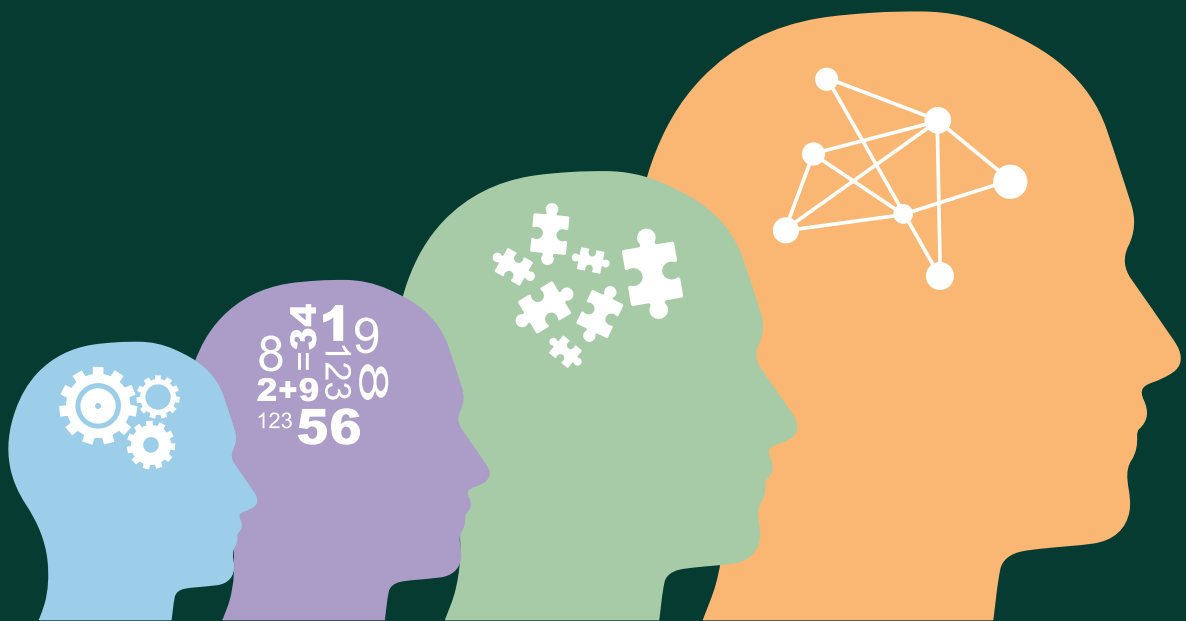




Defence Academy
of the United Kingdom

The UK Armed Forces and the Opportunity of Neurodiversity



“The kids used to laugh at me when I tried to read out loud...

I always thought I was a bit thick”

(Millionaire entrepreneur, dyslexic)

Executive Summary



To be blunt, autism made me a better naval officer.

Vice Admiral Nick Hine¹



A significant percentage (between 7 and 12%) of the UK population is now defined as neurodiverse. Some people that are neurodiverse are unable to live independent lives and are unsuitable for employment in the UK Armed Forces, but others function at a high level in many different (and changing) careers. The Armed Forces have a large (albeit unknown) number of personnel that are neurodiverse. Many of these people are successful in their career despite of, or because of, their neurodiversity.

Some specific roles in the Armed Forces, such as those in the Joint Cyber Reserve Force, are particularly suited to people with some neurodiverse traits. However, for operational effectiveness, and the safety of the individual and the organization, all training outcomes should continue to be met without any changes to their assessment methods to accommodate the neurodiverse. The current entry standards for recruits to the Armed Forces are appropriate.

The UK Armed Forces do more to identify and support neurodiverse personnel than the great majority of other UK organisations and businesses. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, and some training and educational units (such as the Defence Academy) put significant resource into the identification and support of the neurodiverse. The Army's Educational and Training Services educate soldiers, many of whom have very few qualifications and are neurodiverse, using methods and materials that are the envy of both schools and businesses.

¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/vice-admiral-nick-hine-to-be-blunt-autism-made-me-a-better-naval-officer-rvg8p8rxl>

The costs of providing targeted support for the neurodiverse are small, compared with the cost of training recruits, especially officers and technical specialists. However, given current and likely future resource limitations, it is unlikely that wholesale testing of recruits for neurodiversity and provision of specialist support in some parts of the Armed Forces, for example the infantry, would be cost effective, although technological developments will increasingly challenge this statement.

While entry standards and training outcomes should not be amended, the levels of support that the Armed Forces provide to the neurodiverse could be explained better in recruitment methods and media. It is possible that the current problems with recruitment could be addressed, at least in part, by making more explicit the support provided to the neurodiverse.



Introduction

This paper has been produced with the aim of stimulating thinking about how the UK Armed Forces can make more effective and efficient use of the large number of people in the UK (and other countries whose populations are eligible to serve in the UK military) that are nowadays described as neurodiverse.

The paper is written for staff in the Defence Academy, for personnel involved in the Armed Forces Recruiting Programme, and staff in DCDC.

The paper has been produced by a team consisting of personnel from CDERA, a SpLDA based at the Defence Academy, and members of the Worshipful Company of Educators, a Livery Company affiliated with the Defence Academy.² Additional material in the form of case studies was provided by members of the Company of Entrepreneurs, also affiliated with the Defence Academy.



² The Worshipful Company of Educators is also affiliated to 22 Group RAF, the RAEC and ETS Association, and the RN TM Specialisation.

Methodology

Producing this paper has involved both primary and secondary research.

Primary research involved the author team holding interviews with:

- Senior officers and civil servants in ETS, 22 Gp RAF and RN TM,
- SpLDAs in the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force,
- Staff working in secondary schools and universities,
- Academic specialists in neurodiversity,
- A member of the Economic and Cyber Crime Committee of the City of London Police Authority Board,
- Head Teachers in six UK secondary schools.

Secondary research involved an extensive literature review of peer-reviewed academic articles, articles in practitioner journals, and articles and blogs produced by specialists in neurodiversity support. Interview data was analyzed by grouping of common themes which were then validated by reference to secondary research material. Case studies of people that have been successful despite of, or because of, their neurodiversity have been provided by the Company of Entrepreneurs.

Drafts of the paper were critically reviewed by academic and military personnel with relevant expertise in the subject area.





Neurodiversity: Definitions and Realities

“I can easily visualize a complex business issue with multiple relationships, connections and challenges and then design a system that helps that business operate more effectively.”

Software sales and marketing consultant, Dyslexic

It is important to note that even now, about twenty years since its first use, there is still no proper scientific definition of neurodiversity. Slapakova et al. (2022) point out that neurodiversity is understood as neurological differences in the context of wide, and genetically influenced, variation in neurocognitive functioning.

In practice it covers a wide variety of conditions or neurological variations, including but not limited to dyspraxia, dyslexia, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autistic spectrum disorder, dyscalculia, and various learning disabilities. It is important to note that neurodiversity has been described as a ‘movement’ because this approach deliberately moves away from regarding these conditions as pathological, but rather as an essential form of human diversity. Neurodiversity inclusion is about incorporating the high-performance potential of specialists, as well as the competence of generalists.

The neurodiversity movement sees people with neurodiverse traits as individuals possessing a complex combination of cognitive strengths and challenges (some of which might suit some of them to a career in some parts of the UK Armed Forces). Neurodiversity is about what is, not what is missing (Lorenz et al. 2017). However, leaders in the neurodiversity movement do recognize that traits, e.g. Autism, can be a disability, as society and organisations are nearly always designed for people that are neurotypical (Motttron, 2011; Nicolaidis, 2012). Additionally, it is recognized that some people with traits such as Autism can be so disabled by their condition that they are unable to function without constant and specialist support.

There is extensive research showing that neurodiverse conditions often co-occur (or overlap) with one another. This means that a person with one diagnosis is quite likely to have challenges in one or more areas, to a lesser or greater degree, but may not necessarily have a diagnosis. There may be several reasons for this, including not having needs recognised, or not completely reaching a diagnostic threshold, or not having access to professionals to provide a diagnosis.

Some diagnoses are also more easily obtained and there remains in the UK a postcode lottery.³ Historically there has been a far greater focus on Dyslexia than Dyspraxia despite about 25% of people with Dyslexia also having some traits associated with Dyspraxia. Someone with Autism is very likely to have attention difficulties and motor difficulties but may not have been screened for either. Neurodiverse students will each have their own profile of strengths and challenges. In reality, two students with apparently the same diagnosis may have very different profiles. They may also be studying different courses with different course demands. While challenges may be in a number of areas, people will be influenced by the environment they are in (course, living conditions, experiences) and the task demands placed on them.

Across the western world⁴ an increasing number of students with learning difficulties associated with neurodiversity have been entering higher education (HE) and employment over the last 20 – 30 years. Responding to these learning and behavioural differences poses a shared and growing challenge internationally for teachers and institutional leaders, and employers. Responding to this challenge, children and young people that are neurodiverse are increasingly getting support from schools, colleges, and universities (Clouder et al. 2020). In 2022 the UK

government Department for Education (which has responsibility for education in England) piloted assistive technology training for mainstream school staff, and in November 2022 announced a more general roll-out of such training.⁵

Large technology companies are increasingly developing tools to assist the neurodiverse thrive in education and in the workplace.⁶ All tablet devices and smart phones now come with a huge amount of free assistive technology (AT), while specialist technology such as the DO-IT Profiler System⁷ can be used to screen large numbers of students at one time for neurodiversity traits, including strengths and challenges and mapping study skills.

The system delivers an instant person-centred report for the student, guidance for tutors and teachers, and data mapping for the educational organisation to target where support is required at the start of the academic year. Other Assistive Technologies, such as MindGenius⁸, Scholarcy⁹, and Dragon¹⁰, provide support in helping learners to visualize their work, improve understanding of academic papers, or use voice recognition to provide hands-free typing (Kambouri et al. 2023). There is a requirement for the effectiveness of technological aids to the neurodiverse to be properly evaluated before their widespread adoption.

However, it is important that senior officers responsible for recruitment, education and training are up-to-date with the ways in which the neurodiverse are being supported in primary, secondary and tertiary education. They should seek to introduce cost-effective technology to improve the support available to the neurodiverse within the Armed Forces.



³ For example, Buckinghamshire County Council did not recognize or test school children for dyslexia in the 1990s and 2000s as it would then have had to provide resources to support those identified with the condition. Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire County Councils did test and provide support.

⁴ Neurodiversity population data are not available for much of the world. However, it is generally accepted that approximately one in eight of the world's population can be described as neurodiverse.

⁵ <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/11/29/message-to-the-education-and-care-sector-on-send-reform-from-the-secretary-of-state-for-education-gillian-keegan/>

⁶ <https://news.microsoft.com/accessibility-commitment/>

⁷ <https://doitprofiler.com/> The DO-IT Profiler is used by the UK Justice System and the Fire and Rescue Service and is being trialed by the RAF and RN. Other tools are also in use, such as Genius Within and Cognassist.

⁸ <https://www.mindgenius.com/>

⁹ <https://article-summarizer.scholarcy.com/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nuance.com/en-gb/dragon.html>

Support for the Neurodiverse in the Civilian Workplace

The support that the neurodiverse increasingly get at school and college is not matched by the great majority of UK employers. Although the Disability Confident employer scheme¹¹ has some 18,400 signatories (ranging from large employers, such as Tesco, to very small businesses and individuals), signing up to the scheme is a statement of intent, not an audit of action taken. A member of the Economic and Cyber Crime Committee of the City of London Police Authority Board, interviewed on 3 March 2023 pointed out that none of the UK PLCs were particularly good at neurodiverse recruitment or career management. Medium and small enterprises are even less likely to deliberately recruit and then support the neurodiverse. There are exceptions though; the website of the John Lewis Partnership states ‘if you have a disability, a learning difficulty such as dyslexia, a medical condition or individual need – which you believe may affect your performance in selection, we’ll be happy to make adjustments to our processes to enable you to perform at your best.’¹²

Unsurprisingly, the public sector suggests it provides more support for the neurodiverse than the private sector. The Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022 to 2025 states, “we will use positive action where needed in relation to training, support recruitment and promotion to ensure the broadest range of diversity is achieved and there an equality of opportunity for all.”¹³ There is a voluntary Civil Service Dyslexia and Dyspraxia Network (CSDDN) for staff which aims to improve the working experience of civil

servants affected by or interested in four learning differences: dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. Guides for managers are available to assist them in managing a diverse workforce.¹⁴ The National Police Autism Association¹⁵ has, as one of its four aims, to encourage a “culture of neurodiversity” in the police service. The Association’s website points out that, “*more than ever, the UK police service needs staff who can ‘think differently,’ to fully represent the communities it serves and to help meet the challenges of policing in the 21st century. We believe that police forces should identify individual strengths, guiding officers and staff into roles and career paths in which they can excel and achieve their full potential.*”



The lack of support to the neurodiverse provided by the majority of UK employers should not come as a surprise. The behaviours of many neurodiverse people run counter to common notions of what makes a good employee—solid communication skills, being a team player, emotional intelligence, persuasiveness, salesperson-type personalities, the ability to network, the ability to conform to standard practices without special accommodations, and so on. Inevitably, these criteria systematically screen out neurodiverse people (Austin and Pisano, 2017). However, there are numerous examples of people with neurodiverse traits being very successful at work, some because of, and others in spite of, their ‘condition’.¹⁶

Contillo (2021) argues that there are many inherent traits in people with Autism that are well suited for working in cybersecurity. For example, many people with Autism are pattern thinkers and are highly detail-oriented. This allows someone in a threat-hunting position to find those subtle differences between malicious and non-malicious code and catch the threats that automated tools might miss. Such people may also be able to hyperfocus, which allows them to concentrate on problem-solving and stick with complex issues that other people may abandon.

A few businesses appear to deliberately recruit and employ people with certain neurodiverse conditions. The Danish IT company Specialisterne¹⁷ claims on its website that a majority of its workers are neurodiverse, diagnosed with autism, ADHD, Tourette’s syndrome, or similar conditions. Auticon, an IT company based in Germany employs only Autistic individuals as consultants. Their slogan “Auticon—Querdenker mit System” (approximately “systematically thinking outside the box”) highlights how Autistic individuals are often able to work more detailed, concentrated, and systematic than neurotypicals and have different ways of looking at problems. Around two-thirds of the company’s employees are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Condition and its annual impact report claims that ‘Auticon succeeds as a result of its neurodiversity.’¹⁸



¹² <https://www.jlpjobs.com/accessibility/>
¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2022-to-2025/civil-service-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2022-to-2025-html>
¹⁴ See, for example <https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2020/03/Dyslexia-Dyspraxia-Dyscalculia-and-Dysgraphia-Line-Manager-Toolkit.pdf>
¹⁵ <https://www.npaa.org.uk/>

¹⁶ It should be noted that most of the examples in the literature of people that are neurodiverse look at autism and not other conditions.
¹⁷ <https://specialisterne.com/>
¹⁸ <https://auticon.com/uk/about-us/>

Support for the Neurodiverse in the Armed Forces and Security Services

There are commonly cited examples of the armed forces of different countries seeking out and supporting neurodiverse people for specific and specialist roles. The Israeli military has made use of the strengths of autistic individuals (Kushner, 2019). In its Special Intelligence Unit 9900, young Autistic adults use their above-average visual perception skills for various geography-related tasks, for example, mapping or analyzing satellite images for the smallest changes (the unit also includes soldiers that are not autistic). To ensure their abilities match the military's requirements (both perception skills and social abilities), young autistic adults who want to join the Israeli Defense Forces must participate in the Ro'im Rachok¹⁹ ("looking forward") training programme (Rubin, 2016).²⁰ In three training intervals (each of three months), they are prepared for their job with a mixture of therapy sessions and military courses. The initiative is based on a growing body of research is showing that autistics outperform neurologically typical children and adults in a wide range of perception tasks, such as spotting a pattern in a distracting environment (Motttron, 2011). However, it is recognized that for many of the unit 9900's autistic soldiers, the more daunting challenge is learning to communicate and socialize with their peers.

The UK's Joint Cyber Reserve Force overtly sets out to attract people that might be neurodiverse, recognizing the talents that some people will have. Its website²¹ includes the statement:

"We recognise that cyber talent crosses all genders and diversity, it knows no bounds and therefore we erect no barriers or obstacles to entry. We are able to apply for waivers to the normal entry standards to meet this requirement. It is well known that the cyber sector has a workforce including a substantial percentage of neural divergent population. We embrace neural diverse talented people, and recognise that they can often see what others cannot."



Also in the UK, GCHQ promotes itself as 'Daring to think differently and be different'. A blog posted in 2019 states that supporting neurodiverse staff is crucial to its work, and identifies the positive aspects of some neurodiverse traits as:

- Very good attention to detail, can spot patterns, anomalies and trends easily.
- Very good focus on a task and determination to complete it, perhaps even explore wider context to it and innovate.
- Very good, logical, science-based decision making without the, often distracting, emotional baggage many people have this. So able to make independent, unbiased decisions.²²



¹⁹ Ro'im Rachok is Hebrew for 'seeing into the future.' The programme was started in 2012 by three former agents of Mossad.
²⁰ Those selected for service with Unit 9900 must be on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum, with self-sufficiency in daily routines and basic time-management skills.
²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-cyber-reserve-force>
²² <https://www.gchq.gov.uk/information/daring-to-think-differently-and-be-different>

Neurodiversity in the UK Armed Forces



I believe a significant proportion of the Army are neurodiverse thinkers and find that an Army career plays to their strengths.

SO1 APSG



Most militaries have criteria for who is – and who is not – eligible to join the Armed Forces, stemming from reasons including mission-specific justifications such as combat effectiveness and military readiness. For example, the UK Armed Forces are excluded from the Equality Act employment provisions on disability and age on the basis of the ‘need (of Armed Forces personnel) to be combat effective in order to meet a worldwide liability to deploy.’

However, to improve the representation of previously excluded or under-represented groups in their ranks (particularly females and members of ethnic minorities), the UK military has enhanced its efforts to recruit individuals with diverse backgrounds, skills and abilities in recent decades.²³ Correspondingly, various changes have been made to organisational policies and practices regarding diversity in the UK Armed Forces. Despite the Armed Forces efforts to stress their diversity and inclusion practices, it is interesting to note that the recruitment websites of the Army, Royal Navy and RAF do not specifically mention neurodiversity.²⁴

The UK’s Armed Forces have always contained people that are neurodiverse. The citizens armies of WW1 and WW2 contained tens of thousands of such people. There are hundreds of personnel currently serving that have dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD, including very senior officers, fast-jet pilots, and cyber specialists. It is important to find ways to exploit the traits associated with these, and other, conditions. It is also important to ensure that people with neurodiversity do not assume that they cannot join the UK military when in many cases, they can.

It is commendable that the UK’s Armed Forces have also made significant progress in leveraging neurodiversity, seeking to harness the advantages that a diverse workforce can contribute to an organisation to enhance organisational effectiveness. The Royal Navy is perhaps leading the way in that it has followed the lead of DSTL and the Metropolitan Police²⁵ in establishing a network to support and advocate for neurodivergent personnel (Wavell Room, 2020).

Despite some inevitable discrepancies in practice (some of which are described below), it is worth highlighting that the Armed Forces do more than the great majority UK employers to attract (albeit currently in only certain areas) and support the neurodiverse. The JSP 822, ‘Defence Direction and Guidance for Training and Education’ includes provision for the screening and diagnosis for Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia, and for the provision of support on a need basis within the bounds of the Role PS or Competence Framework.

Additionally, there is medical policy for diagnosis of neurodiverse traits that are not Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia.

Inevitably there are differences in the ways that current policy is understood and applied across the Armed Services, for example:

- RMAS students are not allowed to use assistive technology to assist them with their course work, although some of them will be neurodiverse.²⁶
- The RAF’s selection processes, especially those for officers, probably filter out many neurodiverse people by being too generalist.²⁷
- A phase one trainee at BRNC was dyslexic. They had their exam paper printed onto yellow paper because it helped them to read it more easily. The trainee also happened to have a broken wrist. The member of staff invigilating the exam stated in front of the whole intake “I don’t get it, how does the yellow paper help your wrist.”²⁸

²³ See for example, <https://jobs.army.mod.uk/regular-army/inclusion-values/>

²⁴ See <https://jobs.army.mod.uk/regular-army/inclusion-values/> <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-people/diversity-and-inclusion> <https://recruitment.raf.mod.uk/diversity-and-inclusion>

²⁵ See <https://www.npaa.org.uk/>

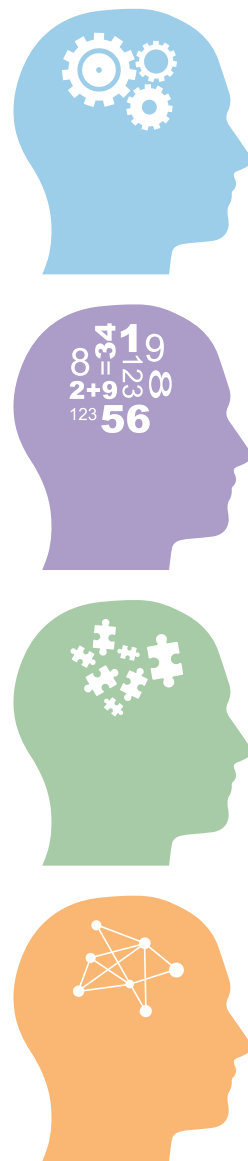
²⁶ Source: interview with senior ETS officer, 7 February 2023.

²⁷ Source: interview with RAF recruitment and training specialist, 8 March 2023.

²⁸ Interview with RN SPLDA

Conversely, there are some notable examples of good practice which are worth highlighting. The RAF has had effective systems in place to support personnel discovered to be neurodiverse but, until recently, has not had a front-end filter. However, the DO-IT Profiler (described above) has been trialed at RAF Halton and RAF Honington and has helped to identify personnel in Phase 1 training with a range of issues. The tool has enabled RAF educational and training specialists to provide individuals with support at the earliest and lowest levels possible. It is intended that this support will reduce the need to refer personnel to expensive Educational Psychologists.

The Royal Navy is also trialing the DO-IT Profiler. Additionally, the RAF has commissioned external specialists to develop new tests to more effectively identify individuals with specific neurodiverse traits. All three services have a series of publications to support line managers and instructors; for example, the Army has guides for people that are dyslexic, their line managers and instructors. Moreover, the education of other ranks in the Army, including those exhibiting neurodiverse traits, is regarded by many civilian educators as 'best in class.'²⁹



An Opportunity?

Identifying and supporting people with neurodiverse traits is a significant challenge for the UK Armed Forces. While educational and training specialists might want to identify and support all neurodiverse personnel, it is unlikely that the resources are, or will be, available to allow all these challenges to be met. Senior officers, as resource allocators, might be understandably reluctant to identify a host of new demands on their budgets. The key issue is to determine those roles where the neurodiverse can give a decisive, intellectual, edge and allocate resources accordingly. The standards of assessment for determining a person's suitability for a career in Defence should not, in most cases, be reduced but standards could be reviewed to determine if reasonable adjustments to account for neurodiversity can be made without compromising those standards.

However, given the support provided across the Armed Forces to the neurodiverse, and the success that many neurodiverse people enjoy within the Armed Forces, the opportunity must exist to overtly welcome applications from the neurodiverse in the military recruitment strategies. Making amendments to recruitment media and methods to explain the opportunities and support available in the Armed Forces to the neurodiverse need not be expensive, and would position the military at the forefront of UK employers of the neurodiverse.



²⁹ Including a group of members of the Worshipful Company of Educators that visited 10 Army Education Centre in 2022.

Conclusions

Neurodiverse people enjoy, and will continue to enjoy, successful careers in the UK's Armed Forces. In many cases these people will benefit from the support provided to the neurodiverse by the Armed Forces, which is superior to that offered by the great majority of UK employers.

The UK's educational system, at all levels, is increasing the support provided to the neurodiverse. The Armed Forces must be aware of what the educational system is doing in order to provide seamless and progressive support to its neurodiverse personnel. Additionally, as new technological aids for the neurodiverse are tested and proved effective, the costs of providing some support may reduce.

Therefore, the Armed Forces must keep up-to-date with the evolving technology designed for the neurodiverse.

While entry standards and training outcomes should not be amended, the levels of support that the Armed Forces provide to the neurodiverse could be explained better in recruitment methods and media. It is possible that the current problems with recruitment could be addressed, at least in part, by making more explicit the support provided to the neurodiverse.



Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- All education and training specialists in the three services should understand how mainstream education is evolving and increasing the support it provides to the neurodiverse.
- All education and training specialists should be aware of existing and new technological aids that are proven to be cost-effective in supporting the neurodiverse, and should know how to employ them.

- Recruitment strategies and methods should explain the support that is provided to the neurodiverse by the UK military.
- Case studies of people that have had successful military careers (at all levels) despite of, or because of, their neurodiversity should be used to aid recruitment.



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