Difficult Life Transitions: Learning and Digital Technologies in the Military to Civilian Transition

Study Report

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Difficult life transitions and digital technologies: an overview

One of the features of modern life is the rapid pace of change and the number of transitions individuals choose to, or are required to, make. Struggling with these transitions can have negative consequences, not just for the individuals concerned, but for society as a whole. Unemployment, poor health and breakdown in relationships have economic implications in addition to personal and social costs. Consequently, an important strand of public policy over the recent past has been providing support structures to assist those undergoing transition. An example of this are Careers (Connexions) Services, which provide information, advice and guidance to young people moving from education into employment with the intention of enabling them to find suitable jobs or training courses and so avoid becoming 'NEET' (not in employment, education or training).

Transition has been an important study area in the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, and recently researchers with an interest in transition, and those with a background in exploring the use of digital technologies, have undertaken a number of joint projects. For example, Passey, Davies and Rogers (2010) and Passey and Davies (2010) have examined the role digital technologies might play in supporting young people make the transition from education into work. These studies concluded that whilst such technologies could not entirely replace personalised, face-to-face support, they could nevertheless make a very useful contribution during this phase of a young person's life by providing information, learning activities and on-line access to advisers.

Although transitions of all types are worthy of study, those people who tend to experience difficult transitions deserve particular attention, if we are to both understand these difficult transitions, and how to support those encountering them. An example of such a group is those who leave the armed services and struggle to adjust to civilian life styles. Repeated research shows that most veterans make a successful transition to civilian life, but there is a minority who do not, and within this minority there is a small number who experience substantial problems.

Researching military veterans can prove challenging because it is not easy to gain access to this population, although some established research centres, for example the King's Centre for Military Health Research[1], have been active in this field for a number of years. In 2011 an opportunity arose for evaluators from Lancaster University to study a military to civilian transition support course run locally at the Brathay Trust, Ambleside, Cumbria. This was run by the Future for Heroes Charity (F4H)[2], in 2011 named Remount. (Fuller details about this charity are provided later in the report). As a result of ongoing links with F4H, the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research applied for a research grant from the Lancaster University Research Support Office under the 'Radical Futures in Social Science' call. This provided an opportunity to weave together areas of research interest and conduct a study of military to civilian transitions, focusing on the role

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[1] http://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/index.aspx
[2] http://www.f4h.org.uk/

digital technologies might play in making this potentially difficult transition easier to navigate.[3]

1.2   Purpose of the study

The study had four principal purposes:

> ➢ To contribute to the understanding of transition in contemporary society by focusing on a group for whom transition can be a difficult experience;

> ➢ To trial methods of gathering data during predominantly outdoor experiential learning courses, from a potentially difficult-to-reach group, many of whom do not have stable accommodation and may be reluctant or unable to take part in studies organised around traditional data collection methods such as questionnaires and interviews;

> ➢ To build on earlier work examining how the use of digital technologies might be used to support those experiencing difficult transitions;

> ➢ To assist the F4H charity to further develop its post-course mentoring programme by presenting it with evidence on how the use of digital technologies might contribute to this.

1.3   Transition and the Future for Heroes Charity

The number of transitions many people are required to make in their lives has increased over recent years[4]. In areas such as education, employment and family relationships, the former more stable and predictable patterns that once occurred in a typical life are being replaced by an increasing number of changes as education is left and then re-entered at different ages, as careers come to an end after a relatively short period and new ones are embarked upon, and as families break up more frequently with members then forming new relationships. In the literature review accompanying this study (Davies, 2014), Ecclestone et al. (2010) argue that whilst transition involves movement between different social settings, which is a challenge in its own right, it also involves changes in identity as people leave behind not just a college or a job but important sets of relationships and ways of living their lives that have often played a major part in defining who they actually are. Of course transitions do not have to be problematic, and for some people they represent new beginnings and opportunities and can be a source of motivation and energy. However, for others transitions can be difficult, especially if they involve leaving behind an identity which they valued, and which they find hard to re-create in a new set of circumstances.

People leaving the armed services can experience challenging transitions because being part of the military involves not just undertaking tasks which clearly differentiate soldiers, sailors and air force personnel from the civilian population, but also involves immersing oneself in a culture and a web of relationships which tend to dominate almost every aspect of life. Hence, Higate (2001: 443) refers to the "tenacious military identity" which can act as a set of chains

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[3] From now on this is referred to as 'the study' to distinguish it from the previous evaluation.
[4] http://jobsearch.about.com/od/employmentinformation/f/change-jobs.htm

binding armed services veterans to a former type of life and preventing them from adjusting to new civilian relationships and pursuits. The literature review showed that most of those who leave the armed services do make this adjustment, but there is an important minority who do not, and for whom transition is difficult, associated often with negative outcomes such as unemployment, relationship breakups, and poor health.

There are numerous charities which have been established to support former members of the United Kingdom (UK) armed services, for example, the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes. F4H is one that specifically addresses the needs of those who have struggled, or who anticipate doing so, as they return to civilian life. It is open to all those who have served in the military, but it is particularly focused on those who are experiencing difficulties that not only have negative consequences for themselves, but also for the people close to them, and indeed, wider society. At the core of its work is a four-day residential experiential learning course held at the Brathay Trust, Ambleside, Cumbria. The course consists of a specially-tailored curriculum for former members of the armed services which enables them to reflect on their current circumstances, and learn skills and strategies which equip them to overcome the transition difficulties they are experiencing. It contains a mix of 'classroom based' tutorials and discussion groups, but also a series of outdoor physical challenges such as 'high ropes' and boating exercises which both appeal to those with military backgrounds, but more significantly provide metaphors for the challenges of becoming a civilian once again whilst also coping with the loss of a valued military identity. Essentially the course aims to show how the skills and experiences obtained during a military career can be modified and adapted to civilian life.

1.4   The 2011-12 evaluation

The F4H course was evaluated between 2011 and 2012 (Davies, 2012). This evaluation had three significant outcomes. First, there was a considerable amount of evidence to show that the course was highly valued by participants, enabled most of them to exercise more control over their transition, and for some represented a life changing moment. Second, whilst the four-day course provided a useful boost and offered a framework for further personal development, it was also clear that it would be useful if measures were put in place to enable participants to maintain contact with F4H trainers and volunteers.[5] Third, the actual process of undertaking the evaluation presented some interesting methodological challenges. For example, it was suggested by F4H trainers that some former members of the armed services might find it difficult to talk about their experiences with a civilian evaluator. So, in terms of data gathering, formal interviews and questionnaires were not considered to be effective methods, and because a significant number of participants were living in temporary accommodation, follow-up contact might also be difficult. Consequently, the evaluation was undertaken through a participant observation approach which required gathering data 'on the move' in circumstances where it was frequently difficult to make detailed written notes until after a course activity had been completed. Furthermore, before meaningful data collection could begin, it was essential that the evaluator became integrated into the group and gained its trust. Therefore, this represented a particularly interesting method of conducting an evaluation, and one of the purposes of the current study was to develop this approach to data gathering.

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[5] Since the 2012 evaluation, F4H has established a post-course mentoring programme.

1.5 Data gathering

There were three main challenges in gathering data from a group participating in a F4H course:

> Much of it is conducted out of doors and consists of adventure activities such as 'High Ropes' and 'Ghyll Scrambling'. This meant that most of the data needed to be gathered 'on the move', which meant there were problems associated with both recording and storing data;

> Many of the participants found it difficult to discuss personal information, especially that which related to the problems they were experiencing returning to civilian life. Essentially, the key questions the researcher wished to ask were the very topics many participants had difficulty speaking about;

> Participants felt comfortable on the course, primarily because they were mixing with others who had a similar military background. Therefore, there was potentially an issue about how they might relate to a civilian researcher. Although a major purpose of the course was to help narrow the gap between military and civilian life, there was nevertheless a distinct military culture present on the course into which a civilian had to be accepted if meaningful conversations were to be conducted.

The 2011-12 evaluation had been undertaken partly by the evaluator participating fully in the course and joining in all of the activities (the primary source of data), and partly through post-course follow-up telephone interviews with a small sample of participants. The current study also involved participant observation as a method of data collection by choice, as this seemed to be a way of becoming integrated with course participants and gaining their trust. In addition, several new methods were trialled, and these were: 'snatched conversations'; an interactive 'focus group'; and a post-course 'email trail'.

> 'Snatched conversations' - the term 'snatched conversation' was suggested by a F4H participant who had noticed how the researcher took the opportunity to start (or as he said "snatch") a brief conversation with people as they walked from activity to activity or during breaks between activities. Each of the 'snatched conversations' might only last for a few minutes and just cover one or two topics. But over the course of a day, several 'snatched conversations' with the same person could produce a reasonably large amount of data.

> Workshop and group discussions – the researcher also ran a workshop on job hunting during each F4H course.[6] This provided a valuable source of data on participants' experiences of searching for civilian employment. In addition to this, informal, and almost spontaneous, group discussions occurred during longer breaks at lunchtimes and after evening meals. They were often initiated by the researcher who started a conversation with a couple of participants in one of the seating areas around the Brathay Estate. This would attract other participants who would walk over and join the group. Throughout the course, participants would vary what they did during breaks. Sometimes they opted to be alone, whilst on other occasions they looked for groups to

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[6] This had started after the 2011-12 evaluation when the researcher began working with the charity as a volunteer.

join which would often result in discussions about topics directly relevant to the current study.

➢ Follow-up emails – participants were invited to maintain contact with the researcher by giving email addresses. Over the research period 11 participants gave these details, with six eventually taking an active part in the research. Where a number of email exchanges took place with a participant, this formed a useful 'email trail', which recorded their ongoing thoughts about particular issues.

Additional back ground data were collected from F4H trainers and from members of the Brathay staff who supplied the course with specialist services. This was gathered through emails, telephone interviews and from numerous conversations conducted during F4H courses.

1.6   Sample

The total number of participants who attended the five F4H courses from which data were taken was 45, and this was the number upon which the general observations were made and who also took part in the workshops and group discussions. Thirteen of the 45 gave further data through 'snatched conversations', and another six participated in the 'email trail'.

1.7   Research ethics

A considerable amount of thought was given to ethical dimensions of the research. To some extent an ethical framework was provided by the F4H course itself, where it was stressed that all the activities and discussions which took place were not obligatory but entirely voluntary. The phrase 'challenge through choice' was used not just to describe the pedagogy of the course, but also the climate in which participants would work whilst on it. The terminology used during the course was also a manifestation of the supportive ethical framework within which it was conducted. For example, course trainers deliberately 'invited' people to take part in activities and were happy for some to decline the invitation. From the previous evaluation it was evident that those who declined to join in a group or disclose information about a topic remained fully integrated into the group, and there were no consequences arising from a decision not to participate in a particular activity.

Other learning taken from the evaluation was also applied to the current research. F4H staff had stressed that in addition to not naming individuals, it was advisable not to name the branch of the armed services they had been in. Relatively few had Royal Navy or Royal Air Force backgrounds and so could be identified relatively easily. For the same reason it was decided not to mention the exact rank of a participant, although a phrase such as 'held a post of responsibility'[7] was used where the seniority of a person was fundamental to understanding the significance of a comment. Furthermore, because the various F4H cohorts included in the current research represented a relatively small community, details such as a home town or a

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[7] This could refer to any type of promotion in any of the three services.

particular type of civilian occupation sought could also be a source of identification[8]. Therefore, this information is not included in the research reports.

Lancaster University ethical guidelines were also applied. Participants were told about the research and what its purpose was. Each cohort was given the opportunity not to take part and that this decision would have no impact on the course or their relationship with F4H. Where a group of participants consented to taking part, the course director signed a consent form confirming they had been briefed about the research and had agreed to contribute to it. Throughout the course the researcher frequently reminded participants that research was taking place. If a significant observation was made that was relevant to the research topic, the participant was again asked if it could be included. Those who opted to have post-course contact with the research through email or telephone were asked to complete an additional consent form which included details about the research process.

In addition to formal briefings and consent forms, the ethical dimension of the research also included what to ask, how to ask, and when to ask. Questions about specific military experiences were not asked, although sometimes participants chose to disclose some information. However, they mostly did not. When a participant introduced a topic of direct relevance to the research which was of a sensitive nature, such as a family difficulty since leaving the armed services, follow-up questions took the form of phrases such as "Yes, I can see that is an issue" rather than a more direct "Would you tell me more about that please". In this way participants were given the choice to continue the conversation or not without having to say "I don't want to answer that question". But, probably the most important ethical consideration was deciding when not to conduct the research. One of the purposes of the F4H course was to enable participants to use the Brathay Trust Estate on the edge of Lake Windermere as an opportunity to undertake calm reflection. In the breaks between activities some participants would walk around the estate or find a spot providing a particularly attractive view. If they acknowledged the presence of the researcher this was taken as an invitation to start a conversation. However, if it appeared they would rather be left alone, no attempt was made to talk to them.

1.8   The current study: focus and limitations

This study is presented as a preliminary investigation which, although providing a useful insight into the experiences of a relatively under-researched group in the UK, has a number of limitations, primarily due to its modest size and the challenges of gathering data 'on the move' with a group of participants, many of whom did not find it easy to talk about the difficulties they were experiencing. Three important factors need to be taken into consideration.

First, those who attend the F4H course are not representative of the armed services as a whole, with the majority of veterans making relatively unproblematic adjustments to becoming civilians once again. A typical F4H course tends to be predominantly made up of former army personnel with relatively few with backgrounds in the Royal Navy or Royal Air Force. Furthermore, most occupied relatively junior ranks in the army, often in infantry

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[8] The sample contained two female participants. The description 'she' is not used in this report to further preserve the anonymity of these participants.

regiments, with fewer transferable skills than those who had benefitted from technician or craft training whilst serving.

Second, the study was undertaken as much to examine whether it would be possible to study a group of participants as they worked their way through a course where much of their time was spent undertaking physical activities either at height or on water. Whilst the study showed that this was indeed possible (see later sections), the data collection tended to be as much opportunist as planned, undertaken in short bursts of activity rather than in structured or controlled conditions, and often brought to a relatively early close as participants moved to other activities or chose to bring conversations to a halt because they wished to place a limit on the amount of personal information they disclosed. In this sense, some of the data gathered, though valuable, is incomplete, and to produce a fuller account of participants' views and experiences, it would be necessary to have a larger, better resourced, and more comprehensive study which provided more opportunities to follow-up participants and so develop those themes and issues which were identified on the course but not pursued to their full extent.

Third, following the 2011-12 evaluation, the researcher had attended F4H courses as a general volunteer and to run a workshop on job hunting resources. This meant there was an element of role duality during the current research. To an extent this helped, since during the initial 'meet and greet' session the researcher was presented as a volunteer who supported the aims of the charity. This played an important role in easing integration into the group and narrowing the military-civilian divide. On the other hand, it also meant that the researcher was associated with the charity, and this could potentially have an impact on the data participants supplied. Whilst this is clearly a possibility, the data presented in this report indicate that participants were encouraged to express their own views and were comfortable in doing so.

2. DATA COLLECTED BY METHOD

In this section of the report, a brief overview is given of the type of data which was able to be gathered by each method, as well as some comments about the status of such data. The four data methods used were:

- General observations;
- 'Snatched' conversations;
- Workshops/group discussions;
- Follow-up 'email trail'.

2.1 General observations

This method was useful in helping to understand the populations which formed each F4H course. A prevalent view apparent in both the academic literature and the popular media is that there is a particular military culture which is, in many respects, different from civilian culture. Therefore, one of the benefits of using general observations was to determine whether this was the case and, if so, what its nature was.

On all the courses observed, it was noticeable how easily the individual participants formed a team. This did not necessarily mean that they engaged with all programme activities from the outset, as there was often a settling-in period required before participants discussed their feelings and ideas in a programme session. However, it was clear that in the early informal sessions at coffee breaks, and during the walks between activities, there was a substantial amount of general reminiscence about military life, and relaxed banter where stories about humorous incidents were retold. As participants mentioned on countless occasions, one of the most pleasing aspects of the F4H programme was the ease with which they forged strong relationships with those who shared a similar armed services background. Moreover, many also explained that they suddenly felt more comfortable discussing personal circumstances and concerns amongst relative strangers on a F4H programme than they did with the general civilian population in their home environments.

One point frequently raised by participants was that it was easier to speak about individual situations in front of a group of military and ex-military people because of the shared understanding of common experiences and the high levels of trust. This growing amount of trust and understanding could be observed developing during the conversations and banter exchanged between participants as the course progressed. It was also apparent that within each of the F4H cohorts there were some who felt more capable of adjusting to civilian life, and who were better placed to pass on hints and tips to others who were struggling in this respect. These were significant data and showed that participants valued advice provided by a fellow veteran, and perhaps more so than from the civilian agencies with whom many were now dealing. A speculative conclusion taken from the general observations strand, and then checked with other data, was the way in which the more vulnerable participants would seek the advice from the more confident. This could be the start of an embryonic mentoring relationship which might continue after the course.

The general observations highlighted the good levels of verbal communication which normally existed within F4H cohorts. This was most clearly evident during the planning and execution of the various physical activities where information and advice of a technical

nature, such as how to hold a rope or balance yourself on a log, was given in very clear and easy-to-understand ways. During the planning session for the 'Lake Cluefind' activity, there would normally be several suggestions as to the route the boat should take and the number of clues targeted. On almost all occasions an eventual consensus was reached which would then be summarised succinctly by one of the team with this summary then becoming the plan. Participants explained that this was typical of military practice, where suggestions would be offered but where it was also recognised that quick decisions needed to be made so that an operational plan was produced. This again suggested that there was potential for participants to help one another following the course.

2.2   'Snatched conversations'

As mentioned previously, sometimes these were deliberately started with a targeted participant because of something said earlier. On other occasions, they were entirely opportunistic with a casual chat with a participant turning into a more serious conversation about circumstances, plans for the future, and the extent to which these plans would be enhanced through the use of digital technologies.

'Snatched conversations' tended to be of two types. Some were stationary and took place during a break in the F4H programme. More often than not they took place outside on one of the benches found around the Brathay Estate or on the boathouse jetty. Most, however, were conducted 'on the move' on walks between the outside activities or during the activities themselves, such as an early morning walk up one of the local fells. Such conversations were, in fact, facilitated by one of the course trainers who would encourage participants to 'get alongside each other' as they moved from activity to activity. This was part of the course ethos, encouraging participants to share experiences and advice.

By their very nature the conversations were not structured. They would often be led by the participant who would raise matters of concern about military to civilian transition and illustrate these with personal experiences. Usually, the participants would speak of the obstacles and difficulties they faced making their transition, and because of the unstructured nature of these conversations, it was left to the participant to volunteer the specific difficulties they faced, be this, for example, employment, family or health. The only deliberate attempt to steer the conversations was seizing the opportunity to pose the question whether digital technologies might be of help. Generally, their responses fell into one of three categories: i) already using digital technologies but could make more use of them; ii) never considered them but can appreciate the potential use; and iii) cannot envisage how they could help with my problems and my situation.

2.3   Workshops and other group discussions

The 'Job hunting' workshop normally lasted for an hour and took place following the 'Lake Cluefind' activity. This is where participants selected the resources or kit they would need to successfully undertake a rowing challenge on Lake Windermere and seek to collect a target number of clues. Therefore, the session following this seemed a very appropriate time to discuss the resources needed to make another challenging journey, that from military to civilian employment. It proved to be a very productive method of gathering data, as it

provided the one fixed point on each course where participants discussed the issues involved with securing civilian employment. In many respects it took the form of a focus group.

Although each of the workshops was slightly different, due to the characteristics of each cohort, a number of key themes emerged during all of them:

➢ Relating military experiences and skills to civilian job opportunities;
➢ The perceived reluctance of some civilian employers to recruit veterans;
➢ Problems arising from injury or poor health;
➢ Lack of stable accommodation;
➢ Little knowledge of civilian recruitment techniques, training opportunities and sources of advice and guidance.

These themes were often inter-connected and expressed forcefully as might be expected from a group with an experience of difficult transition. As each workshop drew to a close, it was apparent that even though the general group discussion had come to an end, many could benefit from further conversations, especially where general advice needed to be tailored to individual circumstances. For example, there appeared to be at least four types of further conversations:

➢ With participants who just required specific employment or educational information;
➢ With participants who needed help in identifying a particular direction;
➢ With participants who were demoralised or confused and required encouragement;
➢ With participants who were dealing with deep-seated problems and needed further opportunities to share and discuss their difficulties and concerns before they could even start considering entry into employment.

There was some opportunity to have these conversations during the remainder of the course. However, it was also apparent that it would be useful to continue them by some means after the course had finished.

2.4   Follow-up 'email trail'

The previous evaluation of F4H had shown that follow-up telephone conversations were problematic for a number of reasons, including participants' difficulty in organising their lives around arranged telephone call appointments, sustaining telephone conversations for more than a few minutes, and poor quality conversations because of technical issues such as weak mobile telephone signals. Therefore, in the current study it was decided to gather post-course follow up data through questions sent by email, since this would provide the participant with more time to consider their answers before needing to reply. Furthermore, by just sending a couple of questions at a time it was intended to prevent participants from feeling overloaded, whilst eventually gathering data from a series of questions sent through an email trail lasting several weeks. To some extent, providing participants with time to respond to questions did produce answers which were more considered and detailed than those collected through 'snatched conversations'. However, overall, the email trail proved less effective than anticipated in gathering data. Eleven participants agreed to take part in the 'email trail' but five of these did not respond to the first email or reminders. However, six replied promptly, although one did ask to continue by telephone as well as email.

The email sample of six can be divided into two groups, each consisting of three participants. The first group started off by supplying detailed information on their use of digital technologies and how they were using them during their return to civilian life. However, it was evident from some of their comments that the difficulties they were experiencing were not always easy to write down, plus they explained that writing was not necessarily their strong point. They noted that it had been much easier to speak about their situations whilst on the F4H programme than put their thoughts down in emails. This was apparent from their answers to the emails which tended to be brief and mainly factual with few attempts to discuss emotions and feelings. Over the research period the quality of their answers eventually diminished, and the gaps between their responses to the emailed questions increased. It was decided to stop these after two of them reported starting new jobs and hinting that they would have difficulty finding time to continue. The third then asked for his views to be gathered through telephone conversations. Even though the amount of information supplied from this group was limited, their answers provided insights into what it is like for a long-serving soldier to feel socially isolated and disempowered after the camaraderie and fulfilment of a military career.

The second group of three continued replying to emails throughout the study, supplying extremely valuable information. They were able to answer questions by both referring to their own situations and those of the armed services as a whole. They provided illustrations and examples of the difficulties of adjusting to civilian life, and offered detailed accounts of how they had used digital technologies as part of this, where they had been effective, and where they thought their role was limited and needed to be combined with other sources of information and advice. The responses made by these three participants pointed to the fact that follow-up emails were an effective and efficient means of gathering data. On the other hand, each of them had ended their military careers in posts of responsibility, had been particularly articulate whilst on the F4H programme, and was confident that, with the boost provided by F4H, they had the resources to manage the military to civilian transition. In this respect, they were less typical than other F4H participants who had experienced greater difficulty in adjusting to civilian life.

3. DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED

Participants usually applied for, or were recommended to undertake, the F4H course because they faced a number of often inter-connected difficulties which were having a negative effect on their adjustment to civilian life. Very occasionally, an individual might only have a relatively minor problem, often a lack of specific information, and would use the course as a means of ensuring they kept on track as they moved from the armed services. However, most had more substantial problems associated with unemployment, lack of suitable accommodation, social isolation, health issues, and so forth. For these, the course often represented the start of a process that might continue for several months or even longer.

The difficulties participants experienced during transition are presented according to the method by which the data were collected. One of the interesting findings from the research was the different ways difficulties were presented and discussed in the different research settings. For example, during the physical outdoor challenges there was very little discussion of personal difficulties. At these times the banter amongst the group was at its highest, and as one said, "We are back in military mode". In contrast to this, the 'snatched conversations' produced data that were very personal and often referred to a sense of vulnerability or frailty. It was very unlikely this information would be offered during an outdoor activity.

3.1 Workshops and group discussions

The data gathered from workshops and other group discussions provided a useful overview of the nature of the difficulties F4H participants thought they faced in making transitions to civilian life. These difficulties could be viewed as actual examples of the three organisational concepts used by Ecclestone et al. (2010) to examine transition: identity; agency; and structure. In particular, most of the participants explained that they were experiencing, or had experienced, a loss of confidence in their ability to construct a satisfactory civilian life, and were contrasting these recent, unhappy episodes with their memories of successes and achievements whilst in the armed services. The cumulative effect of this was to conclude that their best days were now behind them, and whereas they had the attributes and skills to be effective soldiers, sailors or air force personnel, and therefore fitted into these worlds, they did not possess the attributes and skills for civilian life. They tended to contrast favourable memories of armed service life with unfavourable depictions of what it meant to be a civilian. Some thought that by investing so much in a military identity, they were not very capable of constructing a new, viable civilian one.

The list of difficulties raised by participants was broadly similar on all the F4H courses, with the principal ones being:

➢ Problems associated with transferring particular military skills and experiences across to civilian occupations;

➢ The military/ civilian culture divide, and specifically different patterns and norms of civilian social behaviour which many with military background found difficulty fitting into;

➢ Disruption to domestic relationships brought about by leaving the armed services, often exacerbated by changes in location, concerns about accommodation and re-

establishing regular, daily contact with partners and children following a career which had mostly been spent away from them;

➢ Loss of direction, motivation and confidence caused partly by the loss of military support systems and camaraderie, and partly by a lack of enthusiasm for a new identity as a civilian. This can possibly be summed up as the struggling with the emotional adjustment to becoming a civilian;

➢ Difficulties navigating a way through civilian agencies as applications are made for housing, benefits, training grants, etc. Lack of familiarity with these processes because so much in the military is done on behalf of people;

➢ The re-emergence of issues such as poor literacy skills or low qualifications that were in existence before entering the armed services, and which remained a cause of difficulty on return to civilian life .

During one of the group discussions it was suggested by one participant, and was then agreed with by the others, that length of service was not necessarily a good predictor of whether transitions to civilian life would be troubled or smooth. On the one hand, those who served for only a short period of time were likely to face questions from a civilian employer about why this was the case, and this would be a difficult situation to present in a positive way if they had left for health or disciplinary reasons. On the other hand, those with long military careers would probably find that becoming a civilian again was a major adjustment, and would possibly be affected in negative ways by the loss of camaraderie and the military support systems. Employers might also think they were "still too much of a soldier" to fit into a civilian workforce. Some suggested that there was no "good time" to make the transition, and that it was just the case of managing the individual situation in which you found yourself.

3.2 'Snatched conversations'

The nature of the F4H programme, where the custom is to invite participants to disclose private information about themselves only if they chose to, meant that data about personal difficulties could neither be gathered in an entirely controlled nor systematic manner such as through a structured set of questions. Instead individual items of information were volunteered by participants in varying degrees of detail and at different times, often depending on the atmosphere or mood of the course after a particular type of activity. As previously mentioned, walking to and from outdoor activities was a good time to have an individual conversation, and on these walks a judgement was often needed about the questions to ask and whether it seemed appropriate to probe initial responses for supplementary information. Consequently, whilst an attempt has been made to quantify the number of times a particular type of difficulty was discussed during the 'snatched conversations', these numbers need to be treated with a degree of caution as the conversations varied in type, duration and the actual topics which were covered. The main difficulties reported during the 13 conversations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main difficulties reported by F4H participants (n=13)

Nature of Difficulty	Number
Unable to find stable and rewarding employment	12
Lack of clear direction in life (often associated with loss of motivation)	11
Transferring military skills and values to civilian life	10
Becoming increasingly socially isolated	9
Lack of stable accommodation	7
Out of date or inappropriate qualifications	7

Where it was possible, participants were asked to identify what they thought was the single, main difficulty they faced, and 10 were able to do this as Table 2 illustrates.

Table 2: Single main difficulty reported by F4H participants (n=10)

Single Main Difficulty	Number
Age on leaving armed services	2
Health	2
Little interest in civilian occupations	2
Poor literacy skills	1
Poor verbal communication skills	1
Lack of confidence	1
Not coping with stress	1

Some short case studies are offered here, to illustrate the effect of these difficulties.

A	Works in a "dead end, zero hours contract job" and lives alone in a town where he has no family or close friends. He increasingly spends his non-work hours alone and has lost confidence and motivation. He wishes to find a better job but does not know how to. He thinks it may be wiser to "play safe" and stay where he is. But he dislikes himself for doing this as it implies a lack of confidence and ambition.

B	Left armed services early because of a health-related issue. He has difficulty coping with stressful situations. He starts jobs or training courses but often leaves after a short while. He tends to feel "overloaded" by the accumulation of numerous small problems. He feels disappointed in himself because he cannot cope with these. He does better when he is surrounded by supportive people, but even these can become frustrated with him because of his mood swings.

C	Has been unemployed probably mainly due to very poor literacy skills. He is unable to form longstanding relationships, and those relationships which are formed often have negative consequences. He feels socially isolated and often uses alcohol to cope. He has periods of feeling "very low", and tends to hide the feelings behind a "happy go lucky, exterior" which is actually very brittle.

D	Has experienced periods of homelessness and feelings of low self-worth. He has difficulty concentrating or focussing on one thing for long enough to succeed at it. He has experienced periods of social isolation and a reluctance to ask for help. He has practical skills but not the qualifications which would enable him to use these in a job.

3.3   'Email trail'

The six participants who replied to questions through emails were, as mentioned earlier, not typical of the F4H cohort as a whole. They had all held positions of responsibility in the armed services and stood out on the course as people who felt confident enough to make contributions to group discussions. The fact that they agreed to take part in the email trail and actually did so (five others also agreed but did not reply to the first email) suggests that they had the personal and digital confidence to take part in this form of data gathering. Two of them did not mention any issue related to health or emotional wellbeing that was likely to cause a difficulty during the transition, but for the other four, health and wellbeing were factors. One was recovering from a physical injury, and the remaining three discussed, in general terms rather than in specific details, the emotional difficulties they faced.

In five of the cases, finding reasonably well-paid civilian employment was the main concern, and with the sixth it was finding new family accommodation. They all had well-developed digital technology skills and had access to a range of standard technologies such as laptops and Smartphones. They had used digital technologies whilst serving in the armed forces and found it relatively easy to acquire enough skills in order to undertake day-to-day tasks and take part in personal social media. One had taken a European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)[9] course after leaving the military, whilst another explained that he had used YouTube video clips to enhance his skills. They all thought their digital skills were good enough to enable them to research civilian opportunities, and in this respect they were confident they had the resources to gather sufficient information about jobs, courses and civilian welfare and support agencies.

Although a direct question about family and social networks was not asked, they all chose to disclose some personal information as part of their answers to other questions, and this seemed significant. Four mentioned partners and children, and although from one perspective having a family was a responsibility, and a source of pressure during transition, it was also a form of stability. Two lived alone, and it was these two who mentioned emotional difficulties more frequently and which, from time to time, had a negative impact on self-esteem, motivation and confidence. In particular they had found it hard to identify a particular civilian direction and suggested this might have been easier if they had family support. However, they were frequent users of both military and civilian employment agencies, and during the course of the email exchanges, they both reported obtaining employment, replied more sporadically to emails, and eventually broke contact with the research. However, before they did so, they explained that a substantial amount of contact with the employment agencies was conducted on-line, and it could be concluded that their digital skills had contributed to their eventual offer of employment.

The four other contributors to the email trail were at different points in transition. One had virtually completed it, had identified a new occupation, and was currently undertaking the training course. He had planned his transition very carefully, ensuring that his family were in a settled location which provided continuity in terms of his wife's career and his children's education. The main concern was finding an occupation for himself that was both fulfilling and which supplied an income for a growing family. Although describing his digital skills as acquired "unconsciously", in fact he was very competent in this respect, and although he thought they offered him no great advantage in his job hunting, it was also very clear that he

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[9] http://www.ecdl.com/

was able to access and use a considerable amount of on-line information which eventually provided the direction to a civilian career which appealed to him.

Another participant was in a similar position. He was not completely sure what he wanted to do as a civilian but was confident.

> *"I believe that the skills I have would be transferable to a range of employments."*

However, the main concern was finding new accommodation and researching whether the family would be entitled to short-term benefit payments if finding a civilian job proved problematic. Having considered what he thought was a complicated transition from the armed services, he had decided to separate out the issues and address each in turn, with accommodation being the foundation upon which to build a new civilian family life. He felt confident that with his skills, and with the careers information he had gathered on-line (he mentioned curriculum vitae (CV) building and job comparison tools), his prospects of finding employment were reasonably good.

The fifth email contributor was actively involved in voluntary work and was investigating whether it might be possible to use this as a platform for a new career. He had good digital skills and was well informed about training, sources of grants and his local job market in general. Attending the F4H course had convinced him that he had both a viable civilian career plan and the resources needed to achieve his goal. He was using a blend of good social networks and digital technologies to explore his options.

Finally, a sixth participant suffered from lacking a sense of direction.

> *"My real problem is I really do not know what I want to do – there are too many things I would like to try and want to get involved in."*

This person had very good digital skills, but had mixed, and possibly contradictory, views about how much they would help him during transition. On the one hand, he was concerned about what he described as the difficulties of "conveying true meaning through text". Added to this was the fact that he had excellent social networks and used these to maximum effect.

> *"Pays to keep an ear to the ground when socialising."*

During his transition period he was offered various jobs through his network and was confident that he would eventually find the one (unspecified) for which he was looking.

On the other hand, he also explained that there could be occasions where a more formal on-line written application might be more effective, as he sometimes had difficulty remembering key information during conversations. He seemed to suggest that he would analyse each opportunity in turn and decide whether an informal, spoken or more formal written application would be the more effective in a particular situation. In this sense he was displaying considerable transition skills in tailoring his approach to specific sets of circumstances. Towards the end of the research period he emailed to say he had obtained a job he was very interested in, through a contact rather than a written application.

Whilst a sample of six is obviously small and not necessarily representative, it could be argued that although all six experienced challenges associated with the loss of their military identity, they nevertheless felt reasonably capable of navigating a path to worthwhile civilian employment. The F4H course had confirmed a view they all had, that is, it is preferable to discuss difficulties, and accept advice from people who understood the nature of military to civilian transitions. Four of them found this relatively easy to do, but the remaining two thought they needed to more actively seek social contact to prevent them from becoming socially isolated.

4.   USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

The sample for this section consists of 19 participants, 13 of whom mainly contributed through 'snatched' interviews, and six through the 'email trail'. It also contains some background data provided by four F4H trainers, although these data are not included in the totals provided in this section. Indeed the totals provided are for guidance only, because there is the possibility that not all the information obtained through 'snatched conversations' was then recorded in the subsequent notes.

Even within a relatively small sample such as this, it was possible to identify a wide range of opinions as to how digital technologies might or might not be useful in easing a difficult transition to civilian life, as well as some contrasting personal experiences of using it in practice. Nevertheless, it was also evident that three main issues were dominant:

> ➤ The most commonly used form of technology was the Smartphone, and this had important implications for the nature of communications and the amount and type of information that could be communicated;

> ➤ The main barriers to using technology were restricted literacy skills and lack of confidence in handling large amounts of text. Participants felt much more confident about actually operating the technology;

> ➤ Many of the participants were concerned about relying totally on technology to help them gather the transition information they needed. In some respects this was linked to the previous two points as there was a lack of confidence about handling large quantities of digital information.

4.1   Ways in which participants used technology

Social and entertainment
The most common use of technology was for social and entertainment purposes, with 16 participants mentioning this. The examples they gave included making arrangements by email for social events, obtaining headline information from sports websites about results, and logging on to social media sites such as Facebook. Participants were generally confident about using digital technologies for social and entertainment purposes, mainly because they did not feel under a particular pressure to produce a polished piece of work, and most of the messages sent were short and tended to take the form of questions and answers. The fact that they were sent to friends who would not judge the quality or accuracy of the language or spelling was another factor which contributed to this confidence.

 'General life management'
However, approximately half of the participants supplied examples of paying bills online such as television licences, obtaining insurance quotes, and sorting out journey details through rail websites. Several of them explained that this was a more pressurised activity than social and entertainment uses because of the need to supply accurate information. However, since very little writing was involved in these processes, as they mostly had to click on the relevant option, it was something they could do with reasonable confidence.

Employment, education and training

Of the sample as a whole, 12 stated that they had used digital technologies to help them investigate or apply for employment, education or training opportunities. A further participant explained that even though he had not yet done so, because he was not currently seeking such opportunities, he believed he had sufficiently strong digital skills to enable him to do so.

Six explained they had not used digital technologies for this purpose and would probably be unlikely to do so. Three of them were more comfortable using more traditional means of obtaining job information, such as looking in the 'Situations Vacant' section of the local paper, using the Jobcentre, and physically walking around industrial estates calling in at different factories. The other three explained that they thought their poor literacy levels and general lack of familiarity with digital technology would probably work against them, making this a pointless exercise.

In the case of the 12 who had used digital technologies to help them with work, education or training, nine were worried about doing so because of their lack of confidence with reading and writing. They mentioned two main problems. The first was managing and making sense of online information, whether this was in the form of emails or on websites. The sheer quantity of the information, "it's paragraph after paragraph" "too busy with information" was a major deterrent. The second was anxiety about making mistakes with basic spellings and punctuation when they needed to produce CVs or email covering letters with CVs attached. They used digital technologies because it was required, although they would have much preferred to use traditional telephone calls and have face-to-face meetings with prospective employers. One mentioned that he would only use a laptop when emailing an employer because there was more likelihood of making a mistake on the smaller keyboards found on telephones.

4.2   Using digital technologies to provide post-course support

Transition can vary considerably according to context and individual circumstances, and this is particularly the case with some veterans as they return to civilian life. Transitions are not necessarily a straightforward and linear process and often contain set-backs and detours. However, in previous studies of transition and the use of digital technologies, for example Passey and Davies (2010), most successful transitions consist of three standard stages:

- ➢ Gathering specific information about options;
- ➢ Reviewing the options from individual situations and identifying the more appropriate ones;
- ➢ Discussing potential barriers and obstacles with an adviser in order to be prepared for the reality of transition.

There is a good degree of consensus in the literature on how digital technologies might provide support during these standard stages of the transition process. In the context of career advice, Hooley et al. (2010) noted that technologies are generally used to:

- ➢ Deliver information;
- ➢ Provide an automated interaction, e.g. on-line matching tools and diagnostic tests;
- ➢ Provide a channel of communication between a client and adviser or between clients and other clients, e.g. on-line guidance and social network and discussion forums.

Although F4H participants have, to varying degrees, found transition difficult, and have had to deal with a complex set of inter-woven problems, the standard three-step transition process listed earlier can nevertheless be used as a starting point for providing them with support. Indeed, the three uses of digital technologies mentioned by Hooley et al. (2010) are actually closely aligned with the F4H curriculum which stresses the importance of gathering information about options, understanding yourself better, and discussing personal issues with those who can provide help. Therefore, it could be argued that digitally delivered information, automated inter-action, and communication are as relevant to those making the military to civilian transition as they are to any other type of transition.

There was a range of views expressed by F4H trainers concerning the role digital technologies might play in making the transition to civilian life easier. Certain parts of the 'digital world', such as careers information websites, were thought to be very useful and would benefit participants if they became frequent users of them. Ideas such as a 'transition app' for a Smartphone which contained essential information and contact details could also prove useful. For those who were socially isolated, and whose lives and future prospects might be enhanced by having more contact with other veterans, Facebook sites and other social network groups could add value by enabling them to follow 'conversations' about particular topics of relevance to those experiencing difficult transitions.

However, F4H trainers thought that digital technologies by themselves would very probably only help a small minority of the people who attended F4H courses. Nevertheless, there was also a clear consensus amongst the trainers that they had the potential to be very useful if they were used in combination with a F4H mentor, so that it was not the case, as one trainer put it, "that they just find themselves talking to a computer". In this respect, the mentor's principal role would be to assist the participant in making the most of the opportunities provided by digital technologies, helping them filter the vast amounts of information that is potentially available online, alerting them about sites and information which are less helpful, and most important of all, working with them to apply the information and advice they received to their own particular circumstances.

From an analysis of the individual situations faced by F4H participants, there were four broad levels of difficulty being experienced. These levels could also be viewed as being a reflection of individuals' senses of agency, with those feeling more confident about managing transition positioned at what could be classed as level one and those least confident at level four. Table 3 summarises the levels of difficulty that have been identified and the types of intervention that might be needed to address them.

Table 3: Levels of support identified for F4H participants

Level	Characteristics of the Difficulty	Intervention
Four	Difficulty in visualising a civilian future Usually socially isolated Require substantial help about jobs, lifestyle, finance, relationships, etc. Need mentoring to draw line under current situation before moving on	Stabilising
Three	Generally pessimistic Partial or sporadic support Losing confidence in ability to manage transition Need an external source of motivation	Coaching
Two	Generally optimistic Support from family/friends Less sure about information required Need to discuss suitability of different options	Advice
One	Positive outlook Support from family/friends Ability to gather and interpret information Need pointing to specialist information	Information

Participants judged to be at level one generally felt reasonably capable of making a successful transition, especially after attending the F4H course, but would nevertheless benefit from some additional information, such as sources of training grants, details about entitlement to social housing and so forth. It is probable that these participants would eventually access this information, but an experienced mentor could short-cut the process by pointing out the most useful websites. This would be a form of 'light touch' mentoring.

Those judged as level two participants tend to require advice rather than simply information. They would probably benefit from recommendations about the appropriateness of different ideas, suggestions of options they may not have considered, and possibly some criteria they might use when judging options against one another. At this level it is probable that a mentor would enter into a dialogue with participants stretching over some weeks, and that this might be done through a mix of email exchange and telephone calls. This would be a more deliberate level of mentoring, and involve a degree of suggested direction and action rather than a simple supply of information.

Coaching could be offered to those judged to be at level three who have lost, or are beginning to lose, confidence in their ability to manage their futures, especially where there is evidence that motivation might now be decreasing. In this situation the mentor would take a more active role in inviting participants to discuss their situations and feelings, respond with positive statements, not just about specific matters related to employment or accommodation, but to life as a whole, and explain how different people cope with different types of obstacles in their lives. The intention would be to enable participants to feel more empowered and capable of getting in closer touching-distance with what it is they desire. This level of intervention would involve email and telephone correspondence, but might also include

pointing participants to appropriate websites where they could take part in on-line discussions with others experiencing similar difficulties. It is likely that the mentor would take deliberate steps to contact participants at frequent intervals to review progress.

Participants who are most likely to benefit from the fourth level of intervention, stabilising, are those who are experiencing severe difficulties as they struggle during the return to civilian life. They often face an interwoven set of problems including unemployment, poor health, unstable living conditions, social isolation, sometimes a criminal record, and so forth. They frequently refer themselves, or are referred to, F4H in order to stop the slide into more unproductive and destructive behaviour, and to find a means and motivation to start the process of constructing a healthier and more rewarding life. It is almost certain they require more than just information, advice or coaching. They need to work with a person or group of people who can help them find a purpose, provide them with a direction, and help them make contact with specialist agencies where they can gradually start to sort out each one of the complex web of problems they face. Here a mentor needs to be very proactive in making contact by telephone or email, listening, reading and understanding the difficulties as perceived by participants, and then suggesting gradual steps they might take.

As a general rule, participants who are judged to require this level of intervention often value the F4H course as it enables them to break out of their social isolation and mix with others from a similar background. Therefore, one possible strategy for a mentor might be to encourage participants to use every opportunity, both on-line and in the actual community, to join groups and mix socially as well as seeking support from specialist agencies.

4.3   On-line mentoring

F4H has assembled a considerable amount of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the course and the mentoring support it provides. It is now turning its attention to developing further its mentoring provision, and the data gathered during this current study points to a way in which on-line mentoring could be of help to those experiencing different levels of transition difficulty.

There is an emerging literature about on-line mentoring which, although some claim is a well-established practice, is none-the-less also experiencing a period of rapid development. What is evident from one recent evaluation of on-line mentoring (Hooley et al., 2014) is that there are several key features found in all mentoring relationships and these need to be replicated in the on-line version. These are:

➢ Building relationship and trust;
➢ Clarifying purpose and intended outcome;
➢ Communicating and reviewing progress with individuals;
➢ Bringing the relationship to a close.

The Hooley et al. (2014) evaluation found that although some mentors and mentees only inter-acted on-line, others combined this with face-to-face meetings. Another issue was the extent to which the mentoring relationship was restricted just to the discussion of specific information such as course applications, or whether it addressed personal and emotional issues too. In the latter case, on-line mentors believed they needed additional training to help them with this.

On-line mentoring could be potentially useful for F4H in providing post-course support. A new term, blended or 'b-mentoring' has been introduced to describe situations where on-line or 'e-mentoring' is combined with face-to-face meetings (Murphy, 2011). However, taking into account the fact that the F4H mentors and mentees are likely to be geographically dispersed, it is more likely that 'b-mentoring' will probably consist of on-line contact and telephone conversations. Furthermore, it is probable that some F4H participants will choose to discuss personal and emotional issues with their mentors as well as more specific topics such as training or accommodation. Therefore, as Hooley et al. (2014) indicate, potential F4H 'b-mentors' could benefit from training in how to deal with such issues, and will need to operate within a clear set of guidelines and protocols, for example, knowing when to refer a person for specialist help.

5. CONCLUSIONS

There is a general consensus in the literature that the majority of former members of the armed services make a relatively problem-free transition back into civilian life (Ashcroft Report, 2014). However, it has also been noted by some authors, for example Hatch et al. (2012), that transition difficulties can arise several years after becoming a civilian, and that transition involves not just successful movement into an occupation but the creation of an all-round, viable civilian identity. As such, the F4H course is attended by both the minority who have immediate problems as they make the transition, and some from the seemingly problem-free majority who, whilst at one level appear to be functioning well as civilians, at another are actually having difficulties in adjusting to the fact that they are now no longer part of the armed services.

The participants included in this current study (and also those who took part in the earlier evaluation) did not all fully engage with the F4H course from the outset. Reflecting back at the end of the course, it was not uncommon for participants to say that even though they were tempted to get back on the train or back in the taxi at the start, now they had completed the course, they wished it was a little longer. The reasons given for this change in the state of affairs included: enjoying mixing with military veterans; feeling rejuvenated by the facilities and natural beauty of the Brathay Estate; and becoming empowered because the course syllabus had provided them with a vocabulary and set of tools which they could then use to address the difficulties they faced. Using the observational data gathered during the study, one of the most notable features of the course is the comparison of the conversations which take place at its conclusion with those that had occurred at the start. The closing conversations tended to be longer, more reflective and meaningful, whereas the initial ones tended to be shorter, rather defensive, and do not contain much personal information.

Data gathered from the workshops/group discussions and from the 'snatched conversations' provide the start of an explanation why this is the case. Firstly, participants are reassured that they are not the only veteran experiencing difficulties, and that others on the course are "in the same boat". Secondly, it is often the case that part of their difficulty is their perception (or possibly misperception) that civilians cannot be trusted as much as former comrades, and as levels of trust develop during the course, so does the quality of the conversations within the group. Finally, although the outdoor activities make the most immediate impact upon them because of the appeal to the military identity, there is also the growing realisation amongst the group that the indoor discussions are helping them to articulate and bring to the surface the issues they believe they face. This is particularly beneficial for those who are socially isolated and do not have such quality conversations in their day-to-day lives.

For some, the F4H course provides enough of a boost to enable them to start the process of overcoming their transition and adjustment barriers. Others, however, would probably benefit from continuing these conversations after they have left the course, and this is where digital technologies could make an important contribution to making transition less difficult. For example, participants who attended a F4H re-union course at the Brathay Trust in May 2014 reported that although F4H training provided an "immediate boost", this could wear off over time, especially if the difficulties they faced were significant. They suggested that one way of tackling this would be to find a method of continuing with the quality conversations they had started whilst on the initial course. It would appear that 'b-mentoring' could be such a method.

At the start of the report it was stated that this current study had four main purposes. Each of these is now considered in the light of the data gathered.

5.1   To contribute to the understanding of transition in contemporary society by focusing on a group for whom transition can be a difficult experience

Ecclestone et al.'s (2010) assertion that transition can be understood by employing the concepts of identity, agency, and structure is supported by the data. Leaving the armed services can disrupt one's sense of identity more than leaving a civilian occupation because so much of a former life is left behind; for example, purpose, camaraderie, and an organisation which, whilst demanding much in terms of commitment, also provides a support structure that is suddenly taken away. This explains why seemingly capable service personnel can find themselves lost as veterans in a new civilian life which they find difficult to manage. In addition to this, structural problems such as poor educational experiences, which would have caused problems in the civilian world had the armed services not been entered, re-emerge once more and act as an obstacle to obtaining employment.

5.2   To trial methods of gathering data during a predominantly outdoor experiential learning course, from a potentially difficult to reach group

In some respects the data gathering methods used during this study were successful. In particular, they enabled a civilian researcher to become integrated into an essentially military group (even though most are now actually civilians themselves) and gain their trust by participating in the challenges the course offered. Most of the participants agreed to, and also felt reasonably comfortable about, sharing personal thoughts and feelings that may not have had the same richness had they been collected through questionnaires and formal interviews. On the other hand, it was difficult to manage the methods to ensure that a representative set of views was obtained. Data gathering was often opportunistic and depended on the ability of the researcher to memorise large amounts of information and then record it several hours after it had been collected. Some participants deliberately avoided taking part in group discussions or 'snatched conversations'. The 'email trail' in particular was mainly used by the more articulate participants who had well-developed digital skills.

5.3 To build on earlier work examining how the use of digital technologies might be used to support those experiencing difficult transitions

Digital technologies can provide a considerable amount of support for those experiencing difficult transitions. This can be seen clearly by adopting a counterfactual perspective. For example, there were two participants who stated they had no digital experience and no access to any form of digital technology. When discussing future options with them it was difficult to identify a starting point, as so much advice about transitions now starts with a suggestion about logging on to a particular website, or 'googling' a key phrase. In one case all that could be suggested to a participant was for him to find where his local library was and ask for assistance there, which meant that his search for a course had not got much easier, although he did now have a starting point.

Digital technologies can play a role at each stage within a standard transition process consisting of information gathering, advice about options, and discussions about progress and difficulties. Although many F4H participants were not experiencing what might be termed a standard transition, their situations were, nevertheless, likely to be improved if they were given information, advice and the opportunity to discuss their difficulties. Essentially this was very much the content of the quality face-to-face conversations they valued whilst on the course, and whilst an inter-active website or on-line chatroom are not perfect substitutes for quality face-to-face conversations, they are of value, especially if combined with other forms of support.

5.4 To assist the F4H charity develop further its post course mentoring programme by presenting it with evidence on how the use of digital technologies might contribute to this

For some participants the F4H course itself is sufficient to help them manage their transition. For others it represents just the starting point, and these latter participants would benefit from continued contact with the charity. On-line mentoring, and in particular 'b-mentoring', is one way of doing this, and as this report illustrates, it is possible for this to be used to provide interventions at each of the four levels of difficulty being experienced by participants.

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