

Professional Military Education in the Irish context: reflecting on the partnership between Maynooth University and the Irish Defence Forces.

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This article focuses on the partnership between the Irish Defence Forces (DF) and Maynooth University (MU)¹ that has existed since 2002, focused on the provision of officer education primarily at the Military College within the Defence Forces Training Centre (DFTC) at the Curragh Camp in County Kildare. The aim of the paper is to provide insight into the changing nature of the partnership between these two institutions and in doing so to shed light on some of the challenges and opportunities associated with such partnerships in Professional Military Education (PME). The conclusions must be set within the wider context of Irish defence, where successive governments have placed a very low priority on defence spending, with an inevitable impact on the resources available for military education. It will be argued that the Irish experience shows the value of military/academic collaboration, with an emphasis on the idea of 'partnership' as an arrangement where two parties agree to cooperate to mutual benefit to achieve shared goals in a spirit of collaboration and mutual respect.

Before proceeding it is important to note that this is a personal reflection. The author has been involved in the relationship between MU and the DF almost from the beginning, initially in a supporting capacity and more recently as Director of the Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies (CMHSS), the body now responsible for Maynooth's link with the military. My engagement in this partnership was entirely unplanned. For personal reasons I relocated from the UK to Ireland in 2003, leaving my job as a Senior Lecturer in the Defence Studies Department at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College to take up a position in the History Department at Maynooth, with no knowledge of any connections being made with the DF. However, knowledge of defence studies and experience of PME had obvious relevance for the DF and almost immediately I began to be involved in work at the Military College, providing one of the most fulfilling aspects of my academic career to date. My involvement in the events discussed here should provide insider insight into the evolution of the partnership over more than twenty years, but it is important to be aware of the reality that the analysis is based rather heavily on the views and perceptions of an individual whose positionality may have both positive and negative impact on their understanding of events (see Mercer, 2007).

¹ The university was known at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) until a rebranding in 2014 saw the adoption 'Maynooth University' (MU) for common usage. To save confusion, the current name will be used throughout this paper.



Origins of the partnership

The origins of the partnership between MU and the DF have been explored in detail elsewhere (Durnin, 2003. Ryan, 2012. Lawlor, 2022). It is sufficient here to note that from its establishment in 1930 the Military College was like many other such institutions, with military Directing Staff (DS) focused on a military training programme without outside accreditation. This changed in the first years of the twenty-first century as the DF sought to revise officer education to meet the challenges of a 'new era'. At a time where the apparent certainties of the Cold War had been replaced by an array of complex threats and challenges, where individuals of all ranks might be required to make difficult decisions, quickly and in full view of the world's media, it was commonplace for western militaries to emphasise the need for personnel to be better equipped, and better educated, in order to deal with the unexpected (Utting, 2009). This was as true of Ireland as of anywhere else. As the then DF Chief of Staff, Lt-General Jim Sreenan, noted, the DF recognised the need for 'leaders who had developed open and enquiring minds, whose preparations goes far beyond what might have been required for the type of operations associated with the Cold War' (cited in Hodson, 2016: 256).

The DF were well aware of developments in PME elsewhere, not least because of an exchange system whereby each year a successful graduate of the Irish Staff Course was sent to either the US or UK Staff College to complete the programme there, before returning to share their knowledge with the wider organisation. An understanding that the DF were not keeping pace with developments overseas, and an associated realisation of the benefits to be gained from engagement with a university, particularly in terms of quality assurance and benchmarking, informed the drive towards an initial agreement with Maynooth. This resulted in an agreement for the university to engage with the Command and Staff School and accredit a revised staff course as a 90 credit Level 9 MA in Leadership, Management and Defence Studies (Ryan, 2012. Lawlor, 2021:12). Earlier suggestions that the School itself should accredit a postgraduate award, through the National Council for Educational Awards, were not pursued (Hodson, 2016:246). The first DF/MU student cohort were registered in 2002 and graduated from Maynooth the following year. Between then and 2025 over 500 Irish and overseas officers have graduated from this programme.

Radical adult education pedagogy

In the first phase of the partnership between MU and the DF the relationship was managed through the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE). Maynooth did not have a Politics, International Relations or Strategic Studies department and the History Department did not yet have a focus on military history. DACE was chosen as the parent body for the partnership because that department already had a record of success working with outside agencies (Lawlor, 2022: 177), and there was no-one else willing or able to take on the role. The approach adopted by DACE did not match that more usually adopted elsewhere, where departments built their engagement on the possession of specialist

knowledge in what might broadly be defined as 'defence studies'.² Their emphasis was not on teaching military related topics, but instead revolved around a radical adult education pedagogy that focused on critical thinking and a post-positivist methodology (see Ryan and Walsh, 2004: 113. Walsh & Ryan, 2015), challenging students to create new meaning and knowledge in a manner that was self-consciously alien to their prior experience within military education. Even the make-up of the DACE team was challenging, as the majority of lecturers were women at a time when the staff and student body at the Command and Staff School was, with the exception of one civilian secretary, exclusively male.

Maynooth's engagement with the DF focused on the Staff Course at the Command and Staff School, where mid-ranking officers (OF3: Commandant/Lieutenant Commander) received staff training and education designed to equip them for future command and staff appointments. The contribution by DACE was focused on the research element (a 15,000 word thesis). Maynooth staff were not based at the Military College nor were any devoted exclusively to supporting this partnership; engagement with the military existed alongside their other more traditional university roles. Staff remained based in the university and travelled to and from the Military College to give lectures or meet students without their having any permanent base or offices within that institution. Military personnel also occasionally took the reverse journey, to undertake classes at Maynooth and to avail of the on campus learning resources. This tended to be popular with both staff and students as the process of changing into civilian clothes and working within a less formal civilian environment seemed to help students to relax and to think differently than they might have done in the more formal context of the Command and Staff School. Access to the MU Library was also a significant bonus. On a more practical level, the absence of students from the Military College may have given School staff the time and space to catch up on other work, and perhaps also to relax just a little for a few hours.

None of the team from DACE had any particular knowledge of military institutions or operations, or of military history or strategic theory, and the teaching of such matters remained the exclusive responsibility of the DS, often supported by outside lecturers sourced by the military. Thesis supervision was undertaken in partnership between the DS and Maynooth academics, as co-equal supervisors, with the former providing (at least in theory) subject matter expertise and the latter providing expertise in research methodologies and the business of thesis writing. Reflecting the DACE emphasis on adult education methodologies, considerably more staff time was devoted to supervision than was the case in, for example, the equivalent process in the UK (the Defence Research Paper on the Advanced Command and Staff Course). Students received very effective supervision and support, and this was (and still is) reflected in the very high quality of the end product.

It is interesting that the DF did not follow a more traditional route when partnering with a university, to link to an institution and a department with subject matter expertise in the field of defence. To have done so in Ireland in 2002 would have been difficult, as there

² 'Defence Studies' is used here to refer to an inter-disciplinary field that examines defence related matters and usually incorporates elements of military history, strategic studies, international relations and other cognate fields.

were then no centres or departments with genuine expertise in the field. Even those universities with expertise in politics or international relations (and in 2002 this did not include Maynooth) would have needed to invest in new staff to have credibly offered a 'defence studies' capability to the Military College. Leaving aside the difficulty of doing this from a standing start, this would have required significant investment and also a contract of sufficient duration to make such investment worthwhile. The DF was able to offer neither of these things as they first dipped their toe into an academic/military partnership.

In practical terms, a new 90 ECTS credit MA was mapped on to the Staff Course, with the DS responsible for teaching the military course, worth 60 x ECTS credits, with involvement from MU focused on the research element, a 30 x ECTS credit 15,000 word thesis. There was no formal MU involvement in the military element of the programme in the first year (2002-3) but the coincidental arrival in Maynooth of an academic with experience of teaching defence studies at the UK Staff Course (the current author) resulted in a decision to include an academic led 'Defence Studies' module in the first semester of the next course, starting in Autumn 2003. From this point the Department of History supported DACE in providing the MA, through provision of this module and also through my own involvement in thesis supervision, but DACE retained the academic lead.

A comprehensive assessment of the strengths and limitations of the above approach would require more discussion than is possible here, but some conclusions about the process can be derived from an assessment of the results, reflected in the completed MA theses. The quality of the latter would appear to support the view that DACE was very effective in broadening student horizons and in equipping them with the methodological skills required to challenge established orthodoxy. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the reflection of those involved in the process (see Lawlor, 2022). This was not always a comfortable process, and there were individuals among the staff and the student body who would have preferred a greater emphasis on subject matter expertise amongst their supervisors, but most commentators (and all external examiners) emphasised the high quality of the research undertaken. In terms of teaching critical thinking, the process was a success.

Less successful was the university's engagement with the remainder of the course. With the exception of the Defence Studies module there was no significant university engagement with staff course beyond the research process. This had the unfortunate effect of creating a two-tier system where the 'research element' and the 'taught element' existed alongside each other but the university knew and understood rather little of the latter. In practice this meant that, while the thesis was truly benchmarked to international academic standards, the same was less clear for the military course elements. Moreover, while university 'ownership' of the thesis process gave Maynooth some leverage in terms of pressing for the provision of time for research and reflection, the same did not apply across the military course elements. Here there was an unfortunate tendency for some military educators to try to leverage in ever increasing amounts of content without adequate reflection on the impact on overall student learning or well-being. This does not appear to be a problem unique to the Irish context.

Beyond the staff course

The partnership discussed above focused on engagement of the university at the Command and Staff School. It also included provision by DACE of a Strategic Leadership course for senior military personnel in 2011-12, but that course did not endure. In the years immediately following the initiation of this relationship a different form of partnership developed, as the History Department began to provide modules in defence studies for the Cadet School and also the Officer Training Wing (OTW) at the Infantry School. Initially unaccredited, these later formed the basis for new university accredited courses at both schools, building on the development of subject matter expertise within the History Department, reflected in the creation of new (civilian) MA in Military History and Strategic Studies, the first of its kind in Ireland.

In addition to the above, History also developed a role teaching short courses on maritime strategy and strategic studies to Naval Service Cadets, exploiting the very specific subject matter expertise of some of its staff. It soon became clear that the History Department needed to create some structure to manage this growing engagement in PME. The result was the establishment of the Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies (CMHSS) in 2009. The Centre was created to promote the Department's work in military history and strategic studies at Maynooth and also at the Military College but the pressure of events soon meant that its primary focus became PME. Initially engagement with the DF was undertaken by staff whose main focus was Maynooth, much as was the case for DACE, but over-time, and as the fee structure at the Military College was revised to be more realistic, the CMHSS was able to employ staff devoted specifically to the military partnership. Over recent years the Centre has grown to represent something akin to a mini-department within History, with its own staff and budget focused on PME. It has established links and developed projects with a number of institutions overseas and has supported numerous major projects, including the conference that provided the inspiration for this journal edition. From 2024 it has developed a new relationship with the Department of Defence and now provides micro-credentials in 'Defence Studies' for civil servants in addition to its work with the DF.

The success of the existing relationship between the DF and Maynooth, and awareness of an emerging international norm in terms of the accreditation of career courses, prompted the Cadet School and OTW to explore ways to accredit their own programmes. The History Department was able to build on its own growing expertise in defence studies and military history, and the experience of some staff in PME overseas, to work with DS at both schools to develop new programmes. In the case of the Cadet School a 60 ECTS credit Level 7 Diploma in Leadership, Management and Defence Studies was developed, building on established academic modules then being taught by occasional staff and, for the first time, providing university accreditation for the military led modules. This replaced an earlier 'National Diploma in Military Studies' awarded by HETAC³ since 1988 (Lawlor, 2022. Hodson, 2016:257). Equivalent accreditation was provided for 'other ranks'

³ The Higher Education and Training Awards Council, formerly the National Council for Educational Awards.

seeking a commission through the Potential Officer's Course. Periodic interest in using the Cadet Course as the basis for a bachelor's degree proved unsustainable given the short length (15 months) of that course.

At the OTW the CMHSS already provided a 'defence studies' module for the Junior Command and Staff Course⁴ and the academic coordinator there felt strongly that the course already met most of the requirements for university accreditation. The military instructing staff shared this view and this prompted moves to revise and accredit the course as a 60-credit Level 8 Higher Diploma in Leadership, Defence and Contemporary Security. As with accreditation of the Cadet Course, there were some challenges in terms of adapting and adjusting military training and assessment practices to meet university norms and standards. The process required some flexibility on the part of both institutions but was undertaken in a spirit of cooperation and friendly engagement. Indeed, the trust and good will that already existed between the two institutions represented a key element of success. The first of the new Higher Diploma courses ran in 2013-14 and continued with one or two iterations each year (depending on DF needs) until 2025 when it was replaced with a new 60 ECTS credit level 9 Postgraduate Diploma in Command, Leadership and Land Operations. The latter was embedded into a revised and updated Land Command and Staff Course, which had replaced the old junior course.

In contrast to the approach at the Command and Staff School, here all elements of the military course were included into the accreditation process and fitted into a regular university modular structure that could be seen to meet university norms and standards. The only exception were minor course elements designed to assess 'officer-like behaviour', which could not reasonably fit into the university assessment structure. The need to fit into normal university rules and regulations brought some new restraints to established practice and required some adjustment of expectations on behalf of the DS. Assessment rubrics and marking schemes had to be aligned to match university norms, a process that required much discussion before it was achieved. Students could no longer be given a 'course average' if they missed an assessment due to illness or injury. Positions on plagiarism and academic integrity had to be standardised between the institutions, and very many other issues had to be addressed. There was some concern from the CMHSS side that we would not be able to accredit 'deeply military' activity such as TEWTS and GTEs (scenario based tactical exercises and exams utilising maps and requiring detailed military planning). However, on investigation it became clear that these represented highly robust exercises in the application of military decision making theories, taught carefully and assessed forensically by the DS. Once the process was explained and understood within the university context there was no significant difficulty accrediting such activity and a series of external examiners have praised the results.

⁴ The Junior Command and Staff Course was a six month long residential intermediate level staff course for Army and Air Corps Captains. It was a requirement for all Captains to take this course before promotion to higher rank. It was replaced in 2020 by a new Land Command and Staff Course, still accredited as a Higher Diploma. The LCSC was revised and restructured in 2025 and this new programme is now accredited as a Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma.

A change in direction

Thus, within a few years of the initial engagement between MU and the DF there were two different models operating at the Military College. At the Cadet School and the Infantry School the university, through the CMHSS, adopted an approach typical of that overseas, albeit within limited staffing linked to a shoe-string budget. Academics with subject matter expertise worked with the DS in the provision of defence related education. At the Command and Staff School Maynooth provided support in terms of research methodologies, and the development of critical thinking, while the military held sole responsibility for almost all taught elements, with the exception of a module in Defence Studies taught by the CMHSS.

This overall structure continued until 2017, when DACE decided to withdraw from the connection with the Command and Staff School. At this point the CMHSS took over responsibility for the partnership with the DF, and for the MA programme, and shortly after both the Staff Course and the MA underwent major revision (discussed below). The decision by DACE to step away from PME may have been impacted by the retirement of some key staff and by others moving on to develop new projects, as is normal in an academic career. Likely it was also influenced by the fact that the department received very limited financial compensation for their work with the military. In retrospect, it is clear that the funding model was inadequate, demanding significant resources for limited reward. Inter-institutional engagement in PME can only be successful if there is 'something in it' for all parties. They cannot be sustained long term without appropriate funding nor can they be based solely on the enthusiasm of a few individuals.

It is important also to note the problems caused by a lack of certainty in the relationship between the two institutions caused by the absence of an appropriate contract. When the partnership was initiated it may have been important to both organizations not to be tied formally into something that was new and unknown. The result was a flexible, ad hoc arrangement that simply rolled over each year. Maynooth and the DF collaborated over the course of the year, and assumed that they would do so the following year unless something dramatic happened. It was 2009 before a DF/MU Memorandum of Understanding was signed, to bring some formality to the partnership between the two institutions, but this did not result in a contract with a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities or any commitment to maintain the relationship within a given time frame. This brought an element of risk to both parties, who could find themselves abandoned at short notice. It is possible that this impacted on the fee charged by the university, which remained below market norms, perhaps through fear that a more realistic fee might prompt the DF to seek alternative partners. This reduced the value of the partnership to the parent department and to the wider university and it impacted on the nature of support that could be provided to the military customer. Ultimately it may have contributed to the decision of DACE to withdraw from the programme and it impacted on the nature of that withdrawal, which occurred in a more precipitate manner than would have been the case had a contract been in place.

Building on strong foundations

As DACE withdrew from the partnership with the DF the CMHSS took over responsibility for the MA at the Command and Staff School. This changed the nature of the relationship from one where the primary academic emphasis was on critical thinking and research methodologies to one where MU staff became more engaged in teaching across all course elements, exploiting subject matter expertise in the field of defence studies. However, all parties were keen to maintain the existing strengths in terms of radical adult education and in support of that one lecturer was (and continues to be) seconded to the CMHSS from DACE to support PME within the Military College. Their involvement, alongside more 'traditional' defence focused staff, creates something of a hybrid model where subject matter expertise is supported by a continued emphasis on critical thinking and structured reflection built around radical adult education methodologies. One example of this in practice would be the Reflective Portfolio introduced recently into the joint staff course, designed to help the students to 'think about thinking' and to systematically question their experiences, using reflection as a tool for learning, self-development and critical thinking (McGinn, 2025).

It is in the nature of military education that courses are revised and updated periodically. The staff course in Ireland was revised initially to account for a new focus on the operational level of war, removing many of the tactical level land-focused exercises that had characterised the course in the early 2000s. This was followed by an even more fundamental review to cater for a new emphasis on joint operations, transforming the former (rather army-centric) course into a new Joint Command and Staff Course that better reflected the need to take account of activities across all military domains. The first new course ran in 2018 and was the result of close engagement between the military and MU partners, devising a course that, for the first time, matched the normal university modular structure and that had academic engagement and involvement in all such modules (see Lawlor, 2021). The old division between academic and military modules was gone, although there were still many areas where the DS played the lead role.

The revision of the MA, and the creation of a new joint course, was an exciting process and one that demonstrated the strengths of the MU/DF partnership. Building on the success of the existing relationship, the CMHSS was able to support its military partner and could exploit years of experience in terms of matching military needs with academic principles; a task that could sometimes feel a little like hammering square pegs into round holes but one that, in the event, caused fewer difficulties than it might have done. It was also significant that, whereas in the first days of the relationship DS may often have had ideas about PME that were grounded in a previous era, by this time the military instructors all had experience working with Maynooth academics. Things that were once controversial, that could cause heated debate between academic and military partners, were now mainstream. There was far greater understanding of the need to give students time for individual study and to allow space for reflection. The focus on critical thinking was now mainstream within the DF, as was an appreciation of the value of academic engagement. This had a very positive impact on the nature of the new course. Thus, for example, the revised course included provision for Syndicate Room Discussions (SRDs), modelled on the

seminar style classes common at the UK and US staff colleges, where DS and academic staff work together to promote student led discussion of a variety of topics, on the model of the flipped classroom, encouraging active learning and engagement with course material rather than simply having students listen passively to a range of lectures.

Associated with the development of the new Joint Command and Staff Course was the move to formalise the DF's link with academia through a 2019 'request to tender' for a new contract. For the first time, academic institutions were given the opportunity to compete for a contract to teach at the Command and Staff School. This forced the DF to think carefully about their own requirements, in order to specify these in the tender documentation, and it gave an opportunity for different institutions to provide their own solutions, and to set a realistic fee. The resultant contract (won by Maynooth) remained relatively short term, at only four years, but did at least provide all parties greater security than had hitherto existed. The contract renewal process can be arduous, in terms of the time and effort required to build a convincing case, but the process has value in forcing all parties to take the time to reevaluate needs and requirements, to think carefully about what might be changed and to avoid the potential for stagnation.

The next contract was expanded to include PME at the Infantry School and the Cadet School, encompassing the Diploma and Higher Diploma courses already accredited through the CMHSS. This meant that for the first time the university could treat activity at the Military College as a coordinated whole, with all schools covered by the same contract enabling academic staff to be allocated in a more rational manner than was hitherto the case. CMHSS staff are now embedded in each of the three schools. Core staff are based permanently at the Military College, in office space provided within the relevant schools, and now represent an integral part of the teaching staff of each school. This has had a transformational impact on the levels of support that the academics can provide to the military. They have moved from being 'outsiders' who occasionally travel to the college to being 'insiders' who occasionally travel to the university. This creates a closeness between the DS and the academics that was impossible before, they are now very clearly part of the same team with positive impact across all aspects of the partnership. Additional support and engagement from Maynooth based staff, and from academics linked to other departments, means that the partnership represents a 'whole of university' engagement, but there is a core team of PME experts based at the Military College.

The short-term nature of the current contract may serve military interests in terms of limiting long term liability and also in keeping the academic partner 'on their toes' through the need to constantly consider the possibility of their losing the next bid. It has negative impact on the university insofar as it complicates long-term planning; why invest heavily in something that might be gone in a couple of years? The long-standing nature of the partnership between MU and the DF means that the former is still willing to invest in the role, taking the risk that the engagement will endure beyond the short term (and with almost 25 years of partnership, this has been a reasonable assumption to date). However, short-term contracts for the university have an impact on the employment status of staff hired by the university specifically to support those contracts. They lack the security

provided by traditional academic tenure. Such staff might be forgiven for keeping at least one eye on the wider job market, potentially creating an unhelpful dynamic in an environment where specialist knowledge and experience of PME represents a key force multiplier.

The other side of the hill

It would be presumptuous for an academic to say too much about the experience of the military DS, except to note that it has been a privilege to work with such an enthusiastic and dedicated group of individuals over the years. In Ireland, as is common elsewhere, DS are not specialist educators. They are regular DF personnel who rotate through roles in PME in the same manner as they rotate through other duties, usually after no more than two years in any particular job. Some few may have qualifications in education, but such cases are rare. On the other hand, all have deep specialist subject knowledge through their own experience as military personnel and all have recent experience as ‘consumers’ of PME on their own military courses. By the time they are appointed as DS at the Staff College, many will have already filled roles as instructors elsewhere.

DS are always committed to the success of the course and to support for the students but, particularly in the early days of this partnership, they may not always have had a very developed understanding of the best ways to promote engagement and retention of learning. The requirement to stick rather rigidly to the strictures of a very full programme may not have helped in this respect, although programmes have tended to become more amenable to change, and less congested, over the years. The move to embed academic staff in the Military College has helped in this respect, fostering a closer relationship and a deeper understanding of the needs of the other from both sides of the partnership. DS are now much more aware of academic norms and standards and CMHSS staff are adept at managing these to meet military requirements.

Unfortunately, recruitment and retention challenges facing the DF have contributed to a situation where staff often rotate through roles rather quickly, without time for them to develop and exploit their knowledge of PME. Similarly, there is an unfortunate tendency for posts to be ‘gapped’ for periods, adding substantially to the burden of those who remain, who now have to pick up the teaching, assessment and supervision duties of missing staff. Within this context the embedded academic staff become even more important – they provide an element of continuity and a repository of knowledge that might otherwise be lacking. If nothing else, they have an important role to play in explaining to new DS the challenges of fitting military requirements to university standards, noting that the latter do not bend to meet military exigencies. This can be important in terms of acting as a barrier to any temptation from the military hierarchy to adjust programmes, or perhaps to dilute standards, to meet temporary emergency needs promoted by short-term personnel challenges. In this respect the DF’s initial interest in academic benchmarking and quality assurance seems prescient.

In conclusion

The partnership established between MU and the DF in 2002, broke new ground in a variety of ways. It was the first such partnership of the DF with a university. The emphasis on radical adult education methodologies was novel within a PME environment, and the emphasis on the development of critical thinking challenged students in ways that most would not previously have encountered. The partnership has grown from rather limited beginnings to one that now provides accreditation across the three key career courses provided for officers at the Military College and has matured to the point where MU provides staff embedded within the Cadet School, Infantry School and the Command and Staff School. After almost twenty-five years working together, almost every officer in the DF is now a graduate of one or other of Maynooth's programmes.

The partnership between the DF and MU has been a success in terms of creating courses designed to meet the educational needs of the students, and of the wider organisation. It is fortunate that the DF did not follow through initial ideas about accrediting programmes themselves through the NCEA as it is improbable that the organisation could have brought to the process the expert knowledge and experience in terms of adult education methodologies that was available through the university and it is even less likely that, working alone, they would have been able to foster the kind of radical changes that were required to programmes, methods and structures to allow them to become widely regarded as examples of excellence in terms of officer education (a point emphasised by independent overseas external examiners as well as by the end-users within the DF itself). Put simply, PME at officer level in Ireland is a success because of the effective partnership between the DF and an outside academic institution. As an aside, the same appears to be true of education for 'other ranks', and here the primary outside partner is the South East Technological University. The model has been tested, and it works.

In the introduction to this paper the notion of partnership was emphasised, and the word has been used self-consciously throughout. That word can be used to describe a simple contractual relationship between two parties, and that does indeed reflect one aspect of the current relationship between Maynooth and the Defence Forces. However, the success of the relationship depends on something much more profound. From the very first days, the partnership between the two institutions has been underpinned by a sense of collaboration, by a willingness to work together to find solutions to sometimes novel problems, and by understanding of the need to be flexible, and to learn from each other, to meet the evolving learning needs of our students and of the wider organisation. The relationship could not have worked without this. It is more than a business arrangement. That said, these days universities must run in a business-like manner and armed forces must constantly strive for value for money. This is particularly true in the Irish case, where the defence spend is never generous. In the early days of the partnership the fee structure was unrealistic, and this impacted on the resources that could be devoted to this role and, ultimately, to the ability of the original host department to remain engaged. The issue is less acute today, as the more formal contractual relationship enables better alignment of costs and needs, although the short-term nature of such contracts causes some unwanted uncertainty from the perspective of the university. Excellence in PME requires long-term investment, particularly in terms of staff expertise, that is not well served by short-term contracts.

It is possible that the above will be addressed in the relatively short term by the establishment of a new National Defence Academy recommended by the Commission on the Defence Forces (CoD, 2022) and currently 'under evaluation' by the government (Harris, 2025). At present it is not clear what, if any, form that Academy might take and the CMHSS remains eager to participate in discussions about future academic provision. Experience over the past twenty years suggests the value of continued engagement between the military and other universities. It also suggests the value of working with those who have deep expertise not only in the relevant subject area, but also in PME. Whatever happens in terms of the planned Defence Academy, if the DF retains a need for officers equipped to think critically in order to deal with difficult and unforeseen contingencies then partnerships such as the one explored here will remain important.

Please note that the views expressed here represent those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent those of Maynooth University, the Defence Forces or any other group and organisation.

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