

Education in the British army: Comparison with civilian standards for the 16-17 age group

Introduction

More than **80 per cent** of UK armed forces enlistees aged under 18 join the army and train in England. This briefing compares education provided by the army and by the English education system.¹

Education standards in England

Participation

Age 18 is supplanting 16 as the *de facto* end of basic education. Between 2004 and 2014, participation in full-time education at ages 16 and 17 rose from **68 per cent to 82 per cent**.² The proportion of the age group not in education, employment or training (NEET) fell from **15 per cent to 6 per cent**.³

In order to consolidate this trend, the Education and Skills Act (2008) has laid on young people a statutory '**duty to participate**' in education to age 18. Those not in full-time education may fulfil the duty while working, provided that they complete at least **280 guided learning hours** per year towards Ofqual-accredited qualifications, which usually means studying at a local college for one day per week.⁴

Achievement

The government's target for minimum attainment is **A*-C GCSE passes in English and maths** by age 19, to be achieved with additional support post-16 if needed.⁵ This policy was set after the Wolf Review of Vocational Education concluded that core GCSEs are of '**critical importance for employment**' and that other, more elementary Level 2 awards, such as Functional Skills, were '**certainly not in themselves... adequate**'.⁶

Achievement at this standard has been rising. **64 per cent** of 19 year olds now hold A*-C GCSE passes in both English in maths, up from **44 per cent** in 2005.⁷

Provision

Schools and colleges must comply with Ofsted's full standards regime. State-funded institutions are mandated to support students aged 16 or 17 to **achieve good GCSE passes in English and maths** if they do not already hold them, and to enable others to **progress to Level 3** qualifications such as A Levels or BTEC awards.⁸ Sub-GCSE provision at Levels 1 and 2, such as **Functional Skills** courses, can support transition to the GCSE standard for those who need extra support, but these were **not designed as stand-alone qualifications**.⁹

Education in the army

Standards

The army is not subject to the standards described above. Trainees are **exempt** from the duty to study for 280 guided learning hours per year.¹⁰ Ofsted inspects the **welfare provision** in initial training establishments but **not the quality and suitability of their education**.¹¹ The army's minimum target for attainment after up to 12 months of basic soldier training is **Entry Level 3**, equivalent to a **reading age of 9-11**; after three years soldiers are expected to have reached the next level up, **Level 1**.¹² The army does not monitor this policy, which in any case falls well short of the standards applicable to the same age group in civilian education.

Provision

GCSE courses and resits are **not offered to trainees**, who may only study for these on their own initiative and in their own time. The training offered for some technical army roles can be substantial, but most recruits aged under 18 are enlisted for non-technical, frontline roles such as the infantry, for which the education provided is rudimentary.

The main training camp for recruits aged under 18 is the Army Foundation College (AFC) near Harrogate. Its 12-month soldier training for non-technical roles includes the sub-GCSE **Functional Skills** courses in **literacy**,

numeracy and ICT at Level 1 and, optionally, **Level 2**.¹³ No other accredited education is provided.¹⁴ Other training establishments accepting recruits aged under 18 provide still **less mandatory education**.¹⁵ A civilian college that applied these standards would forfeit its funding.¹⁶

For most trainees, their Functional Skills qualifications are packaged with their basic soldier training as an **apprenticeship in 'Public Services'**, designed to support progression inside the army but not elsewhere.¹⁷

Recruits who hold good GCSEs and enlist for non-technical jobs are overqualified for the Functional Skills regime and are **not offered suitable alternatives**. A parent told Child Soldiers International in 2015 that because her son held GCSEs his education at AFC amounted to one hour per week.¹⁸

Achievement

Trainees who arrive at AFC without any qualifications usually complete their Level 1 Functional Skills courses and most opt to progress to Level 2.¹⁹ Their high rate of achievement suggests that, with the right support, **many could successfully retake their core GCSEs**, but their early enlistment currently precludes this.

Planned improvements

In response to concerns about the level of its education provision, the army has announced plans to provide a BTEC course to AFC trainees who hold good GCSE passes on arrival from autumn 2016; from autumn 2017 it intends to allow trainees who achieved a D in GCSE English or maths to retake their exams.²⁰ It is not yet clear whether these will be optional or mandatory for the recruits concerned.

This will enhance the army's provision, although it will still not meet the civilian standard. Trainees will **remain exempt** from the duty to participate in education for 280 guided learning hours per year towards accredited qualifications and Ofsted's full inspection regime will still not apply. Trainees aged 17 at other training centres will not benefit, and there is no additional provision envisaged for recruits who enlist without GCSE qualifications below grade D – those most in need of further support.

In addition, the high drop-out rate among the youngest trainees, at **one in three**,²¹ suggests that the army's route to GCSE retakes is likely to be riskier than the civilian system, where only **one in ten** students withdraw.²²

Does enlisting at 16 prevent young people from being 'NEET'?

It is a common misconception that disadvantaged young people would be 'NEET' if they had to wait to age 18 before joining the army.

Of the most disadvantaged **15 per cent** of 16 year olds (i.e. those eligible for free school meals), **82 per cent** now continue in sustained education; **13 per cent** drop out or are recorded NEET.²³ Disadvantaged 16 year olds are therefore much more likely to be in education than NEET; encouraging them to join the army means, in most cases, encouraging them to abandon their full-time education.

Ofsted has challenged local colleges to improve outcomes for young people,²⁴ but this underperforming sector still achieves substantially more for the age group than can the army. **41 per cent** of young people eligible for free school meals now achieve A*-C grades in core GCSEs by age 19, up from **19 per cent** a decade ago.²⁵

Conversely, those who join the army at 16 or 17 run a substantial risk of becoming NEET later. **Two in five** minors who join the infantry will have left the army within four years, most of them during training.²⁶ Having left school early to join the army and then left the army as well, these young people risk permanent disengagement from the education system and long-term unemployment as a direct consequence of enlisting prematurely.²⁷ In contrast, adult recruits are more likely both to complete training and to be promoted through the ranks.²⁸

Since disadvantaged civilians aged 16 are subject to the 'duty to participate' standards and have more opportunities than army trainees to gain core qualifications, and since many do achieve at GCSE level, the evidence suggests that young people would benefit educationally from a rise in the enlistment age to 18.

Policy options

Option 1: Raise the army's standards

The following measures would ensure that armed forces trainees were supported to meet the government's own minimum standards of participation and attainment after the age of 16:

1. Repeal the armed forces' exemption from the 'duty to participate' provisions and ensure that **all** trainees under the age of 18 complete 280 guided learning hours per year towards accredited qualifications.

2. Support **all** trainees without A*-C passes at GCSE in English and maths to achieve them.²⁹
3. Support **all** trainees with good GCSE passes to progress to Level 3.

This additional education provision could be facilitated by day release to civilian colleges, but it would detract from recruits' military training. It could also be costly; initial infantry training already costs three times as much for a 16 year-old as it does for an adult.³⁰

Option 2: Raise the recruitment age to 18.

The other option is to raise the minimum age of enlistment to 18, in common with almost all comparable countries around the world. There are already a host of ethical, practical, and financial reasons to do so, discussed elsewhere.³¹ By enlisting adults only, the armed forces would allow young people every possibility to enhance their qualifications as civilians, subject to all the relevant standards, before they decide whether to join up. The armed forces would also benefit from recruits who have up to two additional years of maturity and education behind them, whose Phase 1 training is around three months instead of a year, and who can be deployed immediately after they finish training.

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Appendix

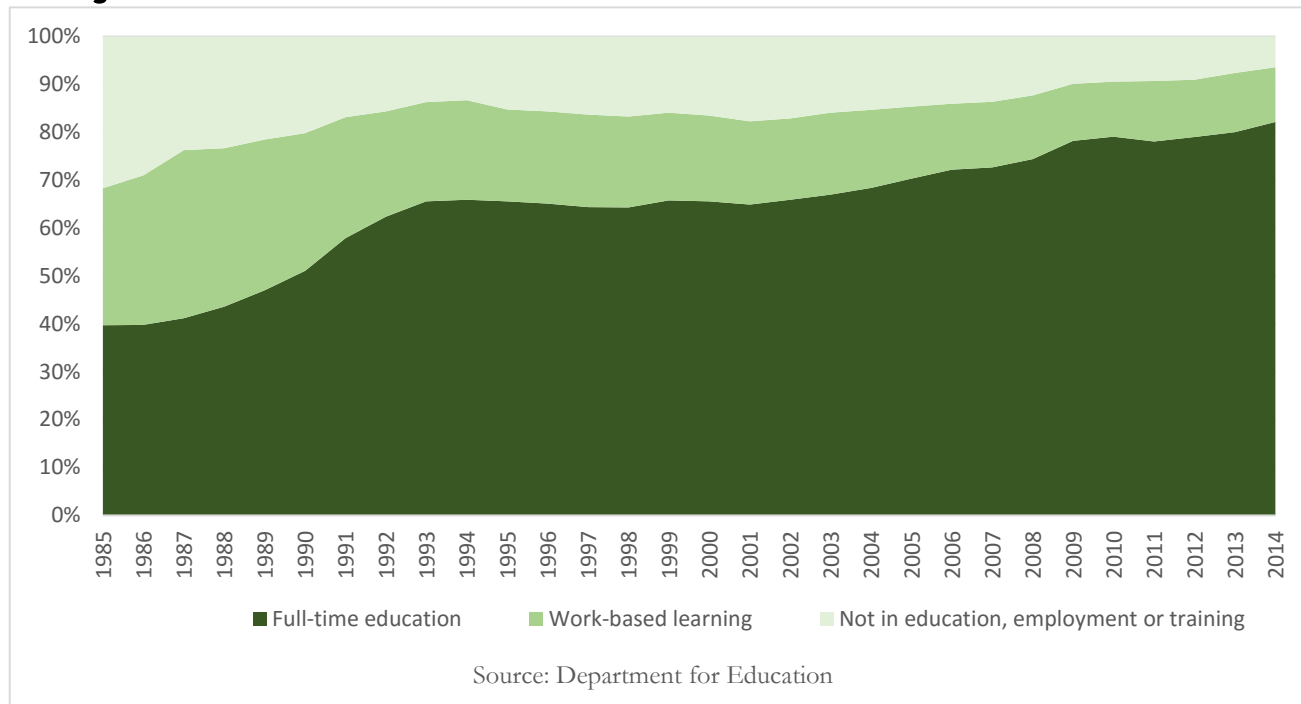
A. Education standards and provision at age 16:

Comparison of army training with civilian standards in England

Standard	Army training for 16 year-olds	Civilian college
Statutory 'duty to participate' in 280 guided learning hours per year.	✗	✓
Wide choice of subjects	✗	✓
Support with sub-GCSE literacy and numeracy at Levels 1 and 2.	✓	✓
Support to achieve government minimum standard at Level 2: GCSE A*-C grades in English and maths by age 19.	✗*	✓
All learners with Level 2 supported to progress to Level 3 (A Levels, BTECs and equivalent).	✗*	✓
Unrestricted freedom to leave or change college at any point.	✗	✓
High sustained participation rate (c. 90 per cent) ³²	✗	✓
Ofsted inspects child welfare arrangements.	✓	✓
Ofsted inspects quality and suitability of education.	✗	✓

* Current army plans will enhance provision for some recruits by autumn 2017.

B. 16 and 17 year olds in: a) full-time education; b) work-based learning; c) no education, employment or training: 1985-2014



C. Guide to education levels

Level	Description/example (GLH=guided learning hours)	Army/civilian standard
Entry Level 1	Literacy/numeracy expected at age 5-7.	Army enlists at this level in practice. ³³
Entry Level 2	Literacy/numeracy expected at age 7-8.	Army's minimum standard for entry. ³⁴
Entry Level 3	Literacy/numeracy expected at age 9-11.	- Army's minimum attainment standard at end of initial training. ³⁵ - Approx. three-quarters of the youngest army recruits arrive at this level or below. ³⁶
Level 1	- GCSE D-G (130 GLH)*	- Not currently provided to army recruits.
	- Functional Skills Level 1 (45 GLH)	- Provided to youngest army recruits – mandatory. - All soldiers expected to reach Level 1 after 3 years.
Level 2	- GCSE A*-C (130 GLH)*	- Government minimum standard by age 19, now achieved by 64 per cent of young people. ³⁷ - Not provided to army recruits.
	- Functional Skills Level 2 (45 GLH)	- Provided to youngest recruits – optional.
Level 3	'A' Level/BTEC	- Provided in civilian colleges to those who hold Level 2 qualifications. - Not currently provided to army recruits.

* 130 Guided Learning Hours applies to whole qualification across grades A*-G.

References

- ¹ In 2014-15, the armed forces recruited 2,170 minors, of whom 1,820 (84 per cent) joined the army. MoD, *Annual Personnel Report* [2014 edition], <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-armed-forces-annual-manning-statistics-index>.
- ² Figures for 2015 are not available at the time of writing. DfE, *Table A7: Participation in education and training of 16 & 17 year olds, England, 1985 onwards*, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/436531/Additional_tables_rates_SFR19_2015.xls.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Department for Education, *Participation of young people in education, employment or training: Statutory guidance for local authorities*, 2013, p. 18.
- ⁵ Department for Education (DfE), *Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government response*, 2011, p. 7.
- ⁶ The Wolf Report noted that NVQs at Level 2, for example, have been shown to have no beneficial effect on earnings. A Wolf, *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*, 2011, pp. 31-32, 84.
- ⁷ Figures are for 2015 and 2005. DfE, *Table 13: Attainment at age 16 and 19 in English and maths at GCSE A*-C and other Level 2 qualifications*, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19-in-2015>.
- ⁸ DfE, communication with Child Soldiers International, 25 April 2016.
- ⁹ A Wolf, *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*, 2011, pp. 80-96.
- ¹⁰ In 2013, a statutory instrument was introduced to exempt armed forces trainees from studying for 280 guided learning hours per year towards accredited qualifications. *The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013*, SI 1205, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/1205/regulation/8/made>.
- ¹¹ For example, see Ofsted, *Army Foundation College (Harrogate): An MoD inspection report*, 2012, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=92852e13-74f7-42d0-a13f-204b0cc10dc3>.
- ¹² Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 16 December 2015, Ref. FOI10541/2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=2466329a-09f1-4d7d-8870-f6ff0dfe4336>.
- ¹³ For example, see Maj Gen Tickell, *Witness Statement, submitted in Child Soldiers International v Secretary of State for Defence*, 2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bbebc862-99f3-4adf-85d7-98020c6c1eb4>, pp. 13-14.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ The other two army initial training establishments are at Catterick and Pirbright, where education provision is minimal. For details, see information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 16 December 2015, Ref. FOI10541/2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=2466329a-09f1-4d7d-8870-f6ff0dfe4336>.
- ¹⁶ It is a condition of funding in civilian colleges to provide GCSE courses in English and maths to learners who arrive with D grades, and to assess whether students who arrive with E grades or below should also be provided with GCSE courses or sub-GCSE courses, such as Functional Skills, as a stepping stone to GCSEs. DfE, communication with Child Soldiers International, 25 April 2016.
- ¹⁷ As per the Level 2 apprenticeship standards, completion requires only numeracy and literacy at Level 1. The full list of learning outcomes from the army's Public Services Apprenticeship is: Maintain competence, knowledge and standards of conduct in public service; Work safely in public service; Work as a team member to deliver public service; Administer first aid; Use and maintain physical resources; Use communication systems in working contexts; Meet physical fitness requirements; Plan and navigate a cross country route; Operate and maintain small arms and team weapons; Perform ceremonial duties. Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards, *HM Forces (England): Apprenticeship framework*, pp. 18-19, <http://www.afo.sscalliance.org/frameworkslibrary/downloader.cfm?FRID=FR02016>.
- ¹⁸ Parent of recruit at Army Foundation College, communication with Child Soldiers International, 2015.
- ¹⁹ For example, see Maj Gen Tickell, *Witness Statement*, op. cit., p. 14.
- ²⁰ Letter from Earl Howe, Minister of State in the House of Lords, to Lord Selkirk, 31 July 2016.
- ²¹ Between 2009-10 and 2013-14, 4,270 (33 per cent) of 13,030 enlistees under the age of 18 left the army during training. Joiners aged under 18: 2009-10: 3,630; 2010-11: 2,400; 2011-12: 2,930; 2012-13: 2,300; 2013-14: 1,770; TOTAL: 13,030. Joiners under the age of 18 who subsequently left the army during training: 2009-10: 1,370; 2010-11: 770; 2011-12: 990; 2012-13: 630; 2013-14: 510; TOTAL: 4,270. MoD, *Annual Personnel Report* [2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 editions], <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-armed-forces-annual-manning-statistics-index>; drop-out figures from Hansard: HL Deb, 27 April 2016 (no. 7676). (Note: figures from 2014-15 have been excluded since some of the youngest recruits who enlisted during that year had not completed their training at the time the drop-out statistics were generated and so may still have left.)
- ²² In 2012/13, the withdrawal rate from civilian education in England for the post-16 age group was 10.1 per cent (all post-16 learning aims). Centre for Economic and Social Exclusion, *Achievement and retention in post 16 education* (Table 1), 2015, <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/11431/Achievement+and+retention+in+post-16+education,%20February+2015/746a1fb2-2a89-49e9-a53b-f5339288d4b1>, p. 6.
- ²³ Eligibility for free school meals (FSM) is a well-established statistical proxy for socio-economic disadvantage. The most recent statistics, published in October 2015, record the education and employment destinations in 2013/14 of 561,110 people who finished Key Stage 4 in 2012/13, of whom 81,120 (14 per cent) were FSM-eligible. 82 per cent in the FSM cohort continued in education for a 'sustained' period afterwards, defined by the Department for Education as a minimum of two terms, October to March. DfE, *Table NA12 (FSM): KS4 destination measures: 2012/13 cohort into 2013/14 destinations. (Provisional)*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-destinations-key-stage-4-and-5-pupils-2013-to-2014>.
- ²⁴ M Wilshaw, in J Burke, 'Ofsted boss hits out at "inadequate" FE sector', *FE Week*, 18 January 2016, <http://feweek.co.uk/2016/01/18/ofsted-boss-hits-out-at-inadequate-fe-sector>.
- ²⁵ Figures are for 2015 and 2005. DfE, *Table 13b: Attainment at age 16 and 19 in English and maths at GCSE A*-C and other Level 2 qualifications, by eligibility for free school meals at 15*, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19-in-2015>.
- ²⁶ For every five soldiers under 18 recruited into the infantry each year, two previous infantry enlistees are leaving before completing four years' service. For example, in 2011-12, 1,270 minors joined the infantry; in 2012, 560 infantry recruits who had enlisted as minors left the Army. Hansard: HC Deb, 19 January 2015; HC Deb, 13 May 2013 c99w.
- ²⁷ Most ex-forces personnel with problems such as unemployment and substance abuse are those who leave within four years of enlisting. M Ashcroft, *Veterans' transition review: follow-up report*, July 2015, http://www.veteranstransition.co.uk/vtr_final_report%202015.pdf, p. 3. See also British Army, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, *JSP 575: Early Service Leavers, Guidance notes for resettlement staff*, 2010, <http://www.ctp.org.uk/assets/x/51978>. Buckman JEJ, Forbes HJ, Clayton T, Jones M, Jones N, Greenberg N, et al., 'Early Service leavers: a study of the factors associated with premature separation from the UK Armed Forces and the mental health of those that leave early', *European Journal of Public Health*, 2013, 23(3), pp. 410-415.

²⁸ The trainee drop-out rate among adult enlistees in the army was 24 per cent for the five-year period 2009-10 to 2013-14 inclusive. After six to nine years in the army, those who joined youngest are **less** likely than adult recruits to have reached the rank of Corporal or Sergeant and more likely overall to have remained at the lowest rank. Ministry of Defence, *JE vs SE project*, 2010, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/00618, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1c22cdd8-7565-471f-971d-138119cafc39>, (Tables 8 and 9).

²⁹ See footnote 16 for the minimum standard of provision that applies in civilian colleges.

³⁰ It costs £28,000 to put an adult through Phase 1 infantry training; the cost of training a 16 year old to the same standard is more than three times as high, at £90,000, due mainly to the longer training course for the youngest recruits and their higher drop-out rate. (The figure for Phase 1 adult training is derived by dividing the cost of combined Phase 1 and 2 infantry training by two.) Hansard: HL Deb, 26 April 2016 (no. 7675).

³¹ For a summary of the case for raising the enlistment age to 18, see Child Soldiers International, *Soldiers at 16: Sifting fact from fiction*, 2016, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/soldiers-at-16-sifting-fact-from-fiction>.

³² Of 16 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds who continue in education, 9 per cent do not sustain their course for more than two terms (DfE, *Table NA12 (FSM): KS4 destination measures: 2012/13 cohort into 2013/14 destinations. (Provisional)*, op. cit.). For the drop-out rate among those who enlisted in the army as minors, see footnote 21.

³³ 7 per cent of recruits enrolled onto the main training course at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate in March 2015 were assessed to have literacy skills at Entry Level 1. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/03426, 21 April 2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0d50449e-ae18-423c-8620-cb2c07218ac3>. No recruits were enlisted at this level at AFC in September 2015, although it is usual to do so, as indicated by AFC's Commanding Officer in March and October 2015; see Lt Col Lane, *Witness Statement, submitted in Child Soldiers International v Secretary of State for Defence*, 2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fcbaa22f-2b26-4be0-a7c8-c6692fbff7e0>, p.7; Lt Col Lane, in TQ Education and Training, 'AFC Harrogate: Celebrating educational achievement' [film], 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiYlv2_bBVE.

³⁴ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 8 June 2015, Ref. FOI2015/04544, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=4ec8c6e4-d896-4a0e-bf0e-7444c118a2e6>, p. 96.

³⁵ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 16 December 2015, Ref. FOI10541/2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=2466329a-09f1-4d7d-8870-f6ff0dfe4336>.

³⁶ 74 per cent of recruits enrolled onto the main training course at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate in March 2015 were assessed to have literacy skills at Entry Level 3. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/03426, 21 April 2015, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0d50449e-ae18-423c-8620-cb2c07218ac3>.

³⁷ Figures are for 2015 and 2005. DfE, *Table 13: Attainment at age 16 and 19 in English and maths*, op. cit.