



**TRANSITION FROM THE ARMED
FORCES TO STUDYING A FULL-TIME
LAW DEGREE: A PERSONAL
PERSPECTIVE**

Patrick Prestidge¹

Introduction

In June 2015 I found myself in a hospital bed, I was incapable of walking, talking or being able to rely on my cognitive abilities. It rapidly became apparent that my biggest fear was about to materialise, I would no longer be able to continue with my military career. This was terrifying because I had inadvertently conformed to an opinion that many service members adopt, which is, there are no prospects for certain service personnel outside the military.

I have found that ex-service members adopt a negative perception towards entering or re-entering education due to an accumulation of factors. For example, there is a strong presumption that the ability to succeed in academia is lost, having spent several years away. Also, many service leavers have families and financial commitments, thus the idea of attending university would be perceived as unsustainable. I, also, had similar circumstances, however, having now completed one-third of my undergraduate law degree, I no longer have these concerns. Therefore, the intention of this article is to give an insight into the transition from the Armed Forces to full-time education, by explaining my own personal experience, whilst rebutting the belief that academic skills are lost.

Prior to Enrolling at Plymouth University

I left the Royal Marines in January 2018 due to medical discharge. I was fortunate to have a prolonged rehabilitation, whereby I was given the opportunity to access numerous schemes that strive to aid in the transition from military service to careers

¹ Patrick is currently a second year law student and in year one achieved a place on the Dean's List.

outside the military. However, my personal objectives were vastly different to those being offered through these schemes. I aspired to have a career in the legal sector because the law and its ever-changing nature had always fascinated me. Additionally, I believed that the demands required by legal professionals, would allow me to continue to challenge my own boundaries.

The transitional schemes offered by the military, towards education, were rarely discussed or acknowledged. This was likely dictated by what the majority of leaving personnel objectives were, it meant I had no knowledge of the requirements needed to succeed in academia. Additionally, like most mature students, I have a young family where my presence and financial contributions were desperately needed. These issues proved insignificant and although spending is still limited, student finance provided loans and grants to address financial commitments. I also have more opportunity to spend time with my family than I had throughout the whole of my military career.

My biggest concern, prior to the commencement of my degree, was that in September 2017 I was still reliant on a wheelchair and undergoing upwards of ten hours of intense rehabilitation a week, thus I was uncertain how this may impact my ability to learn. I had a meeting prior to enrolment, with the staff at University of Plymouth, and was astonished to see how prepared and flexible they were towards these personal restrictions. I was assured that all lectures would be discretely pre-planned, to ensure I could access them in a wheelchair. Additionally, alternative methods for accessing learning material was discussed, which would allow me to continue with rehabilitation and not miss essential learning. Naturally, the university could not advise me on the transition between the Armed Forces and studying for a full-time law degree. Nevertheless, having now completed over a year of studying at Plymouth University, I have discovered that full-time education is both exhilarating and demanding, but also remarkably a relatively simple and rewarding transition for ex members of the armed forces.

First Week

My first day at Plymouth University was mid-September 2017 and I felt perturbed due to the journey I was about to commence. Many of my peers, it seemed were ten years my junior, and I was in an environment so unfamiliar that these feelings immediately exacerbated. It suddenly became apparent, that I no longer had the team mates, who I had relied on for many years, to help when anxiety or stress materialised. I felt my interests and perceptions on life would be so vastly different to other students that the

ability to be socially compatible would be difficult. However, I was immediately proved wrong.

The atmosphere at the University was welcoming, helpful and portrayed a genuine team spirit. The staff had the ability to compensate for all types of students, regardless of background, age, gender or disabilities, thus my own personal restrictions, as promised, were addressed in advance and discretely. My fellow students were welcoming, approachable and had a tremendous amount of determination to succeed from the outset. These circumstances, coupled with the fact that they were also nervous, primarily due to many of them living away from home for the first time, created a comradeship that I thought I would never experience outside of the military. This comradeship was amalgamated throughout the whole of the university, regardless of what subject or how far into their studies students were, there was always a genuine desire to help, whether it was finding a book in the library or a specific room on campus.

Therefore, once the first week had concluded the comradeship assisted in immediately settling nerves. My fellow students felt like previous team mates who I could rely on when feeling stressed or in need of help. The professionalism and determination shown throughout the university was mirrored with that seen throughout the military. This meant I approached the next week feeling that these two worlds were no longer vastly indifferent.

First Four Weeks

The first lecture was due to commence on the Friday, after a week of familiarisation with the computer systems, library and support centres which are situated across the campus. The first four weeks were intended to ease students into the subject, and I was excited to start learning and applying my skills in unfamiliar areas. However, after concluding my first two-hour lecture, I felt nothing but dread and stress. It had been several years since I had attended any form of academic learning, thus the environment was challenging and completely the opposite to a practical style of learning experienced throughout the military. I had no previous knowledge of the law and felt unprepared due to the confident answers being given by other students especially as it became apparent that some students had studied A level law.

The aim of the introduction module was to bring all students up to the same legal understanding. Personally, I was reluctant to believe that in four weeks I could gain a solid understanding of the law. The requirements for all students were to learn independently after lectures and attend as many lectures as possible. Dedication and punctuality, like any service person, were skills I possessed, thus I found reading the

additional text provided and attending all lectures second nature. Certain parts of the transition were directly related to service, for example, timetables informed us of where we needed to be and at what time, much like what the military call 'standing orders'. Therefore, the skills and discipline that are adopted in service, resulted in me becoming accustomed to the learning environment relatively easily and it was merely a matter of applying them in a different setting.

Once the four weeks had concluded there was a test to consolidate all that we had been taught. I felt my understanding of the law had become greatly improved and felt confident that I had acquired the skills to assist me throughout the law degree. This was evidenced by achieving a first class grade. This module allowed me to acknowledge the importance of independent learning and evidenced to me, that the transition from the military to full-time education would be manageable.

Coursework

After the completion of the introduction module, the remainder of the term was focused on two additional modules, one being the English and Welsh legal systems and legal skills. I had realised the importance of the independent learning factor in university but did not realise this meant having the dedication and discipline to complete upwards of 150 hours of individual learning for each module. At first, it was peculiar to think no one would investigate if I was doing the work required, especially since in the military, it is normal practice for your superiors to ensure you are completing what is required of you. The principles remained the same, only by not completing the independent learning instead of letting team mates down, I would be letting myself and lecturers down. The importance of attendance and punctuality was proven even more so in this module, no lecture was the same and it was a constant cycle of learning new things. Additionally, the demands of work, rehabilitation and family was becoming difficult to balance. Therefore, I was grateful that the military had given me the organisation skills to meet all my obligations.

The completion of this module was distinctly different to the introduction module because it was assessed by coursework, this meant the ability to submit an essay. I had written essays only a handful of times since leaving secondary school, and I was aware that my past grades were mediocre at best. I lacked confidence in my writing abilities and knowledge of what was required to complete an essay. The process was demanding and undoubtedly caused tremendous stress, but in retrospect it was the first time where I had experienced actual stress outside the military. I was using the same skills in dealing with stress as I would at work. My first essay was graded as a

2:1 which means above average [ed: more than above average!] but also improvements could be made.

All essays are returned and annotated by the lecturers to help students acknowledge their weaknesses and improve. This was the feedback I desperately needed to be successful moving forward as like all military personnel, I tend to strive off constructive criticism and always aspire for excellence. Therefore, this feedback gave me the opportunity to implement my attention to detail skills acquired through service, so I could understand where improvements could be made on future essays. The next essay was due to be submitted in May 2018, after spending 16 weeks learning about contemporary legal issues. This was the time where I could evidence to myself, that the skills I acquired through military service could be transferable to an academic environment. I understood my areas of weakness in the first essay, and ensured these were not carried forward, by addressing them throughout the year. In the second essay I achieved another first. This evidenced that by transferring and implementing the skills I had gained in the military, to an academic context, it would make the transition manageable regardless of the overall objective.

Exams

Exams were an underlying concern. I completed GCSEs at secondary school, but have little success to talk about, in fact, out of 12 exams I achieved one C grade. In retrospect, this was the main reason why I never pursued further education from an early age. I had not been exposed to an exam environment or, had the need to revise in 13 years and knew this was a weakness which needed addressing. This is because in any subject at university, and especially law, exams are perpetual and are mandatory twice a year. The first year at Plymouth University law students are required to pass two exams in Contract law and Constitutional law. The methods for revising and consolidating notes in preparation are essentially a personal preference. However, regardless of the method a student chooses, the whole period is stressful and requires the highest regard to self-dedication.

At first, I was at a loss, I did not know where to start, or when to finish revising. This was undoubtedly a type of stress that I had never experienced. I tried every revision technique we were advised, and no technique instilled me with the confidence I needed for the exam. I knew how successful my coursework had become by simply implementing the skills I had learnt in the military. Therefore, I adopted a technique which I had experience in and felt most comfortable with, repetition.

I repeatedly read notes, analysed law and recited them in my head daily. The reason this worked well for me was because skills and methods in the military are taught and instilled through repeating the same thing constantly. Also, due to being a mature student, I felt I could make sense of contract law by applying them in a practical sense. For example, many mature students have credit cards, mobile phone contracts and mortgages, and by relating these to academia it provided additional scope in the exams. These methods of revising were successful and evidenced by the two firsts I achieved. It also showed that academic skills are not lost which is often adjudged by ex-service personnel. Instead, they are strengthened when transferring existing skills [ed: which shows why you made the Dean's List!].

Extra Curriculum Activities

In university extra curriculum activities are as beneficial as those in the military. For example, playing sports can assist tremendously in meeting new people and improving personal progression. In studying law, any student, academic or professional will emphasise how critical extra curriculum activities are in improving your curriculum vitae and gaining practical experience. I felt I had the time to enrol and dedicate myself to the negotiation competition.

The negotiation competition is based on fictional scenarios, where students use negotiation skills in the hope of securing a means of alternative dispute resolution for clients. The competition required confidence in communication, professionalism, time management and the ability to work in a team to have success. These skills and characteristics were again directly transferable from what I had acquired during military service. For example, it is imperative that soldiers can communicate effectively when liaising with each other, thus the requirement to express information verbally was immediately unproblematic. The only concern I had, was whether I could work in a team with someone I did not know or have any prior dealings with.

Any concerns were soon assuaged. My partner showed the professionalism and dedication I was used to working with and within one pre-arranged meeting our ideas were aligned and our team comprehension was apparent. This was evidenced by reaching the semi-final and representing the University of Plymouth in an external negotiation competition. Due to these skills being directly transferable, I was recognised as being able to judge and coach the negotiation competition this year by my respective peers.

Conclusion

My personal perspective of the transition from military service to full-time education is entirely positive. The atmosphere and team spirit I experienced at Plymouth University, is mirrored with that seen in the military. The students are nothing short of professional, determined and thoroughly committed, thus it was effortless when working within a team. Contrary to widespread belief, the skills and personal traits that ex-service personnel have, coupled with their attitude to go 'above and beyond' when challenged, only generates an additional platform for success.



University of Plymouth Student Law Society Negotiations Team