Student Motivation, Expectation and Engagement, and Views on Work-Life Balance in the Colombian Army
Time for a Change?

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Abstract

Student expectations regarding their education influence attendance, motivation, and attrition. This applies to tertiary but also to military education. In this exploratory study, we examined the expectations and attitudes of 175 lieutenants enrolled in a course in the Colombian army. Results showed that students at the beginning of the course held significantly higher expectations than at the end of the course. Students who completed the course were specifically dissatisfied with the limited time they spent with their families due to the time-intense demands of the course. Implications of the study will be discussed.

People join the military for reasons which are often complex and motivated by several economic and psychological factors (Ginexi et al., 1994). These reasons include job or skill training, self-improvement, serving one's country, money for education, time out, or no other jobs or prospects available, and they are often a combination of factors (Ginexi et al., 1994). Moskos (1977) proposes a conceptual framework to describe individual motivations for joining the military, either institutional or occupational. When someone views military service as institutional, he or she considers how contextual and broad factors such as organizational norms, values, and

practices provide a personal sense of obligation, loyalty, and a sense of duty (Moskos, 1977). Challenges such as long working hours and intensive training are counterbalanced by a sense of individual commitment (Griffith, 2008; Moskos, 1977). Motivation to work and remain within the military organization is intrinsic. The other motivation to join the military is viewed as occupational or perceiving the military as one would a civilian job (Griffith, 2008; Moskos, 1977). People who hold an occupational view tend to see military service as work that has established tasks, times, and locations, and any work beyond regular hours or conduct tasks that require great effort are expected to be compensated (Griffith, 2008; Moskos, 1977). Incentives to work are extrinsic such as time-off bonuses, promotions, or a salary raise (Griffith, 2008).

The military expects its members to demonstrate standards of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, integrity, honor, and personal courage in every aspect of their lives. This high standard requires that every soldier is self-motivated and can accomplish each task (Fall et al., 2011). Armed forces across the world, though, experience high attrition rates, sometimes more than 75%, despite rigorous screening (Gayton & Kehoe, 2015). The U.S. Army, for example, spends an estimated USD $22,000 to recruit and screen an application (range of $11,000–$44,000) with another USD $36,000 to train a soldier to his/her operational assignment (Niebuhr et al., 2013). At times, personality measures and intelligence scores have been used to help prevent attrition but these tend to have limited predictive value (Picano et al., 2006). Factors such as enjoying learning play a more significant role in predicting better military performance as a study conducted with Argentinean cadets showed that in their first year, cadets who performed at higher military levels showed higher ratings on the love of learning compared to cadets with lower levels of performance (Matthews, 2008). A study on the retention of cadets in the United States showed that persistent effort in pursuing one's

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Figure 1

Responses to Questions 1-4 Pre- and Posttest
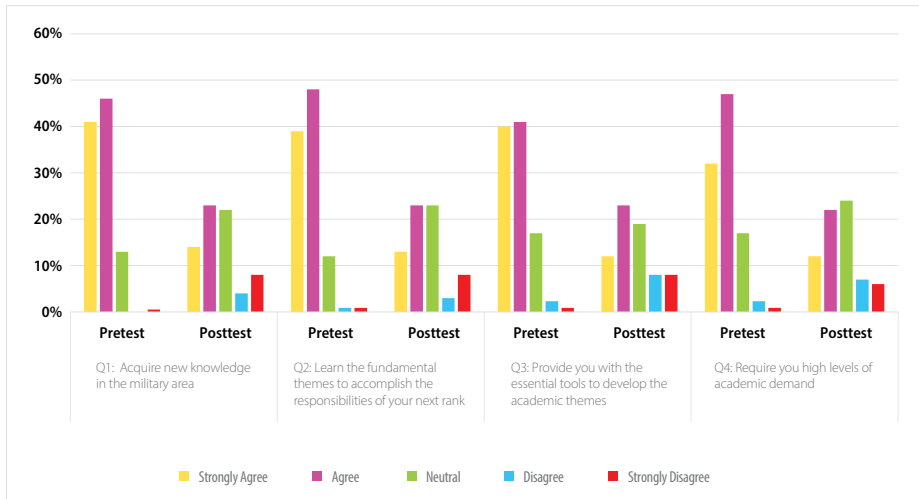
goals is a significant predictor of performance and retention (Maddi et al., 2012). In addition to the enjoyment of learning, and the persistent effort in one's own goals, another important factor for high performance in the army is motivation. It is important to assess soldiers' motivation to prevent high attrition rates and make sure that the best qualified and motivated personnel are employed in the army.

Expectations and Teaching Methods

Student expectations are known to determine factors such as satisfaction, attendance, performance, and attrition in a course, particularly at the tertiary education level (Lobo & Gurney, 2014). When students' expectations are met or fulfilled, this creates a productive learning environment, whereas unmet expectations have the opposite effect and can lead to low motivation, poor performance, and attrition (Bordia et al., 2008).

The expectations students hold regarding their education are shaped by many different factors, including previous educational experiences, interest in the subject matter, self-perception, and perception of the institution (e.g., Brinkworth et al., 2009; Byrne & Flood 2005; Crisp et al., 2009). Students can have different expectations about workload, using various interesting teaching methods, feedback from teachers, and having access to practical assistance (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Cooke et al., 2011; Perera et al., 2008).

These aforementioned findings can also be applied to students in the military. Ford et al. (2013) argue that those individuals who hold high expectations of military

Table 1

Mann-Whitney U Results for Statements 1-4

Statements	U	p value
Statement 1: The intermediate course will enable you to acquire new knowledge in the military area	11327	.00
Statement 2: The intermediate course will enable you to learn the fundamental themes to accomplish the responsibilities of your next rank	11320	.00
Statement 3: The intermediate course will provide you with the essential tools to develop the academic themes	11406	.00
Statement 4: The intermediate course will require you high levels of academic demand	12182	.00

life are more likely to adjust well due to their own assessment of their abilities and interests, as research has shown that expectations about whether one fits with the job or organization based on their judgment tends to be reasonably accurate (Cable et al., 2000; Edwards, 2008; Ford et al., 2013).

Research into leadership training programs, which can be described as developing and enhancing competencies of leaders within a changing organization (Beheshtifar & Panah, 2012; DeRue et al., 2012; Ismail et al., 2017), such as the army, has shown that course content, instructors' role and trainees' motivation to learn are strongly interrelated (Ismail et al., 2017). Therefore, it is essential for a course to be well-designed, based on the job requirements, and to select the right instructors to teach and motivate their students (Ismail et al., 2017). One of the critical factors in student learning is having an instructor who cares about student learning (Finn et al., 2009). Teven (2001) argues that on the one hand, when students perceive their instructor to care about whether they learn, then students should also care and therefore become motivated to learn. On the other hand, any conflict and mistrust between teacher and student can have a negative effect on student learning (e.g., Hamre et al., 2008; Spilt et al., 2011).

The self-directed learning theory suggests that the willingness of someone to learn independently to fulfill specific needs and expectations might lead to the person performing positive actions benefiting others and/or him- or herself (Knowles, 1975; Kolb & Boyatzis, 1970). Knowles (1975) identifies three reasons for self-directed learning: (1) individuals who take the initiative in learning learn more and in superior ways than

Figure 2
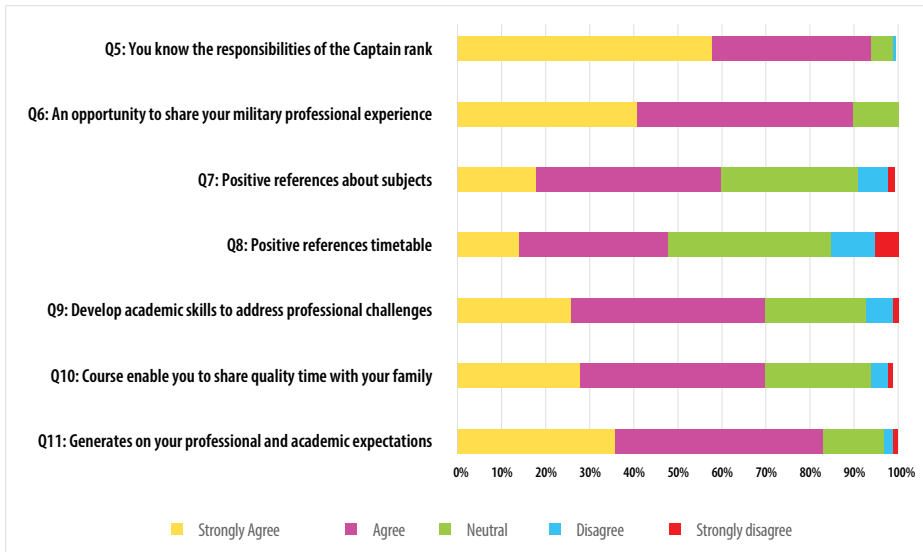
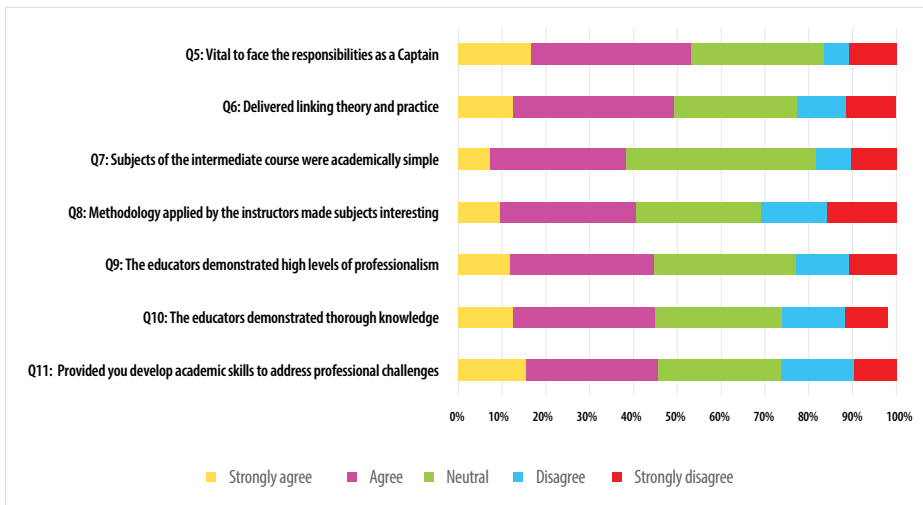*Responses to Questions 5-11 Pretest*

Figure 3

Responses to Questions 5-11 Posttest

those who sit and wait for the teachers, (2) self-directed learning is more in tune with our natural way of psychological development, and (3) many new developments in learning put a heavy responsibility on learners to take advantage of their own learning. Knowles (1975) argues the implications of those three reasons are the facts that (1) it

is no longer realistic to define the purpose of education as primarily transmitting what is known, (2) there should be somewhat different ways of thinking about learning, and (3) one can no longer equate education with youth (Knowles, 1975; Manning, 2007). In terms of adult learning, Confessore and Confessore (1992) explain that there might be situations where teacher-directed learning is the preferred method over self-directed learning. However, even in this instance, which is common in the army (e.g., Xu et al., 2013), Knowles (1975) argues that the learner is still responsible for his or her own learning and critical thinking. This applies even when students experience a "traditional" teacher-focused learning environment. Some scholars believe that students' beliefs about their ability are most influential to their behaviors (Bandura, 1997; Graham & Williams 2009; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). If students believe they will be able to succeed at learning tasks or activities, they will be more likely to choose them and persist when things get difficult (Bo & Fu, 2018). The application of self-directed learning should be an important aspect in a military force operating in the 21st century (Flack & Reith, 2019). Flack and Reith (2019) argue that in order for members of the military to advance their training and education, they need to be given freedom to direct their own learning.

When students are motivated, they are likely to spend more time on their academic study and educational activities. The amount of time students spent on their studies is one of the best predictors of student success (Asmar et al., 2015).

Colombian Army and Family Factors

The recent peace process (with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC) has influenced a change in the role of the Colombian army. The Colombian army is currently transforming its culture and mindset. It supports this process with military education, as evidenced by creating a command for the transformation of the military (Lohmuller, 2016). However, military service can put enormous pressure on family life (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). The military is still a male-dominated organization (Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, 2010) with a rigid hierarchical structure of ranks and privileges that focus on "command and control" (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011, p. 168). Military stressors include repeated relocations, frequent separations due to training, and deployments (Drummet et al., 2003). When members get deployed or have extended work hours, family members often take on new or additional responsibilities in terms of caregiving, household chores, and emotional support (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). The close connection between personal and professional life in the military, as well as heavy workloads and increased responsibilities can create work-family conflict (Kelly et al., 2008). Vuga and Juvan (2013) argue that a military organization is by tradition one of the most demanding institutions because it requires its members to identify closely with the organization, and also expects devotion and loyalty. These demands often clash with

Figure 4
Most Effective Assignment Methods (Items A-E) Pre- and Posttest
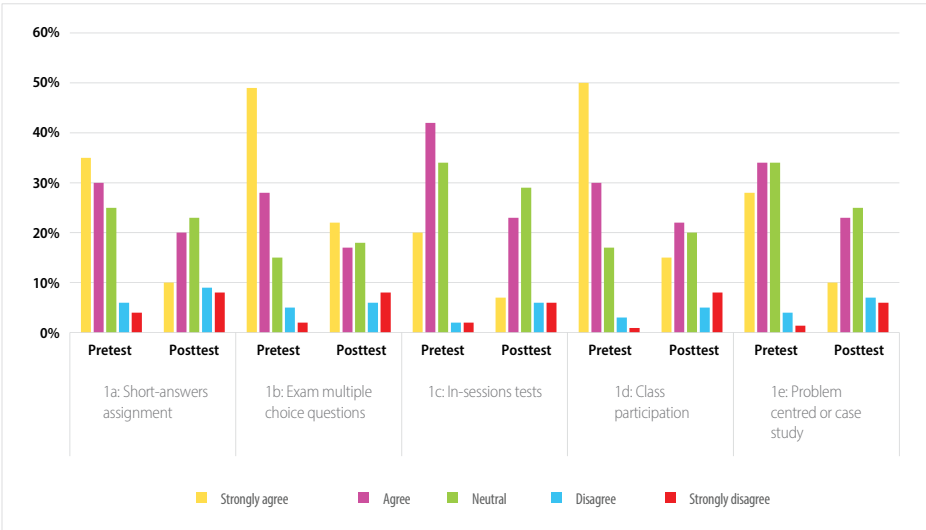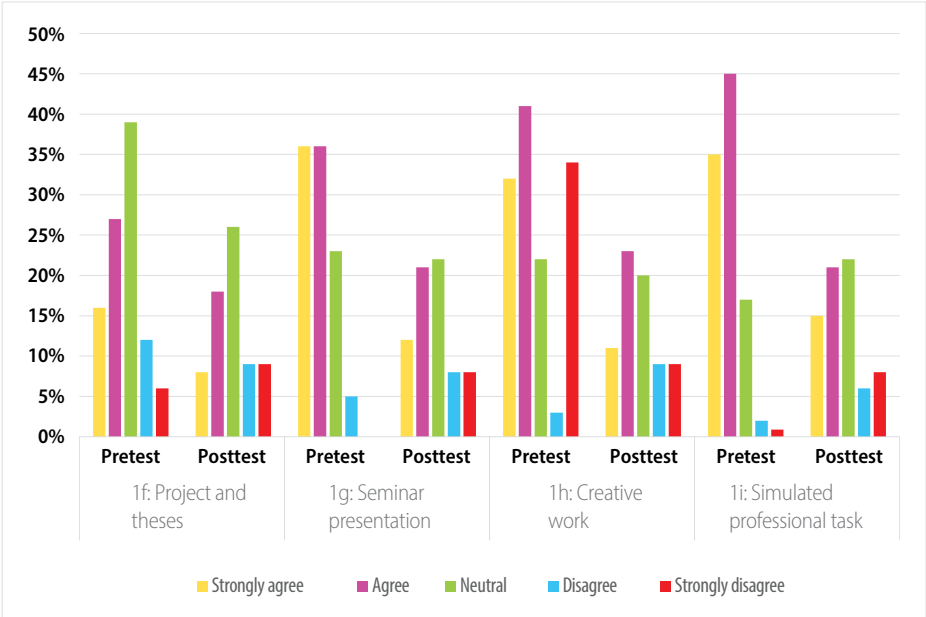

Figure 5
Most Effective Assignment Methods (Items F-I) Pre- and Posttest

family demands such as less time for family and more stress and family or private life is often subordinate to work demands (Vuga & Juvan, 2013).

In this exploratory study, we examined the motivation, attitude, and expectations of Colombian soldiers (for the purpose of this study called "students") enrolled in a course to graduate from lieutenant to captain. We also asked them about their work-life balance to gain a better understanding of how the demands of the course specifically impacts their family lives. The research questions for this exploratory study were the following:

1. How motivated are students enrolled in the *Curso Intermedio* in the Colombian army?
2. What expectations do students hold at the start and the end of the course?
3. How much time do students spend on their coursework and are they able to find a balance between work and family life?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were officers of the Colombian army who undertook the *Curso Intermedio* at the School of Branches and Services of the National Army of Colombia.

Table 2

Mann-Whitney U Results for Statements Regarding Assignments

Statements	U	p value
Statement 1a: Short answer assignments	13235	.00
Statement 1b: Exam multiple choice questions	13958	.00
Statement 1c: In-session tests	14378	.00
Statement 1d: Class participation	11851	.00
Statement 1e: Problem centered or case study	14480	.00
Statement 1f: Project and theses	17143	.07
Statement 1g: Seminar presentation	12308	.00
Statement 1h: Creative work	12554	.00
Statement 1i: Simulated professional task	12683	.00

This course is one of the requirements for first lieutenants to be promoted to the rank of captain. The age range was between 27 and 31 years old. All students were male and Colombian nationals. For this study, we collected data from two separate cohorts: one cohort of students was about to start the course ($n = 218$), and the second cohort had just finished the course ($n = 175$). No information was collected on the qualifications of the instructors. Some instructors have a teaching qualification or some teacher training while others come directly from combat and have no teaching qualifications. However, the teaching method is fairly traditional with the instructor lecturing to the students and with little room for interaction or personal input from the instructor. Unfortunately, logistical difficulties prevented us from surveying the same cohort twice. Because these cohorts were taken from the same sample of Colombian soldiers, we would therefore assume that they are comparable. The academic background of the students varied; however, all students in the first cohort held an undergraduate diploma in military sciences. Seventy percent of students had another undergraduate degree, and 77% of participants had conducted postgraduate studies. Students' professional experience background included responsibilities as leaders of military organizations at platoon and company level throughout seven years as an officer in the army. We did not ask students in the second cohort for their educational level but would assume they would be similar to the first cohort.

Survey

For this study, we designed a survey in Spanish with 17 statements focused on motivation, engagement, expectations about the course, and family-life balance on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree). We designed two versions of the survey: one version to be administered to students at the beginning of the course; and one version, similar to the first one but with slight changes, administered at the end of the course (copies of the questionnaires are available on request from the third author).

Statements included:

- *The intermediate course will enable you to develop academic skills to address professional challenges in other higher education institutions.*
- *I have received positive references from the alumni about the subjects of the intermediate course.*
- *The intermediate course will enable you to share quality time with your family.*

A survey was chosen due to its convenience and ability to capture the views of a large number of participants. The survey was administered by an administrative staff member employed in the army. This person was not involved in the study. During class time, the staff member explained the study to the students, and they were invited to fill in the questionnaire. By filling in the questionnaire, students automatically

Figure 6

Time Spent with Family Pre- and Posttest
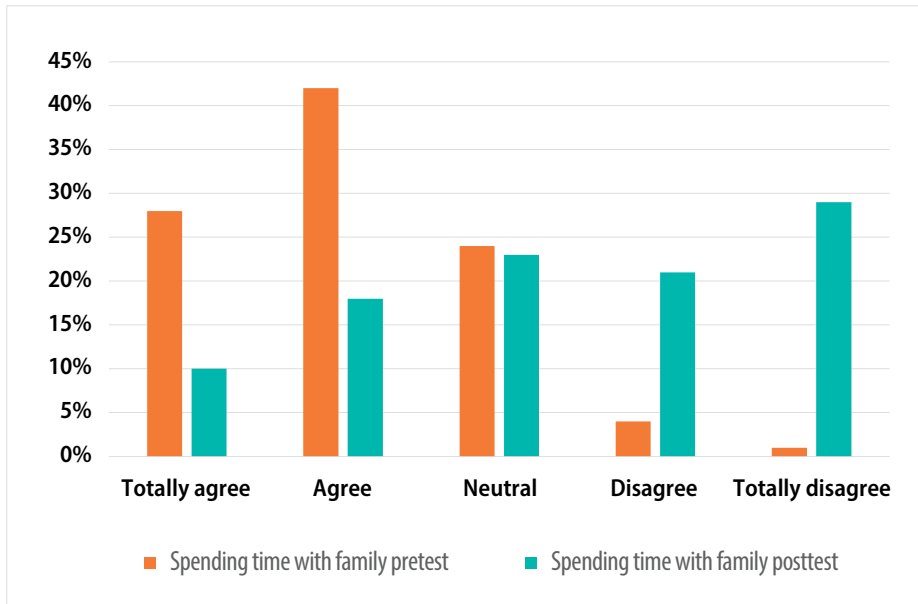
consented to participation. All enrolled students participated in the study, in both the pre- and post-test groups. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Wollongong, Australia, and was conducted in 2017.
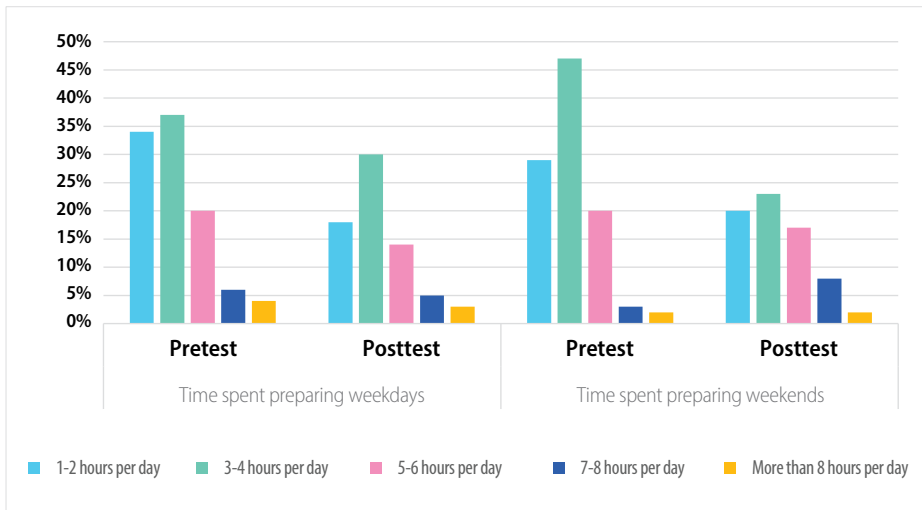
Results

The survey data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, and analyses were run using SPSS 24. The first four statements in both the pre- and posttest were the same, and therefore, a comparison between the groups was possible. Figure 1 shows the responses to the first four statements by the pre- and posttest groups. The figure shows that the pretest group was more likely to agree with the statements or more positive than the posttest group.

To examine whether there was a statistical difference in the responses between the two groups, we used the Mann-Whitney U test. A Mann-Whitney U test can be used when the dependent variables (responses to questions 1-4) are on an ordinal level (completely agree, agree, completely disagree) (Pallant, 2010). The independent variable was the group, so one group filled out the survey *before* and one group filled out the survey *after* they completed the course. Table 1 shows the Mann-Whitney U results. For all four statements, there was a significant difference in the scores between the two groups.

Figure 7

Time Spent Preparing During Weekdays and Weekends Pre- And Posttest

As shown in Figure 1 of the descriptive results, students in the pretest group were more likely to agree with the four statements than those in the posttest group, indicating that the posttest group was significantly less positive about the course than the pretest group.

Figure 2 shows the descriptive results for statements 5-11 for the pretest group. The figure shows that in general, the students were relatively positive about the course before it started. For example, almost 60% of the students completely agreed with the statement that they knew the responsibilities of a captain, and another 36% agreed with this statement. The students disagreed most about receiving positive references regarding the time table and the subject itself (see also Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows the results for statements 5-11 for the posttest. These were different statements than those used for the pretest, so they cannot be compared across the two samples. The results show though, that in general students were reasonably positive about the course; approximately 40% of the students strongly agreed or agreed with most of the statements. Students were least positive about how the instructors applied the methodology to make the subject interesting (question 8). The number of students that "strongly agreed" with this statement was smaller than in the pretest group.

In both the pre- and posttest, we asked students which assignment methods they deemed most effective. Figures 4 and 5 show the descriptive results for the two groups. As is evident from Figures 4 and 5, students tended to be more positive about the assignment methods during the pretest, particularly regarding multiple-choice exams (1b) and simulated professional tasks (1e). Interestingly, students in the pretest were the least positive about creative works (34% disagreed that creative works were good assignments), while this number was only 9% at the posttest.

We ran Mann-Whitney U tests between the two groups for the assignments statements. Table 2 shows there were significant differences between the groups for all the statements regarding the assignments but one (project and theses). Again, students were more positive at the pretest than at the posttest.

We also looked at whether students thought they would have enough time to spend with their families. Figure 6 shows that students in the pretest group were more likely to agree that they had enough time during the course to spend with family. Those in the posttest group were less positive, with 29% in the posttest group *totally* disagreeing that they had enough time to spend with their families. The Mann-Whitney U test was 8455 (p = .00), indicating there were significant differences between the two groups, with the posttest group less positive about spending quality time with their families.

Finally, we asked students how much time they spent preparing for the course during the week and weekend. Students in the pretest group said they would spend more time in preparing during both weekdays and weekends than the posttest group did (see Figure 7).

Discussion

In this exploratory study, we aimed to address the following three questions: (1) How motivated are students enrolled in the *Curso Intermedio* in the Colombian army? (2) What expectations do students hold at the start of the course? (3) How much time did students spend on their coursework, and are they able to find a balance between work and family life?

Students who were about to begin the course were far more motivated than those who had nearly completed the course. Although motivation is a complex structure, other studies have also found that motivation can decrease over time during instruction and learning (e.g., Jodaei et al., 2018). The results suggest that students start with high expectations of the course, but somehow, these expectations are not met. Students, for example, expected to acquire new knowledge, get provided with essential tools to develop academic themes, and thought the course would require high levels of academic demand. However, on the posttest, no more than 20% of students agreed with these statements (compared to sometimes up to 50% agreement on the pretest), and many shifted their responses to neutral or disagree.

One of the reasons why students' expectations might be lower at the end of the course could have been the way of delivery. Students were in general less positive about the educators or instructors and how they delivered the course content. The Colombian army tends to use a traditional approach to teaching with the teacher lecturing to students and little room for student participation or interaction. However, "didactic lecturing" has been criticised for a "one size fits all" approach that shows

little to no understanding of the complex ways in which students learn (Arvanitakis, 2014). Although there can be benefits of listening and note-taking, there is general agreement that lecturers need to do more to promote active learning and critical thinking in order for students to understand the content and retain information beyond just being lectured at (Exeter et al., 2010; French & Kennedy, 2017; Holbrey, 2020; Tormey & Henchy, 2008). The focus within military preparation programs tends to be outcome-based with the stakes to achieve excellence being very high (Vespia et al., 2016). It is possible that the traditional teaching approach of transmitting knowledge from teacher to learner makes it more challenging for students to engage in self-directed learning as they are more dependent on their instructor. Posttest results demonstrated that students were not overly positive about the effectiveness of their instructors. It is possible that there is a mismatch between the expectations of the students and the delivery of the content. Future studies could ask students about how they are expected to direct their own learning and what they expect of their instructors. This might help shed some light on instructor effectiveness, method of teaching, and student expectations.

The most widely accepted definition of self-directed learning, according to Guglielmino et al. (2004), has been defined by Knowles (1975) as the process where individuals take the initiative in identifying their learning needs, formulating their learning goals, identifying resources (human and material) for learning, implementing learning strategies, and evaluating the learning outcomes (Morris, 2018). Adults might have a deep psychological need to be self-directed and motivated; however, it cannot be assumed that adults automatically have the necessary skills to be effective in this process (Morris, 2018), and this is likely to be true for the military as well. A study by Morris (2018) found evidence of teacher-directed learning where teachers directed the objectives and means of learners (Knowles, 1975), which is a more traditional or didactical approach (Dewey, 1938; Hiemstra, 1994). Freire (1970) argues that "education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 59). When students have more flexibility and opportunities to direct the objectives and means of learning, they can make personal meaning of knowledge and skills. This might also explain why the students were dissatisfied with the amount of time they had to spend on their studies, which limited the time they could spend with their families.

A study on soldiers pursuing a degree found that having a supportive supervisor had a positive effect on their learning opportunities (Covert, 2002). There is ample evidence in the education literature that the instructor plays a significant role on student learning (e.g., Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Terhart, 2011). In the army, most instructors do not have a teaching degree and might not necessarily be a competent teacher. Teachers need to understand how students learn and what the most effective ways are to teach students certain content. The results in this study indicated that students liked simulated tasks and in-class participation. These are more interactive

ways of engaging students and might be of particular relevance and importance to students in the army. If the army is interested in increasing the motivation of its students, which might in turn lead to better performance, it could be useful to review the teaching qualifications of the instructors as well as the methods used.

The course the students in this study have to take is a required course in order to be promoted to captain. Students will have a priori expectations about the course, in particular when it is one they are required to take and not one they choose to take. Boshier (1979) argues that reasons for participation should be congruent with the dominant needs of the individual. When students believe they already possesses all the knowledge, their motivation will be lower than someone who believes he or she will learn something during the course.

Another impediment to motivation in the post-test group could have been the limited time students had available to spend with their families. Students in the posttest were significantly more negative about having enough time to spend with their families. Currently the course starts early every morning. The military base where the course is offered is situated in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Bogota. Unfortunately, most soldiers do not earn enough to be able to live in this area and they need to travel long distances to get to the military post in time. This means they leave very early in the morning and come home late. This limits the time they can spend with their families as they might not be there in the morning to take their children to school or pick them up in the afternoon after school. Informal conversations with current students confirmed this explanation. Military families often experience stressors other population groups do not encounter such as frequent moves, periods of extended family separation, living far away from extended family support systems, and the threat of harm to or death of a loved one (Black, 1993; Denning et al., 2014; Robertson & Black, 2017). Families can also struggle with the emotional effects of having a family member deployed and then struggling to reintegrate back into the family (e.g., Clymer et al., 2008; Ebata et al., 2013). Robertson and Black (2017) found in their study of six Canadian veterans that all of them struggled finding a balance between their military and parent roles. The authors noted that when work involves a high level of stress or trauma, it can be even more challenging to find a balance between their parent and military roles (Robertson & Black, 2017).

Conclusion

Results from this study suggest that students enrolled in the course started with high expectations and were quite highly motivated. However, motivation among students dropped significantly by the end of the course. As most instructors in the army do not hold teaching qualifications, it would be worthwhile to evaluate the teaching practices of the instructors and provide training where needed. Many students indicated that the course interfered with their family/life balance as students had to get

up early to travel through the city to get to the base. The army might consider starting later in order for students to spend more time with their families in the morning. This study is a snapshot of prospective captains' views on the course. For a better evaluation of officers' motivation, attitude and engagement, we would recommend following a selection of captains over time to examine the relationship between expectation and motivation. It would also be helpful to interview a selection of officers who finished at the top, the middle, and the bottom of their class and look more closely at differences in motivation and expectations between the groups.

Limitations

This study was an exploratory study as not much is known about motivation among Colombian soldiers undertaking courses in the army. As we used two different samples, differences between the two might have been due to preexisting differences between the two groups. Future studies should follow cohorts and also look at how students perform at the rank of captain after completing the course. This would allow examination of the relationship among motivation, attitude, and performance.

This study is limited in that we only collected data via survey and the data was self-reported. A more complete study would conduct focus groups or interviews with students. It would also be helpful to examine the contents of the course, as well as how the course is delivered and the qualifications and instructional strategies used by the instructor and comparisons among instructors of the same course. ৪

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