

# **Council of Military Education Committees**

## **Guidance for Newly Appointed Commanding Officers of University Service Units**



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## Foreword

Taking up command of a University Royal Naval Unit, a University Officers Training Corps, a University Air Squadron or a Defence Technical Undergraduate Scheme Squadron is one of the more exciting and stimulating appointments open to an officer. It involves working with some of the brightest and best of our young people but it also involves working with people whose first allegiance must be to the pursuit of their chosen academic discipline and place of study rather than to the Service Unit. This means that military training has to be organized and fitted around academic study periods, terms or semesters.

Whilst a significant number of those who join the University Service Units will pursue a service career and may well attain the very highest positions within their chosen Service, many will ultimately enter industry, commerce and public organisations where they may also become leaders and decision makers, but in rather different spheres. Membership of a University Service Unit not only develops an individual but it also hopefully promotes a favourable long-term public relations view of the Armed Forces within a wide variety of professions.

The command of a unit is a complex task and one of the most difficult problems facing the newly appointed Commanding Officer, particularly in the early days of their posting, is gaining an understanding of the often complex management structures and procedures of the various universities with which he or she will be dealing. Most, if not all, Service Units now recruit from a local consortium of universities in which each university may operate in a completely distinctive manner – where the dates of each institution's teaching terms or semesters may differ, where there are different titles for people doing the same job and where there are Departments with the same or similar disciplinary titles but which, in reality, may be offering a completely different course content.

Commanding Officers of University Service Units also need to take account of the fact that the nature of undergraduate study has changed considerably within the last two decades. As a result of the introduction of semesters, modularisation and the implementation of Teaching Quality Assurance measures, many degree courses now require students to submit increased quantities of coursework at regular intervals throughout the year. Consequently there is now considerably less flexibility for students to rearrange their academic studies to fit round their military training activities than there may have been formerly.

The following notes are intended to provide some insight into the workings of the University Service Units, particularly as seen within the context of the UK Universities, Institutions of Higher Education, and the local Military Education Committees (MECs). It is hoped that these notes will be of particular value to those officers who have never studied at a university or similar institution, or whose experience at university is now somewhat dated and needs to be refreshed.

The Executive Committee of COMEC is indebted to Dr. Roy Bradshaw of the University of Nottingham for initiating this project almost 15 years ago now, and also to members of MECs who have made constructive comments on the content.

Dick Clements MBE  
Chairperson  
Council of Military Education Committees



## **Historical Background of the University Service Units**

The University Service Units owe their origins to the Haldane reforms of 1905 - 1908 and, in particular, to the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act (1907) under which the Officer Training Corps (OTC) was first established. The then War Office stipulated that any university wishing to establish a contingent of the OTC must have a committee responsible for military education established by the host university. In later years cadet units associated with the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force were established. The University Air Squadrons (UASs) were first created in 1925 and University Royal Naval Units (URNUs) in 1967 (at least in their modern format). As a consequence, Military Education Committees now have oversight of all three Service Units within their respective universities.

The four Defence Technical Undergraduate Scheme (DTUS) Squadrons were formed following the 2001 Defence Training Review (although a single service Royal Navy Thunderer Squadron had been in existence at Southampton since the closure of Royal Navy Engineering College, Manadon in 1992-95). The DTUS Squadrons are subject to a specific contractual relationship between the Ministry of Defence and the partner universities. Hence their relationship with the Military Education Committees and with COMEC is somewhat different to that of the URNUs, the OTCs and the UASs. Nonetheless, newly appointed Commanding Officers of DTUS Squadrons may find the content of this brochure of some interest and utility.

Originally a University Service Unit and its Military Education Committee were established at a single university, and this was reflected in the Unit's title. More recently most, if not all, University Service Units serve a consortium of universities, and membership of an MEC is made up of representatives from institutions within the consortium. For example, the University of Nottingham Officer Training Corps was originally established in 1908 but since that date it has been expanded to include students from other universities within the region. There are now students from seven universities within the Unit (Nottingham, Leicester, Loughborough, Nottingham Trent, De Montfort, Derby and Lincoln) and the title of the Unit has been changed to the East Midlands Universities Officer Training Corps.

The number of University Service Units has varied over time and currently there are 14 URNUs, 19 OTCs (four of which are brigaded into two OTRs) and 14 UASs. These are spread throughout the country in an attempt to provide students reasonable geographical access to the various University Service Units. Similarly the number of Military Education Committees has, over the years, varied with changing circumstances. Currently there are 20 MECs. In addition there are a number of Liaison Committees which operate either under the auspices of an MEC or are free standing such as the Yorkshire Universities Royal Naval Liaison Committee and the Yorkshire Universities Air Squadron Liaison Committee.

## **The Organisation, Training and Administration of University Service Units**

The organisation, training and administration of a University Service Unit is determined by the appropriate Armed Service; for example the organization and administration of the OTC is set out in the current version of the Officers Training Corps Charter. This document lists procedures, activities, areas of responsibility and chain of command for an OTC. For the army, Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst is responsible for sponsorship, funding and overseeing all military activities undertaken by the OTCs. RMAS also liaise with the Council of Military Education Committees of the Universities of the United Kingdom (COMEC) and, where necessary, with individual MECs on specific OTC matters. Similar documents set out areas of responsibility and procedures for the URNUs and UASs.

## **Universities and Institutions of Higher Education in the UK**

There are 165 institutions within the UK Higher Education and UniversitiesUK includes 133 Vice Chancellors and Principals of HEIs with university status in the UK. The picture is in constant flux with further institutions seeking university status and established universities forging strategic alliances to maintain competitive and financial advantage. In addition there are a small number (five at the time of writing) of independent university institutions.

Each of the UK Higher Education institutions has autonomy over matters such as the start and end dates of the teaching terms or semesters, the format and dates for examinations, and so on. This means that the overall picture of what goes on within the Higher Education sector is extremely complex. The website of UniversitiesUK contain useful information and details of all current universities and colleges in the UK including the current status of each institution. See <http://UniversitiesUK.ac.uk>.

Commanding Officers will wish to acquaint themselves with the characteristics of each of the particular universities and institutions of higher education from which they recruit. They will need a broad understanding of how each institution is organised, the start and end dates of each institutions teaching terms or semesters, and the main examination periods. It is a necessary inconvenience that Service Unit activity has to be accommodated on a best fit basis round the academic calendars of the institutions.

It should also be noted that universities are organized and operate in a very different way from the Armed Forces. Although there are different job titles and "ranks" within the university system - Vice Chancellor, Dean, Professor, Reader, Lecturer, etc. - there is frequently no rigid line of command. Many important decisions are made in committee often after long periods of deliberation during which the views of a junior member of staff may carry just as much weight as those of a more senior colleague. For example, a senior member of a university may express an opinion on some issue but (in contrast, perhaps, to some other environments) this does not necessarily mean that this view will automatically prevail. Most decisions have to undergo due process and have been sanctioned by the appropriate committee before they become part of any university's policy and practice. On the other hand, in recent years attempts have been made in many universities, to streamline decision making by reducing committee numbers and giving designated individuals decision making powers in some areas. In some cases this has complicated things further by blurring lines of responsibility between individual and corporate decision making.

In recent years universities, under ever increasing financial pressures, have come to regard themselves as "businesses" as much as educational institutions. Commanding Officers may find that a university no longer has a "Vice Chancellor" or a "Principal" or a "Provost", but instead a "Chief Executive" or some other title taken from business practice. As competing businesses the various league tables and comparative indices created by the press have become very important to universities. Although many universities leaders publicly deprecate these league tables, at the same time they are delighted when their university does well! Because graduate "employability" is an important factor in many leagues tables, this may give the USUs some traction. The skills which students take away from their USU training include some which improve employability very considerably. Commanding Officers should ensure that this "value added" aspect of the USUs is emphasised whenever possible. There may also be opportunities for USUs to run leadership training for students beyond those who are formally members of the USU. Such opportunities are worth grasping – they are valuable to the USU profile within the universities

and also offer opportunities to publicise the Armed Forces' message to a broader constituency. This must, of course, be balanced with the pressures on your own resources and the various Service priorities.

### **Military Education Committees (MECs)**

Each university or group of universities wishing to raise a Service Unit is required (under the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act 1907) to establish a Military Education Committee (MEC). Membership of the MEC will normally represent each of the constituent institutions plus the Commanding Officers, and other members of the University Service Units. Additionally it is common practice for other military personnel to be invited to join the MEC, such as the Honorary Colonel of the OTC, the local Army Brigade Commander, the Chairman of the regional Reserve Forces and Cadets Association and Regional Liaison Officers from the RN and RAF. However because of the autonomous nature of MECs considerable variations exist.

Each MEC is responsible for overseeing the work of all the University Service Units (University Royal Naval Unit, Officer Training Corps, and University Air Squadron) within its consortium. Whilst MECs may appear to be autonomous bodies and may vary considerably in terms of constitution, they are, nevertheless, responsible to their constituent institutions. The Chairperson and members of an MEC are expected to report regularly and advise the senior management of the institutions involved on any issues which may be of concern to the institutions.

Normally the cost of an MEC is borne by the constituent universities and institutions within its consortium. Each MEC normally meets on two or three occasions a year and performs a number of roles. In particular the universities require the MEC to monitor the operation of the Service Units and be assured that they are being run in an appropriate manner. Whilst the detailed terms of reference for each MEC are determined by each university or group of universities, normally they include the following:

- *To oversee and monitor the Service Units which are constituted within their universities.*
- *To advise their universities and institutions on matters relating to military education.*
- *To make recommendations or advise on matters relating to the appointment of Commanding Officers and senior honorary posts in accordance with the arrangements established by each Service.*
- *To ensure that student activities within the University Service Units are not to the detriment of academic progress and general student welfare.*
- *To ensure that the Health and Safety, Ethnic, Gender and Social Policies and the legislation related thereto (by which every UK University is bound) is, as far as practicable, maintained within the University Service Units.*
- *To encourage and promote an interest in defence studies within their constituent universities.*

MECs form the main line of communication between the University Service Units and their respective universities. It is important that good relations be maintained with the MEC to help ensure that the interests of the Service Units are well represented within the constituent universities. MECs have a certain standing within their constituent institutions and MEC members are in a position to help with student problems. By raising issues with appropriate members of the academic staff MEC members may well be of assistance in providing a satisfactory solution. Typical problems include students who need to undertake re-sit examinations, or who may need to be absent from university for a short time during the teaching term in order to undertake Service Unit activities, or who may become known to the officers to be having difficulty with their studies. In the event of serious or difficult incidents

arising within a Service Unit it is important that the MEC Chairperson is kept informed. This is particularly so where there may be a possibility of local or national media coverage arising. Commanding Officers need to be constantly vigilant to ensure that the legal and social legislation regulations (Health and Safety, Gender, Equal Opportunities and Diversity issues, etc.) which are in place in all UK universities are strictly observed. Such regulations (and issues arising therefrom) are not only monitored by the university administrations but also by external agencies such as the Higher Education Funding Council and standard setting bodies such as the IIP (Investors in People) organisation. Furthermore, in the institutions which have particularly active Student Unions it is important to be cognizant of the fact that such matters are also carefully and regularly monitored and brought to the attention of the appropriate university administrators.

Whilst some MECs are flourishing and very active others may be much less so. If the latter is the case then the Commanding Officer should try to encourage the members to take an interest in the Unit's activities. Enthusiasm is often infectious. Enthused and involved members will often feel able to make a worthwhile contribution to the work of the MEC. Such members are worthy of valued attention.

It is important to remember that most of the academic members of the MEC will no longer have direct experience of the Armed Forces and therefore may have limited knowledge of military jargon or procedures. In all communications try to ensure that specialist terms and acronyms are explained.

Serving as an academic representative on a Military Education Committee is voluntary. Members gain no direct benefit and, in the current climate, academics are assessed predominantly in accordance with their ability to undertake teaching and research to a high standard. Often an MEC member's Head of Department may be discouraging or even forthrightly obstructive to a lecturer's membership of the MEC. Attendance at MEC meetings and MEC related activities often has to be fitted into an academic's spare time.

MECs normally have to report on student activities within the University Service Units to their constituent universities - either to the Senate, Governing Council or Court. Usually such bodies will have little or no understanding of any facts or figures concerning Service Unit activities but will appreciate and gain much from any examples of a unit's external activities, particularly where they represent high standards of personal achievement, service to the community and charitable works. Commanding Officers should encourage members of their MEC to attend appropriate unit activities whenever possible. An invitation to a unit Cocktail Party or other similar social function can be a useful way of saying thank you for a member's interest and efforts. Similarly an invitation to attend a training event can be an ideal opportunity to show the nature of the work undertaken within the unit. It is good practice to circulate a timetable indicating to which events MEC members would be particularly welcome. The key person on the MEC is the Chairperson. It is the Chairperson's responsibility to take the initiative and to ensure that things happen. A strong and supportive Chairperson can be a great boon to a Commanding Officer and vice versa. On the other hand Commanding Officers should also be aware that, in some universities, the Chairperson of the MEC (and maybe other members too) may have been appointed largely as a member of the senior management rather than because of their commitment to the USUs and the Armed Forces. Informing and nurturing the interest of such individuals may be a valuable aspect of your role.

Commanding Officers should note that MECs have a role in the appointment of Honorary Colonels to UOTCs. When an Honorary Colonel's appointment is about to expire

it is important that the MEC is consulted before any decision is made about who to approach to replace the Honorary Colonel. It is also important that Vice Chancellors are informed (via their representatives on the MEC) when an appointment is made. The UOTC carries the University's name and imprimatur; it would therefore be unfortunate and potentially embarrassing if it became publicly apparent that a Vice Chancellor did not know that a change had been made, and the identity of the new Honorary Colonel.

### **Defence Studies Lectures**

MECs are responsible for promoting an interest in Defence Studies within their constituent universities. Sometimes this takes the form of a Defence Studies Dining Club or a Defence Studies Lecture series. Speakers at such events normally include a mixture of serving high ranking officers, academics, politicians and journalists. It is hoped that Commanding Officers will support these lecture series and encourage their students to attend and become involved in debating defence issues. In some institutions funds are made available to subsidise student attendance at these defence studies events. However, caution is also necessary. Some institutions (and their Student Unions), for various political or social reasons, are unwilling to openly support or endorse any military or defence studies. As a consequence an MEC may have to be somewhat circumspect in the pursuit of such activities

### **Student members**

Commanding Officers need to take account of the many different circumstances and backgrounds of students and the very different academic courses of study being undertaken by them. Not all courses of study makes similar levels of demand on student time. Traditionally students in the Arts and Humanities tend to have more flexibility in their patterns of study than those studying Science and Engineering where more time is spent in laboratories and on projects which may require the student to be at the university for specific and often extended periods of time. It is also the case that most students following Postgraduate Education Studies, Medical, Dental and Veterinary courses have much longer periods of study and extra-curricular academic activity - in some cases up to 11 months in the calendar year, resulting in their having much less free time to undertake Service Unit activities.

With the introduction of tuition fees (firstly at £3,000 pa and latterly at £9,000 pa in England and Wales) many students now incur considerable levels of debts whilst they are studying. [NB the student fee regime is different in Scotland and Northern Ireland]. Many, perhaps even most, students feel the need to seek employment during the vacations to try to reduce their debts. This may constrain the time available to undertake their Service Unit activities. A good percentage of students also take part time jobs during the term time. For many who join the Service Units, the pay they receive for time spent on duty is an important way to reduce their debts and remain solvent. Commanding Officers need to be aware of these financial pressures, and particularly how unevenly students are affected. Students from less affluent backgrounds may well feel under greater pressure than some of their peers.

The introduction of modularisation and Teaching Quality Assurance measures has also led to an increase in the volume of project work required from the students. This trend towards continuous assessment can severely limit the ability of the students to rearrange their working patterns. Commanding Officers may need to introduce considerable flexibility in the way they deliver their training programmes to enable students to complete their military training qualifications. For example, those students studying under a semester regime usually have to take examinations at the beginning of or in mid-January. This means that

they may not be able to attend skiing or winter sports activities over the Christmas period whilst they are revising for the examination. However, at the end of January such students often have a short break and it may be possible to accommodate such activities at that time. For many students one of the great attractions of the University Service Units is the opportunity they provide to undertake programmes of Adventurous Training. A vigorous and imaginative programme will help to maintain a good *esprit de corps* within the unit and help ensure the retention of recruits.

### **Student Unions**

Each university and university college has a Student Union which is responsible for organizing a considerable amount of their students' non-academic activity. Although the universities are responsible for overseeing the proper running of these bodies (i.e. compliance with Health and Safety legislation, etc.) the Student Unions normally operate with a large degree of autonomy over matters such as political or societal activities. From time to time issues have arisen such as the admission to Service Units of homosexual individuals, problems related to students with disabilities and age restricted entry into the Armed Forces which have led to Student Unions refusing the University Service Units permission to recruit at Fresher's Fairs and similar events. Commanding Officers need to be aware of the role and influence of Student Unions within their member universities. Policies, decisions and actions taken in one Student Union do not necessarily apply elsewhere - either within a Service Unit consortium or nationally. If an issue does arise, it is often the case that student members of the Service Units from the affected institutions are the first to know and will alert you, as Commanding Officer, and discuss the issue. You should acquaint the Chairperson of the MEC. The Chairperson and members of the MEC may be able to help resolve the issue by taking up the matter with the appropriate student authorities concerned. But in many cases, particularly where motions are to be debated and voted on at Student Union General Meetings, the best approach is to assist your student members in mounting their own defence. The practical leadership skills which they have acquired in the University Service Units should give them a tactical advantage over the general run of the student body. It is a good exercise in Joint Operations for them to do this on a tri-service basis!

It is important to be aware that academics have no control over many areas of Student Union activities. The most they are able to do is to try to explain the consequences of a particular action which may not be in the Service Unit's or the students' own best interests. In the promotion of good relations a Commanding Officer may wish to organize a social meeting or other event to which Student Union representatives are invited. This will provide an opportunity to stress the valuable contribution which a Service Unit provides for its members; of the development of important transferable skills and the "added value" which a student may gain from being a member of a Service Unit. Evidence of service to the community such as fundraising for charity, help in developing the community, support for ACF units and other similar activities are factors which greatly influence the value of the Service Units.

### **The Council of Military Education Committees of the Universities of the UK (COMEC)**

COMEC is the national organization which represents the interests of the MECs. It was originally established in September 1919 following a conference of MEC representatives. The function of COMEC is as an advisory and coordinating body rather than having an overt executive role. There is an elected Executive Committee of university representatives. In addition the staff officers responsible for the URNUs, the UOTCs, the UASs, the Defence Technical Undergraduate Scheme and a representative from the staff of the Reserve Forces

and Cadets Division of Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Personnel and Training) are ex officio members. The Executive Committee normally meets four times a year and, in addition, holds an Annual General Meeting which usually takes place in mid-September. The Chairperson of COMEC has direct access to senior officers within the three Armed Forces.

In 1991, COMEC created the office of President. Its first incumbent was Field Marshal, the Lord Vincent. The appointment of an extremely prestigious and influential figure as COMEC President has helped raise the profile of COMEC within the Ministry of Defence and the defence community generally. Lord Vincent's successor as President was Professor Sir Graham Davies, Vice Chancellor of the University of London. He was followed by General Sir Mike Jackson. COMEC now has a considerable presence within Whitehall, the Ministry of Defence and the three Services. The Chairperson and officers of COMEC have access to senior service personnel and are regularly consulted on a range of defence matters affecting universities and the Reserve Forces. The terms of reference of COMEC include:

- *Coordinating and representing the views of MECs to the Ministry of Defence and the three Armed Services.*
- *Considering policy matters as they relate to the three types of University Service Unit and advising MoD and the universities thereon.*
- *Facilitating the systematic instruction and training of candidates for commissions in the Armed Forces.*
- *Maintaining links and liaising with other bodies concerned with Defence Studies and related matters.*

In its coordinating and advisory role COMEC has undertaken a number of initiatives which have strengthened its more traditional internal activities and has extended its external influence and general profile within the UK Defence Community. One such innovation has been the periodic COMEC lectures. A prestigious figure from the Defence Community is invited to speak on a topic of contemporary interest to which members of COMEC, members of MECs and the wider defence and academic communities are invited. In recent years these lectures have given way to a range of similar lectures organised within individual universities.

COMEC has always been keen to promote the recognition of the particular skills, particularly in leadership, which students derive from their University Service Unit training. Many universities have, in recent years, introduced some form of award in addition to their academic degree which recognises skills which students derive from co-curricular activities such as sport, drama, music, societies and Student Union leadership. COMEC and individual MECs have actively promoted the inclusion of skills derived from University Service Unit activities in the schemes for these awards. Commanding Officers should encourage their student members to take advantage of these schemes where they exist. COMEC has also supported and encouraged the moves within the Services to obtain recognition and accreditation through the Institute of Leadership and Management and the Chartered Management Institute for the leadership training element within the training syllabus of the various University Service Units. As a result of these parallel developments the former COMEC Leadership Award, a qualification validated by the City and Guilds Institute, has now been discontinued.

The COMEC Prizes is an annual award made to the best student or students nominated by a Commanding Officer from amongst all the University Service Units. The prize is not awarded solely for the exercise of military skills but to the candidate who has undertaken something extra during their time within their Unit. This can often take the form

of service to the community or providing extra support to fellow officer cadets or to the Unit in general. It is a prestigious award marking outstanding achievement and is recognized by the presentation of a cup and a cash prize. COMEC is currently developing, in association with the Sandhurst Trust, a further prize for excellence in expedition leadership, and also an annual photographic competition. Commanding Officers are strongly encouraged to bring forward suitable candidates for the awards.

Finally as a Commanding Officer there may be some issues of general concern to you which you feel may have a deleterious effect on your Unit's activities. In such instances you should raise the matter with the Chairperson of your MEC who may then take the matter forward to COMEC for consideration at a national level.