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Girls in the Combined Cadet Force: a qualitative exploration of the impact of their experiences on their graduate employability skills

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Abstract

Purpose: Every year several thousand female cadets participate in the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) in the UK but little is known about the impact that this experience has on the subsequent employability of the female cadets. This study aimed to understand the perceptions of academic teenage girls from one all-female unit of their participation in CCF and the personal benefit or otherwise in relation to their ultimate employability.

Design: This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of 10 young women who had participated in CCF for at least three years. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis.

Findings: Participants were effusive about the transformative effects of CCF in relation to personal confidence, recognising transferable skills and raising personal aspiration, all key elements to employability, particularly for women. They also considered they had gained future workplace advantage having had opportunity to trial leadership strategies in mixed gender teams, an experience unavailable elsewhere to them. Loyalty to the contingent pervaded every discussion and the importance of team goals, although this level of selfless commitment may be detrimental to employability, subsuming their personal interests to the greater good.

Originality: Research into the benefit or otherwise of teenage girls' extra-curricular activities is scarce, and this is the first study, to our knowledge, that explores the perceptions of the impact their time in CCF had on their graduate employability skills.

Introduction

In the UK approximately 16,000 teenage girls, participate in the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) every year. The CCF is sponsored by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and takes place within their schools as an extra-curricular activity (MOD, 2021). This paper seeks to understand how girls from an all-female CCF contingent attached to an academic school, perceive the experience of participating in CCF and, specifically, how their perceptions feed into models of long-term employability.   All references to employability relate to graduate employability, reflecting the academic expectations of the participants. The research seeks to answer the following question. 'How do academic teenage girls perceive their participation in the Combined Cadet Force has affected the personal attributes which underpin long-term employability?'

The Combined Cadet Force and wider extra-curricular activities

MOD sponsorship of CCF costs £45million per annum, and aims to provide young people with developmental opportunities, thereby generating societal benefit (Hazenberg and Denny, 2020). Each CCF contingent is school-based and affiliates to one or more of the armed forces, Army, Royal Navy or Royal Air Force with cadets who are taught a curriculum that includes concrete skills such as navigation and first aid as well as soft skills such as leadership and communication.

CCF is distinct from other extra-curricular activities in that it gives teenagers genuine responsibility with rank, teaching formal leadership and encouraging adherence to collective standards and values. A four year mixed methods study was commissioned by the MOD to assess whether cadet provision represents value for taxpayers (Denny *et al.*, 2017; 2018; 2019, 2021). The results were universally positive in relation to cadets' confidence, resilience and educational attainment for lower socio-economic groups and boys in particular in relation to crime, unemployment and social cohesion. Academic girls were not a specific focus of the report, and this paper seeks to build that body of knowledge: enhancing understanding of the factors which feed into women's employability will be crucial in the ongoing battle to reduce the gender pay gap (ONS, 2020).

CCF provides a testing environment of mental and physical personal challenge from the outset with a requirement to learn technical military skills, work in constantly fluctuating teams and take personal responsibility.   Although other youth initiatives target the development of leadership skills, very few opportunities provide teenagers with genuine decision making experience (Kress, 2006). For girls educated in single-sex schools, CCF will also be a first opportunity to work with male counterparts and assume leadership of mixed gender groups; whilst there is limited academic research about the long-term benefits of this experience for teenage girls, it seems likely that early exposure provides workplace advantages in terms of accelerated leadership proficiency (Taylor, 2016). The safe space allows experimentation with regard to leadership style (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011) and structured feedback - a benefit unavailable to many women, even in the workplace (Jampol and Zayas, 2020).

Long-term commitment to extra-curricular activity by teenagers correlates positively to employability outcomes by building social and human capital and allowing employers to distinguish candidates (Clegg, Stevenson and Willott, 2009; Ng and Feldman, 2014). This level of long-term commitment has been identified as *grit:* 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals' accounting for 4% of uplift in a variety of measurable outcomes (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007). Many employers are now introducing grit into assessment processes to attract candidates able to weather the vagaries of the workplace (Butz *et al.*, 2019).

What is Employability?

The concept of employability within Higher Education is complex and highly subjective but it is becoming increasingly relevant as students are more and more concerned with graduate outcomes when choosing their university (Callender and Dougherty, 2018). Yorke (2006 p.8), defines it as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'. Employability thus differs from employment in that it encompasses the skills and attributes necessary to identify suitable fulfilling job opportunities, to negotiate the recruitment process and, critically, to flourish once employed. Whilst constituents of employability can

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be signposted to students in the lecture hall, hands-on experience is essential to truly embed the principles (Cranmer, 2007) and the nature of individual response to such challenges will influence levels of ultimate career success (Ng and Feldman, 2014).

Antecedents of employability include stable characteristics such as personality type and malleable factors such as expectation and self-efficacy, increasingly important in today's workplace where jobs are largely self-sought and careers self-managed (Kanfer, Kantrowitz and Wanberg, 2001). Research demonstrates that various types of activities contribute to enhancing employability, including extra-curricular activities, part time work and internships (Alawamleh and Mahadin, 2022)

Employability implications for women

Employability is rarely considered through the lens of gender and yet 62% of top companies encounter difficulties attracting and retaining female graduates (Highfliers, 2021). A pipeline of strong female talent has tangible benefit for organisations; a higher proportion of women in teams results in superior problem solving (Hirschfeld *et al.*, 2005), in precarious work situations, women are proven to have superior success rates reflecting flexible collaboration skills (Ryan and Haslam, 2007) and companies which promote women to Board level consistently outperform all-male counterparts (Adler, 2001; Lückerath-Rovers, 2013).

Women and the graduate job market

As graduates complete their studies they face the demanding challenge of securing employment. Women make up more than half of the graduates in the UK, yet account for only 40% of successful hires onto the top graduate schemes (Oleeo, 2019), have 27% lower salary expectations than men and are 56% more prone to abandon graduate applications (Bright Network, 2021). Graduates average 29 applications, with only 1 in 20 reaching interview stage (Graduate-Jobs, 2013); self-efficacy and resilience, attributes which are malleable and can be enhanced, are key to success in this ultra-competitive environment (Alawamleh and Mahadin, 2022; Beaumont, Gedye and Richardson, 2016; Burke, Blenkinsopp and Stephenson, 2019).

For women self-perception has a disproportionate impact on employability. Women feel less confident about applying for high-prestige roles (Ferriman, Lubinski and Benbow, 2009; Tang, Pan and Newmeyer, 2018) and are more likely than men to suffer from anticipatory disappointment aversion. This has the effect of reducing optimism (Metz, Fouad and Ihle-Helledy, 2009; Carlin *et al.*, 2018; Dawson and de Meza, 2018), which then has a knock-on negative impact on career success (Kim, Lee and Lee, 2014). Activities which build confidence are likely to enhance employability in women (Clarke, 2018).

For the majority of graduates who are unsuccessful at securing places on graduate schemes a job search becomes an unstructured process based on multiple applications and personal networking. Self-evaluation and the ability to articulate relevant positive attributes are critical to a successful job search (Kanfer, Kantrowitz and Wanberg, 2001): whilst women are generally aware of their academic prowess they often undervalue their employability skills and the worth of their extracurricular experience in the application process and select careers which under-utilise their capabilities (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012; Kay and Shipman, 2014). To maximise their chances of success, graduates must network among existing associates and cultivate new contacts, adopting a variety of communication

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styles which may result in unexpected but nevertheless positive career turns (Krumboltz, 2009). A proactive personality (Bateman and Crant, 1993) has positive career outcomes in terms of obtaining roles and flourishing within them (Seibert, Grant and Kraimer, 1999; Jackson and Tomlinson, 2020). Whilst less likely to leverage their network successfully for personal gain (Sahai and Singh, 2017), women are significantly more likely to utilise their contacts where they perceive a strong group identity (Bapna and Funk, 2021).

Challenges of translating women's employability to career success

It is important to consider employability in terms of flourishing within the workplace as well as obtaining initial employment. Growing up, girls have fewer leadership opportunities than boys (Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014) and may subsequently struggle to establish credentials as dominant male counterparts take control; men are more likely agentic, pursue ambitious career goals and are rewarded with challenging roles that render them more promotable (Ferriman, Lubinski and Benbow, 2009). Women, by contrast, are prone to undervalue their capabilities and are less willing to identify with leadership positions (Ain, Sabir and Willison, 2019; O'Leary, 2021). Role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau's 2002 theory which explains how the incongruity between the feminine behaviour expected from a women and the masculine behaviour expected from a leader can lead to prejudice against women leaders) explains a further challenge, whereby women have to choose between being seen as selfless and unambitious, or assertive and bossy (Bandura, 2001; Eagly and Karau, 2002) and may find they have to act in a way that is not congruent with their values in order to progress (Sealy and Singh, 2010). Legislation seems to have contributed to a decrease in over hostile sexism in organisations, but 'benevolent' sexism (comments or behaviour that may be positive in tone but nevertheless reinforce stereotypes of female inferiority) stemming from paternalism can be even more detrimental to career development, sending a message of inferiority but remaining unchallenged (Dardenne, Dumont and Bollier, 2007; Becker and Wright, 2011).

Team focus is highly valued by women and features prominently in their leadership style (Green *et al.*, 2005), yet this can prove counterproductive to individual women as their personal achievement may be overlooked as a result of the focus on community success (Heuzé *et al.*, 2006; Amanatullah and Tinsley, 2013). However, where women incorporate small adjustments to communicate team goals *coupled* with self-promotion, they are better perceived and more likely to be successful (Heilman and Okimoto, 2007; Merchant, 2010). Successful women develop flexible strategies based on adaptive communication; removing emotive language from discussion, enlisting difficult colleagues as advocates in group tasks and switching communication medium (Rubin *et al.*, 2019; Wolfe and Powell, 2020).

The present study

Whilst the literature described demonstrates that employability is well researched, there is a gap in understanding whether activities undertaken as a teenager, particularly those with leadership opportunities for girls, underpin employability. As CCF offers girls opportunities unavailable elsewhere, this research seeks to answer the question, 'How do academic teenage girls perceive their participation in the CCF has affected the personal attributes which underpin long-term employability?'.

Method

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Participants

The participants for this research come from an all-female CCF unit, embedded in a state school in the UK. The school is an academically excellent selective girls' school with from which 85-90% attend university. Participation in the CCF at the school is voluntary and cadets can join and leave at any time. Pupils are invited to join the CCF in year 9, when they are 14. Approximately 80 students, around half of the year group, join the CCF each year at this school when the opportunity presents, and around twenty remain until they leave the school, usually at eighteen, four years later. We were not able to find any published research to explain the reasons for such attrition within the CCF, but the school is highly academic and cadets who leave often cite exam pressures.

Participants were female cadets leaving school, aged 18. Military ranks were representative of this population, ranging from Corporal to Regimental Sergeant Major, with the majority of the participants concentrated at Sergeant and Staff Sergeant level. Criteria for participation were i) to have spent at least three years in CCF, by which stage the participants would have two years of leadership experience ii) to have participated in at least one week-long residential training camp which would require a level of personal responsibility and working with other contingents and iii) to be over eighteen years of age.

The CCF Training

Employability is not a formal aim of the CCF Training programme but cadets are offered training in a range of personal and work-relevant skills. The cadets benefit from a combination of formal and informal lessons in relation to communication skills and leadership. Initially they are introduced to the concept of clear communication and different leadership styles by way of lessons taught within the contingent but with no formal feedback. Once they reach 16 a compulsory weekend course is introduced to teach cadets how to instruct others including lesson planning, clear communication, time management, posing questions, dealing with difficult behaviour etc. Formal structured feedback is given to each cadet. To reach the level of sergeant and above cadets are offered external courses run centrally by the Ministry of Defence in mixed groups of males and females. These courses offer formal structured feedback and mirror teaching provided to serving army and navy personnel. Further details of the programme can be found in the supplementary file.

Procedure

Once ethical approval (approval reference ETH2021-1960) was granted from City, University of London, an email was sent to the twenty eligible participants outlining the study and nature of their potential involvement. The email focused on CCF experience rather than the research focus of employability as participants might otherwise second guess expectation in the interview, reflecting the power dynamic with the researcher, and adjust responses accordingly (Willig, 2016). Ten cadets responded positively to the email, an acceptable number for a homogenous group (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 1995). Interviews took place in a quiet area of a coffee shop or via Zoom according to interviewee preference and ranged from 45 to 75 minutes, averaging 62. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A semi-structured interview format was employed to ensure conformity of questioning with the flexibility to follow up with additional query where participants seemed likely to provide further rich data (McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl, 2018)   All names were changed to ensure anonymity; pseudonyms

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were assigned randomly from a list of popular girls' names in the year the participants were born 2002/3. Ranks were not included and the name of the CCF contingent and its location have been omitted.

Design and Research Philosophy

The paper is underpinned by a phenomenological epistemology, focusing on the participants' subjective recollection of their experiences and the sense they make of them (Willig, 2013). The research paradigm is interpretivist, making use of qualitative data, allowing the researcher to understand the participants' experience from their personal lens of personality and background but also construct an understanding in relation to the wider implications for the participants (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020), in this case in relation to employability. Questions were focused on the full range of participants' experience and follow up questions, asking how they feel in retrospect, enabled them to pinpoint changes they see in themselves facilitating consideration of their experiences in terms of employability. A question pinpointing what they felt they would tell a prospective employer about CCF provided an avenue for them to highlight their own view of personal employability in an unfettered manner.

Data Analysis

To ensure a rigorous methodology, the Braun and Clarke (2006) systematic framework for thematic analysis was followed and the researchers looked for patterns of meaning across the whole data set. The stages set out by Braun and Clarke were applied in this way. First, the transcripts were read and re-read for familiarisation. They were initially read with no particular focus but to get a sense of the meanings and experiences of the participants. The next stage was coding. The scripts were examined line by line, and meaningful, relevant features were systematically coded with a particular focus on words, phrases and experiences that would help to answer the research question. For ease of organisation, codes were stored in Nvivo software. The next stage was developing themes. Thematic analysis is concerned with patterns of meaning and to this end, we looked for threads of recurrent, related codes and collected them together to form themes. Themes were then revised and refined to ensure that they reflected the participants' experiences and answered the research question. To minimise researcher bias, considerable care was taken to ensure that the semi-structured interview questions were objective and not leading and the two authors discussed the data and coding in depth, regularly.

Findings

The study explores the participants' experience of taking part in CCF during their secondary school years. Specifically, we were interested in their perceptions of the development of the personal attributes which underpin long-term employability. We developed three key themes: Enhanced Self Perception, Transferable Workplace Skills and Negotiating Mixed Gender Groups, each with a number of subthemes. Themes and subthemes are illustrated in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

Table 1: Themes and subthemes

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Themes	Sub-themes
Enhanced self-perception	• Everyday personal confidence • Self-efficacy from CCF compared with other extra-curricular activities • Self-regard fuelling higher aspirations
Transferable workplace skills	• Adaptive communication style • Resilience based on self-awareness • Proactively identifying and seizing opportunities • Promoting team success
Negotiating mixed-gender groups	• Finding personal strategies for mixed teams • Dealing with dominant masculinity

Enhanced Self-Perception

Participants discussed their enhanced self-perception following CCF participation covering the following - i) everyday personal confidence, particularly compared with other extra-curricular activities and ii) self-regard fuelling higher aspirations.

i) Everyday Personal Confidence- almost every participant regarded herself as significantly more confident as a result of the broad CCF experience of physical activity, leadership roles and teaching younger cadets. Millie's summary was fairly typical of comments made, 'I found that believing in myself was like a huge thing, I think lots of us have, like young girls […] when they're growing up, have a lot of insecurities and CCF really helps me to like push those aside.'

CCF leadership roles are introduced with rank after only one year and Claire felt these had built her up both mentally and physically, 'my confidence has grown massively. I think they would say they see like a physical difference in how I hold myself as well'.

Whilst participants were not asked about employment prospects, several made the link between confidence and work success. Sophia credited obtaining a summer job to CCF confidence saying 'I'm much more confident and that's how I got my current job. Because I had to do an interview and I was able to sit comfortably smiling and chatting because of CCF'. Similarly Lottie considered future interviews where she felt the CCF confidence would be beneficial, 'I think another thing I'd probably say, in a job interview, is dealing with such a huge variety of people'.

Other extra-curricular activities participants were familiar with such as Scouts, music and sports, whilst enjoyable, were not perceived to provide equivalent breadth of experience and responsibility, 'CCF I've got more unique opportunities' (Liz) and 'There's so much responsibility and opportunity for

learning and teaching at such a young age. I think that in Scouts have…you have some responsibility but it's not nearly the same level' (Iris).

ii) Self-regard fuelling higher aspiration

Michaela had long harboured an unspoken dream of becoming a surgeon and felt her CCF experiences had allowed her to own her aspirations, 'it wasn't until like year 10 when I actually said it, because I was so nervous that once I say it, and what if I don't, what if I fail at it'. In terms of career outlook Claire had also reappraised her attitude towards applying for part time work at university. Prior to her CCF experience she would have regarded it essential to meet all criteria in a job specification but her opinion shifted having observed male counterparts at other CCF units who would consistently step forward for opportunities. She shared her thoughts: 'I have some of the skills. If I don't get it doesn't matter. Like I might as well just put myself forward for it'.

Transferable Workplace Skills

All participants identified, and critically were able to articulate, a number of key attributes which will contribute to their workplace skillset: i) adaptive communication style ii) resilience built on self-awareness iii) proactively identifying and seizing opportunities and iv) promoting team success.

i) *Adaptive Communication Style*

Every participant praised the flexible communication skills they had honed in CCF as leaders and team members, reflecting the diverse nature of groups they had encountered, 'you could be put in a team of, you know, that could vary from 200 other girls from all different year groups, all different life experiences' (Sophia). There was a general understanding of adaptability, introducing different styles according to situation and seniority of audience. Michaela attributed her success at university interview to CCF. She explained that a variety of communication styles were required in a high adrenaline roleplay situation at her university interview and felt she would have been lost 'if I hadn't of been exposed to that sort of environment and doing that kind of thing'.

Participants had received formal training to teach other cadets and as a result had amassed a variety of attributes, not least the ability to speak in front of a group and 'instil some enthusiasm for what we're teaching' (Emma). Structured feedback by adult officers had enabled participants to develop self-awareness regarding personal communication style and adjust where appropriate. Lottie, for example, felt that she had learned not to self-undermine, 'apologising for what you've done; I don't anymore'.

ii) *resilience built on self-awareness*- the majority of participants discussed developing a personal toolkit to help them persevere and deal with the stretching challenges they faced in CCF, 'learn about the way that I handle like stress and like anxiety and to be like self-constructive with it' (Claire). They expounded individual coping strategies they had finessed relating to, for example, personal preparedness and acceptable standards. For some, such as Iris, this involved intense preparation to maximise personal readiness. Iris explained that 'you make an effort like outside of CCF to, to know your stuff so that when you're there you know it, and you're secure in your knowledge'. Georgia recognized

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herself as an overthinker and countered this by becoming present, intensely concentrating on 'the idea of listening to the instructions'.

The selective nature of their school meant that many participants were used to striving for excellence academically. However, in CCF they had learned to adjust personal goals to individual circumstance and accept mistakes, which they felt had boosted their sense of resilience. 'I think I've learned […] when to push through at all costs and when to recognise the need to step back' (Sophia). Similarly, Lottie had learned that 'good enough' was perfectly acceptable she did not need to overachieve constantly, 'So I think I probably learnt to trust my judgement a bit more'. Finally, participants mentioned the importance of recognising when they had genuinely no more to give, 'you can go further and things, but sometimes you've got accept when to stop' (Iris).

iii) Proactively Identifying and Seizing Opportunities

Participants referenced a huge array of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that CCF had offered including ice climbing in Aviemore, firefighting and sea kayaking in Norway. Critically the participants mentioned proactively seeking out these opportunities by research and networking. Alex summed this up by saying 'I was up for taking any opportunity, and I would ask other cadets how they had managed to get on it'. Georgia recognized the personal value of sailing qualifications she had sourced and had pushed herself completely out of her comfort zone to apply and attend alone, asserting 'I'm not going to give up the opportunity that great because my friends are not doing it'.

Across the contingent the participants felt that a message was being conveyed that rewards were available for those who were prepared to self-promote 'And so just watching them, and the staff encourage them to be really proactive about what they're doing sort of made me realise that why can't I do that? Why shouldn't I?' (Millie).

iv) Promoting team success-
every participant regarded contingent identity as integral to their CCF experience often citing their success as an all-female unit in a male dominated environment as incredibly bonding 'it's not an individual sort of activity but a collective sort of identity' (Iris). They alluded to the military standards and values with the code of selfless commitment frequently cited, 'what would I do if this was… if I was selflessly committed?' (Lottie).

Interestingly the sense of team often subsumed the importance of personal identity with most participants favouring 'we' rather than 'I' and several comments about the importance of getting the whole team to the finish, 'I suppose you have to find ways to get through as a team' (Millie). The sense of empowering the team was palpable, 'I'm good at finding people's individual strengths and what people can do to make a team' (Alex). Many regarded personal success as relevant only in the context of contingent success. 'I've learned as much as, like, I'm like, I can be a strong individual, I'm better as a team member' (Sophia).

Negotiating Mixed Gender Groups

Whilst their school and CCF contingent are all-female, the participants had frequently undertaken mixed activities with other contingents and assumed leadership roles with male cadets. They discussed their experiences in terms of i) finding personal strategies for mixed teams and ii) dealing with dominant masculinity.

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i) *Finding Personal Strategies for Mixed Teams-* participants were well aware of the dichotomy of representing an elite female CCF contingent, 'breaking down boundaries to win' (Millie) but becoming isolated socially if not conforming to feminine stereotype 'I wasn't going into the roles that the boys expected' (Lottie). They had developed an array of strategies in CCF for mixed groups according to circumstance. There was a general perception, for example, that low level sexism was not worth addressing: Alex described her irritation at being referred to as 'Little One' on a formal leadership course but felt that calling it out would draw attention to her for the wrong reasons. Where possible humour was used to deflect sexism but many participants felt there was a line in the sand. A number referenced a gun run competition which they had originally been excluded from on gender grounds but were subsequently admitted to after a showdown and subsequently won. That was regarded as an important stand for female cadets and if faced with similar blatant sexism in the workplace Millie commented 'I would confront it'.

The participants felt they had gained strategies for fostering cohesion. Michaela outlined a one-to-one approach of speaking to a male counterpart away from peers to formulate a plan 'I was just able to sort of take him to one side and talk to him and say, 'Look, we've got girls from my school who aren't super confident about this'. Lottie described accommodating 'fragile masculinity' by allowing a senior male cadet to own her winning suggestions, 'I was just telling him what to do, but in a way that he thought was his idea' but she acknowledged the dilemma of not undermining herself in the process.

ii) *Dealing with Dominant Masculinity-* whilst male counterparts were largely reasonable to work with, most participants gave examples of boys assuming leadership roles uninvited or foisting ill-considered opinions on the team. In recounting these experiences the participants were often angry, Millie, for example explained: 'and then he just treated us like absolute shit on the ground!'. Georgia found the experience of being over-talked and ignored dispiriting, 'you just feel so down, like, is that really what it's going to be like, everywhere in the world?'. Often the participants felt that they had to prove themselves superior to male cadets to be taken seriously, but Lottie had found that her success in this came at a cost: when her section suggested she was the better leader, her male rival 'basically didn't speak to me after that'.

Despite the challenge of these unpleasant situations the participants regarded this as a valuable learning for future employment, and explained that they allowed them to develop effective strategies mainly around enhanced communication: 'you've got to point out to them that there are other ways of seeing it' (Sophia). Participants had reflected and amassed a wealth of strategies for dealing with similar scenarios in the future 'So I feel like we can handle our approach to the situation better because, you know, we've had that experience' (Emma). They had also learned that they occasionally had no option but to counter male dominance with a show of assertiveness themselves. However uncomfortable, some participants acknowledged they had to confront toxic masculinity head on, such as Alex 'I didn't even realise how big of a shift my view on standing up for myself was […] I've realised that I've got to assert myself'.

Discussion

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The study considers the views of young women on their involvement with CCF, seeking to answer the question "How do academic teenage girls perceive their participation in the CCF has affected the personal attributes which underpin long-term employability?". We developed three key themes. First, participants highlighted dramatically enhanced self-perception, confidence and faith in their abilities, in many instances regarding their experience as transformational. Second, the participants felt they had embedded key skills which would be highly valued by employers, categorised as transferable workplace skills. Third, the participants had negotiated mixed gender teams, often for the first time; whilst not always positive they felt they had gained valuable experience to take into future roles. As research into the benefit or otherwise of teenage girl's extra-curricular activities is so scarce, the findings provide valuable signposting regarding employability.

Enhanced Self-Perception

The first theme supports Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory that confidence gained in one activity transfers to personal confidence elsewhere. Examples of enhanced self-perception as a result of girls' CCF activities echo the extensive Denny research (2017; 2018; 2019; 2021) in relation to wider cadet activities. Participants' ad hoc comments about confidence in, inter alia, job interviews, speaks to academic theory of employability which stresses importance of self-perception and, in particular, Clarke's representation of employability as *dependent* on self-perception (Alawamleh and Mahadin, 2022; Clarke, 2018). The participants strongly identified with their contingent and its perceived elite status had in turn bolstered their personal confidence. As women's employability, in particular, is restricted by poor self-perception (Ferriman, Lubinski and Benbow, 2009), this enhanced personal confidence for these female cadets is an important finding. Despite, or perhaps because, of the highly academic nature of their school, many of the participants mentioned they had suffered from low levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy prior to their cadet involvement. The breadth of opportunity and experience within CCF, however, contributed to a much stronger sense of personal value which chimes with the Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2008) theory of welcoming and learning from experience and critically should last into adulthood (Fukasawa *et al.*, 2020).

An unexpected finding was that the majority of participants perceived that CCF had encouraged them to own more stretching career aspirations, often a stumbling block to employability for women, both at graduate recruitment stage (Highfliers, 2021) and throughout their career (Kim, Lee and Lee, 2014). The participants were self-aware and perceived that their higher aspirations reflected an ability to relinquish fear of failure, often a significant constraint for women in terms of career aspiration (Tang, Pan and Newmeyer, 2018).

Transferable Work skills
The benefits

The second theme corroborated Cranmer's (2007) assertion that hands-on experience is highly beneficial in developing a valuable employability skillset. Every participant articulated skills they gained in CCF that would, in their opinion, be valuable in an employment setting, largely correlating with the Transferable and Social Skills identified by key academic employability theorists. For example, participants cited adaptable communication skills as a significant benefit, with interview success frequently referenced, aligning with employability theory and employers' criteria for new starters

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(Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017). Critically structured feedback within CCF had taught participants to self-evaluate, an important antecedent to successful job search behaviour (Kanfer, Kantrowitz and Wanberg, 2001) and also conferred a workplace advantage unavailable to many women (Jampol and Zayas, 2020). Awareness of their transferable skills provides these participants with an employability advantage over their female peers at the career selection stage and beyond as they are less likely to under-sell their capabilities (Kay and Shipman, 2014). There was a general sense among participants of the unique nature of CCF with unmatched opportunity which they had seized by a combination of networking and research. Generally women are less comfortable leveraging their personal network than men (Sahai and Singh, 2017) but these participants were inspired by peers to do so.

Participants' perception of heightened resilience and adaptability built within CCF resonates with quantitative research on the value of extra-curricular activities for teenagers and is likely to underpin longer-term employment success (Gardner *et al.*, 2020). Unknowingly, participants supported the Grit theory (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007), perceiving that ability to persevere in the face of setback strengthened them; as employers are increasingly targeting this metric, it is likely to provide tangible career benefit (Butz *et al.*, 2019).   Resilience and adaptability are crucial at every career stage but particularly in the highly competitive market for graduate schemes and graduate jobs, where rejection is the norm (Oleeo, 2019).

The possible downsides of team focus as a transferable skill

It is arguable that strength of team focus, mentioned by every participant, may actually have negative employability implications for the female cadets. The participants spoke with pride about their involvement in an elite female unit, with a goal of team success, underpinned by the military value of Selfless Commitment. The emphasis on teamwork resonates with the view that women leaders favour team focus rather than personal aggrandisement (Green *et al.*, 2005). However, prioritising the team over the individual may, in reality, diminish participants' employability by reducing women's individual visibility (Heuzé *et al.*, 2006; Amanatullah and Tinsley, 2013). By honing team focus in CCF there is a possibility that the participants' employability may be impinged as they subsume their own interests to the collective and are less prepared for individuals who may pursue an egotistic agenda.

Negotiating Mixed Gender Groups

Echoing existing research in the workplace, the third theme highlights the challenges the young women face as they walk a tightrope of perception: trying to avoid being thought bossy if they are assertive, and ineffective if they are less forthright (Bandura, 2001; Eagly and Karau, 2002). Interestingly participants acknowledged the difficulties they faced in the male-dominated, command-and-control structure of CCF but viewed even the negative experiences as learning for future workplaces. They recognized that they were unlikely to experience similar leadership opportunities elsewhere at their age, corroborating Fitzsimmons (2014). Nevertheless it is disheartening that despite their self-belief, these young women need to resort to a panoply of techniques to smooth relations with male counterparts including removing emotive language, separating individuals for discussion and even deliberately diminishing themselves, echoing Wolfe and Powell (2020).

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The participants experimented with workplace strategies. They adjusted their communication style which assuaged dominant masculinity to a degree, but some found that they simply had to act counter to their values to fit in (Sealy and Singh, 2010).   Participants experienced sexism but drew a line between hostile sexism, which they would confront, and a more benevolent sexism which they would find irksome but ignore, echoing Becker and Wright (2011). In reality the benevolent sexism is likely to be the more damaging in terms of employability sending an unchallenged message of inferiority (Dardenne, Dumont and Bollier, 2007).

These findings deviate from previous research about women in male-dominated teams (Eagly and Karau, 2002) in that participants were not generally discouraged. It seems likely that the finite and non-critical characteristics of CCF allowed them to compartmentalise the unsatisfactory mixed-gender team experiences, and critically, from an employability perspective, regard them as a learning. There was a widespread sense of amassing leadership techniques in mixed gender groups through trial and error which, as mooted by Taylor (2016), will give them a headstart in terms of long-term employability role when they ultimately reach the workforce.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any research study, there are limitations. The first author is a commissioned member of staff within the contingent and her position will have had an influence on the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 2021). Self-selection bias by participants is a second limitation. Only half of eligible participants chose to participate and their motivation may have been overtly positive or negative sentiment not shared by the non-participants.

Future studies could consider the experiences of academic boys within CCF to complement this research and provide balance. Quantitative analysis too would give a broad understanding of employability outcomes from CCF particularly compared to other activities if incorporated in multi-year longitudinal study. Further, research focusing on women articulating personal impact *in conjunction* with team focus would give pointers about self-promotion without abandoning personal values.

Practical Recommendations

Participants' perceptions signpost changes both short and medium-term which could benefit the CCF movement as a whole and wider teenage activities, particularly where male-dominated.

i) Ensure leadership roles are scrupulously distributed to prevent the most agentic, often male cadets, being rewarded at the expense of equally able but less forthright team members, often female cadets. Leadership evaluation should emphasise the merits of multiple styles of leadership, not merely the authoritative command and control methodology (O'Leary, 2021).

ii) Eliminate all paternalistic sexism and references to female cadets' size and strength with regard to, for example, carrying weapons, eating sufficiently and managing tasks in the field. Similarly ensure that there is no expectation that more physical jobs will be automatically delegated to male cadets.

iii) Provide tailored leadership advice within CCF alerting female cadets to beneficial behaviours such as stepping forward for opportunity and minimising self-apology. Many of the best practices, such as reverse mentoring, would be valuable in CCF in enhancing long-term outcomes for female cadets.

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iv) Teach male cadets the benefits of inclusive leadership and the genuine performance uplift of Psychological Safety (Edmondson and Lei, 2014) and hearing every voice. This style of leadership needs to be clearly communicated in terms of accommodating those less likely to proffer opinions rather than the more divisive construct of gender difference.

v) University career practitioners could usefully be aware of the perceived downsides of the lack of visibility that may result from too much team focus, and the importance of helping ex-CCF cadets to articulate their individual contributions to potential employers.

Conclusion

This study explored academic teenage girls' experiences of prolonged participation in CCF and how their perceptions underpin key theories of graduate employability in relation to obtaining work and flourishing within it. Participants considered that the unique experiences and responsibilities within CCF were transformational in underpinning key pillars of long-term employability. Enhanced self-perception was repeatedly and almost universally referenced as well as communication skills, proactivity and resilience chiming with key theories of employability. Arguably the only negative was the focus on team at expense of self, likely to be detrimental to women in terms of employability, albeit held dear by the participants as a personal value. Finally, there was a general positive perception of the benefit of working in mixed gender teams in CCF as a workplace learning for the future even though actual experiences were, on occasion, disheartening. Participants considered themselves fortunate to have had leadership experience, formal leadership training and feedback which they feel, justifiably, gives them a workplace edge over future female counterparts.

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