPs and other support connections. As discussed earlier in this thesis (Section 1.6.3), the concept of CoP is strong within the UK military and once their formal technical or trade-based training is complete, individuals evolve by engaging with others in a shared domain of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Individuals continue to absorb knowledge from other more skilled persons in the community, adding practical experience to their theoretical knowledge and learning new skills to augment their position within the community. In time, this propels them forward and with experience, they become the learned individual who can pass on information to others. As Berthaud and Mason (2018) suggest, learning takes place in the lived environment, in contexts that are both formal and informal, and participants become active agents in defining their own journeys through knowledge. Whether operating at their home units or on deployments, which have become a more regular part of UK military life, members of their CoP are united by their collective concerns and commitment to resolving shared problems, which fosters an environment of continuous, collaborative learning (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In this instance therefore, the wider military network can be considered a broader learning system where life itself, not simply the classroom, becomes the primary learning environment. As they enter academia, UK military students have an expectation that their learning journey will be similar but these study findings suggest that their experiences do not always match this expectation.

Prior to the start of this study, I had surmised that the participants would speak of or infer a singular military CoP but the findings suggest something far more complex than that. Participants spoke of diverse networks that spanned both formal and informal

contexts, which included close colleagues who were either currently studying or had studied previously, as well as broader military contacts that developed over time. This extended to the four veterans in the participant group, who spoke about actively reaching back into their previous military CoP and also their veteran groups to provide support in their studies. This also displays a potential strength for older learners in this student community who are able to counter the pressure of greater distance in years since mainstream schooling. Many previous studies have spoken of the need for peer support mechanisms for military students (Howe and Shpeer, 2019; Jenner, 2019; Ziencik, 2020; Cable et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) but there is little granularity or detail in these studies with regards what is actually required in these support mechanisms. Additionally, these previous studies provide little detail about how the study participants dealt with the challenges when faced with transitional difficulties or specifics about how they enact their own support mechanisms. This UK-based study provides further important clarity regarding not only the obstacles faced by military students, but also the complexity of their relationships when forced to turn inwards for assistance. It also provides further insight about how and why UK military students engage with these diverse number of support mechanisms when faced with what they perceive to be a lack of support from the delivery organisation. The socialisation process undertaken throughout their military lives, including training and operational deployments with like-minded others, becomes the bedrock of resilience on which they can navigate their university experience (Camacho et al., 2021).

Participants in this study utilised a wide array of methodologies to support their own learning, including forming their own support groups (both serving and veteran groups) and setting individual targets for completion of assignments. In addition, these communities also provided moral support to group members who were struggling for inspiration or simply having a hard time on the course. Those participants who had spent longer on the course offered their own support to other less-experienced students, reaching out across their military connections to do so. The study found that the more senior (in terms of their military rank) participants in the study were more liable to reach out to others to provide support, with senior staff feeling it was part of their duties to do so. This may be an approach that online tutors could look to facilitate, linking into the propensity of UK military students who want to help other students by providing buddying opportunities to promote student to student collaboration and to

help break down the social isolation of online learning (Madland and Richards, 2016). Whilst this is a non-cost option for tutors, such an approach could have major impacts on the UK student community and especially in terms of a student's relatedness to the course.

The study found a dichotomous relationship between the participant's length of military service, their inherent lack of formal academic experience associated with this often extended period of service, and their support networks. Thirteen of the fifteen participants had served for ten or more years, with around half of these having served over twenty years and this meant that the time since mainstream schooling presented a challenge when returning to academic study. Notwithstanding this lack of recent formal academic experience, their length of service meant that they had formed much wider networks across their respective service (and oftentimes across other military services) and were able to utilise these to better support themselves when faced with study challenges. The concept of CoPs bridging across silos (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) proves particularly relevant here and those participants with greater military experience were better able to facilitate connections across both Unit and Service divides. The two participants that had served less time did not yet have these wider Service networks but given it had been only a short time since mainstream schooling, they felt better able to cope a little more effectively with the academic challenges.

Around fifty percent of the participants in the study spoke of the absence of a continuing and cohesive, welcoming community spirit towards UK military students as they studied the online programmes. Despite all of the participants stating that their opening module was met with positivity and provided lots of useful tips for their future studies, this positive level of support did not always continue as the participants continued their courses. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) highlight the importance of welcoming new members into a community, in this case the academic community, but this UK study has shown that this needs to continue for the duration of the course. However, the study participants often spoke of forming their own informal support groups to fill the gaps left by the formal learning structures. These self-formed communities were critical for navigating the complexities of online learning, covering not just academic content, but also the administrative aspects of the courses and providing coping strategies for the challenges of studying remotely. Whilst this can be seen in a positive light, the findings demonstrate that this simply places

additional pressure on students who are already living busy lives and tells a less than positive story about the course delivery. Participants spoke of the significant challenge of balancing their academic work with military duties and family life and that the UK military environment, with its emphasis on duty and responsibility, making it problematic for individuals to prioritise academic pursuits. The findings of this study align with the research of Camacho et al. (2021), which highlights how the university experiences of military personnel are shaped by their previous educational histories. In the case of this UK study however, those electing to take their studies beyond the Fd are undoubtedly going to be influenced by their experiences on the Fd and may choose to take a different path.

Military personnel that are enrolled in online education courses represent a valuable resource for the organisations they engage with. Courses that are structured and well managed, which support UK military students throughout their studies are likely to attract others from the same backgrounds, which can only be a positive thing for all concerned. Their participation on these courses can be seen not only as an opportunity for personal development on their part, but also as a significant investment for the military (Powell and Townley, 2025), which gains a more educated and competent workforce in the process. Sadly, the fact that all of the participants felt the need to form their own communities to support their learning, is perhaps indicative of the feeling of UK military students regarding their courses. Rather than feeling involved and part of the online community, the delivery style of courses has forced them to make alternative arrangements. Online tutors would be well advised to harness this military community spirit and involve them much more with the module delivery as suggested by Garrison (2016) and his COI approach. Instead, this study shows that students feel alienated from the academic community, often opting for alternative means to complete their studies, thereby filling the perceived gaps in delivery style and succeeding in spite of the challenges they faced. Rosendo (2022), in her study of civilian interpreters in Afghanistan, states that becoming a member of the military community as a civilian is not without its difficulties. Based upon the findings of this study, I would argue that there are similarities with regards UK military personnel being accepted during their online studies by the academic community.

Regardless of their specific situation, and in addition to their feedback on military CoPs, all participants noted the critical role of family support networks in completing

their studies. These included family members outside of the military, some of whom had never studied before, along with a wide range of other support networks, which will be discussed further in Section 4.4.1. These support networks appeared to be just as vital to the participants in this study and no less important than their military CoPs.

4.4.1 Family support networks

The importance of support from family groups, which in the context of this study generally consisted of family members whether they had studied before or not, could not be underestimated by the participants in this study. Whether the support received was of an academic nature or just from an emotional perspective, it proved absolutely key to the success of the participants in this study. Previous studies have also discussed the importance of family backing for students and the importance to their mental health and overall happiness. The study by Heagney and Benson (2017) of Australian mature students highlighted that the support of family and friends was of paramount importance in helping students succeed in their studies. With this support, they were far more likely to be very successful in HE, with family members providing encouragement and picking up some of their more mundane responsibilities such as their housework duties. This was emphasised in the findings from this UK-based study and whilst it may seem a particularly innocuous subject to discuss, it does allow students to fully concentrate on their studies and it is a key part of their journey to successful completion. Worth mentioning, however, was that all of the participants in this study were involved in a relationship of some form or another and none of them were single. This raises the potential for future research around single UK military students, to be discussed in Section 5, as they may not have the opportunity to receive this direct emotional and practical support.

Given the decline in number of online support sessions experienced by the participants in this study after their first semester (Section 4.3), there was a deterioration in the wellbeing of some participants. The importance of family support at this time in their studies became extremely important, whether or not their family had studied themselves before. Partners who had studied before were able to advise participants of the challenges around university life and how to approach such skills as academic writing for example. Even those participants with partners who had not studied at university were still able to receive moral or practical support, which appeared to be

just as useful. Participants spoke of the importance of this support at their lowest moments, perhaps where otherwise they may have dropped out of the course. The flexibility of online learning and the opportunity to study around personal and work-related circumstances is often cited as the reason individuals choose that route through education (Waterhouse et al., 2022). The reality however can be very different and there was an expectation on the part of the participants in this study that greater tutor and organisational support would be provided, which was not realised by everyone. The reliance on family to supplement this perceived lack of support was not expected either and almost certainly placed additional pressures on both the students and their family units. This does however align with previous studies elsewhere (Heagney and Benson, 2017) that have highlighted the importance of family units to students studying online.

In summary, all of the participants spoke of actively using the support from their family in some form or another and how essential this was for their state of mind and being able to continue their studies. Feelings of disconnection from their studies suggests a desire on their part to be better connected with other students on their courses and the findings show that various military CoPs and their family units went some way to satisfying their unmet needs for relatedness and autonomy (Section 1.5) in the academic environment. As stated earlier, it has raised questions regarding how comfortable UK military students feel in approaching their online tutors or other elements of the delivery organisation when they are struggling.

4.5 Specific differences highlighted in this UK-based study

The findings from this UK-based study align in a number of ways with previous studies (mostly from the US), but they do differ in some areas, which are described below. This study has shown that the successful completion of their studies in HE by UK military students requires a number of interrelated and interwoven elements to be constantly effective throughout their time in academia. Figure 4.3 shows the relationship cycle between these elements, starting with the student's self-confidence and motivation to study, be that for intrinsic or extrinsic purposes.

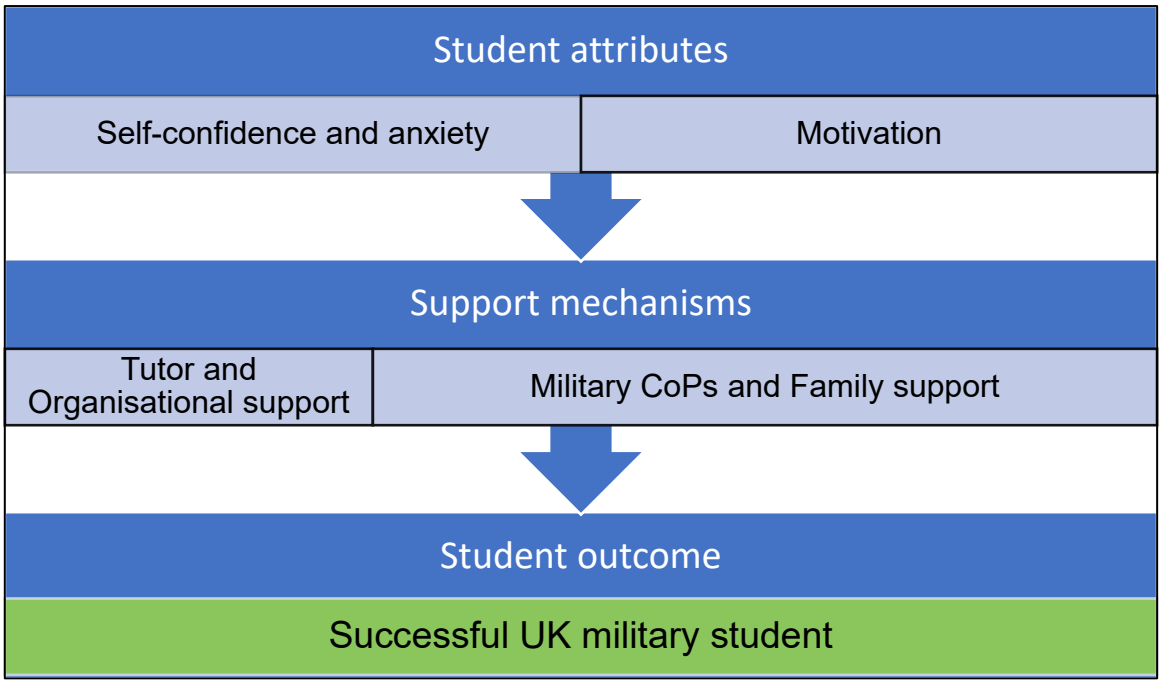

Figure 4.3 - The relationship of factors affecting the success of UK military students within HE

Generally speaking, UK military students start their studies with good levels of both self-confidence and motivation and want to succeed in achieving their achieve their educational goals. To maintain these levels of self-confidence and motivation, they enter online courses with an expectation that they will receive appropriate tutor support within the course modules, which they rely upon as part of their transition to HE. This study has shown however, that there are challenges associated with UK military students becoming dependant learners, with the findings showing an overreliance upon various military CoPs and family units to fill the perceived gaps. It is crucial for UK military students to feel well supported by the entire delivery organisation if they are to successfully complete their studies and these simple elements are key to maintaining their levels of satisfaction. Highly motivated and self-confident UK military students can very soon lose heart in their academic studies if not supported by the organisation. Whilst the study participants spoke of their reliance on military CoPs and family units, this is not the long term answer if organisations are to successfully deliver online course to this unique group of students. The remaining sub-sections examine the differences associated with the findings of this study.

4.5.1 Equitable treatment for UK military students

The overwhelming majority of the US-based studies are centred on participants who are leaving the military and entering civilian life via academia. In the US, there is clear financial and administrative support to both student and organisation about how to support personnel, including veteran support groups at many levels. This is simply not available in the UK and whilst there are a few military-related charities, these generally concentrate on rehabilitation for injured personnel from recent or historical conflicts. At the UK national level, there is no single body that provides support to UK military personnel entering HE and at the delivery organisation level, students are treated exactly the same as their civilian peers. I argue that this places the UK military student at a distinct disadvantage and that they are being treated unfairly, both in terms of their tutor and regulatory support. UK military students do not wish to be treated any better than their civilian peers but simply wish to be treated equitably and in a manner that aligns with their roles as unique students undertaking extremely busy working roles. This study has shown that unlike the support mechanisms available in the US, the UK remains somewhat lacking in their support for UK military students. The lack of understanding of their needs at tutor level is simply compounded by a lack of recognition of their needs at the regulatory level, making their studies far more challenging in many ways than their civilian peers. Compounding this even further are the effects of a shrinking military in the UK, which is discussed in Section 4.5.2.

4.5.2 The impact of a shrinking UK military

The UK military is relying more on technology and despite recent suggestions regarding an increase in military expenditure (Parliament, House of Commons, 2025), the statistics suggest that manpower numbers across all three Services are dropping (Ministry of Defence, 2024). The impact on those UK military personnel who have chosen education as the means to affect their futures is noticeable and the findings from this study show that many of them were impacted by deployments at a more regular tempo than previously experienced. In addition, some were posted to new units part way through their studies, which also negatively impacted their ability to study as before. This attrition rate across the UK military (Ministry of Defence, 2024) is already affecting those studying in HE and will no doubt continue to do so over time. Whilst it

is beyond the remit of this current study, it is worthy of consideration for those UK military students entering HE for the next few years who will need to take this into consideration as they plan their studies. With regards supporting UK military students who are more regularly deployed than ever before commensurate with personnel numbers, I argue that greater flexibility is required on the part of delivery organisations to support them.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This UK-based study offers vital insights into the unique challenges faced by UK military personnel transitioning into online HE learning environments. The study showed that whilst participants initially entered their academic courses with good levels of self-confidence and motivation to succeed, these traits often deteriorated within the first semesters of their course. Their assumption that military-acquired skills, such as leadership, teamwork, discipline, and adaptability, would translate seamlessly into academic success proved overly optimistic. Instead, many of the participants found themselves grappling with self-doubt and a profound sense of disconnect and isolation from their studies. Unlike previous US-based studies that emphasised strong institutional support networks, this research found that such mechanisms are largely absent in the UK context. A substantial finding of this UK-based study, therefore, is the lack of formal structures to help UK military students renegotiate their identity within academic settings. Where US studies show comprehensive systems tailored to military learners, including mentorship programs and dedicated veteran support offices, UK delivery organisations appear ill-equipped to support the specific requirements of this student demographic.

This sense of isolation reported by study participants was perhaps not simply a personal failing on their part, but an institutional one. Course design, tutor engagement, and communication protocols did not adequately support early and ongoing online socialisation, which is seen by many as essential in maintaining motivation and developing autonomy in online learners. Unlike their daily lives in the UK military, where coordinated teams and peer accountability are essential to success, many of the study participants found their online modules isolating and lacking in community spirit. The inherent team-based learning culture of the UK military was neglected by course tutors, who failed to harness this natural disposition towards

collaborative work. A further finding of this study, therefore, is that the online courses failed to adequately socialise the UK military student effectively throughout their time on the course.

This UK-based study highlights a striking cultural mismatch between the UK military and academic environments. UK military personnel are used to a high degree of structure, order, and mission-driven activity whereas in contrast, the online HE courses experienced by the participants of this study, may appear unstructured, confusing, and overly individualistic. This clash of cultures led to many participants questioning their place within academia and their capability to succeed, despite their prior accomplishments in the UK military environment. Compounding this issue was a noticeable lack of tutor awareness regarding the specific challenges that UK military students face. In some instances, delivery styles designed for on-campus learners were replicated online, an approach that gave little regard to the needs of remote, time-constrained, and community-oriented UK military students. It appears as though tutors often lacked the skills or awareness to facilitate the early stages of online engagement, leaving students feeling unsupported and disconnected. In addition, some participants spoke of tutors not setting the online material at the right level for new students, which appears to reflect a disconnect between military and academic cultures. Despite participants speaking of their readiness for study as mature students, the experiences of some study participants demonstrates they struggled to cope with the lack of both pastoral and direct tutor support. Combined with their extremely busy roles in a UK military that faces manpower reductions set against deployment increases, this further impacted their lived experience. A further finding of this study, therefore, is that online tutors were unaware of the challenges facing UK military students and failed to support them adequately during their studies.

One unexpected finding of this UK-based study was the reluctance of many participants to report issues they were experiencing, which may be attributed to the phenomenon of self-silencing. Embedded in military culture, where resilience and self-reliance are valued, this led to some participants struggling in silence, which further compounded their motivational challenges and led to them feeling even more alienated. In the UK military environment, however, the tutor is considered the learned other and would not normally be challenged so this may reflect their sense of military culture. The study showed that the importance of peer support and community cannot

be over emphasised, with the participants in this study very familiar with operating within well-defined CoPs where learning, development and identity are communally negotiated. In the HE context however, study participants spoke of a complete absence of collaborative structures resulting in courses that lacked camaraderie and team spirit, which further undermined student engagement and autonomy. This invites further study around CoPs in the UK military versus CoPs within the HE environment, especially if UK delivery organisations are seeking to improve their delivery to this unique cohort of students. In its current guise, the transition into HE for the UK military student appears to be challenging and based upon the findings of this study, there is a disconnect between the two cultures. Given the daily roles of UK military students, I would describe their transition into online HE courses as being very much their latest battlefield.

Another crucial dynamic and finding from this study is the dichotomy between years served in the military and the time since leaving formal education. Those participants who had served longer tended to be further removed from mainstream academic practices, which compounded their struggle to adapt. Whilst their life experience and professional discipline were initially seen by themselves as assets, the academic context often demanded skills, such as essay writing and theoretical engagement, that had atrophied or were never fully developed. This created a dual-layered challenge for participants in that they not only had to renegotiate their identities within the academic environment but also had to reacquire or learn from scratch foundational academic skills under intense pressure and without sufficient organisational support. The study findings show however, that in addition to support from various military related CoPs, family support was found to be a key steadying force at this point in time. In the absence of institutional support, participants leaned heavily on their military CoPs and family units for emotional reassurance, time management assistance, and motivation maintenance.

One of the more subliminal findings from this UK-based study is that organisations may be overlooking a valuable student demographic and revenue stream. UK military students are typically mature, motivated, and bring a wealth of real-world experience to the online classroom. However, without tailored support structures, such as transition programs, UK military-aware tutors, and community-building mechanisms, these students would appear to remain underserved. In such circumstances, it would

seem likely that such groups may seek study opportunities elsewhere that are better supported in terms of their unique study requirements. This research area is limited and requires further examination in light not just of UK military student needs but also of the changing face of UK military demands for these students in a dynamic world seemingly full of conflict. Figure 4.4 provides an overview of the relatedness of SDT and CoP to Salmon's Five Stage Model, including advice based upon the findings of this study. The study findings provide a much needed UK perspective on the issues faced by UK military students but given the fact that this is a singular study and contained only fifteen participants, caution is required not to generalise the findings across all UK HE organisations. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable insights regarding the approach to best harness the fundamental attributes of the UK military student as they enter online degree courses within HE.

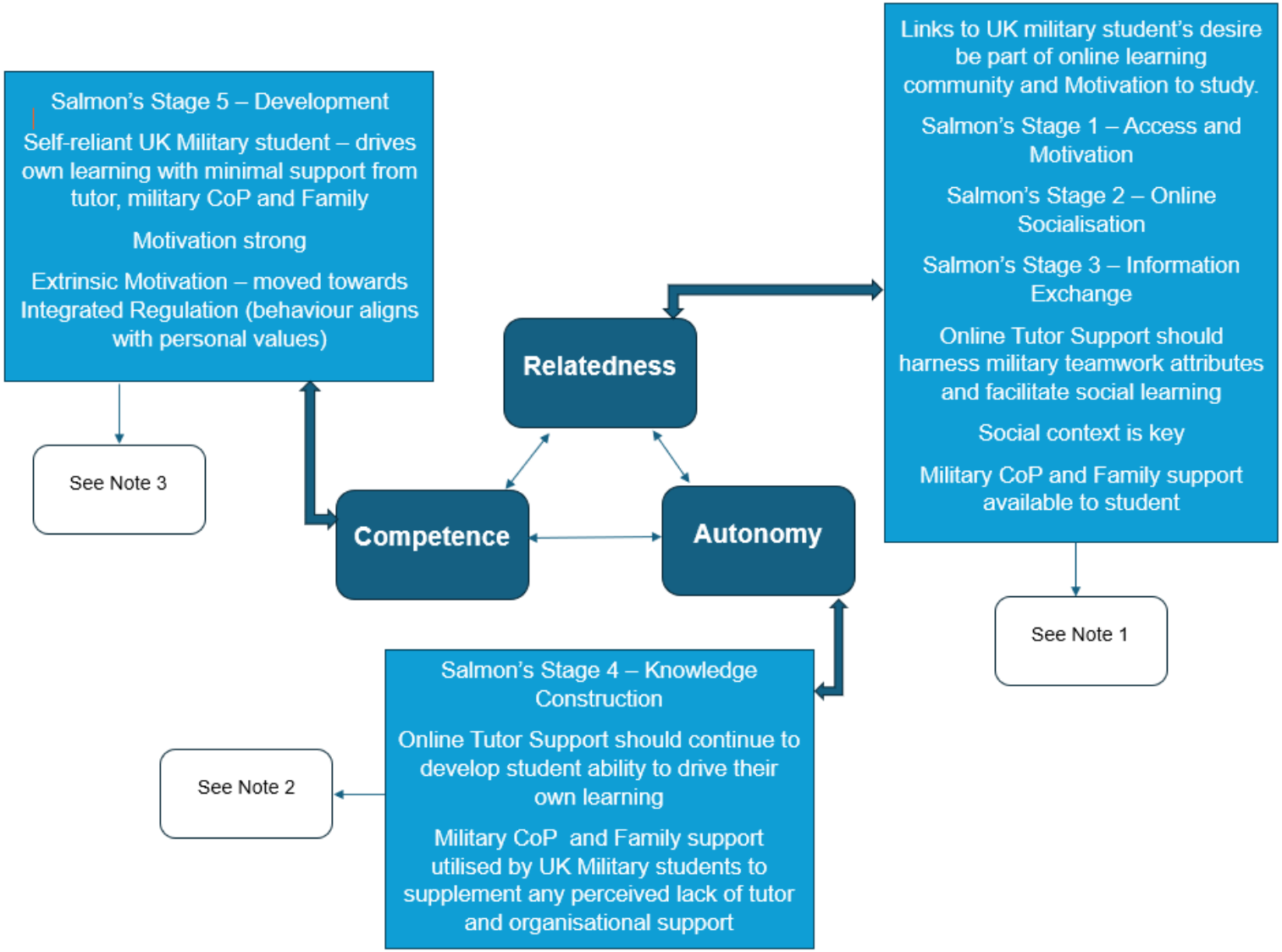

Figure 4.4 – Relatedness of SDT and CoP to Salmon's Five Stage Model

Note 1 – the findings from this UK-based study demonstrate that UK military students are highly motivated at the start of their online Fd courses and strive to be a part of or Related to their studies. Based upon their previous military experience that is centred on CoP, they have an expectation that their online courses will be social in nature, which aligns with their personal drive to study with other like-minded military individuals. The first three stages of Salmon's Five Stage Model propose that Access and Motivation, Online Socialisation and Information Exchange are key to success within an online learning environment. It is important therefore that the online tutor harnesses the predisposition of the UK military student to learn in social groups and maintain their motivation to study. SDT suggests that this is especially important to those who are extrinsically motivated to study (thirteen of the fifteen participants) as the social context of the situation is key to maintaining motivation and driving it towards Integrated Regulation. At this point in their studies, although military CoPs and Family support is available, the tutor should be the main source of support for their studies.

Note 2 – as UK military students continue with their studies and start to construct knowledge (Salmon Stage Four), they should start to develop Autonomy or start to become a self-reliant student. This is achieved by ongoing support from their online tutors, working with students in groups and as individuals to further develop their confidence as an online learner. The study findings suggest that this support can be lacking at times and instead, they chose to fall back on their military CoPs and Family units as a stop gap for support. This has the potential to not only restrict development of student autonomy but also to reduce their motivation to study.

Note 3 – Salmon suggests that as online learners become self-reliant, they are in the Development stage of her model. When students achieve this stage, they maintain high levels of Motivation but also move successfully towards Integrated Regulation, where their achievements match their personal goals. The study findings suggest that although the participants achieved this, they did so utilising their military CoPs and Family units as opposed to support from their online tutors.

Chapter 5 Research Conclusions

5.1 Thesis Purpose

This thesis seeks to address the lack of academic literature and knowledge around the lived experiences of UK military students transitioning into HE and undertaking online Fd courses. It is hoped that by doing so, it will highlight the challenges faced by this cohort of students and better enable delivery organisations to provide online courses that are suited to their specific needs. Life in the UK military is a distinctive career path and only those who experience this life can fully understand the difficulties personnel face when serving. If these difficulties can be highlighted by the findings of this study to those delivering online courses within the HE environment, then it is hoped that courses can be delivered in a manner that is cognisant of their needs. With growing numbers of UK military personnel choosing HE as the route to civilian life, it is hoped that delivery organisations will be more supportive of their study needs and utilise their strengths more effectively.

This group of students faces unique academic challenges, with global deployments growing, remote learning environments and lengthy gaps since mainstream schooling for many. Entering HE with minimal academic qualifications, they face many challenges during the transition and require ongoing support from online tutors. This study highlights the requirement for initial support as they enter academia in order to manage their expectations and promote relatedness to the course. It also highlights the requirement for focussed academic support throughout the course, with a view to enabling students to achieve competence and autonomy as a student. The research aims to inform both online tutors and the delivery organisation as a whole about the specific requirements of UK military students within the online environment. Although high in self-confidence and motivation to study, inadequate support to students can easily degrade these attributes to a point whereby students feel isolated, anxious and unable to continue their studies. The study also highlights several important features related to the varied use of CoPs within the military and the importance of the family unit to the student when studying. In particular, the study has highlighted shortfalls in tutor support, along with wider lack of organisational support throughout the course.

5.2 Research Questions – how did the findings address them?

This study has highlighted a number of important findings regarding the lived experiences of UK military students as they transition into and through online Fd courses within the HE environment. The three Research Questions and associated sub-questions have provided the framework for the study and are summarised below:

Research Question1: How academically prepared are UK military students for a Distance Learning Fd programme?

- **Sub-question**: What is the relationship between the time since the student left mainstream schooling and their experiences on the course?
- **Research objective**: Evaluate the academic preparedness of UK military students for the MoD DL Fd programme.

This UK-based study has shown that despite their high initial expectations and personal beliefs that their military training and experience would prepare them for academia, these were soon replaced with self-doubt and a sharp realisation that they were ill-prepared for their academic studies. Despite being mature adults who had often planned their studies later in life and in line with their personal and workplace responsibilities, studying a Fd within HE proved very challenging for some. Thirteen of the participants had spent longer than ten years in the UK military, so it had been a considerable time since they attended mainstream schooling. Crucially, however, after their initial difficulties in building relatedness to the course, this length of service proved to be a valuable source of support to them and they were able to tap into wide networks across their military communities. It was found, therefore, that the relationship between time spent in the UK military and the time since mainstream schooling provides a dichotomous association that is more complex than was expected at the commencement of the study. The study findings suggest, that despite being confident and well-trained individuals with lots of life experience, UK military students are ill-prepared for study at HE and require a good level of support from online tutors and the wider delivery organisation in order to build a sense of relatedness to the course. This is required at all stages of their course if they are to be successful in their transition.

Research Question 2: What impact does the age and military experience of the student have on their motivational factors and own perceived abilities to successfully complete their Fd?

- **Sub-question**: Is there a difference in the lived experience on the course between students who are preparing to leave the military and those who are remaining in the organisation?
- **Sub-question**: How do motivational factors impact the lived experience on courses?
- **Research objective**: Explore the professional and personal factors that affect the experiences of UK military students on the MoD DL Fd courses.
- **Research objective**: Explore the motivational factors affecting UK military students during their transition into HE.

The findings regarding this research question were complex and presented several observations around motivation for the course. Of the eleven participants still serving, all but two of them expressed the view that they were studying to formalise their military experiences and skills to transition to civilian life in the near future. The other two participants were studying for either intrinsic motivational reasons, i.e. simply for the joy of learning new knowledge, or to increase their chances of promotion within their Service. The study found there were no perceived differences in levels of motivation between those preparing to leave the military and those who were remaining. All of the participants in the study were highly motivated at the commencement of their course, including the four veterans. Motivation levels were however challenged for around half of the participants when faced with what they perceived to be a lack of tutor support, both from a delivery and pastoral perspective. This surprised them having expected an online community that supported their studies, which in many cases failed to materialise, leaving them with feelings of isolation that negatively affected their motivation to complete their course.

The professional and personal factors affecting the participants were complex and despite their own best efforts to study effectively, the perceived lack of tutor support in some cases was also compounded by their location within their own Service. As the study took place with the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this exacerbated the difficulties for some participants with an increase in the operational

deployment tempo. It could be argued that world conflict may always affect students from the UK military in some form or another but given the reductions in military manpower across the three Services, the impact is being felt more severely than ever. The size and operational tempo are of beyond the remit of this study but it provides an example of how complex it can be for UK military students to navigate their studies alongside their evolving and extremely busy roles.

Research Question 3: What are the experiences of UK military students throughout the first semesters on the MoD DL Fd programme?

- **Sub-question**: How do the students' military and personal support networks affect their experiences on the course and chances of success?
- **Sub-question**: How supported do students feel from a learning and pastoral perspective?
- **Research objective**: Examine the lived experiences of UK military students joining the MoD DL Fd courses and throughout the first semesters of the course.
- **Research objective**: Examine the relationship between the student's military and personal CoPs and the impact on their lived experience of the course.

The findings from this study presented a varied picture with regards the lived experiences of the fifteen participants. Around half of the participants were happy with their module delivery, with the other half expressing dissatisfaction with tutors from a communication and module design perspective. The findings suggest differences between military and academic culture, with several participants speaking of waiting weeks if not months for replies to study queries, which is very different from their experiences within the military environment. This speaks of several things: a lack of understanding on the part of some online tutors regarding the complex lives of UK military students who have limited time and opportunity to study, along with an apparent disregard for their study needs at times. The subject of module design raised a number of findings, with some participants speaking of poorly structured online modules, with others expressing their dissatisfaction regarding the level of support for students new to online learning. This challenged their ability to develop online socialisation, which in turn negatively affected their sense of relatedness to the course and their competence as a student.

The utilisation of CoPs within the military environment was a major feature of this study but was far more complex than originally envisaged. Given the perceived lack of tutor support expressed by some participants, military support networks were used extensively by all of the participants, ranging from moral support by partners to direct study support from other students. This extended to the four veterans in the study, who regularly reached back into their ex-military communities to support their studies. Almost all of the participants stated that without these support networks, they would likely have either dropped out of their studies completely or would definitely have struggled even more. This support extended to family units, who provided not just study support, but also time management support that allowed more study time for the participants. In summary, the findings suggest that communities within the UK military and the support of family units was instrumental in students being able to successfully complete their Fd. Given that around fifty percent of the participants experienced what they perceived to be a lack of support at times, then this study suggests that more needs to be done to support our UK military students as they transition into HE.

5.3 Specific and Original Contribution to Knowledge

5.3.1 Paucity of Literature regarding UK military students in HE

This study set out to better understand the lived experiences of UK military students entering and undertaking online Fd courses within HE organisations. Literature from the US (Kirchner et al., 2014; Howe and Shpeer, 2019; Kirchner and Pepper, 2020; Ziencik, 2020; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) has provided a comparatively robust picture of how US military personnel experience this transition but very little has been written previously about the UK experience and research is therefore lacking from this perspective. This dearth of UK-centric literature leaves us with a shortage of knowledge regarding the challenges of UK military personnel as they transition into online HE courses, which potentially leaves these students less well supported when compared to their civilian peers. Cable et al. (2021) provide an oversight and comparison of the support approaches used across the US, Australia and the UK. However, from a UK perspective, the paper is very much focussed on the veteran community and written at the macro level with suggestions made that do not appear to reflect student experiences from studies. This UK-based study has found that UK

military students are generally self-confident, highly motivated and very keen to undertake online Fd courses that will support either their transition to civilian life or enhance their chances of promotion within their respective organisation. Participants were for the most part extrinsically motivated and expecting a similar supportive and community-related environment within HE to the one they experience in their military lives. The findings suggest however that they often do not experience positive and/or supportive relationships with online tutors and are forced to rely upon a variety of CoPs within the military, along with the support of family units, to maintain motivation. Additionally, participants found the online learning experience challenging, finding online modules unsupportive and not conducive to fitting in with their very busy and challenging daily roles. The combination of these lived experiences left them with feelings of solitude, isolation and identity loss during the transition to HE and during their ongoing studies, which negatively impacted their motivation to study and desire to complete their course. Participants struggled to gain a sense of relatedness to the course, which in turn delayed development of student competence and autonomy. Although this study is limited in the number of participants and was focussed on one delivery organisation, the findings show that far greater granularity regarding their transition into online HE courses is required as this knowledge will assist UK delivery organisations if they are to deliver suitable courses to UK military students. Prior to this study, the UK has failed to maintain momentum in this important research area and delivery organisations are faced with a lack of knowledge on how best to approach and deliver online material to UK military students. Continuing in this manner is not in the best interests of this student cohort and potentially sees them disadvantaged when compared to their civilian counterparts, which this thesis seeks to address.

5.3.2 Academic Preparedness of UK military students

Little has been written previously regarding the academic preparedness of UK military students as they enter academia, which is often a very different journey to that of their civilian peers. In this study, it was found that participants chose to study later in life, often after ten to twenty years in the military environment, which had a profound effect on their lived experiences. My five years of experience as Course Leader for the CSU informs me that many UK military students have not studied for A Levels before beginning their online HE courses (an experience supported in this study where only

three of the fifteen participants had done so) but are in possession of a great deal of life experience. The study highlighted significant challenges for the participants, who whilst starting their studies with high levels of self-confidence and motivation to study, often struggled to maintain these levels once they engaged with their online courses. Participants highlighted poor engagement from and with online tutors, along with course modules that were poorly structured and failed to engage with the community attributes of military students who have a natural disposition for working in teams and desire to engage with other online military students. The insights gathered during this study provide further recognition of the difficulties faced by UK military students attempting to navigate the process of moving from a structured military life to an academic setting that is full of uncertainty for them. Coming from a highly regulated process-driven life in the UK military, participants spoke of their expectation that the online courses would be more supportive to new students. Their actual lived experience was often not as they expected, with tutor support and module design falling short of their expectations, in particular it was found that module structure was mixed with some modules providing inadequate guidance to students. Some participants required greater help at times and especially early in the courses so soon after their transition. As a result, they were forced to fall back on their military CoPs to fill the perceived gaps and it is at this point that we see the dichotomous relationship in that their lengthy military service actually provided the basis on which they were able to succeed. Relationships built up over many years of military service provided the support platform from which they were able to learn more effectively, which proved to be the case for both serving and veteran participants. This study therefore shows that lengthy military service is not necessarily a hindrance to successfully completing online degrees and in fact, it can often prove to be beneficial in circumstances where the support received in the online environment is not what was expected by the student. This UK-based study provides a clearer understanding of the way in which UK military student communities prefer to study, which is in supportive environments with like-minded individuals and with a community approach to their studies. This very much aligns with previous research from Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) when they discuss legitimate peripheral participation and learning as a social system. The training for online tutors needs to be cognisant of the attributes possessed

by UK military students and specifically how these can be facilitated within the curriculum.

5.3.3 Impact on UK delivery organisations

The findings from this study suggest delivery organisations may need to adapt their teaching practice towards groups such as UK military students and gain a better understanding of their unique needs. Whilst several other studies (Kirchner et al., 2014; Howe and Shpeer, 2019; Kirchner and Pepper, 2020; Ziencik, 2020; Cable et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021) have highlighted the challenges that military students face when they transition into academia, this thesis provides detailed findings regarding the difficulties for UK military personnel. The study suggests that online tutors did not completely understand or identify with the unique requirements of their military students and this led to lived experiences that were less than optimal for the students. The combination of this and the tutor's failure to engage with the students' desire for greater community related learning led to a decrease in student self-confidence and motivation to study. As a result, the students' sense of relatedness to the course was not developed, which in turn hindered their ability to become competent and develop autonomy. Online learning is challenging enough for students (Chiu et al., 2021) but it is key that online tutors get to know their student cohorts as far as practicable in the online community and deliver material that meets their requirements. I would suggest that an increase in the number of tutors with military experience would assist with this and enable better informed courses to be delivered. This may also assist with recruitment of military students into HE organisations, providing an attractive feature for students who may perceive ex-military tutors to be more understanding of their needs and therefore favour a particular delivery organisation. Whilst the now defunct school-based 'Troops to Teachers' scheme failed to recruit many ex-service people, there is scope perhaps to consider a similar approach for the HE sector.

This study has taken a unique approach to understanding the lived experiences of UK military students entering HE by combining two well-known theories, namely SDT and CoP. Whilst Chiu (2022) analysed the impact of SDT to students throughout the Covid 19 pandemic, this UK study is the first to my knowledge that combines SDT with theories around CoP. Doing so has enabled the research to better grasp the

participant's motivational reasons for study, the impact that the social context of online learning has on their motivation, along with the manner in which they as a group have utilised a variety of CoPs to achieve successful completion of their studies. Only by combining these two theories has the full story with regards the fifteen participants become clear, allowing a far more detailed representation of their journey. The study involved both serving and veteran participants but there was no delineation between the two groups, with both groups adopting the same approaches to dealing with what they perceived as a lack of support at times in their studies. Participants defined 'support' as both pastoral and direct teaching support throughout this study, expecting their tutor to not only teach a new subject but also to enable closer relationships with other students in the online module environment. This greater granularity and insight into the lived experiences of both groups allows us an in-depth view of their unique difficulties and their often challenging academic journey. Perhaps the greatest insight this study has provided has been the manner in which the varied CoPs have been utilised by UK military students to support their studies. In a number of ways, this highlights the skills and attributes of UK military students and a utilisation of their determination to achieve the mission despite the challenges they faced.

The UK military maintain robust internal bonds with a strong community spirit that is central to its success on a daily basis and on operations. I believe we have a professional responsibility to support them in their studies, providing online courses that better support their needs and for these courses to be delivered in a manner that reflects their extremely busy working roles both in the UK and on overseas deployments. I suggest that based upon the findings of this study, the current regulatory approach in UK HE organisations is not cognisant of these needs and that consequently, UK military students are not always treated equitably. This simply places additional challenges on them and I have no doubt after five years as Course Leader for the MoD Fd courses, that a number of students failed to successfully complete their studies over this period due to a lack of regulatory support. It should be stressed, however, that those considering the futures of UK military students within these organisations are bound by current regulations and do not always possess the power to make changes. As we see growing numbers of UK military personnel looking to transition into civilian life and choosing HE as the means to support this transition, it is perhaps time to consider wider national changes in educational policy and MoD

support mechanisms that support this unique group of students. Prior to this study, there was a real lack of authentic insight into the academic journey for UK military students, which this study has sought to address. This thesis provides specific and original contributions to knowledge that it is hoped will benefit future students who, having spent many years serving their country, deserve greater assistance in dealing with what I consider to be their latest and sometimes hardest battlefield.

5.3.4 Application of current theories to UK military student learning

The study highlighted several interesting links (Figure 4.4) between the core elements of SDT, the main facets of CoP in the UK military and Salmon's Five Stage Model (Salmon, 2012) for online learning. These findings provide a number of exciting opportunities for UK HE delivery organisations that are responsible for the provision of online Fd courses to military students. Along with suggested policy changes at national and organisational level (Section 5.4.3), such opportunities provide guidance for potential improvements in the management and delivery of courses to UK military students that will enhance their chances of success. In addition, this may offer improved business prospects for organisations that wish to expand their online delivery to the military community. The findings also raise some interesting and unique questions regarding the manner in which online tutors engage with the UK military student community who currently, are not fully understood or catered for. This study supports the work of Ryan and Deci (2024) in stating that the social context of the online courses has a major influence on the levels of student motivation, which raises a number of questions regarding training for online tutors. Specifically, their training needs to be adapted to facilitate team working with this cohort of students, which would go some way to developing student relatedness to the course. This would allow them to further develop their competence as a student, which in turn would allow them to become autonomous students who are able to guide their own learning. Whilst appreciating that this is set against the backdrop of tutors operating within an individualised (marketised) environment, this study does provide us with original knowledge regarding the way in which UK military students prefer to learn in social groups.

5.4 Recommendations

The recommendations driven by the findings of this study have been split into four separate sub-sections, including recommendations for the Case Study University (CSU), along with recommendations for policy and practice. The section concludes with recommendations for future research.

5.4.1 Recommendations for the Case Study University

The study findings show that there was a lack of understanding on the part of online tutors regarding the difficulties faced by their UK military students. Targeted training for the tutors regarding these difficulties and also the manner in which UK military students are accustomed to learning, would go some way to enabling them to better appreciate these challenges and be able to direct their teaching in ways that would benefit this unique student group. This training needs to include not simply how best to deliver material to military students, but also how to accommodate their online socialisation needs with other military students. Alongside this training, a set of guidelines for military students would enable them to deal more proactively with the issues they face within the academic environment. Instead of the student feeling forced to turn to their own communities of practice for replacement support, this may go some way to strengthening the bond between online tutor and military student.

Other recommendations include the consideration of increased numbers of ex-military personnel as tutors, which would also go some way to strengthening the relationship between the delivery organisation and the military. Alongside the proposal for the use of an Academic Link Tutor (ALT), which is discussed in greater detail in Section 5.4.2, this would provide the CSU with improved ability to adapt to the often-changing requirements of UK military students. It may also provide opportunities for military personnel to access careers within academia, which may currently feel difficult or unobtainable to them. Additional recommendations that would benefit not just the CSU are covered within Section 5.4.2 below.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Practice

Given the observed increase in the number of UK military students entering the CSU in recent years (CSU, 2024), prompted by increased sponsorship from the RAF in particular, now is the appropriate time to investigate the need for a more direct link between the UK military and the organisation that delivers education to this cohort of students. Organisations in the US (Kirchner, 2015; Naphan and Elliott, 2015; Belanger et al., 2021) have successfully reached out to military students over a number of years, ensuring that they have the required knowledge to transition more successfully into HE and therefore have an equal opportunity with regards to their civilian peers to succeed in their studies. In the UK, the introduction of an Academic Link Tutor (ALT) would be of benefit to both the military and HE organisations, allowing them to have a better understanding of the challenges they each face. In particular, from a UK military student perspective, it specifically enhances their need for relatedness, autonomy and competence with regards SDT (Section 1.5). The outcome presents opportunities for a more streamlined relationship between the two bodies, thereby allowing greater opportunities for clarity on the part of the student to feel part of (relatedness) of the course and the university, whilst also enhancing their study journey in terms of achieving competence and autonomy as a learner. Such an inclusion would of course have to be thought through in terms of who would best fit such a role but with veteran students entering HE as tutors, this would seem to provide a suitable opening for someone with a background in the UK military (Section 5.3.3). A recommendation from this study, therefore, is that a peer-mentoring programme be introduced for online HE courses that cater to UK military students to manage their transition into HE and cater for their specific requirements.

The other positive consideration that is provided by the addition of an ALT is that it allows better opportunities for online tutors to have more insight into the unique study requirements of UK military students. Although beyond the scope of this study, and notwithstanding the current financial pressure on UK HE, there may also be opportunities for HE organisations to form tutoring teams that are solely focussed on delivery to online UK military students. If supported correctly, it offers the opportunity of improving student retention, it is cost neutral and would allow tutors to focus more on the academic preparedness of students as they transition to HE, thereby improving

the student's motivation to study. In addition, it closes the gap between academic and military communities, all of which aligns with the conceptual framework for this study. This would offer greater latitude with regards tutor delivery timings as opposed to the more traditional daytime sessions that many tutors offer, many of which are not suited to the UK military student. It would of course require some flexibility on the part of organisations to allow tutors to set their own diaries but would allow online tutoring that meets the often unique working hours of UK military students. Therefore, a recommendation from this study is that delivery organisations form teams that are solely focussed on online delivery to UK military students.

The final area regarding practice, although it spans both practice and policy, is the lack of meaningful representation by or within any UK HE professional body. Currently, there is no guidance for organisations regarding military students, which would seem to be an oversight that needs to be rectified if they are to get the best possible lived experience in their studies. Thought needs to be given to how this can be approached but a starting point would be discussions between UK HE bodies like the Advance HE and practicing HE tutors with a military background. Such discussions have the potential to guide future policy and practice with a view to providing a better understanding of the difficulties faced by UK military students during their transition into HE. Only by starting these conversations can we hope to improve and guide the policy and practice within HE organisations that currently treat their military students in the same way as their civilian counterparts in the assumption this is equitable. A further recommendation from this study, therefore, is that there be a representative within all UK HE organisations that deliver online courses to UK military students, whose responsibility is to liaise between elements of their own organisation but also UK HE professional bodies.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Policy

In the UK, there is limited support for UK military students transitioning to HE and the Armed Forces Covenant (Gov.uk, 2025), although an undertaking from the nation to ensure military personnel are not disadvantaged, contains little of value for UK military students in HE. Therefore, it would seem that for HE organisations in the UK to be able to better support their military students, change is required at the national level and policy needs to be addressed. Little tangible change has been observed in this

area in recent years and this now requires a reinvigoration if UK military students in HE are to be better supported. In particular, a review and potential expansion of the Armed Forces Covenant would prove a useful starting point to better support UK military students in their transition to HE. Such change could potentially lead to greater emphasis of their needs in the UK HE sector and especially in bodies such as the Advance HE. A recommendation from this study, therefore, is that discussions are commenced between organisations delivering online courses to UK military students and UK HE professional bodies.

5.4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limited size of the participant group in this research, it would be of value to undertake a UK HE sector-wide survey of UK military students to understand if the findings and themes from this research could be compared across other organisations. This study has however highlighted several potential future research areas that may benefit the delivery of online degree courses to UK military students. These include online tutors having a more military student focussed approach to their delivery and a better understanding of their unique study requirements that have been emphasised in this study. In particular, there is an argument for CoP/Team enabled support networks for UK military students that needs to be explored further but this would require further understanding regarding the differences for online tutors who are more accustomed to supporting individual students. This study does however highlight that online tutors would benefit from a greater understanding of the UK military student's needs and support methodologies, which presents a strong potential for them to present online modules in a manner that best suits this specific audience.

All participants in the study were of the opinion that studying later in life as more mature adults had improved their ability to succeed on the course. This subjective view would need to be investigated further and given the findings of this study that highlighted the importance of military CoPs to the participants, a better understanding of the point in time after leaving mainstream schooling at which UK military students may benefit from entering HE needs to be investigated. The study findings do, however, suggest a far more complex set of dynamics within the various military CoPs discussed and this invites a deeper study into CoPs in the military versus academia. It is also worth considering the dynamics of students that are later in their study journey, as opposed

to the participants in this study who were primarily in the initial year of their course. Additionally, future research might consider the differences for younger UK military students studying in HE, with a focus on their lived experiences with less years in the military versus their more senior military colleagues. It may be that their lack of years cultivating support options across the wider UK military has an impact on their experience within HE. This also raises the potential for research around single students and whether they are compromised in terms of their ability to be able to rely on family units for support to the same degree as their married colleagues. This study shows the importance of the family unit to UK military students but it would be interesting to analyse whether the lived experience for the single student is any less effective. This would ensure that all members of the UK military community are included within any new approach strategy to the online delivery of courses.

It would be an interesting future research opportunity to consider if there are differences in the lived experience for each of the three armed Services. Specifically, does their training and experience in their respective Service impact their lived experience during online HE courses? The core training for the three Services is quite different in their approach, which means that students from the Royal Navy, Army and RAF operate professionally in different ways. It would be interesting to better understand if the approach to online HE courses needs to take this into account when courses are being designed and delivered.

The study participants were selected by the Course Director and no consideration was given to their gender and whether this impacts their lived experience on the course. For example, two of the four female participants expressed the view that their study experience was not only impacted by the fact that they had children, but also that they studied to set an example to their children. Part of this example was connected to the fact that individuals could study later in life and did not have to enter university straight after mainstream schooling, whilst also setting an example to their children regarding the importance of determination and other attributes associated with online learning.

Finally, the voices of the online tutors referred to in this research are absent due to the focus on the lived experiences of the students. It is therefore recommended that future research is considered to include the issues experienced by online tutors in what is a

challenging environment. Their views would provide a useful indicator and perhaps offer some differing aspects of the issues highlighted here.

5.5 Thesis Limitations

There are limitations with regards the findings of this study in that it is small in scale and consisted of only fifteen participants and one course provider, although there was a spread of serving and veteran personnel, along with a mix of genders involved. Notwithstanding this, the richness of the data gathered from these fifteen participants points to the need for a larger study across all those UK universities with military students and/or military contracts. The findings from this study suggest something needs to be done to address any imbalance in approach to UK military students but in order to understand if the findings are replicable, it would need to be carried out with greater numbers and across other organisations. Although my experience as the Course Leader on the programme for five years leads me to believe that the findings are likely to be similar, more data is required to underpin these beliefs. The findings and themes from this research could be utilised as the primary variables for future research and a survey of UK military students. It is also worthy of note that the majority of the participants in this study were in the first year of their studies and it is therefore worth considering whether their lived experiences would alter later in their course. Such changes may reflect a better lived experience over time but this is conjecture and would need further research.

5.6 Reflections on the Research

This research has provided a unique understanding of the lived experiences of fifteen UK military students as they study for an online Fd within the HE environment. Whilst it is important to state clearly that this small sample may not reflect the experiences of all UK military students in HE, this research does nevertheless provide some very interesting data regarding the manner in which these students prefer to learn and be supported. The research demonstrates that although UK military students are inclined to be confident and highly motivated individuals in their daily roles, this confidence and motivation is not always replicated as they transition into HE. Instead, these findings suggest they can easily suffer from identity loss during the transition, becoming poorly

motivated and losing their self-confidence. Participants in this study suffered from isolation and feelings of abandonment at times, caused by what they perceived as lack of tutor and organisational support. Feeling forced to fall back on their established military CoPs and family units, participants successfully navigated their study difficulties but chose to self-silence instead of challenging the situation. Whilst this allowed the participants to move forwards with their studies in one form or another, it did nothing to combat the perceived lack of support, positively influence their self-confidence as a student, or move them towards becoming a more motivated self-driven learner.

This study shows that more needs to be achieved from a support perspective for UK military students in the HE environment. There appears to be a lack of knowledge of their skill sets, their desire to be part of a learning community and ultimately, how best to support them in their studies. With the majority of the participants in this study studying for extrinsic reasons, not enough was done with regards moving their motivation towards the Integrated Regulation end of the SDT spectrum (Ryan and Deci, 2020) for extrinsic motivation. It would appear that a great deal of work is necessary at the national, organisational and tutor levels if UK military students are to be better understood as a student body. For them to become autonomous, competent students who relate better to their courses in HE requires further work. These individuals often give everything for their country and it is certainly not too much to ask to support them better throughout their studies.

From a positionality perspective and having occupied the space between the UK military students and the academic delivery team, this research has further developed my own understanding of the lived experiences of the students. Additionally, it has further developed my own practice and resulted in a set of actionable recommendations for the case-study university and potentially for the wider UK HE community. Given the study findings and the highlighted challenges of UK military students undertaking online HE courses, it remains my view that the terminology utilised in the title of this thesis is entirely suited to the study and that this student body do feel at times as though the transition from military environment to academia is yet another battlefield.

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Appendix A – Questions used in Pilot Study for Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. The purpose of my research is to explore and understand the challenges faced by UK military students as they transition through the remote onboarding process and enter their first semesters of the Fd programme. I aim to achieve this by focussing on the following Research Questions:

RQ1. What are the experiences of UK Armed Forces students throughout the remote onboarding process and first semester on the MoD DL Fd programme?

- How supported do students feel from a pastoral perspective?

RQ2. How academically prepared are UK Armed Forces students for a Distance Learning Fd programme?

RQ3. What impact does the age and military experience of the student have on their ability to complete their Fd successfully?

- Is there a difference in the remote onboarding experience between students who are preparing to leave the military and those who are remaining in the organisation?

The interview is entirely voluntary and although it is planned to last for approximately 45 minutes, it may be a shorter or longer depending upon your responses to the questions. The interview is semi-structured and as such, your responses may lead to us discussing other subject areas. All responses will be anonymous and you will be referred to as Student '*A*' during the analysis of the data. You will be invited to comment on the research process as well as the research topic and are under no obligation to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

Following the interview, and with your permission, the information received will be stored securely on my University OneDrive, accessible only to me. In accordance with the University policy, this information will be stored for a maximum of 10 years.

Initial question

1. Can we begin by you telling me a little about your background – your Service background, length of time in the Service, current role (if allowed to give it freely). (*This should provide some sort of context of their experience, current workload and potential impact on their studies*).

2. What are your reasons for undertaking the course?

    a. Explore the primary reasons for study – internal promotion or preparing to leave the Service?

Main questions

3. How long has it been since you left mainstream ‘education’ (school, College etc.)?

4. What level was that education and was it a traditional classroom-based delivery?

5. How academically prepared did you feel for the Foundation degree course?

6. How anxious did you feel about starting the course?

7. What was your experience of the remote onboarding process?

    a. Focus on the socialisation aspects of the process.

8. What was your experience of the Academic writing and referencing Module?

a. How well did you feel the Module prepared you for future Modules?

9. Did you have any previous experience of DL, Open Learning or Correspondence courses?

    a. Compared to traditional classroom delivery, how was the transition to DL? (i. if not experienced before, or ii. If experienced before, how was their experience with Staffs?).

10. Tell me about your learning experience on the course.

11. What factors, if any, most affected your ability to study on the course?

    a. Were these related to personal issues, work issues, workload issues or challenges with the academic environment?

Supplementary questions

12. Consider the following points at the end of the interview:

    a. Do they have anything to add in addition to the other questions?

    b. Is there anything else they would like to raise that they feel would be useful for the research?

Appendix B – Search Strings used for Articles

Search strings used for the selection of articles

Search strings used
Communities of Practice
Self Determination Theory
Military students entering online courses
Online courses for military students
Transition of military students into Higher Education (HE)
Transition into Higher Education (HE)
Transitioning from the UK military into Higher Education (HE)
Transitioning from the military into Higher Education (HE)
Military transition to Higher Education (HE)
Remote onboarding
Onboarding
Socialisation in Higher Education (HE)
Self-Regulated learning
Resilience of military students entering Higher Education
Academic preparedness
Readiness for online learning
Motivation in Higher Education (HE) courses
Motivation in online Higher Education (HE) courses
Promoting engagement in online learning courses
Military culture and online learning
Serving and veteran transition to online learning
Induction to Distance Learning (DL)
DL or online learning orientation
Phenomenology
Qualitative studies on military personnel transitioning to Higher Education (HE)

Appendix C – Selection Criteria for Articles

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Papers related to Communities of Practice (CoP) with particular emphasis on papers published recently. Included all seminal papers by Lave and Wenger as co-authors or individually published, where all dates are used. Also papers by Wenger-Trayner since his marriage.	Other languages than English.
Papers related to Self Determination Theory with particular emphasis on papers published recently, with the exception of seminal papers by Ryan and Deci, either as joint authors or as individuals, where all dates are used.	Other languages than English.
Papers related to military students undertaking online learning and/or Distance Learning (DL).	Other languages than English.
Peer-reviewed journal articles discussing Communities of Practice, with particular emphasis on military-related papers.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.
Book chapters discussing Communities of Practice, with particular emphasis on military-related papers.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.
Full text discussing Communities of Practice, with particular emphasis on military-related papers.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.
Peer-reviewed journal articles discussing Self Determination Theory, with particular emphasis on military-related papers.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.
Book chapters discussing Self Determination Theory, with particular emphasis on military-related papers.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.
Full text discussing Self Determination Theory, with particular emphasis on military-related papers.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.
Book chapters and journal articles related to motivation and/or resilience.	Emphasis on papers published recently, with the caveat of seminal papers produced by key authors.

Appendix D – Information sheet for Student participants

Title of study

Their new battlefield: understanding the experiences of UK military students undertaking online Distance Learning Foundation Degree programmes.

Invitation Paragraph

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project which forms part of my Doctor of Education (EdD) research. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully, discuss it with others if you wish and please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences faced by UK Armed Forces personnel on the Foundation Degree (Fd) scheme with Staffordshire University. The research focusses on the preparedness for their studies and their experiences as a Distance Learner.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited you to take part in this study because you are a student on the programme within the first year of your studies.

What will happen if I take part?

You will receive an invitation to be interviewed by me as part of the study and this will take the form of a recorded semi-structured interview using MS Teams. Although camera and video will be used, only the verbal answers will be captured from the recording and analysed for themes. There is absolutely no impact to you as a student and anything you say as part of the semi-structured interview, will not be held against you in any way. The results are anonymised and you will be allocated a letter and referred to in the research as Student A (or whichever letter is allocated to you).

Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary. You should only take part if you want to and choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in anyway. Once you have read the information sheet, please contact me if you have any questions that will help you make a decision about taking part. If you decide to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form and you will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are absolutely no risks to you taking part in this research and as discussed, the results are anonymised.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The purpose of the research is to analyse the lived experience of UK Armed Forces students, with a view to providing the best possible experience for all students. Therefore, it is hoped that this research will provide insights into how this can be achieved from current students on the programme. By taking part in this research, you will be assisting the researcher to analyse your experiences, helping other students for their future studies and providing valuable insight for research that may assist you in your future studies.

Data handling and confidentiality

Your data will be processed in accordance with the data protection law and will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR).

Data Protection Statement

The data controller for this project will be Staffordshire University. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. The legal basis for processing your personal data for research purposes under the data protection law is a 'task in the public interest' You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this study by completing the consent form that has been provided to you.

You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the Staffordshire University Data Protection Officer. If you wish to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk.

What if I change my mind about taking part?

You are free withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. Withdrawing from the study will not affect you in any way. You can withdraw your data from the study up until the data captured has been anonymised, after which withdrawal of your data will no longer be possible due to the fact that it will be impossible to clarify which is your data as it will have been processed and anonymised. At this point, the data will also have been included as part of the preliminary report.

If you choose to withdraw from the study before the point stated above, we will not retain any information that you have provided us as a part of this study.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results from the study will be used as part of my wider research for the thesis. The thesis will be published and be available at a date to be determined.

Who should I contact for further information?

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details: Arnold.mckie@research.staffs.ac.uk

What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?

This research is being undertaken for the purpose of completing a Professional Doctorate in Education at Staffordshire University. If you have any concerns about this research, please feel free to contact my Doctoral Supervisor Dr Duncan Hindmarch. His email address is d.n.hindmarch@staffs.ac.uk

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact the module tutor or the Chair of the Staffordshire University Ethics Committee for further advice and information:

Email: Tim.Horne@staffs.ac.uk

Work: 01782 295722

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

Appendix E - Participant Consent Form

RESEARCH PROJECT CONSENT FORM

Their new battlefield: Understanding the challenges faced by UK military students commencing study on part time Distance Learning Foundation Degree courses.

Researcher: Andrew McKie

I have read and understood the information sheet.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and I have had any questions answered satisfactorily.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without having to give an explanation and in the knowledge that withdrawing from this study will not affect my treatment on the course now or in the future.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that the semi-structured interview will be recorded using MS Teams.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I consent that data collected could be used for publication in the completed thesis and understand that all data will be presented anonymously.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I agree that data will only be used for the project detailed above, although the data may also be audited for quality control purposes.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I have been made aware that all data will be sorted safely on a password protected computer (electronic data), or locked away securely (hard copies of data) for 10 years before being destroyed.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that I can withdraw my data from the project up to the point of the data being anonymised without having to give an explanation.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I hereby give consent to take part in this study.	Yes ☐	No ☐

Name Participant (print)	Date	Signature
Name Researcher (print)	Date	Signature

Appendix F – Final Questions used for Thesis Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. The purpose of my research is to explore and understand the challenges faced by UK military students as they transition through the remote onboarding process and enter their first semesters of the Fd programme. I aim to achieve this by focussing on the following Research Questions:

RQ1. What are the experiences of UK military students throughout the remote onboarding process and first semesters on the MoD DL Fd programme?

- How do the student's military and personal support networks affect their experiences on the course and chances of success?
- How supported do students feel from a pastoral perspective?

RQ2. How academically prepared are UK military students for a Distance Learning Fd programme?

- What is the relationship between the time since the student left mainstream schooling and their experiences on the course?

RQ3. What impact does the age and military experience of the student have on their ability to complete their Fd successfully?

- Is there a difference in the lived experience between students who are preparing to leave the military and those who are remaining in the organisation?
- How do motivational factors impact the lived experience on courses?

The interview is entirely voluntary and although it is planned to last for approximately 45 minutes, it may be a shorter or longer depending upon your responses to the questions. The interview is semi-structured and as such, your responses may lead to us discussing other subject areas. All responses will be anonymous and you will be

referred to as Student '*A'* during the analysis of the data. You will be invited to comment on the research process as well as the research topic and are under no obligation to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

Following the interview, and with your permission, the information received will be stored securely on my University OneDrive, accessible only to me. In accordance with the University policy, this information will be stored for a maximum of 10 years.

Initial question

1. Can we begin by you telling me a little about your background – your Service background, length of time in the Service, current role (if allowed to give it freely) and reasons for study. (*This should provide some sort of context of their experience, current workload and potential impact on their studies*).

2. What are your reasons for undertaking the course?

    a. Explore the primary reasons for study – internal promotion or preparing to leave the Service?

Main questions

3. How long has it been since you left mainstream 'education' (school, College etc.)?

4. What level was that education and was it a traditional classroom-based delivery?

5. How academically prepared did you feel for the Foundation degree course?

6. How anxious did you feel about starting the course?

7. What was your experience of the remote onboarding/induction process when you started the course?

a. Focus on the **socialisation**, **pastoral** and **communication** aspects of the process.

b. What were your motivations for study?

8. What was your experience of the Academic writing and referencing Module?

    a. How well did you feel the Module prepared you for future Modules?

9. Did you have any previous experience of DL, Open Learning or Correspondence courses?

    a. Compared to traditional classroom delivery, how was the transition to DL? (i. if not experienced before, or ii. If experienced before, how was their experience with Staffs?).

10. Tell me about your learning experience on the course.

11. Do you feel a mentor would have helped with your studies?

12. What factors, if any, most affected your ability to study on the course?

    a. Were these related to personal issues, work issues, workload issues or challenges with the academic environment?

Supplementary questions

13. Consider the following points at the end of the interview:

    a. Do they have anything to add in addition to the other questions?

    b. Is there anything else they would like to raise that they feel would be useful for the research?

Appendix G – Ethical approval

Institute of Education

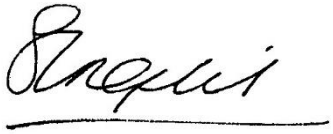
ETHICAL APPROVAL FEEDBACK

Researcher name:	Andrew McKie
Title of Study:	SU_22_358: *Their new battlefield: Understanding the challenges faced by UK military students commencing study on part time Distance Learning Foundation Degree courses.*
Status of approval:	Approved

Thank you for addressing the committee's comments. Your research proposal has now been approved by the Ethics Panel and you may commence the implementation phase of your study. You should note that any divergence from the approved procedures and research method will invalidate any insurance and liability cover from the University. You should, therefore, notify the Panel of any significant divergence from this approved proposal. This approval is valid only for as long as you are employed at the University.

When your study is complete, please send the ethics committee an end of study report. A template can be found on the ethics Blackboard site.

Signed: **Date: 22.08.2023**



Dr Sharon Inglis

Ethics Co-ordinator
Institute of Education

Appendix H – Initial Codes generated from Data Set

Initial Code	Notes
Work life / study balance	This appeared several times throughout the data set and was a key factor for almost all participants. My initial thoughts on this area were that many of the issues might be beyond the scope of this study as the CSU does not control military roles.
Communities of Practice	Several participants struggled with the transition to academia, especially around the lack of support, loss of structure and a perceived loss of identity. This felt at the heart of the study but it was noted from the data that participants often formed their own communities, both from a personal and work-related perspective.
Time since mainstream school	The majority of the participants had left mainstream school some years before, so were anxious about studying. For some, the experience at school had not been positive, which added to their anxiousness.
Anxiousness about study	This related to time since leaving mainstream school, the apprehension about studying after a long period of time but also about studying outside of the military environment.
Motivational factors	Whilst some participants were studying to enhance their internal promotion prospects, the majority were preparing

	themselves for life after their service. I would therefore expect the motivation to be high as they needed to formalise their military experiences into academic achievements. The majority of the participants (all but two) had extrinsic motivational reasons for study.
Module design	A number of participants expressed negative views regarding the module designs.
Tutor interaction	There were mixed views regarding the level of support received from their tutors, with some participants expressing dissatisfaction and others stating their tutor relationships had been positive.
Tutor communications	Some participants stated that they struggled to communicate with their tutors, either from an access viewpoint or from a military/civilian language perspective.
Age and time spent in the UK military	This had both negative and positive connotations in the study: those who had spent longer in the military had generally been out of mainstream school for longer, which concerned them at the start of their studies. However, they found this was balanced by their wider support networks, both from a personal and work-related perspective, which helped them in their studies.

Self-confidence as a learner	Interestingly, self-confidence in the military-related workplace did not necessarily translate to self-confidence in the academic environment. Some of the participants were very experienced military personnel with lots of active service behind them – they were therefore very confident people in the workplace. However, once they started the course, this confidence waned quite considerably on the course, which impacted their motivation and their studies.

Appendix I – Initial Themes generated from Data Set

Initial Themes from the data set	Notes
Preparation for study within a HE environment. Sub Themes: Self-confidence and Motivation	Although generally confident individuals, with strong motivational reasons for study, several participants spoke of the struggle to adapt to the academic environment having spent their daily lives in the generally more structured UK military environment. In addition, time since mainstream schooling was a key factor. The self-confidence of the participants had a major influence on their success in the programme and related directly to any negative or positive effects on their study ability. With regards preparation for study, this related to both time since leaving school and the reasons for study. Motivations for study were strong across the participant group, with two individuals studying for purely intrinsic reasons (to gain new knowledge) and thirteen studying for extrinsic reasons (to prepare for life as a civilian or to enhance their promotion prospects within their Service).

Tutor support	Whilst it is not the purpose of this study to discuss the tutors on the programme, it would be remiss not to discuss tutor support in terms of module design, tutor interaction and communication. There were differing views across the participant group regarding this theme, but it is key to understanding the data that it be included in the study. Further details are found in Chapter 3 and 4 of this work, but it was found that differing levels of tutor support led to increased reliance on other support networks by participants.
Communities of Practice within the UK military environment	This is at the heart of the study and involves issues with the transition academia, tutor interaction and the need to *fill the gaps* left by their perceived expectations of the courses.
Support networks	This was a key thread running through all of the participants interviews and related to several streams. These included relying on personal and work-related networks for support when they were struggling, to 'compensating' for lack of tutor support in the modules. Those participants with greater experience in the UK military expressed greater reliance on these networks having built them up over long years of service in the UK military. This raises an interesting dynamic between length of

	service in the military, time since mainstream schooling and transition to academic environments.
Work location	Although an initial theme, due to the manner in which the majority of students are recruited into the programme, I cannot influence this issue. It was therefore decided to remove the theme from the list, which is discussed in greater detail below.
Situational Factors	This was a constant issue for the participants throughout the interviews and several did not realise the time requirements when they embarked on the course. Additionally, their military roles impacted their time on studies for several participants. However, whilst these situational factors are not within the scope of the study to influence, it was felt that it was important to include reference to it in other themes.

Appendix J – Participant Outlines

This table outlines the details of the fifteen participants in the study and all personal details have either been anonymised or redacted as required.

Participant Pseudonym	General outline
Jay	Currently serving in the Royal Navy and has 12 years of service, is a Junior Non-Commissioned Office (JNCO). Around 13 years since he left mainstream school. Intends to use the degree for personal preparation when leaving the military.
Keith	Served for 22 in the British Army and now a veteran. He left the Army as a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) and has been 22 years since he left mainstream school. Is studying for personal and promotion prospects within his civilian organisation.
Luke	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 14 years. Is a SNCO and it is 14 years since he left mainstream school. Is studying for promotion prospects within the Service.
Beatrice	Served in the British Army for 11 years and left as a JNCO. Now a veteran, she works as an engineering surveyor for a large worldwide organisation. Is studying for personal reasons, to set an example for her children.

Liam	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 4 years, is currently a JNCO. Only 4 years since he left mainstream school. Is studying for promotion prospects within the Service.
Elizabeth	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 15 years, is now a SNCO. It is 15 years since she left mainstream school. Intends to use the degree for personal preparation when leaving the military.
Damien	Served in the Royal Navy and the RAF for a total of 14 years and around 20 years since he left mainstream school. Is a SNCO and is studying for personal reasons (enjoys academic work) and also for promotion prospects within his organisation.
Arnold	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 8 years, is a JNCO. It is 8 years since he left mainstream schooling. Intends to use the degree for personal preparation when leaving the military.
Charles	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 12 years, is a JNCO. It is also 12 years since he left mainstream school and he studies for both personal reasons and for potential promotion prospects.

Alice	Served for 11 years in the British Army and recently left, so now a veteran. Studies for personal reasons and to increase her chances of promotion within her new organisation.
James	Currently serving in the RAF but was in the British Army beforehand, so has a total of about 12 years of service, is currently a JNCO. Left mainstream school 15 years ago and studies in preparation to leave the military.
Billy	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 20 years, is a SNCO. It is also 20 years since he left mainstream school and he studies to enhance his promotion prospects within the military.
Steven	Currently in the RAF and has served for 27 years straight from school. Holds a senior position (Flight Sergeant) and studies to enhance his career prospects when he leaves the military.
Ocean	Currently serving in the RAF and has been in for 9 years, is a JNCO. Left mainstream school 10 years ago and is studying for personal reasons to enhance her career prospects outside of the military.
Patrick	Currently serving in the RAF and is a SNCO. Has been in for 14 years and is studying to use the degree for personal preparation when leaving the military.