



COUNCIL OF MILITARY EDUCATION COMMITTEES

COMEC Annual Conference Report

Edinburgh Napier University

28-29 November 2025

Acknowledgements

COMEC thank you for attending this event. Your presence and participation helped make the event a resounding success

We look forward to seeing you at our next Conference.

Details for the COMEC Conference 2026 will be forwarded to you as soon as they are available. However, if you wish to register your interest in the meantime, please contact The COMEC Secretary by e-mail at secretary@comec.org.uk

A sincere thanks to our keynote speakers throughout the course of the conference.

Thanks, is also extended to the conference organising committee, Professor Gerri Matthews-Smith; Professor David Dunn; Dr Robert Ralston. We also thank the COMEC secretary Professor Ian Stoney for his continuing support throughout the process.

A particular note of thanks is extended to O/Cdt Isla Bethune whose piping provided a memorable and fitting introduction as guests were welcomed into the conference dinner.

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Overview

The COMEC Annual Conference and AGM 2025, held at Edinburgh Napier University on 28–29 November 2025, convened senior military leaders, academics, policymakers, Military Education Committee (MEC) members, and officer cadets to examine the implications of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) for military education, universities, and societal resilience. The conference was framed explicitly around the SDR’s call for a renewed “whole-of-society” approach to defence and security, recognising that contemporary threats blur traditional boundaries between military and civilian domains and require deeper integration between defence, education, health, industry, and civic institutions

Across keynote addresses, expert briefings, workshops, and officer cadet-led engagement exercises, the conference explored how COMEC, MECs, universities, and partner organisations might adapt to this changing strategic environment. Emphasis was placed on clarifying the role and value of MECs within higher education, strengthening relationships with officer cadets and universities, and repositioning military education as a contributor not only to recruitment and capability, but also to employability, social value, civic preparedness, and national resilience.

The programme combined strategic-level analysis of the global and domestic security environment with detailed consideration of organisational practice, governance, and engagement at local and national levels. The inclusion of structured officer cadet insight provided an important evidence base for assessing current shortcomings and identifying realistic pathways for reform.

Executive Summary: Key Outcomes and Recommendations

Key Outcomes

1. Clear Alignment with the Strategic Defence Review

The conference confirmed strong alignment between COMEC/MEC activity and the SDR’s central premise that defence is a collective societal endeavour. Universities were repeatedly identified as critical civic institutions with a unique concentration of young people, skills development, and social influence, yet currently under-leveraged within defence education and resilience frameworks.

2. Lack of Clarity as the Primary Constraint

Across workshop discussions and officer cadet feedback, the dominant finding was that the principal challenge facing MECs is not opposition or lack of goodwill, but a lack of clarity. Purpose, authority, remit, and impact are poorly understood by officer cadets,

universities, and sometimes MEC members themselves, undermining legitimacy and engagement.

3. Visibility and Narrative Deficit

MECs and COMEC were consistently described as low-visibility bodies with an unclear public narrative. Where engagement is effective, it is heavily dependent on informal relationships rather than robust structures, creating vulnerability to personnel turnover and institutional change.

4. Officer Cadets as an Under-Engaged Stakeholder

Officer cadets expressed limited understanding of MECs and low personal engagement, driven by uncertainty rather than resistance. However, they articulated a clear and constructive vision of the MEC as an enabling “root system”: a stable structure that quietly provides protection, opportunity, and connection between academic and military life.

5. Fragmentation of Lifelong Learning Provision

Learning opportunities across officer cadets, serving personnel, families, and veterans remain fragmented and episodic. There is strong appetite for more coherent, modular, and flexible provision aligned with defence priorities and labour-market needs, but governance, funding, and coordination barriers persist.

6. Employability and Social Value as a Unifying Frame

Framing military education around employability, transferable skills, widening participation, and civic contribution emerged as the most credible and inclusive narrative for engaging universities, students, and student representative bodies, while remaining consistent with SDR objectives.

Strategic Recommendations

1. Establish and Communicate a Clear Purpose Framework

COMEC should lead a structured process with MECs to agree and articulate a clear national statement of purpose, supported by flexible but consistent Terms of Reference and shared success measures. This framework should clearly define authority, expectations, and value to officer cadets and universities.

2. Shift from Passive Presence to Relational Engagement

MECs should move from episodic or transactional engagement toward sustained, relationship-based models, including named points of contact, mentoring approaches, and regular touchpoints with officer cadets. COMEC should lead workshops to develop a stronger partnership and cohesive process and provide strategic guidance and assurance to ensure national coherence.

3. Actively Mediate Between Universities and the Military

MECs, supported by COMEC, should explicitly adopt a bridging role between academic institutions, service units, and welfare systems. This mediation should aim to normalise officer cadet participation within university life and reduce reliance on informal or ad hoc arrangements.

4. Secure Formal Policy and Institutional Backing

There is a strong case for nationally endorsed, standardised university policy frameworks that protect and normalise officer cadet engagement. COMEC should identify where policy levers sit above its direct authority and engage strategically with those stakeholders.

5. Balance Standardisation with Local Flexibility

COMEC should set clear national principles and expectations while enabling bespoke local implementation that reflects institutional culture and governance. Consistency should be achieved through shared frameworks, not rigid uniformity.

6. Integrate Officer Cadet Insight as Strategic Evidence

Officer cadet-generated insight should be treated as legitimate evidence and systematically embedded in policy design, communications, and evaluation. COMEC should endorse creative and qualitative methods and ensure active feedback loops across MECs.

7. Redefine Measures of Success

Success should be measured not only by activity or awareness, but by outcomes: improved recruitment and diversity aligned with SDR targets, demonstrable policy change within universities, and evidence of cultural normalisation of military participation.

8. Invest in Structured Collective Development

The report supports further facilitated workshops or development days involving COMEC, MECs, and partners to translate insight into practical, co-produced solutions and to reinforce COMEC's strategic leadership role.

Together, these outcomes and recommendations position COMEC and the MEC network as potentially pivotal actors in delivering the SDR's whole-of-society ambition. Realising this potential will require deliberate leadership, clearer articulation of value, stronger relationships, and a reframing of military education as a civic and societal asset rather than a narrow recruitment function. To achieve these outcomes, planned partnership led workshops need to be instigated to ensure ownership and buy-in to future plans.



COMEC Conference Attendees 2025

1. Strategic and Historical Context

- 1.1 The 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) articulates an ambitious and forward-looking vision for UK national defence, situated within a significantly transformed strategic environment. This environment is characterised by the re-emergence of state-based threats, heightened geopolitical instability, growing uncertainty in alliance structures, and an increased likelihood that the UK will be required to respond to sustained, high-intensity challenges closer to home. Consequently, the Review places renewed emphasis on homeland defence, national resilience, and the capacity for mobilisation at scale, marking a decisive shift away from the assumptions that underpinned the post-Cold War era.
- 1.2 Central to the SDR's strategic logic is an explicit commitment to a "whole-of-society" approach to defence. This approach reflects the recognition that contemporary security challenges cannot be addressed by the Armed Forces alone but instead require the active engagement of a broad range of societal actors, institutions, and capabilities. It is premised on the understanding that the Armed Forces both recruit from, and operate with the consent and support of, the society they are tasked to defend. Accordingly, the Review foregrounds the importance of societal preparedness, civic engagement, and public legitimacy as integral components of national defence capability, rather than as peripheral or supporting concerns.
- 1.3 In advancing this framework, the SDR implicitly challenges traditional distinctions between military and civilian domains, instead emphasising the interdependence of defence, education, skills, industry, and civic institutions in sustaining long-term security. This conceptual shift creates both an imperative and an opportunity to reassess how key societal institutions, particularly those with scale, reach, and formative influence can contribute more fully to the defence enterprise.
- 1.4 While the SDR is ambitious in its overarching intent, its treatment of military education within the UK higher education sector leaves considerable scope for further development. Within the Review, universities are positioned principally as sources of high-calibre STEM graduates, defence-relevant research, and technological innovation as an important and well-established contribution. However, this emphasis also highlights an opportunity to broaden the policy frame: higher education can be understood not only as a contributor of talent and ideas to defence, but as a strategic partner in strengthening societal understanding, civic preparedness, and national resilience. In this sense, the SDR provides a platform on which to build a more explicitly reciprocal model of engagement, one that leverages the scale, reach, and civic role of universities to extend the benefits of defence-related education and awareness beyond specialist pipelines to a wider student and staff community.

- 1.5 This omission is notable given the long-standing relationship between the Armed Forces and universities through University Service Units (USUs), the Officers' Training Corps, University Air Squadrons, and University Royal Naval Units and through the network of 19 regional Military Education Committees (MECs), coordinated nationally by the Council of Military Education Committees (COMEC). Historically, these structures were designed to prepare large cohorts of students for mobilisation and national defence. However, their current footprint has shrunk significantly relative to the size of the higher education sector, with fewer than 0.5% of students engaged through USUs and limited interaction with academic staff or the wider student body.
- 1.6 The 2025 SDR provides a compelling case for reassessment, particularly given the concentration of 18–21-year-olds within higher education and the civic role universities play in shaping societal attitudes, skills, and resilience.
- 1.7 It was against this strategic and historical backdrop that this year's COMEC conference convened a dedicated workshop to examine the future role of MECs, COMEC, and partner organisations in strengthening military education and lifelong learning.

Day 1

2. Welcome from Lord Robertson

- 2.1 Professor Matthews-Smith welcomed all to Craiglockhart campus, taking the time to cover general housekeeping points and an outline of the conference programme before introducing Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, COMEC president.
- 2.2 Lord Robertson addressed the conference in his role as President, he apologised he was unable to join for the first day of the conference due to a prior commitment to another conference elsewhere in Scotland but confirmed that he would be able to make a brief visit on Saturday afternoon.
- 2.3 During the visit, Lord Robertson committed to sharing key messages from the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), on which he served as the lead external reviewer. He emphasised that the SDR is a major, transformational government document that goes beyond the views of individual reviewers and calls for a “whole of society” approach to defence and security. This approach, he notes, has been strongly endorsed by both the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary, who have highlighted the need for a national conversation on defence and security.
- 2.4 Lord Robertson stressed the importance of informing the public about the nature of current threats, the risks the country faces, and the financial realities of addressing them. Defence spending is framed as an insurance premium paid by the nation to protect its overall security. A key example of societal involvement highlighted in the SDR is the proposed significant expansion of the officer cadet forces, intended to give young people a more accurate and positive understanding of the armed forces than that often portrayed in the media. This, he suggests, will help foster military effectiveness and act as a deterrent to potential adversaries.
- 2.5 Lord Robertson concluded by encouraging attendees to read the Strategic Defence Review, noting that it was deliberately written to be accessible, and by wishing the conference well.

3. Welcome from the COMEC Chair – Ms Carol Kinkead

- 3.1 The Chair expressed sincere thanks to the President Lord Robertson for taking time out of his busy schedule to attend the COMEC Conference. And. For his address to the delegates on pertinent messages arising from the Strategic Defence Review (SDR)
- 3.2 Speakers and attendees were welcomed, and it was hoped they would all find the COMEC Conference both informative and engaging. Sincere thanks and appreciation were expressed to Edinburgh Napier University who had agreed to

act as host this year. And thanks were given to the COMEC Conference committee in recognition of their preparation and work in organising the Conference.



COMEC Chair: Ms Carol Kinhead

4. Annual General Meeting

- 4.1 The AGM sought to give an overview of COMEC's governance, activities, and financial position during the year. Members were asked to approve the minutes of the Executive Meeting held on 3 September 2024, with no outstanding matters arising. The Chair's report provided an executive summary of COMEC's work over the year, reflecting on achievements, priorities, and the organisation's strategic direction in line with the conference theme of reflection and forward planning.
- 4.2 The Treasurer's Report, delivered by Revd Professor Patton Taylor as Acting Treasurer, covered the financial year August 2024 to July 2025. He explained that COMEC had successfully restored its reserve fund after concerns from high conference costs in 2024, which were attributed to accommodation requirements at Dartmouth. A marked improvement in the 2024–25 financial position, driven mainly by reduced travel claims and the Secretary's role being undertaken on an honorary, unpaid basis. Looking ahead, it is noted that a return to a paid Secretary would require careful financial review, and the possibility of increasing MEC annual subscriptions is highlighted, as subscription levels have remained unchanged for many years. The Executive committee is therefore urged to consider economies and longer-term financial sustainability.
- 4.3 Beyond financial matters, the AGM formally records the results of the COMEC Prize for 2025, awarded to O/Cdt Salilah Baig of the University of London OTC, with

high commendations for O/Cdt Anne-Marie Harding and Midshipman Daniel Dickens. Ms Kinkead emphasised the consistently high quality of submissions and the importance of encouraging broader participation.



Winner of the COMEC prize O/Cdt Salilah Baig with COMEC Chair and Secretary, Professor Ian Stoney

4.4 Three new members were appointed to the COMEC Executive Committee, routine business questions were addressed, and dates for future meetings in 2026 were confirmed, with the next AGM and conference details yet to be decided.

5. **Societal Preparedness for the Consequences of War and Opportunities for the Cadet Movement – Major General (Retd) Timothy Hodgetts, CB, OBE, DL**



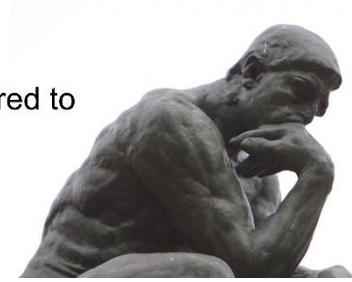
5.1 Major General (Retd) Timothy Hodgetts, CB, OBE, DL delivered a strategic assessment of the UK’s preparedness for the consequences of modern war, arguing that the nation is living in a *pre-war era* marked by rising geopolitical instability and incomplete internal readiness.

Outline

- Context: the threat & consequences of war
- Medical readiness for war
- Building resilience
 - International
 - Societal **Cadet role in national resilience**
 - Health sector
 - Personal



Be prepared to reflect



Are we ready for **mass casualties** of war?
YOU DECIDE



The Threat of War

- 5.2 Drawing on historical patterns and contemporary NATO warnings, he emphasised that peace cannot be assumed and that adversaries such as Russia are actively shaping a more dangerous security environment.

"The story of the human race is War. Except for brief and precarious interludes, there has never been peace in the world."

WINSTON CHURCHILL
"Shall we all commit suicide?"
Essay, 1924



Cold War



- 5.3 War, he stressed, brings not only direct military casualties but also extensive civilian harm and health-system disruption, as seen in both historical conflicts like the Blitz and recent conflicts such as Ukraine.



The Consequences of War

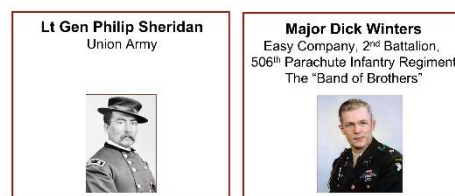
Definition of war

"War is a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed"

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ
ON WAR, 1832



5.4 Maj Gen Hodgetts outlined the cyclical nature of military medicine, which innovates rapidly in wartime but stagnates in peace. Past examples from the Thomas Splint to blood transfusion advances demonstrate how medical readiness is often rebuilt only after costly early failures.



"If it's a good day it's the enemy's casualties; if it's a bad day it's your own"

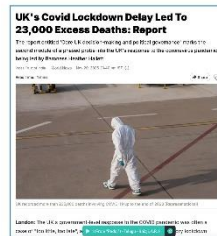
War amongst the people

CIVILIAN DEATHS



War amongst the people

EXCESS DEATHS FROM HEALTH SYSTEM DISRUPTION



5.5 He warned that current UK Defence Medical Services face gaps in capacity similar to those criticised historically, and that continuous innovation is essential to avoid preventable loss of life at the outset of the next major conflict. This requires political will as much as clinical leadership.

Medical Readiness for War

Cyclical readiness

MILITARY MEDICINE (HISTORICALLY) REGRESSES IN PEACE

- “The Royal Army Medical Corps was all but emasculated after World War 1”
ARTHUR MARWICK
THE DELUGE (1965)
- The Royal Army Medical Corps was c.20% below strength in the late 1920s



Cyclical readiness

MILITARY MEDICINE (HISTORICALLY) REGRESSES IN PEACE



- “The DMS are not sufficient to provide proper support to the front line in all realistic planning scenarios and show little prospect of being able to do so in the future.”
HOUSE OF COMMONS DEFENCE SELECT COMMITTEE, 1997

Cyclical readiness

MILITARY MEDICINE ADVANCES IN WAR



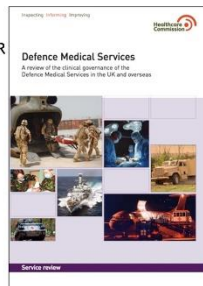
5.6 A central theme of the presentation was resilience, framed across international, societal and health-sector dimensions. Internationally, NATO’s Medical Support Capstone Concept and EU–NATO cooperation demonstrate growing recognition of shared civil–military medical risks, from logistics and regulation to mass-casualty movement. Nations must expect adversaries to disregard international humanitarian law, compounding the burden on both military and civilian healthcare systems.

Cyclical readiness

MILITARY MEDICINE ADVANCES IN WAR

- “The standard of treatment for seriously injured on operations is exemplary”
- “There is much that could be learned by the trauma services in the NHS”

HEALTHCARE COMMISSION, 2009



Cyclical readiness

MILITARY MEDICINE ADVANCES IN WAR

“The best trauma centre in the world”



Cyclical readiness

MILITARY MEDICINE ADVANCES IN WAR

“The best trauma system in the world”



5.7 Societally, Hodggets argued that the UK lacks a sufficiently integrated national resilience framework, despite clear historical lessons and examples from

countries like Sweden and Canada that invest in public preparedness, national distribution plans, and civilian–military exercises.

Building Resilience

INTERNATIONAL

Master precept
RESILIENCE THROUGH DETERRENCE

Si vis pacem, para bellum
PUBLIUS FLAVIUS VEGETIUS RENATUS

International Resilience

NATO EXPANSION UNDER THREAT

5.8 He called for a culture of readiness including 72-hour household resilience and public first-aid capability, highlighting the proven value of “zero responders” during recent UK terror attacks and identifying a significant role for the Officer Cadet movement in strengthening community-level resilience.

International Resilience

ADDRESSING SHARED CIVIL-MILITARY MEDICAL RISK

- NATO Medical Support Capstone Concept (NMSCC), November 2022
- Enhanced Civil-Military integration at its heart
- Stimulated a shared approach to problem solving

International Resilience

ENHANCING CIVIL-MILITARY COLLABORATION

- EU-NATO cooperation
 - Formal
 - Informal
- 'Think tank' fora
 - Chatham House | RUSI | Brussels Resilience Forum

International Resilience

ADDRESSING COLLECTIVE MILITARY MEDICAL RISK

- Workforce
- Medical Logistics
- Mass casualty preparedness
- Casualty movement capacity
- Regulatory constraints

The “Medical Manifesto”

International Resilience

IDENTIFYING NATIONAL & COLLECTIVE LESSONS

NATO Military Medical Centre of Excellence

5.9 The health sector, he argued, is a critical vulnerability. Managing large numbers of combat casualties will require surge capacity far beyond normal NHS operating models, including repurposed facilities and expanded rehabilitation infrastructure.

Health system threats
THE UGLY TRUTH

Expect the enemy will not adhere to IHL and LOAC




Dread Cross
P Parker, A Haldane, T Hodgetts
<https://wavelroom.com/2022/07/27/dread-cross/>

Building Resilience
SOCIETAL (NATIONAL)

Security Funding Commitment

Year	UK GDP Expenditure on Defence	Conflict
1918	47%	WW1
1945	52%	WW2
1952	11%	Korean War
1982	5.9%	Falklands War
2024	2.3%	"Pre-war"
2025	2.3%	"2.6% by 2027"
		"3.0% in next parliament"
		"5.0% on national resilience & security by 2035"

You fund warfare at the expense of welfare

Societal Resilience
A NATIONAL PLAN FOR CRISIS & WAR

"We must create a culture of preparedness in all sectors of society."
WHITE PAPER, 10 JAN 2025

How integrated & comprehensive is our own national plan?

5.10 Knowledge gaps in managing blast and ballistic trauma, fragile just-in-time supply chains, and chronic UK blood shortages all demonstrate the system's lack of wartime resilience.

Societal Resilience
A NATIONAL CASUALTY DISTRIBUTION PLAN



- Reception Arrangements for Military Patients (RAMP)
 - Scalable for 'Operate' to 'Warfight'
 - Rotational to exploit capacity
 - Recognise patients may arrive by air, land or sea

Societal Resilience
CROSS-GOVERNMENT EXERCISE

- Table-top simulation
- Ontario, Canada, 2024
- Tested readiness of the civilian & military healthcare systems to manage a sustained influx of war casualties while maintaining public care




Societal Resilience
PUBLIC READINESS & PREPARATION



EU
 Preparedness Union Strategy
 "A whole of society approach to resilience... helping citizens to become actors of their own resilience, by having resources to ensure a minimum of 72-hours self-sufficiency taking into account their specific needs."



Sweden
 In case of crisis or war
 - Public safety messaging
 - [Limited] first aid advice

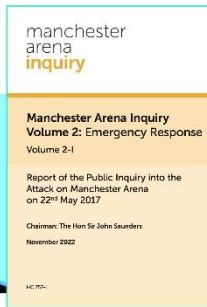
Societal Resilience
CAN WE LEARN FROM OUR OWN HISTORY & MILITARY EXPERIENCE?



Societal Resilience
EFFECTIVE 'ZERO RESPONDERS'



Societal Resilience
EFFECTIVE 'ZERO RESPONDERS'



5.11 Maj Gen. Hodgetts stressed the need for sovereign medical supply capability, innovative blood research, and robust cyber-resilience to counter ransomware and disinformation threats.

Societal Resilience
EFFECTIVE 'ZERO RESPONDERS': READY FOR THE NEXT EVENT?

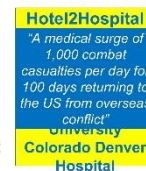
- Huntington Train** - MARAUDING KNIFE ATTACK
- London Bridge** - VEHICLE & KNIFE ATTACK
- Liverpool Victory Parade** - VEHICLE ATTACK
- Stockport Dance Studio** - MARAUDING KNIFE ATTACK
- Manchester Arena** - TERRORIST BOMB
- Borough Market** - MARAUDING KNIFE ATTACK
- Manchester Synagogue** - VEHICLE & KNIFE ATTACK

Societal Resilience
KEY ROLE FOR CADETS!



Health Sector Resilience
CAPACITY FOR COMBAT CASUALTY CARE & REHABILITATION

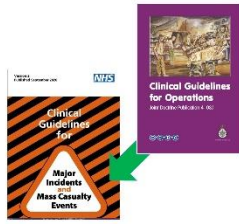
- Military hospitals
- Reduced priority for elective work
- Hotels & exhibition halls for acute surge
 - X UK Nightingale Hospital concept
 - X Hotel2Hospital: US proof of concept
- Holiday camps for rehabilitation capacity



Health Sector Resilience

CAPABILITY FOR COMBAT CASUALTY CARE & REHABILITATION

- Supporting inexperience to manage blast and ballistic injury
- The need for systemic governance to monitor performance and share best practice



Health Sector Resilience

SUPPLY CHAIN (MEDICAL LOGISTICS) SECURITY

- Just-in-time logistics don't work
 - Consumables stockpiling
 - Intelligent stock rotation
 - Sovereign capabilities
- Beware denial of products and/or disruption of vulnerable supply chain, overseas or in-country



5.12 He also noted that the military medical workforce remains understrength, requiring multinational and civil–military collaboration, though none of these measures replace the need for proper investment in personnel.

Health Sector Resilience

BLOOD RESILIENCE IN PEACE

- Estimated 200K donors short per year (NHSBT, Oct 2025)
- NHSE amber alert for blood shortages 2024 and 2025



So what?

- Never waste a good crisis
- If you want **[blood]** resilience in peace, prepare for war
Si in pace firmitatem cupis, para bellum

Health Sector Resilience

IMPROVING BLOOD RESILIENCE FOR WAR: R&I PRIORITIES

- Short-term
 - Improving shelf life & universality
- Mid-term
 - Stem-cell manufactured & HBOCs
- Long-term
 - 'Smart blood'



Enabled by

- Encouraging a larger donor pool
- UK MRC-MoD Centre of Research Excellence
- US DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) funding

Health Sector Resilience

CYBER-RESILIENCE

- Deployment of Ransomware
 - Criminal vs Military intent
 - Need greater supplier cyber-accreditation
- Health misinformation & disinformation
 - Vaccine or drug efficacy
 - Blood contamination
 - False outbreaks for military advantage



Health Sector Resilience

INTERDEPENDENT FACTORS

- Health does not function in isolation of other critical national infrastructure
 - Have you rehearsed treating patients without power?
 - Have you an analogue alternative to the eHR?
 - Can you communicate if the cellular system and/or internet are off-line?
 - Can you get clean water if the system is contaminated?

Welcome to a Field Hospital!

Final thoughts

How ruthless unethical immoral are we prepared to be?

“Your rules, your weakness”



5.13 He concluded by posing ethical and strategic questions about how far a society must be willing to go to defend itself in an era where adversaries may reject legal and moral constraints.

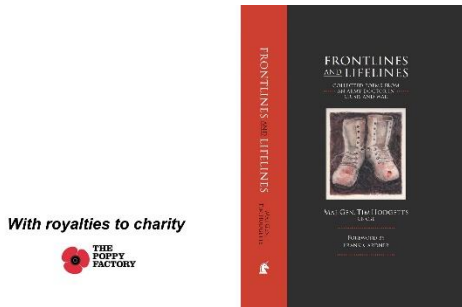


Preparing for Crisis and War



"It is what you read when you don't have to that determines what you will be when you can't help it."

OSCAR WILDE



Are we ready for mass casualties of war?
YOU DECIDE



5.14 Ultimately, he challenged the audience to confront the reality of contemporary risks and to consider honestly whether the UK is truly prepared for the mass-casualty demands of a future conflict. The final message is clear: resilience must be built in peace if it is to be relied upon in war.



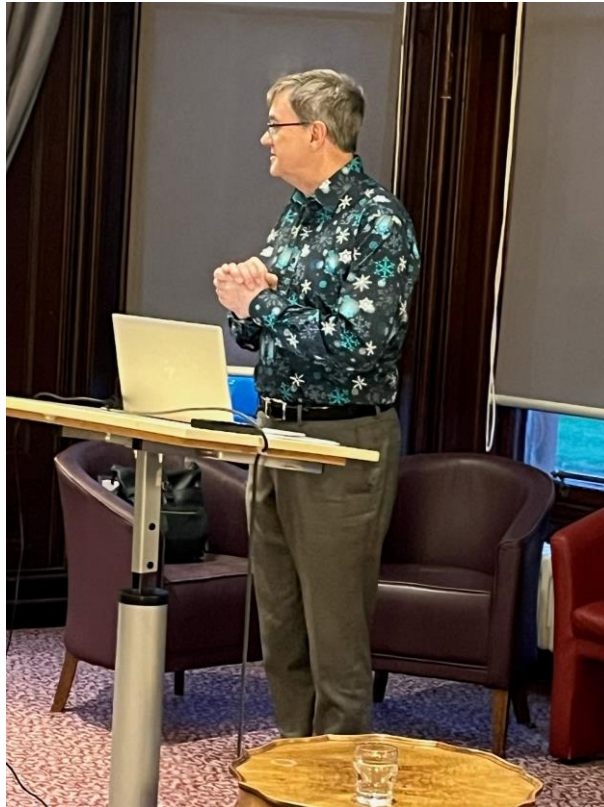
Health Sector Resilience
MILITARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGES: MITIGATIONS

- Employment to full professional ability
- Deployment based on competence vs cap-badge



Health Sector Resilience
MITIGATIONS FOR MILITARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGES





Maj. Gen. Professor Tim Hodgetts

6. Evening Reception – Civic reception with Bailie for the Lord Provost

- 6.1 Attendees were invited to attend a reception at the city chambers with the Bailie for the Lord Provost.
- 6.2 Bailie Doggart formally welcomed delegates to the COMEC AGM and Conference 2025 on behalf of the Lord Provost, expressing Edinburgh's pride in hosting the conference in the historic setting of Craiglockhart. He highlighted Craiglockhart's significance as a former First World War officers' hospital and its present role as home to Edinburgh Napier University's Centre for Military Research, Education and Public Engagement, noting the strong continuity between military service, education and care. He recognised the important role of Military Education Committees in strengthening links between universities and the armed forces, and commended Officer Cadets for their commitment to combining academic study with military service.
- 6.3 He emphasised the timeliness of the conference theme on the Strategic Defence Review and its implications for COMEC, MECs and higher education, welcomed the senior military and academic contributors to the programme, and concluded by thanking the organisers and hosts while wishing delegates a successful and productive conference.



Evening Reception at Edinburgh City Chambers

Day 2

7. Workshop – MECs and COMEC: Maximising Impact, Making a Difference

7.1 Workshop Purpose and Structure

Day 2 of the conference included a two-hour facilitated workshop focused on strengthening the working relationship between COMEC and the UK-wide network of MECs, and on exploring how these bodies might respond more effectively to the priorities set out in the Strategic Defence Review.

Participants worked across five discussion tables, addressing two guiding questions:

- **Key Question 1**

How can the working relationship, communication flows, and mutual learning between Military Education Committees (MECs) and the Council of Military Education Committees (COMEC) be strengthened to enhance coherence, effectiveness, and impact?

- **Key Question 2**

Considering the priorities set out in the Strategic Defence Review, how might Military Education Committees (MECs), the Council of Military Education Committees (COMEC), and Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations (RFCAs) more effectively collaborate to enhance and

coordinate lifelong learning opportunities for officer cadets, serving personnel, families, and veterans?

8. Key Themes from the Workshop Discussions

8.1 Purpose, Role, and Coherence of MECs

Across all five discussion tables, participants consistently identified a lack of clarity and coherence regarding the purpose, role, and anticipated impact of MECs. Although MECs were widely regarded as having significant potential value, there was a shared view that their function is poorly understood by committee members themselves, by universities, and by external stakeholders. This conceptual ambiguity was seen to undermine both legitimacy and effectiveness.

Variation in practice between MECs was viewed as both a strength and a weakness. Local flexibility was recognised as enabling responsiveness to regional and institutional contexts. However, the absence of clearly articulated and consistently applied Terms of Reference was seen to result in uneven performance, limited productivity in some cases, and a risk of mission creep as individuals filled perceived gaps according to personal priorities.

8.2 Visibility, Legitimacy, and Narrative

A closely related theme concerned the limited visibility and perceived legitimacy of both MECs and COMEC. Participants consistently noted low awareness of what MECs do, why they matter, and the value they add, particularly within universities, student representative bodies, and the wider public. This invisibility was widely seen as contributing to scepticism or resistance, especially in institutional environments where sensitivities around “militarism” are pronounced.

The lack of a clear and proactive communications approach was also identified as a barrier to engagement. Officer cadets, Officer Commanding Units, and university leadership were often unaware of the advocacy, brokerage, and support roles that MECs are intended to perform. Participants emphasised the need for a coherent narrative that articulates the societal value of defence education and recognises the contribution of officer cadets beyond a narrow recruitment focus.

8.3 MEC–COMEC Communication and Organisational Learning

The relationship between MECs and COMEC emerged as a further salient issue. While COMEC was generally perceived as effective in communicating upwards to national stakeholders, participants identified weak mechanisms for structured feedback from MECs and insufficient communication flowing back down to local committees.

This was seen to constrain the sharing of lessons learned, good practice, and emerging challenges. There was strong support for more regular and structured opportunities, regionally and nationally for MECs to engage with one another. Importantly, participants stressed that greater consistency should be achieved through shared frameworks and principles rather than rigid standardisation that could undermine locally embedded strengths.

8.4 Engagement with Universities

Participants reflected on the fragility of MEC influence within higher education institutions. Many expressed concern that MECs struggle to engage effectively with senior leadership and professional services in an increasingly market-driven and resource-constrained environment. Universities were often characterised as operating primarily as businesses, with leadership understandably focused on income generation, rankings, and reputational risk.

Where MECs were perceived to be effective, this was usually attributed to strong personal relationships, continuity over time, and the ability to align defence-related activity with institutional priorities such as employability, graduate attributes, widening participation, and social value. However, reliance on informal influence was widely viewed as a structural vulnerability, particularly given leadership turnover on both the military and university sides.

8.5 Officer Cadet Engagement and Pathways

Officer cadets were identified as a central focus of MEC activity, yet participants agreed that they are insufficiently integrated into MEC discussions and decision-making. Many officer cadets were reported to have limited awareness of MECs or the support they can offer, with communication from Officer Commanding Units and regional commands described as inconsistent.

There was strong consensus that officer cadets should be more actively involved, both to enhance the relevance and legitimacy of MEC activity and to strengthen understanding of the educational and employability benefits associated with participation in service units. Participants also highlighted missed opportunities to better connect school-age cadets, university cadets, and higher education pathways, particularly in relation to widening participation and social mobility.

8.6 Lifelong Learning: Fragmentation and Opportunity

Discussion of lifelong learning revealed both significant fragmentation and considerable unrealised potential. Learning opportunities for cadet forces, serving personnel, families, and veterans were commonly described as disconnected and episodic rather than as a coherent system.

Key challenges included recognition of prior learning, funding constraints, administrative complexity, lack of shared data infrastructure, and concerns around governance and data protection. At the same time, there was strong enthusiasm for flexible and modular provision such as micro-credentials, short courses, and digital learning particularly in areas aligned with defence and labour market needs. These opportunities were seen as closely aligned with SDR priorities but in need of clearer ownership and coordination.

8.7 Employability and Social Value as a Unifying Narrative

Finally, employability and social value were widely identified as a unifying narrative capable of strengthening the legitimacy and impact of MECs. Framing MEC activity around transferable skills, graduate outcomes, and societal contribution was seen as more inclusive and attractive to universities and student communities than a narrow emphasis on military recruitment. This framing was also viewed as more accurately reflecting the reality that many officer cadets do not progress into the Armed Forces, yet derive substantial personal and professional benefit from their involvement

8.8 As part of the COMEC conference, officer cadets from Edinburgh University Air Squadron and the University Office Training Corp who attended took part in a facilitated workshop that included a campaign planning exercise. The process followed is outlined below, along with the outcomes reported by the group.



O/Cdts from Edinburgh UAS and OTC

8.9 Capturing Insight Through Creative Drawing

The workshop began with a creative drawing exercise designed to draw out officer cadets' honest views of the MEC. This approach allowed them to express understanding, uncertainty and ambition without relying on formal language or organisational assumptions. The drawings showed clear views, such as the MEC

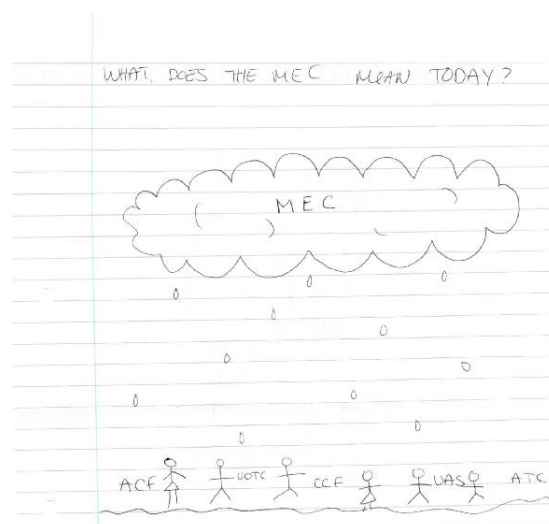
being linked to learning environments and financial support, as well as areas of uncertainty, particularly around the MEC's role and authority. This method revealed emotional and reflective responses that more traditional surveys might not have captured.

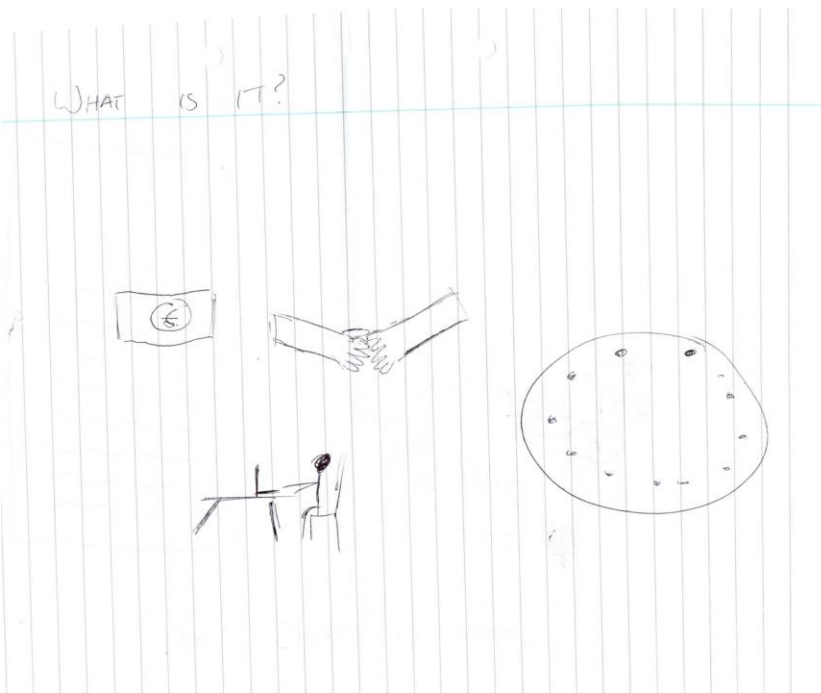
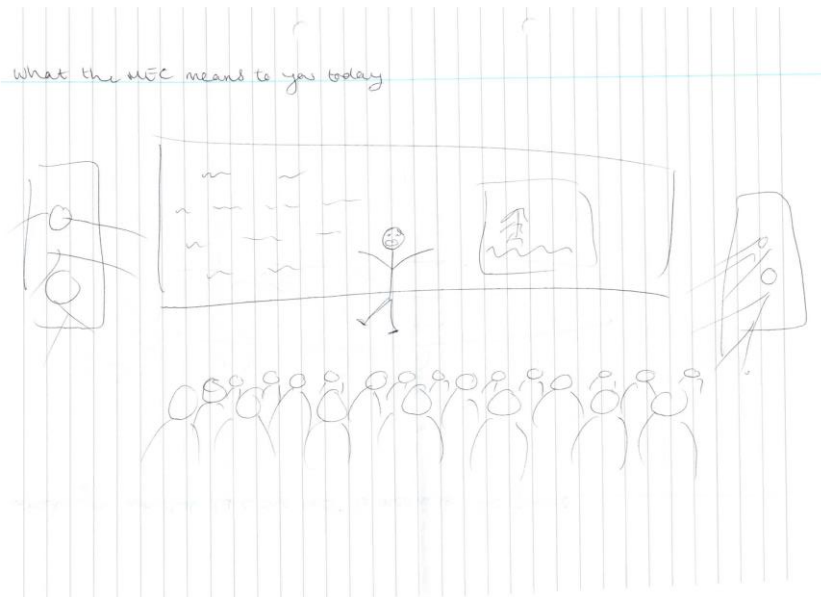
8.10 Interpreting the Current Situation

The drawings were then brought together to build a shared picture of the current situation. The group recognised the MEC as something that existed, but without a clear or visible identity. It was seen as part of the wider university system and as a place that might occasionally answer general welfare or life questions, but its role was not well defined. Information was viewed as broad rather than tailored, which reduced its relevance to individual officer cadets. The drawings also highlighted a disconnect between academic life and military life, reinforcing the view that the MEC did not actively bring these two areas together. While financial support was recognised, it was not enough on its own to build engagement or trust.

8.11 Identifying the Engagement Issue

From this analysis, a clear issue emerged: officer cadets were not engaging with the MEC because they did not understand it. The problem was not opposition, but uncertainty. When purpose, outcomes and personal relevance were unclear, engagement remained passive. This shifted the challenge away from awareness or promotion and towards the need for clarity, connection and credibility.

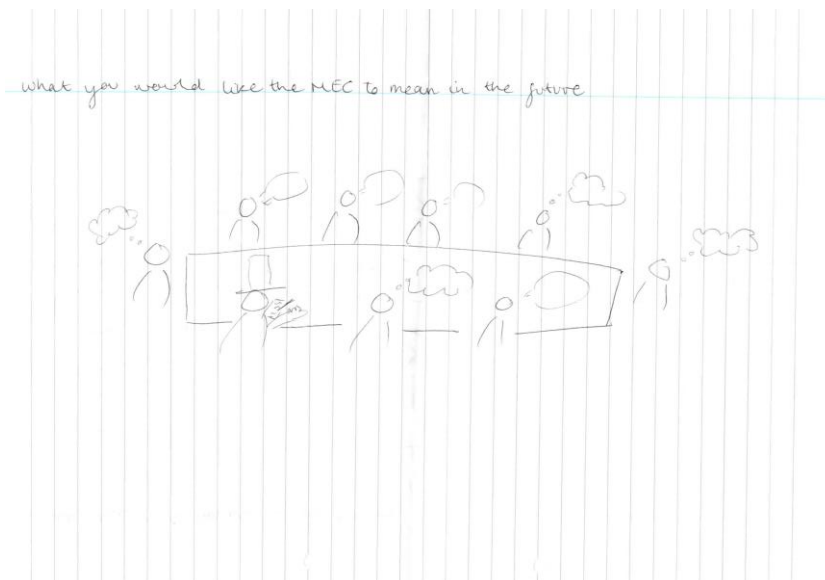
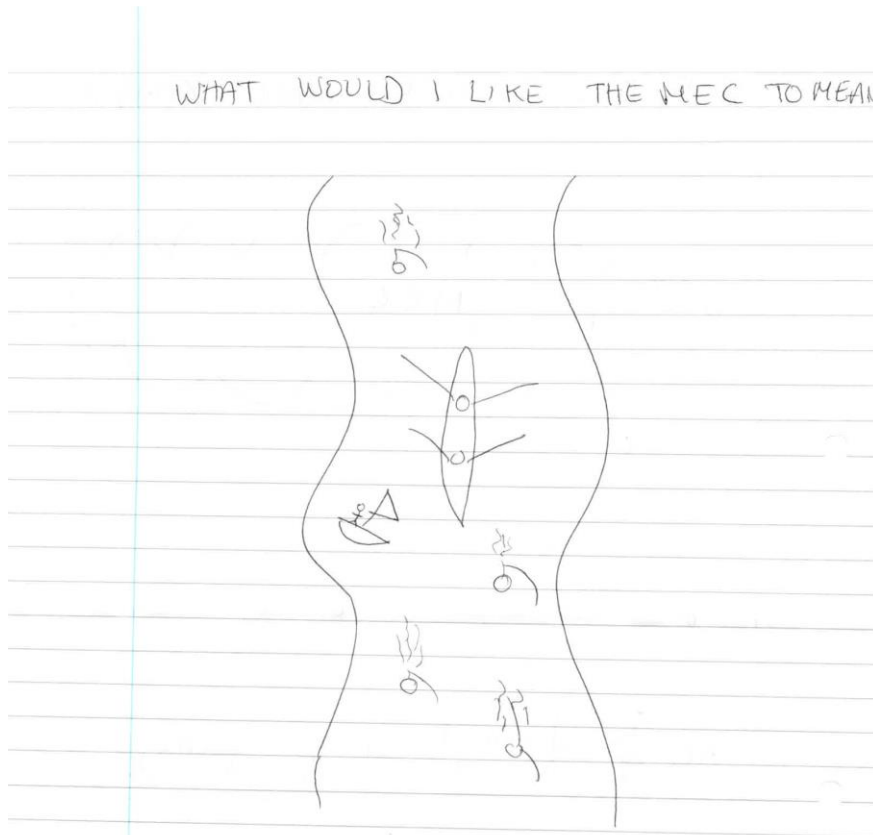


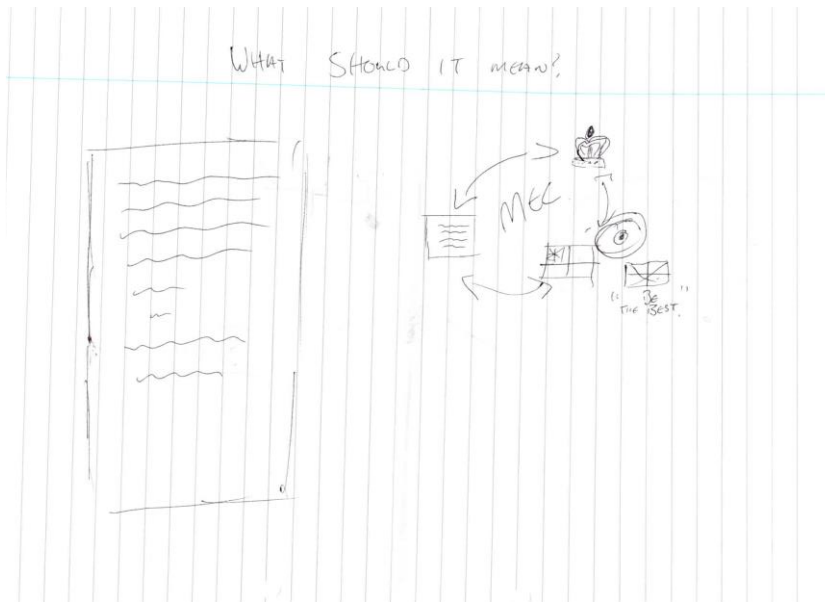


8.12 Defining the Desired Future Role

The next stage focused on turning officer cadets' aspirational ideas into practical expectations. The group consistently expressed a desire for better collaboration, both between individuals and across institutions. The frequently used "tree" metaphor was particularly helpful, as they saw themselves as the fruit, with the MEC providing the roots, strong, supportive structures that enabled growth and opportunity. This reflected an expectation that the MEC should be largely unseen in daily activity but essential to positive outcomes. Calls for the MEC to "bridge

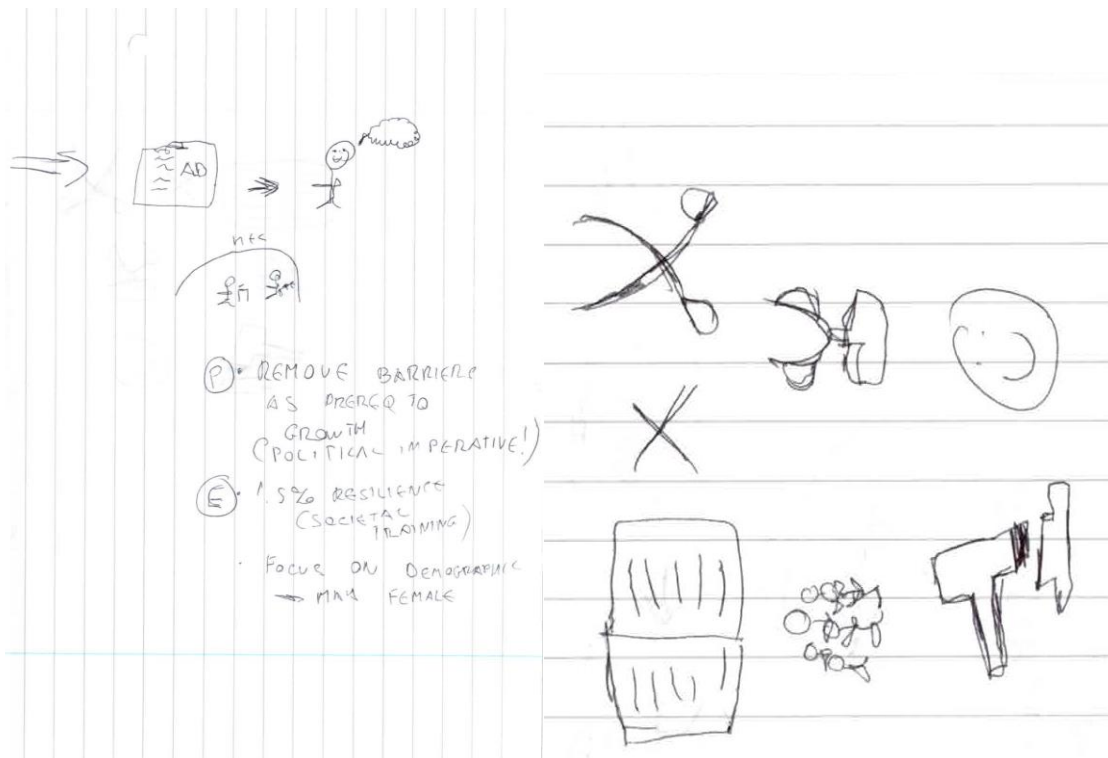
gaps” pointed to a need for active coordination between students, universities and the military system.

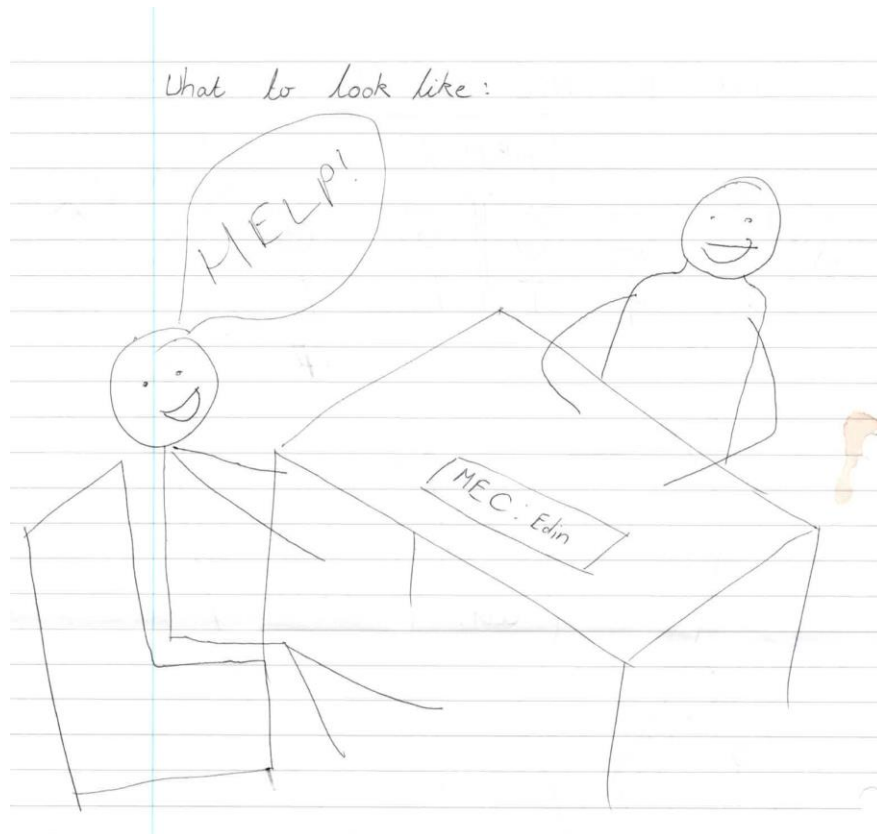




8.13 Turning Aspirations into Practical Action

These aspirations were then translated into practical actions. Personal connection was linked to named points of contact, mentoring and regular engagement. Bridging gaps meant better coordination between academic, welfare and military stakeholders, rather than working in isolation. Requests for legislation or formal university policies reflected a desire for clear authority and protection, ensuring that officer cadet participation was supported consistently and not dependent on local attitudes.





8.14 Informing Policy and Engagement Design

The final stage involved using these insights to shape how the MEC operated and engaged. Creative feedback was treated as meaningful evidence rather than anecdote, helping to inform engagement models, communication approaches and policy goals. By basing future activity on officer cadet-led insight, the MEC could move from being poorly understood to being a clearly defined system that provided structure, advocacy and connection, aligned with officer cadet expectations and institutional realities.

Outcome of the Workshop – What We Learned from Our Officer Cadets

8.15 Officer Cadet Views of the MEC (Current Situation)

The group feedback showed limited understanding of, and weak engagement with, the Military Education Committee (MEC). While it was seen as part of the learning environment and loosely associated with providing general advice or support, many officer cadets were unclear about its purpose, authority and real impact. As a result, engagement was low, with the group explaining that they were not naturally drawn to the MEC because they did not understand what it did or

how it benefited them personally. Information was viewed as generic rather than tailored, and there was a perceived disconnect between university life and the military experience. Although financial support was acknowledged, it was not clearly linked to a wider or more compelling offer.

8.16 Desired Future Role of the MEC

Officer cadets described a clear desire for a more personal and connected MEC. They emphasised collaboration, individual relationships and a role in which the MEC provided strong foundations that allowed students to develop and succeed. They expected the MEC to bridge gaps between students, universities and academic and military pathways. There was also strong support for formal legislation or university policies that actively backed service units, helping to ensure consistent and legitimate support.

8.17 Campaign Framework and Strategic Approach

The proposed campaign was built around a clear mission, end state and lines of activity, while recognising the limits of funding, personnel and time. The approach followed a logical sequence of understanding, delivery and review. The mission was to standardise engagement across universities, ensure equal access to defence-related opportunities, increase interest in military careers and strengthen national resilience. This positioned the MEC as an enabling system rather than simply an advisory body.

8.18 Centres of Gravity and Main Effort

Two key priorities were identified. First, the relationship between the MEC and officer cadets was seen as essential and in need of strengthening. Second, student unions were identified as a key area where negative attitudes towards service units needed to be addressed. At the time of the workshop, the main effort focused on understanding who owned the policies that COMEC sought to influence, recognising that progress depended on clarity around authority, responsibility and accountability.

8.19 Lines of Activity

The campaign adopted a blended approach, combining standardisation with tailored engagement to reflect the differences in university culture and governance. Four linked lines of activity were proposed. Engagement and influence focused on overcoming barriers and improving communication. Communications aimed to improve access to the chain of command and

establish direct links to service units. Policy standardisation, supported by national endorsement, sought to encourage universities to align with agreed standards, supported by clear routes for change. Finally, barriers were addressed directly by identifying what needed to change within universities and student unions to enable progress.

8.20 Understanding Phase and Timeline

The initial phase focused on understanding what needed to be done and how it could be achieved. This included recognising that policy development might sit above COMEC and would take time to navigate institutional processes. A targeted approach to engaging key leaders was proposed, identifying individuals and organisations that acted as obstacles and addressing these through direct engagement and dialogue.

8.21 End State and Measures of Success

The desired end state was a system in which all students could freely access military opportunities while at university, supported by a strong and effective MEC framework. Success would be measured through improved recruitment numbers and diversity, aligned with the Strategic Defence Review target of a 30 per cent increase and recognising the high proportion of female students in the university population. Further indicators of success included positive changes in university policies supporting military engagement, signalling both cultural and structural progress.

9. The Strategic Defence Review 2025: Reflections – Major General Robin Lindsay, CBE

- 9.1 Major General Robin Lindsay gave an overview of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) 2025 which is framed as a response to a deteriorating security environment and a recognition that the UK has entered a new era of strategic risk. With Russia waging war in Europe, probing Western defences, and expanding its hybrid operations, the Prime Minister highlights that protecting the British people remains the government's first duty. The SDR marks a landmark shift in UK deterrence and defence posture, built through extensive consultation and structured around five core focus areas. At its heart is the recognition that national security can no longer rest solely on the Armed Forces; instead, the UK must adopt a whole-of-society approach that strengthens resilience, protects critical national infrastructure, deepens cooperation with industry, and renews the nation's commitment to those who serve. The SDR calls for broad societal

preparedness for crisis or conflict, including greater public awareness of threats and more active participation in national resilience activities.

The Strategic Defence Review 2025: Reflections

Major General Robin Lindsay CBE
General Officer Commanding

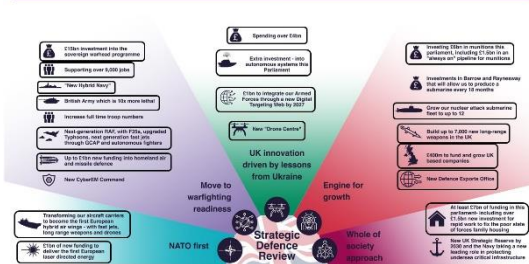


Strategic Defence Review 2025

'My first duty as PM is to keep the British people safe'
'In this new era of defence and security, when Russia is waging war on our continent and probing our defences at home, we must meet the danger head on'

- Landmark shift in deterrence and defence
- Wide consultation
- Challenge panels
- 5 areas

SDR 2025 – 5 areas of focus



SDR – whole of society approach

- Raising awareness of the threats and Defence's role in mitigating them
- Protecting Critical National Infrastructure
- Strengthening the Nation's readiness for war
- Transforming Defence's relationship with industry
- Renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve
- Widening participation in national resilience and developing preparedness for crisis or conflict



9.2 Reinforcing this whole-society approach, the SDR aligns closely with NATO's Article 3 commitment to national resilience as a foundation of collective defence. Civil preparedness is elevated to a central priority, with emphasis on the continuity of government, secure energy supplies, resilient communications and transportation networks, food and water security, and the ability to manage mass casualties. These requirements reflect an understanding that modern threats whether hybrid, cyber, or kinetic target not just military forces but entire societies.



Resilience, civil preparedness and NATO Article 3

- **Civil preparedness:** a central pillar of Allies' resilience and a critical enabler for the Alliance's collective defence.
- **Core Tasks:** deterrence and defence.
- **Article 3:** In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.



NATO Article 3: Resilience and civil preparedness

"Each NATO member country needs to be resilient in order to withstand a major shock such as a natural disaster, failure of critical infrastructure, or a hybrid or armed attack."

- 7 Baseline Requirements:**
1. Assured **continuity of government** and critical government services.
 2. Resilient **energy supplies**.
 3. Ability to deal effectively with the **uncontrolled movement of people**.
 4. Resilient **food and water resources**.
 5. Ability to deal with **mass casualties and disruptive health crises**.
 6. Resilient **civil communications systems**.
 7. Resilient **transport systems**.



The Reserves

- **18% of the Armed Forces**
- **Active Reserve** – currently serving. Under SDR, the Army will seek to deliver a 20% increase in the Active Reserve.
- **Scaleable, Sponsored and Specialist Reserves** - underpin key assured capabilities, deliver greater integration with industry, support mobilisation in time of need.
- **Strategic Reserve** - reinvigorated and reconnected to provide surge capacity and scale as part of our conventional deterrence and defence plans at home and abroad.
- **Recall Reserve** - responsible for enhanced resilience by supporting homeland defence and the underpinning institutional foundation, generating mass at a surge capacity to be part of the deployed force.



9.3 As such, the UK must enhance its capacity to absorb shocks, resist coercion, and operate effectively even under sustained attack. This also extends to Defence’s human capital, with the Review proposing major changes to the Reserve force structure, including growth in the Active Reserve, deeper integration of specialist and industry-linked reserves, and revitalisation of the Strategic and Recall Reserves to provide scalable capacity, surge capability, and mass mobilisation potential when required.

Threats

“Over the next few decades, Europe is likely to face a multitude of security concerns, including increasing competition in the Arctic and North Atlantic, the continued threat from Russia to its East, and ongoing stability resulting in continued migration from the south and south east.

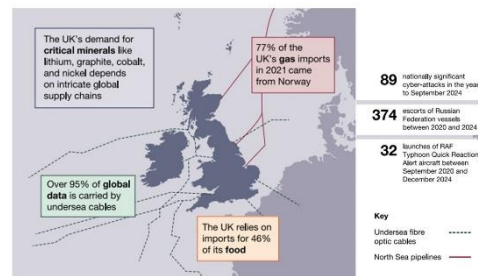
European states will prioritise these security challenges differently, based on their geographic location as well as other factors.”

Global Strategic Trends – Out to 2055



SDR: potential effects of war on the UK way of life

- Attacks on the Armed Forces in the UK and on overseas bases.
- Air and missile attack (from long-range drones, cruise, and ballistic missiles) targeting military infrastructure and critical national infrastructure (CNI) in the UK.
- Increased sabotage and cyber-attacks affecting on- and offshore CNI.
- Attempts to disrupt the UK economy—especially the industry that supports the Armed Forces—including through cyber-attack, the interdiction of maritime trade, and attacks on space-based CNI.
- Efforts to manipulate information to undermine social cohesion and political will.



9.4 The Review acknowledges a threat environment that is expanding in complexity and persistence. Russia is identified as the most acute and immediate challenge, utilising gradual influence operations, disinformation, sabotage, and covert maritime activity including mapping undersea cables and deploying UAVs from “shadow fleet” vessels to undermine UK and European security.

Hostile threat today

- MI5 boss: agency contending with near-record volumes of terror investigations and fast-rising state threats.
- Security service operating in a “new era”, forcing the “biggest shift in MI5’s mission since 9/11”.
- State threats from Russia, China and Iran are escalating: 35% increase in individuals being investigated.
- Russia seeks to use gradual influence, including delicate shifts in narratives and fostering divisions in UK to supplement hybrid warfare.
- Intelligence agencies directly manage these operations, which include espionage, sabotage, and disinformation.
- “Bot farms” push Pro-Russian narratives online to discredit operations such as UK aid to Ukraine.



Cyber-security: Hacking groups deploying new techniques to launch attacks against UK.
 ➤ Apr 25: series of social-engineering attacks against major British retail companies: the Co-Op, Marks & Spencer, Harros, Jaguar LandRover.

UAVs: Violations of European airspace: Romania, Denmark, Germany, Estonia. Moscow systematically probing Europe’s air defences to exposing gaps and force reactions.
 ➤ Sep 25: French military boarded an oil tanker, named on a list of Russia’s “shadow fleet” vessels, as possible launchpad for drone flights in Denmark.

Russian Hybrid operations: Recent surge in suspected Russian hybrid warfare incidents across Europe.
 ➤ Jul 25: five individuals with connections to the Wagner group convicted of an arson attack on a Ukraine aid warehouse in London.

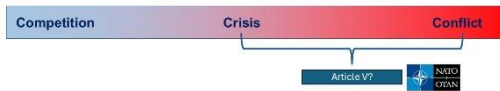
Maritime Exploitation: Russia covertly mapping undersea cables in the West. The UK has around 60 cables, which carry 99% of our data.
 ➤ Recent disruption to UK undersea cables has been blamed on anchor-dragging by Russia’s shadow fleet.

9.5 At the same time, MI5 is contending with near-record terrorism caseloads and accelerating state threats from Russia, China, and Iran. Cyberattacks have increased in sophistication and frequency, targeting major UK businesses, while UAV incursions across Europe further illustrate Moscow’s efforts to expose vulnerabilities. Maritime security is of particular concern, given that the UK’s 60

undersea data cables carry 99% of national data traffic and have already experienced suspected Russian interference. These emerging and hybrid threats indicate why the UK, NATO, and the MOD are evolving their planning for the transition from peace to crisis and potential conflict.

Where is NATO/UKG/MOD thinking?

- NATO approach (Transition to Conflict – lexicon)

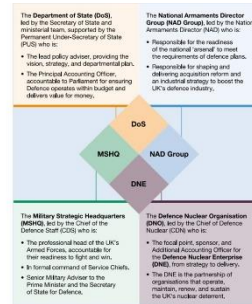


- UKG approach: National Defence Programme (Cabinet Office lead)
- MOD approach
 - Maritime - CASD, shipbuilding, ports, protecting Critical Undersea Infrastructure
 - Land-based - Defence supporting Defence, Enhanced Resilience, Strategic Reserve
 - Air - Air Defence of UK, greater agility through dispersal, base protection

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Defence Reform

- 'One Defence' mindset
- Establish robust and streamlined governance
- Clearer accountabilities
- Faster decision-making processes across MOD and Armed Forces
- Defence restructuring in four areas



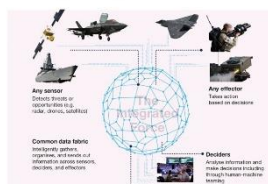
9.6 Defence reform is presented as essential to meeting these challenges. The MOD is adopting a “One Defence” mindset designed to streamline governance, clarify accountability, and accelerate decision-making. Within the Army, the Chief of the General Staff calls for the creation of a “5th generation army” characterised by advanced digital integration, autonomous systems, AI-enabled support, and improved lethality. AI will be used to compress decision cycles, though leadership and education remain paramount. Defence Industrial Strategy and Defence Growth Deals will accelerate modernisation, while a 30% expansion of the officer cadet force aims to build skills, foster cohesion, and enhance societal engagement with Defence.

What is Defence doing?

Maritime	Land	Air
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing Port Capacity Shipbuilding Defence priority taskings New role protecting Critical Undersea Infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivering national resilience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved security guarding mobilisation plans Military sites and CNI protection Reviewing training requirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Air Defence of the UK Agile Combat Employment (NATO Regional Plan NW) Dispersal planning – reviewing use of alternative bases Base Defence Plans – toughening security
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cyber & Specialist Operations Command 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivering specialist operations including medical support Combatting cyber and electromagnetic threats Arming Defence with data, information and intelligence Advancing the UK's influence through defence diplomacy Education and innovation to prepare Defence for future challenges and opportunities 	

What is the Army doing?

- CGS has called for a '5th generation army'
- Use of a digital targeting web. Increase decision making and reduce time between sensor to shooter.
 - 3 layered lethality model. Autonomous and uncrewed systems are essential to increasing our lethality: 40% attritable, 20% survivable, 40% consumable.
 - AI integration. Speed up decisions and provide clarity in uncertainty. It may be necessary, but leadership and education will remain essential.
 - Upskilling our people. Operate with new tech and in increasing uncertainty: training versus education
 - Defence Industrial Strategy (DIS) and Defence Growth Deals. Help accelerate Army modernisation: agility, integration and expeditionary
 - Increasing cadet force by 30% by 2030. Significant social value in cadets: soft skills, employability, community cohesion



9.7 Finally, the 2025 National Security Strategy situates SDR 2025 within a broader governmental ambition to navigate an era of radical uncertainty marked by authoritarian aggression, technological disruption, economic shocks, and climate-driven risks. It emphasises that protecting national prosperity requires strengthening border and maritime security, countering hostile exploitation of democratic openness, and preparing for diverse future crises. He concluded that securing the UK's future depends on mobilising not only Defence and government

but society at large, reinforcing the SDR's central premise: national resilience and security must be collective endeavours.

2025 National Security Strategy

- National security is the foundation for our prosperity and way of life, along with secure borders and a stable economy.
- We are entering an era of radical uncertainty characterised by an intensification of great power competition, volatility, authoritarian aggression, greater exposure to shocks, technological changes, and extremist ideologies.
- We are taking new measures to frustrate and deny hostile actors who seek to take advantage of our openness as a democracy. As part of this, we must increase the cyber and economic security defences which are vital to our ability to achieve innovation and growth.
- The defence of our borders and territorial waters must be strengthened. From protecting our undersea cables to working with our international partners as part of a collective response to challenges like illegal migration.
- We will increase our preparations for potential threats on the horizon, from future pandemics to energy and supply chain disruption to climate-change-induced threats to our food security.
- We must therefore adapt our approach to the dramatic changes around us, calling on the whole of society to join us in countering threats and exploiting opportunities.

The Strategic Defence Review 2025: Reflections



Questions



10. Keynote – Major General Nick Cowley, OBE

10.1 Maj General Nick Cowley was clear on the current geopolitical landscape, recognising Europe is no longer living with a clear boundary between peace and war. That line has blurred to the point where every day civilian life increasingly sits within spheres of instability, influence, and hybrid threat. His presentation linked with that of other speakers noting that NATO countries are preparing their populations accordingly with Sweden, despite only recently joining the Alliance, already rolling out public preparedness campaigns advising citizens to keep candles, wind-up torches, and battery-powered radios at home.

10.2 In contrast, the UK was repeatedly framed as underprepared, both practically and psychologically. This sense of complacency sat alongside the uncomfortable observation that the UK remains perceived by some adversaries as a primary target. The emphasis was not alarmist but rather aimed at highlighting the urgency of rebuilding societal resilience at scale.

10.3 A Whole-Society Approach to Defence and Resilience

The central theme was clear; defence cannot rest solely with the military. True resilience demands a whole-society approach involving schools, universities, healthcare systems, local authorities, civil contingencies, and communities. Delegates were asked to consider what this would look like if taken seriously:

- population-level preparedness
- civilian capability-building
- coordinated communication strategies
- a cultural shift toward normalising shared responsibility in crisis

This connected strongly to discussions about the NHS needing to prepare for war-related mass casualty events not just routine peacetime pressures. Further

reflections highlighted how fragile many organisational systems became under prolonged stress during the pandemic, revealing weaknesses in communication, leadership, training protection, and psychological safety.

10.4 Human Performance: Sleep, Stress, and Cognitive Load

A compelling thread was the science of human performance, Maj Gen Cowley emphasised that optimal performance is not built on toughness or heroic endurance, but on understanding physiology, sleep, and stress neurobiology. Sleep was described as a non-negotiable operational capability, not a soft skill.

The message was consistent: to optimise readiness, you must optimise human functioning.

And although advanced technologies autonomous vehicles, AI-enabled systems, and next-generation sensors are transforming the operating environment, nothing replaces the fundamentals of clear communication, physical fitness, the ability to run fast, dig a trench, think rapidly, and operate effectively under pressure. These remain enduring core skills across both military and civilian operational contexts.

10.5 Training the Next Generation

Insights from Harrogate and Officer Training Corps programmes demonstrated that new recruits now enter a world where traditional soldiering meets high-tech warfare. The training challenge is therefore dual: preserve foundational fieldcraft while simultaneously building digital fluency and technological adaptability.

10.6 Traumatic Stress: Why Healthcare Workers Came Out Worse

One of the most striking discussions compared traumatic stress outcomes across frontline sectors. Evidence was presented showing that healthcare workers emerged from the pandemic with higher levels of ongoing traumatic stress than military personnel.

Importantly, this was attributed not to personal vulnerability but to systemic issues:

- no preparation for mass-scale trauma
- inadequate protective systems
- moral injury arising from impossible demands
- and a total absence of operational frameworks for prolonged crisis

By contrast, the military trains, rehearses catastrophic events, embeds decompression, and has psychological support doctrines integrated into its

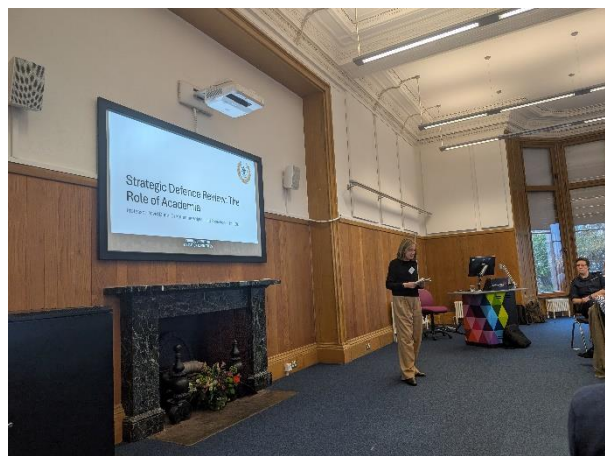
culture. Healthcare workers, facing persistent operational stress exposure without these systems, were left significantly more affected.

11. Strategic Defence Review: The Role of Academia – *Professor David Dunn, Dr Katharine Wright and Lord Robertson of Port Ellen*

Professor David Dunn provided a short presentation on the strategic defence review and the role of academia. He highlighted not just what the report had provided but some of the gaps that may well need to be addressed in the future.



Dr Katharine Wright argues that universities should be understood as vital civic institutions central to national resilience and security, not merely as education providers or economic engines. She highlighted the role of Military Education Committees in fostering civil–military understanding, inclusive leadership, and civic engagement, positioning universities as a bridge between society and the armed forces. More broadly, she framed defence as a “whole-of-society” endeavour in which resilience depends on strong public institutions, social cohesion, and trust. From this perspective, the current crisis in UK higher education is a national-security issue, as weakened universities undermine skills, research, innovation, and the civic foundations essential to democratic and military resilience.



We were delighted that our president, Lord Robertson of Port Ellen was also able to join us for a short time at the conference. In his presentation to the group he highlighted some of the key points related to the strategic defence review and the important role that COMEC and MEC have in representing the support of our officer cadets, the potential to see universities work more in partnership with the military, and the whole of society role in supporting the MOD. As chair of the strategic defence review, he provided insight into some of the key messages and opened this up to the floor for further discussion.



12. International Forum for Peace, Security and Prosperity (IFPSP): “Creating Adaptive Forces: Building Military Resilience in a Changing International Landscape” – Lt Col Ben Redshaw, R YORKS, OCdt Isla Bethune

12.1 Lt. Col Ben Redshaw presented on the International Forum on Peace, Security and Prosperity (IFPSP) which was held in Palermo, Sicily, from 15–20 March 2025 and was the fifth iteration of the forum since its establishment. The conference brought together military leaders, policymakers, academics and students to examine the role of military institutions in supporting long-term peace and prosperity. The conference attracted around 260 officer cadets and academics from a wide range of international universities and 17 military training institutions, including West Point and the Ukrainian Academy, making it the second-largest youth conference worldwide in 2025. The UOTC Group has attended every IFPSP since its inception, with representation drawn from across the UK.

INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON PEACE SECURITY AND PROSPERITY (IFPSP) 15-20 MAR 25

Aim: To bring together leaders, policymakers, researchers and students to explore the role of the military and institutions of public order and justice in establishing the basis for a flourishing peace and prosperity for future generations.

When: 15-20 Mar 25. This was the 5th IFPSP since being founded. UOTC group have attended all alongside ESUAS and ERNU. Representation from cadets have been selected from across the UK.

Location: Palermo, Sicily.

Who: UOTC Group sent 19 OCdts and 5 members of staff this year. Edinburgh Napier University supported the event with 3 x academics. Other universities included Jagiellonian University (POL), Norwich University (USA), University of Bern (SUI), Stellenbosch University (RSA), University of Palermo, Dalhousie University (Canada). 17 Military training institutions attended included West Point and the Ukrainian Academy.

Overall, 260 officer cadets and academics attended in person, and it was the 2nd largest youth conference in the world this year.



12.2 He explained that the UOTC Group deployed 19 Officer Cadets and five members of staff to IFPSP 2025, with additional academic support provided by three staff from Edinburgh Napier University. Lt. Col. Redshaw noted that the conference served as a valuable entry-level Defence Engagement activity, providing Officer Cadets with early exposure to multinational military cooperation and engagement with NATO partner institutions and international military academies. A key component of participation was the submission of academic posters by officer cadets, requiring analytical and research skills typically expected at postgraduate level, thereby supporting intellectual development, confidence and professional growth among future military leaders.

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For UOTC Group, the conference provided an excellent:

- Entry level Defence Engagement event for OCdts to attend and develop on, noting they will be our future Military Leaders.
- Served as an excellent opportunity to develop relationships with multiple NATO partners', military training schools and associated academic bodies.
- OCdts submitted an academic poster, given them the opportunity to undertake a piece of work more commonly delivered at MSc level.

For the Edinburgh MEC, the conference provided an excellent:

- Opportunity to support the delivery of OCdt training delivery and develop military / academic relationships.
- To support the Academic Poster competition and share research of PhD students to a large academic and military audience.
- Alliance for Military Doctoral Collaboration initiated for 2026 conference.
- To submit to the IFPSP academic journal (the Martello Papers).



12.3 He went on to say from an Edinburgh MEC perspective, IFPSP 2025 provided a strong platform to support officer cadet training while further strengthening military-academic collaboration. It enabled academic staff to support and assess the poster competition and to present research to a large and diverse international audience. Engagement at IFPSP also facilitated the initiation of an Alliance for Military Doctoral Collaboration, planned for further development at the 2026

conference, and encouraged the submission of academic outputs to the IFPSP journal.

ARMY INDIVIDUAL TRAINING COMMAND
INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON PEACE SECURITY AND PROSPERITY 2026

- Next year UOTC Gp are taking 21 OCdts and 4 members of staff across 9 OTCs. Edinburgh Napier University will be deploying once again this year and supporting the OCdts academic poster competition.
- More MEC universities are welcome to support. This year's conference runs in Palermo from 22-25 Mar 26.
- The 2026 conference theme is, "Creating Adaptive Forces: Building Military Resilience in a Changing International Landscape."



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12.4 Planning is already underway for IFPSP 2026, which will again be held in Palermo from 22–25 March 2026 under the theme “Creating Adaptive Forces: Building Military Resilience in a Changing International Landscape.” The UOTC Group intends to expand its participation, deploying 21 Officer Cadets and four members of staff drawn from nine OTCs, with continued academic support from Edinburgh Napier University. The conference will be hosted across.

ARMY INDIVIDUAL TRAINING COMMAND
OCDT ISLA BETHUNE



Palazzo Sclafani. Location of our lectures, panels and group discussions



Teatro Politeama



Transnational poster competition led by academics



Opportunity to engage with military cadets from many other nations



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12.5 OCdt Isla Bethune shared her experience of the IFPSP 2025 highlighting the various lectures, panels and group discussions attended. She noted the key venues including Palazzo Sclafani and Teatro Politeama and the opportunity to engage in the international poster competition. She acknowledged there were significant opportunities for international engagement, academic development and professional networking for Officer Cadets.

Closing Session

13. Proposed Actions and Next Steps

13.1 Drawing on the workshop discussions and the wider strategic context, a structured set of proposed actions has been developed to support further consideration and refinement. These actions are intended to provide a practical pathway for strengthening MEC and COMEC effectiveness while remaining sensitive to local contexts.

13.2 Summary of Proposed Actions

1. **Clarify the purpose, role, and expectations of MECs** through agreed statements of purpose, flexible Terms of Reference, and clearer success measures.
2. **Strengthen visibility, legitimacy, and narrative** by developing a coherent communications framework centred on employability, social value, and civic contribution.
3. **Improve MEC–COMEC communication and learning** via formal two-way feedback mechanisms, regular forums, and shared knowledge resources.
4. **Enhance strategic engagement with universities** by aligning MEC activity with institutional priorities and reducing reliance on informal influence.
5. **Integrate officer cadets more fully into MEC activity** through improved communication, representation, and pathway development.
6. **Develop a coherent lifelong learning approach** across cadet forces, serving personnel, families, and veterans, aligned with SDR priorities.
7. **Anchor MEC activity around employability and social value** as the primary unifying narrative.
8. **Enable and support delivery** through practical guidance, capability-building, and phased implementation.

13.2 Options for Further Development

Two complementary options were identified for taking this work forward:

- A series of two or three facilitated focus group discussions involving COMEC and MEC representatives, allowing targeted exploration of priorities and feasibility.

- A more intensive development day, enabling deeper collective sense-making and co-production of solutions, albeit requiring greater time commitment.

14. Discussion on feedback from officer cadets and proposed action plan

14.1 Establish Clarity of Purpose and Authority

The workshop findings indicate that COMEC and MEC's core challenges is not a lack of visibility, but a lack of clarity, and addressing this requires coordinated leadership and facilitation by COMEC. **COMEC must actively convene and facilitate discussion with MECs to agree and articulate an overall strategic direction, ensuring a shared understanding of purpose, authority, and intended outcomes.** Within this framework, MECs can then define and communicate a clear value proposition that explains what they do, why they exist, and how they deliver tangible benefit to officer cadets. At present, generic messaging and broad descriptions of support fail to translate into personal relevance or trust. **Cadet forces require a more precise articulation of the remit of both COMEC and the MEC's, what decisions it can influence, what protections it offers, and what support it can reliably provide, grounded in a nationally coherent narrative shaped and endorsed by COMEC.** Reframing engagement in this way shifts the problem from one of simple awareness to one of clarity, credibility, and relevance. When officer cadets can clearly understand the MEC's role and see consistent alignment between local MECs and COMEC's strategic direction, engagement is more likely to become active, confident, and sustained. to become active rather than passive, grounded in confidence rather than assumption.

14.2 Shift from Passive Presence to Relational Engagement

Officer cadet feedback highlights the importance of shifting the COMEC and the MEC's from an abstract or distant body to a visible and trusted relational actor, supported by clear strategic alignment with COMEC. **COMEC has a critical role in facilitating discussion and collective planning with MECs to agree an overall engagement strategy, undertaken in partnership through structured discussion forums and workshops that enable shared understanding and co-design.** This overall strategy can then be adapted and applied locally to reflect institutional context. Introducing named points of contact provides officer cadets with clear lines of accountability and a human interface through which support, guidance, and advocacy can be accessed, while COMEC sets expectations and provides assurance that this relational approach is implemented consistently across institutions. **Moving beyond ad hoc or transactional interactions, this model embeds mentorship and regular touchpoints that foster continuity and trust over time. Consistent engagement enables MECs to develop an**

informed understanding of officer cadet experiences while signalling commitment and reliability, with COMEC reinforcing the strategic intent and national coherence of this approach. By prioritising relationships rather than episodic contact within a COMEC-facilitated, partnership-based framework, MECs can reposition themselves as active partners in officer cadet development, strengthening confidence in their role and reinforcing legitimacy across both academic and military environments.

14.3 Actively Bridge Academic–Military Gaps

The workshop outcomes support a clear expectation that both COMEC and the MEC's should adopt an explicit mediating role between universities, cadets, service units, and associated welfare systems, operating within a strategic framework guided and reinforced by COMEC. ***Current perceptions point to fragmented and siloed activity, which reinforces the disconnect between academic institutions and military participation. COMEC has a critical role in setting the overarching intent, convening stakeholders, and enabling consistency of approach, while MECs deliver mediation at the local level.*** By actively coordinating engagement across academic, welfare, and military stakeholders, MECs can provide coherence where officer cadets currently experience inconsistency, with COMEC ensuring alignment and shared standards across the sector. This mediation function is critical to ensuring that officer cadet participation in military activity is properly understood, institutionally supported, and routinely integrated within academic life rather than treated as an exception. In doing so, MECs supported by COMEC's strategic leadership and engagement move from a passive advisory position to an enabling mechanism that aligns institutional priorities, reduces friction, and normalises military engagement within the higher education environment

14.4 Anchor the MEC as a System-Level Enabler

Officer cadet use of the “roots” metaphor provides a valuable conceptual framework for redefining the MEC's identity and function, and this framing also clarifies the complementary role of COMEC. ***Rather than being highly visible in day-to-day activity, the MEC is expected to operate as a stable, underpinning structure that enables growth, opportunity, and resilience at the local level, while COMEC provides the overarching strategic stability that anchors this approach nationally.*** This implies organisations that are trusted to function effectively in the background, providing consistency and assurance rather than constant intervention. Aligning with this expectation requires MECs, guided and supported by COMEC, to prioritise the creation of enabling conditions, such as clear policy frameworks, assured access to opportunities, and institutional protection for officer cadet participation over isolated or individual interventions.

By focusing on structural support, with COMEC setting direction and MECs delivering locally, the system can fulfil its role as an essential enabler, quietly sustaining outcomes that are visible in officer cadet development and success rather than in the prominence of either committee.

14.5 Secure Formal Institutional and Policy Backing

The findings strongly indicate ***the need for nationally endorsed, standardised university policy frameworks that formally normalise and protect officer cadet engagement.*** Reliance on informal arrangements or local goodwill creates inconsistency and exposes cadet groups to variable levels of support depending on institutional culture or individual attitudes. ***To address this, policy ownership, authority, and accountability must be clearly defined, recognising that some of the most influential levers for change sit above COMEC and require engagement at higher institutional or governmental levels.*** Establishing clear, authoritative frameworks would ensure that support for officer cadets is embedded structurally rather than negotiated case by case. This approach reduces risk, increases equity of access, and reinforces legitimacy, ensuring that participation is consistently supported regardless of local personalities or prevailing sentiment within individual universities.

14.6 Standardise Where Necessary, Bespoke were Essential

The diversity of university cultures and governance structures ***necessitates a hybrid engagement model that balances standardisation with local flexibility, with COMEC positioned as the guiding and leading body that sets direction and coherence.*** By establishing clear, nationally aligned principles and expectations, COMEC can provide the strategic framework required to ensure consistency, fairness, and equity of access for all officer cadets. ***At the same time, COMEC's leadership role must allow for, and actively enable, bespoke application at the local level, recognising that rigid uniformity risks inefficiency and resistance where institutional contexts differ.*** Tailoring implementation to local cultures, decision-making processes, and stakeholder dynamics ensures engagement remains credible and effective. In this way, COMEC provides authoritative guidance and assurance, while universities retain the flexibility to operationalise policy in a manner that respects local autonomy, delivering a coherent national approach without undermining institutional nuance.

14.7 Prioritise Key Relationships and Barriers

Protecting and strengthening the relationship between the COMEC, MEC and officer cadets must be treated as a primary centre of gravity, with both MECs and COMEC playing complementary roles in sustaining trust, legitimacy, and

influence. MECs are best placed to build and maintain direct relationships with officer cadets through consistent engagement and advocacy, while COMEC provides strategic oversight, coherence, and authority to reinforce the importance of this relationship nationally. ***In parallel, student unions require deliberate and structured engagement, as they often represent a focal point for cultural resistance or misunderstanding regarding military participation.*** Addressing these attitudes directly through dialogue, evidence, and leadership engagement is essential to reducing friction at the local level. Targeted key leader engagement, led or enabled by COMEC where influence extends beyond individual institutions, should focus on those individuals and bodies that act as blockers to progress. By aligning local MEC action with COMEC-led strategic influence, resistance can be addressed systematically rather than episodically, strengthening relationships, removing barriers, and enabling consistent support for officer cadets across the university landscape.

14.8 Redefine Measures of Success

Measuring success must extend beyond simple indicators of awareness or activity and instead focus on outcomes that reflect meaningful, system-level change, with COMEC providing strategic oversight of performance and direction. In alignment with Strategic Defence Review targets, improved recruitment numbers and increased diversity particularly within underrepresented groups should be treated as core indicators of effectiveness. However, these quantitative measures must be complemented by qualitative evidence of progress, including positive shifts in university policy and institutional behaviour that demonstrate sustained support for officer cadet engagement. ***COMEC has a critical role in setting common measures of success in partnership with the MEC's and ensuring consistency in how impact is assessed across MECs, while allowing for local variation in delivery.*** Crucially, evidence of cultural change within universities where military participation is understood, accepted, and actively supported should be recognised as a key marker of success. Taken together, these measures provide a more robust assessment of impact, enabling COMEC and MECs to evaluate progress not just in terms of activity, but in terms of lasting structural and cultural outcomes within higher education.

14.9 Treat Officer Cadet Insight as Strategic Evidence

The workshop findings demonstrate the value of creative and qualitative methods as legitimate diagnostic tools, capable of surfacing insight that would otherwise remain inaccessible through conventional consultation approaches. ***COMEC has a key role in endorsing and promoting the use of such methods across MECs, ensuring that officer cadet-generated insight is treated as evidence rather***

than anecdote. Embedding this insight systematically into policy design, communications, and engagement models enables both COMEC and MECs to ground their decisions in lived experience, increasing relevance, credibility, and effectiveness. Maintaining an active feedback loop is essential to this approach, allowing officer cadet perspectives to inform continuous adaptation rather than one-off change. **By facilitating structured reflection, shared learning, and iterative discussion across MECs, COMEC can ensure that the evolution of the MEC framework remains aligned with officer cadet expectations and experiences, supporting a responsive, evidence-led system rather than a static or assumption-driven model.**

14.10 Overall Strategic Implication:

Taken together, the findings **point to the need for a more deliberate and structured approach to capturing, interpreting, and acting on officer cadet insight, with COMEC positioned as the convening and guiding authority.** To embed this approach effectively, there is a strong case for conducting two dedicated workshops involving COMEC and MEC representatives. The first should focus on collectively reflecting on officer cadet-generated insight, agreeing its strategic implications, and aligning on overarching intent, while the second should concentrate on translating that insight into practical policy, engagement, and communication models that can be adapted locally. These workshops would strengthen shared understanding, reinforce consistency, and formalise feedback loops that ensure MEC evolution remains aligned with expectations and lived experience. **In addition, partnering with the RIFCA should be considered to broaden participation, enhance legitimacy, and ensure wider institutional and stakeholder buy-in. Such a collaborative, evidence-led approach would reinforce COMEC's strategic leadership role while enabling MECs to deliver coherent, responsive, and credible support across the higher education landscape.**

15. Conclusion

The workshop findings reinforce the argument that military education within UK universities remains an underutilised strategic asset. In a context where the Strategic Defence Review calls for greater societal preparedness, resilience, and connectivity between defence and society, MECs and COMEC have a potentially pivotal role to play. Realising this potential, however, requires clearer purpose, stronger relationships, improved visibility, and a reframing of military education around employability, social value, and civic contribution.

Taken together, the historical analysis, workshop discussions, and proposed actions provide a coherent foundation for rethinking the role of military education in higher education and for strengthening the institutions that support it.

