

Introduction

Ian Speller, editor.

This *Special Edition* of the JMHDS publishes a number of papers based on presentations given at an international conference hosted by the Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies (CMHSS) at Maynooth University (Ireland) in January 2025. This event brought together around fifty speakers from a variety of different countries and contexts to discuss “Professional Military Education: equipping students for the challenges of a complex world”. The conference was designed to explore the theory and practice of Professional Military Education (PME) today and into the future. It was intended to examine the ways in which different groups and organisations approach the challenge of educating military personnel, exploring ways in which the latter can best be equipped to think, act and lead appropriately and ethically within an increasingly complex security environment. The aim was to bring together scholars and practitioners, to share ideas and to debate possibilities, in order to better develop our understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with all forms of PME.

There was some trepidation amongst those planning the event that the topic might not garner much interest and that we might not have sufficient speakers, or enough of an audience, to make the effort worthwhile. The opposite proved to be the case. What was planned as a one-day event to be held in one room grew into a two-day conference with very well-attended parallel sessions. Speakers addressed a diverse range of topics (see appendix 1 below), prompting extremely useful discussions and conversations about best practice in PME. The combination of civilian and military practitioners, alongside those interested in the theory of PME, provided an energising mix of experience and outlook creating the opportunity to explore alternative perspectives. As ever with such events, discussions over tea and coffee outside the formal sessions (and over the odd pint of Guinness in the evening) provided added opportunity to share experiences and to discuss new approaches. The organisers were delighted with the event, not least because it equipped them with a range of useful ideas to carry into their own practice in PME. This view seems to have been shared by most others who attended.

The conference call for papers did not define what was meant by the term ‘PME’, an issue that has been explored at length by some commentators (see Clark, 2020. Libel, 2021. Sookermary, 2017). The aim was to be as inclusive as possible and take a practical look at the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching within a professional military environment. For practical purposes ‘professional’ was understood in the dictionary sense of ‘relating to work that requires special training or education’ and ‘military’ was taken to mean ‘relating to or belonging to armed forces’ (Cambridge, 2025). Our approach was congruent with the Irish Defence Forces definition of PME as ‘the military education process’ (Defence Forces, 2025: 16). In that respect we were happy to accept paper proposals from those



interested in education within what is sometimes described as a non-professional (i.e. conscript) context and would have been willing to consider papers that addressed education within an irregular force although, sadly, we received no proposals focused on the latter.

The 'professional' element of PME mandates the need to inculcate a given body of knowledge to the student in addition to encouraging critical thinking. In this respect the military is no different to other professions which require a particular approach and a particular subject focus, and also a commitment to continuous professional development, to equip personnel to fulfil the roles and meet the challenges associated with their chosen career. PME courses may cover some of the same material as their civilian counterparts addressing 'military history', 'war studies' or 'leadership and management', and they may even sometimes do so in the same classes, but the aim is slightly different. It is about supporting the development of the skills and knowledge and also what Clark (2020) describes as the 'attributes and understanding' required of military personnel today. There is an important difference between learning *about* the military and learning *to be* military. PME is a practical business designed to support military practitioners.

Whatever else it may be calculated to achieve (and this may include personal development and support for post-military career opportunities) PME is designed to make military personnel better at their job and fails if it does not achieve this core goal. Usually this requires a combination of training (learning specific knowledge and skills) and education (learning to think critically and creatively). The balance between these two varies according to the student body, typically leaning more towards training in the early career stages with a progressively greater emphasis on education once basic skills have been learnt. Often there can be tension within PME programmes between the needs of training and of education and attitudes and methods associated with the former may sometimes leak unhelpfully into the latter, stifling debate and creativity. On that basis, some have characterized 'traditional' military education as being rather stuffy and old fashioned, with an over-emphasis on deference and rote learning (see Sookermany, 2017. Mitten, 2022). That may be reflected in the training element of many programmes where behaviourist approaches are common and often functional. Few instructors will want new recruits to invent their own weapons handling procedures nor will they invite reflection on the value of marching from the left foot when the order is given. However, in this era of the 'strategic corporal' (Krulak, 1999) most militaries are aware of the need for all personnel to be able to think quickly and creatively to deal with unforeseen and sometimes unforeseeable challenges and the need for critical thinking is built into most programmes (Murray, 2014. Kaurin, 2017).

The author's own experience teaching PME in many different countries suggests that teaching (both military and civilian led) at military academies and colleges tends to be at least as engaging and innovative as it is within the university sector, and military students are generally much less forgiving of dull or deficient teaching than would be their civilian counterparts. The papers delivered at the conference, and those published in this journal edition, are testament to a willingness to think carefully about military pedagogy (or andragogy, to be more precise) and to bring innovative practice into (and out of) the classroom. They would seem to support the contention that there are many opportunities

associated with PME (Powell & Townley, 2025) and that many individuals and institutions are invested heavily in exploiting these to the full.

The first paper, by Dr Don Thieme, explores the use of activity beyond the classroom to create an immersive experience designed to support decision-making at the operational level through carefully designed 'staff rides' (typically historical case studies including field trips to the actual battlefield sites). Thieme offers a three-step approach to the design, delivery and assessment of effective staff rides, showing how these can be utilised very effectively to challenge students, encourage critical thinking and promote retention of learning. Far from being mere 'battlefield tourism', a well-constructed staff ride can incorporate the very best elements of active student-centred learning, providing a good example of how apparently very 'traditional' approaches can be both innovative and impactful.

In the next paper Drs Patrick Finnegan, Tony Clark and Amy Mumby explore the use of low tech simulations (board games) to enhance defence logistician learning. They address the different ways in which a new approach to games and simulations, that places more emphasis on the learning process rather than a zero-sum win/lose dynamic, can have very practical utility as a teaching tool. Drawing on their own experience and research, the authors show that, even in the age of digitisation, there is clear benefit in the use of low-tech games and abstractions that are low cost and have particular utility in supporting the development of the kind of communication and inter-personal skills required to work within a military team, whilst simultaneously challenging student to think carefully about real world challenges and to understand the impact of their decisions. That such games may also be a fun way to learn, and that they may encourage greater student engagement and retention than more traditional approaches, is an added bonus.

The next two papers, by Dr Maria Burczynska and by Dr Augustine Meaher explore some of the challenges associated with online learning, something that has become popular within the PME context as much as it has in civilian institutions in recent years. Burczynska's article reflects on her experience designing and delivering modules for military postgraduate students in the context of an online flipped classroom. In particular, the paper explores the challenges associated with supporting students who may struggle to balance professional commitments and academic expectations. Meaher's article addresses the benefits and challenges of teaching regional case studies in an asynchronous online environment and, in common with Burczynska, he reflects on his own experience to offer insight into the ways in which programmes can be structured and delivered in ways that meet student learning needs. Both papers will be of great interest to those engaged in online teaching and learning.

All papers in this edition include a significant degree of self-reflection, but none more so than the next article. Here Dr An Jacobs discusses a research project designed to explore the relationship between experiential learning and critical thinking, using the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst as a case study. As Jacob's explains, the research outcomes painted an unexpected picture of officer cadets' understanding of critical thinking, which changed the course of the project, and resulted in important lessons, interesting insights, and new research avenues. One key outcome was additional awareness of the importance of positionality in

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PME, where the proximity of the researcher and the subject of analysis could impact on research design and outcomes. The article offers a candid, and very useful, reminder that we can learn from research even when the project did not succeed in ways that we had expected.

The conference included a reception organised by Dr Laura Brown and Dr Angela McGinn, two colleagues from the CMHSS who play a key role in the latter's work at the Irish Military College. The reception was to launch a new 'women in PME' network, to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by women working in what is usually a male dominated field.¹ In her contribution to this edition Dr Anna Sofie Schønning addresses issues of gender in PME, reviewing existing Danish literature on women's representation in this area, revealing a marked paucity of scholarly work on the topic. Drawing from her own experience as a female civilian working in a military education context, the article reflects on how professional expectations, disciplinary norms, and the desire for legitimacy shape research choice, particularly for women.. The article argues that understanding the absence of research is, in itself, an important step and that increased scholarly attention to gender and representation in PME is needed.

The next article was contributed by the author of this introduction, and provides a personal reflection on an innovative educational partnership that has existed between Maynooth University and the Irish Defence Forces since 2002. The aim is to provide some insight into the changing nature of this partnership and to highlight some lessons that may be relevant to others who seek to 'dip their toes' into a new relationship with a military institution.

The final two papers were contributed by serving members of the Irish Defence Forces. In the first, Commandant Simon Keenan examines the implications of 'algorithmic warfare' on military decision making and PME, exploring ways in which leaders can be better equipped to deal with the challenges posed by emerging technology . The concluding article, by the current Defence Forces Registrar, Lt Col Colin Lawlor, addresses the challenge of writing a military education strategy at a time of unprecedented organisational change. The paper addresses the writing and publication of the recent Irish Defence Forces' Joint Professional Military Education Strategy 2025-2028 and, in exploring the practical issues associated with this process, provides a fitting way to end this edition.

The papers presented here reflect just a snapshot of the issues discussed at the conference but they provide ample evidence of innovation in the theory and practice of PME. Whether you are an academic or military personnel involved in the design and delivery of modules and courses in PME, or if you are simply an attentive observer, it is hoped that this edition will prove useful and interesting and that it will prompt you to reflect creatively on the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching and learning in a military environment.

References

¹ For further information, or if you are interested in joining this network, please contact Angela.McGinn@mu.ie or Laura.Brown@mu.ie .

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