



# Australian universities and educational equity for student veterans

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- Flinders 2019 — DVA Supporting Younger Veterans Grant — Veterans at University
- Australian Catholic University (ACU) 2020 — DVA Supporting Younger Veterans Grant — Credit where it's due

This funding of projects has directly and positively affected the higher education sector and led to widespread institutional change. The rapid recent progress in higher education reforms stems in large part from grants they awarded.

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## Abbreviations

ACU	Australian Catholic University
ADF	Australian Defence Force
ADFA	Australian Defence Force Academy
ADFRP	Australian Defence Force Rehabilitation Program
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ASVA	Australian Student Veterans Association
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CHEEDR	Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research
CTAS	Career Transition Assistance Scheme
Defence	Department of Defence
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DVA	Department of Veterans' Affairs
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
NCOs	Non-Commissioned Officers
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
ROTC	Royal Office Training Centre
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SVASTM	Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model
TAC	Tertiary Admissions Centre
VETB	Veterans Education and Training Benefit

## Executive summary

This report draws upon a small but growing scholarship on student veterans in Australia. Two recent projects and studies led by La Trobe University in conjunction with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA) (Harvey, Andrewartha, Smith, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018) and the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Charles Darwin University (CDU), and Western Sydney University (WSU) (Harvey, Andrewartha, et al 2020) have established a platform for ongoing research and reform in the area of military/civil transition and student veterans. From that work, we know that transition from the military is often a challenging time for veterans. Challenges may include the loss of community and friendships, previous roles or status, dealing with the impacts of service on psychological and physical health, and the radical change from being an integral part of a cohesive, constraining environment to an individual in a civilian society. Veterans also bring significant strengths to their studies:

*... including discipline, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. These skills prepare many veterans to succeed at university, while their experiences and perspectives can also inform others and contribute to a richer learning experience for all students (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt Smith, 2018).*

Universities can provide exposure to a wider range of employment possibilities, but they can also be difficult places for veterans to integrate. University life and military life are starkly different.

Higher education is one transition pathway available to veterans, though experiences of university differ. It is an avenue that some defence members have been exposed to during their training or through their careers (e.g., commissioned officers) or that some defence members have not been exposed to at all (e.g., other ranks in some corps). Veterans can experience both opportunities and challenges in attending university. The Australian higher education sector (primarily comprising universities) provides some recognition for prospective student veterans, but as a group they remain largely invisible. Veterans are acknowledged by researchers as a non-traditional student group.

This report describes how student veterans are understood by universities in Australia, and how they are governed and serviced as a group. The study also investigates if, and how, student veterans, or particular groups of student veterans, can have particular equity needs. This information was placed in the context of how student veterans are recognised, understood and supported internationally. This project was led by Flinders University in partnership with La Trobe University, the University of South Australia (UniSA), the University of Newcastle and the ASVA. Our research adopted a mixed methods approach that included:

- a national and international review of programs designed to support student veterans
- examination of specific support for student veterans provided through the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs (DVA)
- three focus groups with university admissions and transition units in South Australia and Queensland, and four in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, asking: How do Australian universities recognise, service and govern the educational equity needs of student veterans?

Ethics approval was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee to conduct the focus groups.

Our findings reveal that:

- Australian student veterans are often acknowledged but not well understood by universities.
- Australian universities are recognising and servicing student veterans in different ways and to different degrees.
- There is genuine goodwill and intent in the university sector to support student veterans.
- Military skills and experience are not adequately recognised or incorporated into university admission decisions.
- Tertiary admissions frameworks are variable and would benefit from a national coordinated approach.
- If universities do not have student veteran-specific programs and processes, they are using existing equity and transition process to support student veterans.
- Universities have support pathways such as “elite athlete programs” which can be emulated to identify, promote and support the needs of veterans studying at university.
- Almost all Australian universities do not know who their student veterans are — there are limited cases of veteran identifiers in university admissions.
- Universities do not collect demographic, study pattern, performance and completion data on student veterans.
- There is limited financial support for student veterans to attend university.
- There are limited specific veteran entry programs at Australian universities.
- There isn't a national framework for supporting veterans in higher education (e.g., a GI Bill).
- Access and opportunity for higher education is unequal in-Defence across rank and corps.
- Higher education is not considered evenly across Defence during the transition phase.
- There is no national consistent framework for mapping and applying credentials for veterans seeking to engage in higher education.
- The articulation of policy across Defence, DVA and the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) is inconsistent or missing.
- Higher education as a transition pathway is conceived under a rehabilitation framework limiting opportunities for university study.
- Not all veterans are exposed to higher education as a possible transition pathway.



# Recommendations

## Government, Defence and DVA

- Establish a national policy for veterans access to higher education (e.g., a GI Bill).
- Defence to establish equal opportunity for higher education for all ranks and corps and to support all members to undertake higher education as part of their transition planning if desired.
- Develop a national framework for credential mapping between Defence and universities (higher education).
- Defence, DVA, DESE and the higher education sector establish a national student veteran working group to evolve veteran access and engagement in higher education.
- DVA and Defence to widen its engagement and support for higher education as an important transition pathway.
- Engage DESE in the assessment and support of student veterans.

## Universities and the higher education sector

- Universities and Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) to develop a national tertiary admissions framework for veteran admission to university that equates with ATAR scores, recognising military skills and experience within university admissions policies and processes.
- Develop flexible timetabling and study plans for veterans to support university engagement, attendance, retention and degree completion.
- Universities to establish veteran-specific entry programs.
- Develop a veteran identifier in university admissions processes.
- Provide student veteran access to transition skills and opportunities including financial, health, career and counselling support.
- Record demographic, study pattern, performance and completion data on student veterans.
- Reorient universities toward student veterans' needs, including study plan flexibility, staff education on student veterans and veteran-sensitive university processes.
- Emulate university support pathways such as "elite athlete programs" to identify, promote and support the needs of veterans studying at university.
- Provide scholarships and financial support opportunities for student veterans.
- Support the presence of ASVA chapters on campus.
- Build university leadership support for supporting student veterans.
- Coordinate campus support for all veterans including the establishment of veteran support officers.
- Create a designated space on campus for student veterans.

# Introduction

This research project was conducted by a team comprising members from Flinders University, La Trobe University, the University of South Australia (UniSA) and the University of Newcastle, in conjunction with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA). Funding was provided by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) at Curtin University. The purpose of the project was to investigate how Australian universities recognise, service and govern the educational equity needs of student veterans. The aim of this investigation was to assess how veterans who are considering attending, or currently attending university as a transition pathway, are supported. This research sought to map the university context for veterans in order to build a platform for further development.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), a veteran is defined as anyone who has served in uniform in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for at least one day. Australia has a relatively small standing force (approximately 58,000), which has meant that veterans have been less visible as a cohort than in countries such as the United States (US) where a much larger percentage of the population undertake military service. In recent years, approximately 5,000 to 6,000 veterans annually discharge from the military and transition back to civilian life. Most of these discharges are voluntary with the largest proportion of transitioning members having less than 12 years of service (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2018). Department of Defence (Defence) records identify about 11 per cent of veterans adopting tertiary education pathways 12 months after separation.

Higher education is a pathway to a successful transition to civilian life. Recent Australian research (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018) reveals that:

- veterans are often invisible in higher education
- universities generally have limited awareness of veteran needs
- universities often fail to recognise prior learning
- most universities do not identify student veterans during and after completion of their studies.

Despite the unique nature of their experiences in the military, veterans are not recognised as one of the “equity” groups in Australian higher education, nor as a specific group to be acknowledged for their national service (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018).

The key research question in this project was: How do Australian universities recognise, service and govern the educational equity needs of student veterans?

This project adopted a mixed-methods approach and consisted of three key elements:

1. Desktop review of programs that aim to support veteran students nationally and internationally on university campuses. This review includes the peer support work being undertaken by student veteran organisations such as the ASVA.
2. Focus groups with admission, transition, equity or diversity unit staff in universities in South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales.
3. Examination of how government policy conceives of higher education as a transition pathway through brief review of policy documents and consultation with relevant departmental officers in DVA and Defence.

This report aims to provide the basis for a whole-of-system approach to managing student veteran transition from the military to the higher education system. A whole-of-system

approach means understanding how higher education sits within the transition process from the service through the decision to separate from the military; Defence policies and support processes; DVA policies and support systems; and supports the research question—how universities respond to student veterans.

The report includes seven sections and provides recommendations for universities and government departments.

Section 1 is a review of the international literature which provides the context for understanding the differences between student veterans as a cohort and other students; the nature of military service; and the key social, cultural, and psychological issues associated with transition. The literature highlights that student veterans compose a unique cohort in higher education requiring suitable programs to assist in transition to university culture and academic requirements, and integration into student life. It also highlights the significant strengths that veterans bring to the university setting.

Section 2 examines the different international models for supporting veteran access to university. This section includes countries that constitute our main point of comparison - the Five Eyes nations (US, United Kingdom (UK), Australia, New Zealand and Canada). We also included Scandinavia due to its similarity with the social democratic elements of the Australian policy context. This research is significant because there is little scholarly work comparing the way different nations offer university experiences to veterans.

Section 3 reviews the Australian Government policy and support programs. Transition issues are a key Australian government focus through the policies and support programs provided through Defence and DVA. Both of these departments operate under different mandates and sets of legislation. We examined these publicly available department policies and processes on higher education and we communicated with these departments. We found that higher education as a possible transition option, is principally constructed within rehabilitation frameworks. In contrast, the international context highlights the importance of support schemes for veterans in aiding transition and contributing to the bridging of civil–military divides. Best international practice points to the need for a designated higher education financial scheme.

Section 4 provides a review of university-based programs for student veterans in Australia. These programs include pathway and on-campus support. We note that the recent development of research on student veterans has resulted in a number of key initiatives and university actions addressing how we understand and value veterans, govern and service their admission to university, support them in their studies and recognise their completions and ongoing achievements. Given this, programs for veterans are relatively new and implemented at a limited number of universities.

Section 5 provides the results from analysis of the four focus groups conducted in South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and NSW. A total of 19 staff members participated, representing 14 universities. Focus groups were conducted by Zoom rather than face-to-face due to the impact of COVID-19.

Section 6 discusses the need for a whole-of-system approach to student veteran transition to higher education. Drawing upon the program review we outline the ways in which universities can improve institutional awareness of veteran students and their needs; undertake equity and diversity approaches; improve admission processes including recognition of prior learning, timetabling, veteran identifiers, and retention strategies; and

provide transition and foundation programs. We particularly emphasise the need for universities to collect accurate data on student veteran admission, retention and study outcomes to inform policy work at university and government levels. We discuss the importance of higher education as a transition pathway and why it should be developed as a specific transition policy by Defence and DVA.

Section 7 provides specific recommendations for the university and government sectors.

## Section 1: Background

Military to civilian transition refers to military members leaving the military to live and reintegrate in civilian society. The process of transition involves new decisions and choices around employment, accommodation and/or education (Black & Papile 2010). Veterans often face difficulties in areas of employment, education, health, social integration, and developing a new identity during this time (Albertson, 2019; Black and Papile, 2010). Transition can lead to uncertainty affecting personal roles, beliefs, and relationships (Bichrest, 2013; Livingston et al., 2011). This has been described as “reverse culture shock” (Bergman, Burdett, & Greenberg 2014). Transition proves to be a major obstacle to degree attainment among student (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). Student veterans therefore require adjusted support from both policymakers and academic programs (Ackerman et al., 2009). Veterans comprise a unique group in higher education (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; DiRamio & Jarvis 2011; Schiavone and Gentry, 2014; Vacchi and Berger, 2014).

The subject of veteran transition into higher education has been well addressed in the international research literature. Much of that literature comes from the US and UK. There is increasing international attention among the Five Eyes nations on enhancing veteran pathways to university and their experiences of study, which extend to new government schemes and support processes. Wider international inquiry into the experience of, and the facilities available to, student veterans remains scarce.

Australian research (Harvey, Andrewartha, Smith, Wyatt-Smith, Jones, Shore, & Simmons, 2020) has shown:

- Universities were generally poor at recognising both the strengths of veterans and their formal qualifications obtained while in service.
- Admissions processes rarely provided recognition of service, and rarely considered military service records and the qualifications, both military and civilian, that veterans had undertaken.
- Australia had no G.I. Bill<sup>1</sup> like the US, nor an Armed Forces Covenant to which many universities had committed, like the UK.
- Financial support for veterans to undertake higher education was limited, despite strong evidence of the link between higher education and higher employment rates.
- Data on veterans were also extremely limited, and the nature and extent of university participation, achievement, and experiences had not been documented.

This report further investigates these findings in a national study of Australian university responses to student veterans. The Australian university dispositions to student veterans are located within the Five Eyes and Scandinavian context of student veteran and university study, and importantly within the Australian Defence policy frameworks for military–civil transition and university study.

Military to civilian transition is about the movement from one culture to another (Grimell & Van Den Berg, 2019), in a context of distinct and often competing cultures. A study on

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<sup>1</sup> The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans. The original G.I. Bill expired in 1956, but the term "G.I. Bill" is still used to refer to programs created to assist U.S. military veterans. [Wikipedia](#)

student combat veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008) illustrated this logic. In adapting Schlossberg's model of adult transition (1989), Grimell and Van Den Berg emphasise the reciprocal nature of veteran transition, as veterans' "move in" to higher education in a subsequent manner to the preceding process of "moving in", "moving through", and "moving out" of military service. In a similar way, Livingston et al. (2011) introduce the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM), which indicates military service as an important contributor to student veterans' academic and social transitions. Research and programs into veteran transition should therefore consider the ramifications of military service and socialisation when investigating veterans' integration into higher education (Wadham & Morris 2019).

Some scholars argue that military and academic institutions share similarities in their structure (Higbee, 2010). The vast majority of studies indicate significant differences between the two. Certainly, the ideal of the service member is constructed in opposition to that of a civilian (Feaver 1996). Military and civilian institutions represent opposing characteristics, values, and norms (Brotz & Wilson 1946; Goldstein, 2001; Higbee, 2010). Student veterans in particular undergo socialisation into an environment that is remarkably distinct from the one they later encounter in higher education (Vacchi, 2012). They move from a value system centred around principles of rank, compliance, sacrifice and bravery, to an almost dichotomous one where the focus is placed on individuality, self-gain, intellect and questioning (Bichrest, 2013; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012). In effect, higher education is structured as the adverse to what makes military operations successful (Higbee, 2010).

Similarly to other higher education newcomers, veterans must develop a new social identity (Sørensen, 2015) that is compatible with the institution. Students who share the common backgrounds, attitudes, and aspirations of the majority group on campus, are able to adapt more easily to campus life than those who do not (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010). Veterans arrive with a well-established identity that varies significantly in background from the average student. Although some are able to gradually disassociate from their previous roles and loyalties (Naphan & Elliott 2015), the majority find that these loyalties shape their perceptions and attitudes well after the transition to higher education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Hutchison, 2019). While student veterans go through a process of re-identification in what are supportive institutional contexts, universities too will over time come to understand veterans and their needs (Hall 2011).

## **Student veterans as a cultural group**

It is important to address questions of uniformity and difference amongst veterans and student veterans in order to understand veteran transition into higher education. The majority of the analysis in the literature and underlying support schemes treats student veterans as a uniform group, often resulting in a "one-size-fits-all" approach to transition and integration (Vaccaro, 2015). However, while sharing a unique fundamental experience, veterans as a population should be considered as a diverse student group (Vaccaro, 2015). This is indeed the case with Australian veterans. Veterans come from a diverse cross-section of society. Their experiences inside the military are varied, in terms of differing operational experience between individuals; differing status between officers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and other ranks; enlistment in the different services (Air Force, Army, Navy) and service or combat corps as a few key distinctions. Veterans also respond differently to their military

experience, and may be discharged medically, administratively or leave, or resign if they are commissioned, further affecting transition (Vaccaro 2015).

Student veterans also differ from non-veteran students as a group. As a whole, they are older, more likely to have dependents, and be first-generation students than non-veteran students (Cole & Kim, 2013). Most importantly, they share a familiarity with military service, which has increasingly become a minority experience in much of the developed world (Huxford et al., 2019). This familiarity lends to a shared historical consciousness and shared economic and socio-political interests (Huxford et al., 2019). While veterans should not be considered a homogenous social group, they may be considered an interest or cultural group (Holcombe, 1999; Huxford et al., 2019, Reger et al., 2008) and a cultural group with distinct concerns and needs.

Despite being considered a non-traditional student group (Ackerman et al., 2009; McBain et al., 2012; Vacchi, 2012), student veterans are not treated as an equity group in Australian higher education (Harvey et al., 2018). The national framework for student equity in Australia denotes six underrepresented groups, including: people from low socioeconomic, regional and remote, and non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous people, people with disability, and women in non-traditional areas. These equity groups typically attract discrete funding and/or policy priority (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). Student veterans may overlap with one or more of the existing identified groups, but little direct support is provided to veterans specifically (Harvey et al., 2018). An ASVA was established in 2016, and a number of scholarships across a selected handful of universities are currently targeted at student veterans. Still, these scholarships are, for the most part, inaccessible to the majority of veterans entering higher education (Harvey et al., 2018).

Student veterans can experience challenges during their academic schooling and may leave higher education prior to obtaining degrees for a variety of reasons. This review demonstrates that the cultural gap between military and higher education carries significant consequences to veterans' level of integration into campus environment. Although found to have higher levels of academic participation and better time management skills than their non-military peers, their academic performance is lower than their non-veteran counterparts (Durdella & Kim, 2012). There is no evidence of these findings in Australia. Student veterans benefit from military socialisation and experience which allows them to develop valuable skills applicable to the academic setting. These include discipline, organisation, determination and task-commitment, among others (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Livingston et al., 2011). These factors that make for veterans' military identity can also complicate their transition. The difficulties they sometimes encounter in establishing cultural and social bonds on campus may negatively impact their academic decisions, persistence, and degree completion. Likewise, US studies reveal that positive relationships and a sense of belonging on campus directly correlate with successful performance (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Osborne, 2014).

As for other non-traditional student groups, higher education for veterans can be an important road for acculturation, can increase opportunities and new forms of cultural capital, and ultimately, aid transition into civilian society (Jones, 2013). Acknowledgment of the civilian–military divide is therefore a crucial step toward mitigating student veteran transition (Kirchner, 2015), and efforts should be directed at assisting veterans in developing a sense of belonging on campus, negotiating the discord between military habitus and higher education institutional culture, and reframing institutional and community identification

(Cooper et al., 2018). Ex-military students compose a unique cohort in higher education, and require suitable programs to assist in transition and integration (Ackerman et al., 2009). For example, universities have a range of programs to support other non-traditional groups such as elite athletes. Veterans may not be an equity group per se, but they do have equity needs which can be supported through flexible timetabling or support for extended assignment deadlines. Universities have support pathways such as “elite athlete programs” which can be emulated to identify, promote and support the needs of veterans studying at university.

In order to achieve this, further research into current programs and policies is required (Barry et al., 2014), and with it, a thorough consideration of veterans’ own experiences and perspectives (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris, Albanesi, & Cassidy, 2019). It is important to note again that this research literature is principally from the US and UK. There is a need for Australian research to test and assess these international findings.



## Section 2: International models of support

In this section, we examine different international models. This permits us to consider the different policy options for Australia regarding supporting veterans' access to university and enhancing their experience of higher education. The US GI Bill is best known in policy debates about veterans' post-service education. We identify the diversity of national traditions in this area and recent shifts in policy. We note that higher education veteran policies typically are situated within broader national strategies relating to the obligations a society has to members of its armed forces.

In Section 2, we outline the prominent models and policies in various countries and geographic regions. This includes countries that are compatible with Australia's civil–military relations and countries that provide alternative cases. This research is significant because there is little scholarly work comparing the way different nations offer university experiences to veterans. Most studies on the relationships between universities and the military have focused on research rather than teaching. In particular, scholarly concern in this area has involved exploring how military influence can have a detrimental effect on the idea of higher education as “both a public good and an autonomous sphere for the development of a critical and productive citizenry” (Giroux, 2001, p. 2). While this issue is not the focus of this report, debates around the military's influence on civil society organisations (Wright Mills 2000, p. 215) does relate in various ways to the experience of veterans on campus and can be a factor that impedes their access to, and performance in, higher education.

We examine national case studies relating to the funding for veterans and their experience of higher education. The case study approach involved a systematic collection and analysis of academic literature, national and regional government policies and university initiatives and programs.

The following key points emerged from this study:

- Support schemes for veterans to study at university can contribute to the bridging of civil-military divides.
- As higher education sector reforms place a greater cost on individuals there is a greater need for a designated higher education support scheme for veterans.
- A strong veterans' study support scheme should be broadly based, providing support for study prior, during and following service for both those that have served and their families, addressing both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.
- Veteran issues should not be seen as separate from broader issues of equity and support services on university campuses, particularly because contemporary veterans may be reluctant to identify with their military service.
- Government regulations and data collection plays a key role ensuring support for veterans in higher education, including taming the excesses of universities using marketing to compete for this population.
- The experience of veterans on university campuses is related to the effective management of civil–military relation broadly, particularly as it relates to public and academic criticism of Defence research.
- There is no evidence that the presence of university-based military units aid in enhancing the university experience of veterans.

- Models of compulsory national service tend to normalise military identity amongst youth but also significantly disrupt university study and its benefits, while potentially contributing to the perception that civilian and military professions are polarised.

## United States

The best-known veteran university participation model is the US. The GI Bill, established in 1945, enhances veterans' access to education. The original policy was primarily motivated to avoid the situation that followed the end of WWI: mass unemployment of veterans and a rise in social problems (Serow, 2004). In 2008, the GI Bill was amended to give additional educational benefits to those who have served since 11 September 2001. This is the most generous of all GI Bills (US Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2013). The amendment provided total funding for public four-year undergraduate education to a veteran who has served three years on active duty, and included a living stipend. If the veteran had served 10 years, they could transfer this benefit to their spouse or children — something added to the initial legislation by President George Bush Jr. with the intent of enhancing recruitment and retention rather than being a source of transition assistance. This intent is also reflected in the eligibility period for using the benefit being extended to 15 years after leaving active duty. Given an increasingly competitive job market, the post-9/11 GI Bill has been popularly taken up, reversing the trends in the 1980s and 1990s of relatively low numbers of veterans enrolling in higher education, as well as periods of relatively low military engagements (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Addressing ways of providing greater support for veterans in higher education is significant as various studies have demonstrated that their completion rates tend to be lower than the average student (Holder, 2011; Radford, 2011). Completion rates are particularly poor for veterans from disadvantaged ethnic groups in the US (Fry, 2002; Harper, 2012; Sciarra, 2007). In 2014, the US's Student Veterans Association (SVA), in partnership with the US Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Student Clearinghouse, published the Million Records Project (Cate, 2014). The project involved the national collection of data as part of an ongoing effort to study the academic outcomes and academic progress of student veterans. Initial results indicate strong postsecondary outcomes for current student veterans. The aim of the project is to provide decision-makers at government, university and community levels with the data needed around how to best support student veterans.

There has been a push from governments, Veterans Affairs and the higher education sector to implement policies that promote veteran-friendly campuses. Most prominently, in 2013, the Obama administration through the US Department of Education entered voluntary partnerships with participating colleges and universities around the 8 Keys to Success program to promote veteran success on campus:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote wellbeing and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralise campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organisations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.

6. Utilise a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

Despite this useful intervention by government, there remains a lack of reliable data and studies on veterans' experiences of higher education study and the way educational institutions support them. There are also no regulations around how higher education institutions promote themselves as being "veteran-friendly", or clear nationwide procedures for giving credit for military training and education. The focus of the marketing to veterans though typically involves offering course credits for military training, institutions having student-run veterans associations, veteran's co-ordinators, veteran-specific career services, veterans' centres, veteran scholarships and the operation of a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) on campus (McBain et al., 2012). The few studies that have been undertaken on such support services have shown that institutions having a 'academic advisor' who is also a veteran, can be particularly significant for improving the educational experience of veterans (Miller, 2015; Ryan et al., 2011). Literature on the topic has also noted the importance of acknowledging and supporting female veterans within veteran programs (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; DiRambo et al., 2015). At the same time, studies have emphasised that any specialised support services should not displace the need for veterans to be accounted for more broadly in relation to university policies, services and campus design; for example, in relation to disability (Branker, 2009).

## Canada

Canada is often viewed as having a civil–military relations and veterans' affairs system similar to Australia. In contrast to the US, Canada has also not had a long-standing university support system for veterans. However, since 2018, the Canadian government has committed significant funding to the establishment of a Veterans' Education and Training Benefit (VETB). The eligibility for VETB is that the veteran was honourably released since 1 April 2006 and served in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) for an equivalent of six or more years (at least 2,191 paid days), with compensation being between \$(CAN)40,000 and \$(CAN)80,000 (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2020) for study at college, university, technical school, or a short-term program. Significantly, the payment is indexed annually. The program, in part, emerged from earlier Veterans' Affairs reports that showed the difficulty of attaining post-service employment for veterans where their military role had no civilian equivalent (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2016a). It is still too early to know how successful the scheme will be in increasing the pre-VETB rate of enrolment in college and university at greater rates than in the preceding decades. Before the announcement of the VETB, VAC noted in a 2016 study that only five per cent of veterans indicated that they were currently employed in education or training (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2016b). VETB though has already had a significant influence on the Canadian higher education sector. Institutions such as the University of British Columbia have launched initiatives to make their campuses veteran-friendly, including providing specialist programs and services designed for veterans around mental health and counselling support, priority student housing, social and recreational opportunities, professional development courses, and establishing a new branch of the Royal Canadian Legion ex-service organisation (Veterans Transition Network, 2020).

## United Kingdom

The UK has been more advanced than Australia in some respects, in regards to student veterans. Universities formally recognise and provide credit for military courses and training, and match them with civilian qualifications. The UK, like most OECD countries, lacks clear policies around veteran participation in higher education. For example, The Defence Holistic Transition Policy (2019), despite having a broad focus that accounts for wellbeing factors other than employment, does not have any clear focus on higher education. This is despite the Policy document recognising that transition can be most difficult for veterans who have served relatively little time, with this being the very population that are often not eligible, or do not greatly benefit from, higher education support programs based on either length of service or deployment experience. For many years, The UK's veteran higher education support programs have involved a co-contribution model, with Enhanced Learning Credits designed to provide military personnel with the funds for higher education. The scheme required individuals to invest as little as £20 per month and they would have access to greater amounts at specific points in their military career, and for up to 10 years after leaving the service. The scheme was generally targeted at officer retraining rather than encouraging enlisted personnel to undertake higher education as part of transition.

The UK differs from the Australian case by having a long history of interaction between the military and higher education. The Senior Officers' Training Corps established at universities in 1906 by the Secretary of State for War, Lord Haldane, for example, produced a vast number of the British officers that served during the First World War. While this direct connection no longer exists, the UK universities continue to have strong links with the military and the defence industry in ways that are seen as advantageous to veterans' experience on campus.

In regard to how veterans' experiences of university might relate to the presence of military culture on university campuses, it is worth noting the British tradition of university armed service units (USUs) (Woodward et al., 2015). Managed through their respective parent services, the British Army, the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Royal Navy, they are funded through the national defence budget. USU participation is selective and members are paid for their roles but, importantly, there is not a subsidy for university fees. While the USU only makes up 0.28 per cent of the total UK university student population, as Woodward et al. highlight, the model is significant for the Ministry of Defence plans as part of its Future Force 2020 program to increase the proportion of Reserves in the armed forces and to increase participation in certain specialist areas that are otherwise difficult and expensive to recruit for and retain in a full-time capacity (2015:2). This strategic shift in relation to the role and funding of reserves relate to both the rise of grey zone activity threats (e.g., cyber-warfare) and current public attitudes toward expenditure on Defence. However, the USU units in themselves do not involve veteran participation and they are concentrated in the elite Russell Group of universities, limiting their potential usefulness as a resource to aid veteran transition or their experience of university broadly.

## Scandinavia

Scandinavia (Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland) provides an alternative context for examining veterans and higher education, because military service is largely compulsory (particularly for men) but university tuition is free. Therefore, offering tuition fee-free degrees as an incentive for enrolling in the military is irrelevant. As such, there are few to no national

guidelines or university-specific services available to help people transition from the military into university. However, higher education study is frequently undertaken during compulsory military service. Study is typically undertaken at military universities such as the Norwegian Defence University College and the National Defence University in Finland. As is the case in other national contexts, military universities only provide instruction to officers. However, this education could be extended in part or whole to enlisted personnel which would presumably increase the opportunity for these veterans to get credit for prior learning, or proceed directly to master's programs, as part of transition. While transition initiatives such as the Danish Defence Agreement 2018-2023 (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2019) addresses the need for the Armed Forces to align military education and training with the civilian education system, there are no specific programs to financially support veterans—typically defined in this context as people who have been deployed on at least one international mission—through living stipends or the like.

## Section 3: Australian government policy and support for student veterans

With the reduction in both tempo and number of operational deployments in recent years, both Defence and DVA have increasingly focused on the complex issues in transition as approximately 5,000 to 6,000 veterans discharge from the ADF each year, medically, voluntarily or involuntarily.

However, in contrast with other countries such as the UK, the US and Canada, Australian veterans have historically been offered limited government support in accessing higher education. This section specifically considers the limited range of programs currently offered by the Defence and DVA and the potential opportunities for government to better engage with the university sector. The following information is taken from discussions with current and former Defence staff, DVA staff and from policy documents.

### Programs provided by Defence

Defence provides the *Defence Assisted Study Scheme* to support pursuit of education. This scheme enables a serving member to access higher education while they are still serving. In practice, the scheme has limited funding for allocation, looks at proposed study in relation to the member's line of work and is therefore more likely to favour commissioned officers who wish to build upon their existing university qualifications, rather than other ranks. The scheme operates on tiered arrangements, with serving members undergoing medical discharge from the ADF receiving priority for assistance; again, subject to available funding.

*Defence University sponsorship* may be available to those already studying who join the ADF while at university. In return for payment of tuition fees, members commit to serving for the time spent in study, plus an extra year. The ADF lists a range of eligible degrees including healthcare, science, engineering, and business administration. This scheme is reported to favour those undertaking study in longer courses such as medicine and dentistry. Defence Officer Cadets often study at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) as part of their initial training.

Defence provides assistance through the *Career Transition Assistance Scheme* (CTAS), based on an “obligation to assist members with career transition when they leave the ADF after qualifying service, whether voluntarily or involuntarily<sup>2</sup>”.

The stated objectives of this scheme are:

- to support the career transition of members from Service to suitable civilian employment, with the minimum involuntary break in continuity of employment
- to enhance the ability of members to competitively market themselves for suitable civilian employment
- to enhance, and make the best use of, members' existing skills gained from ADF service.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.defence.gov.au/payandconditions/adf/chapter-2/part-2/Div-1.asp>.

This is a short-term scheme, focused on getting transitioning members into the workforce rather than higher education. There is some flexibility to pay a small amount towards a TAFE course of study.

The *Defence Force Transition Program* is described as a broader, more flexible approach than the CTAS and is particularly relevant for the non-officer ranks that make up the majority of the transition cohort. Once more, this program is focused on gaining employment post-discharge. This particular program includes access to vocational education and training and the *Transition for Employment (T4E)* which aims to provide long-term vocational and career support to medically transitioning members with complex circumstances. Educational support is highly dependent on the individual's circumstances, chain of command, unit culture and—for those members undertaking rehabilitation—the knowledge of the system by the rehabilitation provider.

## Programs provided by DVA

When veterans leave the ADF, responsibility for providing income support, information, financial compensation, health treatment and rehabilitation services to eligible veterans moves from Defence to DVA. The DVA Corporate Plans 2020-2021 (DVA, 2020a) and 2019-2023 (DVA, 2020b) both focus significantly on the transition process, emphasising working closely with Defence and adopting an holistic approach to supporting veteran wellbeing. A key priority articulated in the DVA Corporate Plan 2019-2023 (DVA, 2020b, p. 7) is to enhance veteran wellbeing by providing “additional funding and new programs which support veterans finding employment”. Education, employment and training are emphasised as important aspects in promoting a seamless transition to civilian life in these corporate plans.

However, despite this focus on education, DVA has a limited role in supporting veterans in higher education, in transition and post-transition. The role of the DVA is currently limited to one defined legislatively in the Acts that govern DVA's provision of services. These Acts include the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004 and the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988. The role is limited to financial support for veterans with liability accepted by DVA for a service-related health condition and who have been assessed as suitable to undertake higher education as part of their rehabilitation plan<sup>3</sup>.

### Higher education as part of a Rehabilitation plan

DVA provides medical, psycho-social and vocational rehabilitation subject to an assessment of needs by a contracted rehabilitation provider. DVA reports that approximately 60 per cent of veterans who medically discharge from the ADF are on a rehabilitation plan. Higher education participation as part of a vocational rehabilitation plan is generally only supported in relation to a goal of returning a veteran to the workforce and generally only up to the bachelor degree level. DVA states that “the aim of a vocational rehabilitation program is to return a person to the workforce to at least the level of their pre-injury employment” (Section 9.1). Qualifications at higher than bachelor level are “not typically in scope of what can be funded by DVA, as a client with an existing education at bachelor degree level is considered to be competitive within the civilian employment sector” (Section 9.8.10).

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<sup>3</sup> DVA's policy and guidelines regarding support for higher education are detailed in Sections 6 and 9 of the Rehabilitation Policy Library available at <https://clik.dva.gov.au/rehabilitation-policy-library>

Although the goal of supporting higher education is to return veterans to the workforce, DVA policy acknowledges a limited number of potential psycho-social benefits. These are listed as harnessing existing motivation; time to adjust to new circumstances post-military, as well as building social connections and confidence (Section 9.8). There is reference in the Rehabilitation Policy Library to some assistance possibly being provided where education is assessed as achieving a psycho-social goal (Section 6). The guidelines indicate that this would generally be limited to Diploma level or Level 5 on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

DVA only provides financial support for veterans assessed as suitable for higher education and where this education aligns with the AQF framework. The requirements for assessment, approval and ongoing support for a veteran undertaking higher education as part of rehabilitation are very detailed (Section 9.8.3), with a focus on cost-effectiveness and ensuring that monies are spent to achieve the planned outcomes of enabling the veteran to gain suitable and sustainable employment (and hence reducing dependence on DVA for ongoing financial support). Anecdotally, there is a degree of inconsistency in the approval processes between the different DVA offices. From the perspective of DVA, the stringent requirements are also in place to ensure that veterans are not set up to fail. Evidence is required to demonstrate that:

- the course of study will benefit the veteran in obtaining work over and above other options
- medical advice that tertiary study is an appropriate option, and that the veteran has the medical capacity to undertake the work for which the course is preparing them at the conclusion of studying
- the veteran has the capacity and aptitude to undertake the course of study.

Once approved, there are detailed requirements for ongoing evidence regarding study progress.

### **Role of DVA providers in higher education**

DVA providers are Comcare-accredited organisations that also satisfy a number of DVA-specific requirements. There are approximately 35 companies contracted across Australia with providers including allied health, psychology and social work. The role of the rehabilitation provider in relation to higher education is to organise or undertake a comprehensive needs assessment and, once the plan has been approved by DVA, to support and assist the veteran throughout the course of study. The DVA guidelines state that the provider must work with the veteran “throughout the course of study to identify, explore and address barriers that may prevent the client from successfully completing their studies” (Section 9.8.3).

In addition, DVA guidelines state that where veterans are experiencing difficulties with their studies, they are expected to take full advantage of the services offered by their university. DVA report that these include:

- academic support services — services such as tutoring, extensions on assignments, resitting exams etc.
- administrative support — assistance to enrol in units, withdraw from units before the census date, appeal failed units etc.
- disability support services — providing services such as disability parking stickers and scribes for exams



- child support services — some institutions offer childcare for students and these options should be investigated where the client has childcare responsibilities (Section 9.8.4).

While there does not appear to be a formal liaison between DVA and the tertiary education sector, it is unknown whether rehabilitation providers liaise with university support services on a veteran student's behalf or whether this is left up to the individual student.

### **Support provided by DVA**

Sections 9.8.4 and 9.8.6 of the policy guidelines outline the financial assistance provided by DVA and the obligations required for ongoing financial support for the duration of the course. If the request for tertiary education is approved by DVA, the student contribution, tuition fee, and/or student services and amenities fee will be paid by DVA. Veteran's incapacity payments are paid at 100 per cent of their normal earnings if studying full-time. Until November 2018, payments were reduced to 75 per cent after 45 weeks. At this time, DVA introduced a pilot measure named *Step-Up* (until June 2022) by removing this step-down and maintaining payments at 100 per cent while the veteran studies full-time as part of their plan. This measure applies to veterans studying full-time at AQF Levels 1-8. As such, it precludes those veterans wishing to access support for postgraduate study. The intent is to support veterans studying full-time by providing financial surety. DVA report that this saw an influx of requests for study approval from veterans on rehabilitation plans. There is some anecdotal evidence that the application of this measure is inconsistent within the different offices of DVA.

Student veterans, whether undertaking study under a vocational rehabilitation plan or independently, are able to access a range of DVA services subject to eligibility requirements. This includes counselling services provided by Open Arms, medical, psychological, allied health, home support, aid and appliances.

### **Number of student veterans**

DVA does not collect statistics about the number of student veterans. However, the Department does collect statistics on the number of veterans with study approved as part of their rehabilitation plan. DVA advised that between 1 November 2018 and 1 June 2020, approximately 450 veterans were approved to undertake study as an activity in their rehabilitation plan, with the numbers trending higher each year since 2017. DVA advised that nearly 230 approvals have been given in 2020 (up until 1 June 2020). However, DVA cautions that the 2020 data is not yet sufficient to enable valid comparisons, especially as the impact of COVID-19 on the data being unknown at this stage. In addition, DVA advised that this data does not include veterans studying as part of their rehabilitation plan who are not in receipt of incapacity payments (approximately 100) and veterans studying part-time.

Overall, the indications are that an increasing number of veterans with medical conditions are undertaking higher education. Completion rates are currently unknown, but the pilot measure would potentially provide an incentive to remain in study for the duration of the course.

### **Relationship with ADF programs**

After veterans discharge from the ADF, the DVA becomes the rehabilitation authority, with responsibility shifting from the Chief of Defence. As such, the focus of vocational

rehabilitation on return to work in DVA differs from that of being fit to deploy in Defence. This difference in focus can have implications for accessing financial support for higher education. DVA states that they generally consider approval in cases where an ADF member was transitioning due to medical discharge and “was enrolled to complete full time undergraduate tertiary studies or tertiary equivalent courses as part of their ADF training” (Section 9.8.2). It is asserted that this is because a judgement had already been made that the veteran had the capacity to undertake the course, and that it was an appropriate option for them, given “their skills, interests, experience and educational background” (Section 9.8.2). However, in cases where an ADF member may have accessed support for tertiary studies as part of an extended transition process, or vocational rehabilitation delivered through the ADF Rehabilitation Program (ADFRP) or *Rehabilitation for Reservists* program, support for study through DVA is not automatic. Given DVA's focus on return to work, a comprehensive vocational assessment is required to guide decision making about whether tertiary education is likely to lead to suitable and sustainable employment outcomes in a civilian setting.

An additional potential stress factor is that DVA and Defence do not contract with the same rehabilitation providers for vocational rehabilitation. Because veterans no longer need to be ready to deploy after a medical discharge, the differing goals of rehabilitation between Defence and DVA require different skills sets of their providers. Whereas DVA contract providers across the country, Defence providers operate in specific geographical locations near ADF bases with BUPA as the main provider. Given that transition can involve a change of rehabilitation provider, DVA report that they work with Defence to enable a “warm handover” between providers, Defence, DVA and the veteran. The DVA perspective is to effect as smooth a transition between the providers, Defence and DVA as possible. DVA report that they have looked at a future operating model, including contracting the same providers, but key issues remain, being the different focus of rehabilitation, and that veterans often relocate away from base after discharge. Other issues for the veteran community include the skills of the provider in advocating with the delegate in DVA on behalf of their client.

The *Defence Transition for Employment (T4E) Program* also potentially complicates transition. The DVA perspective is that this program, which provides support with development of employment opportunities for two years post-discharge, is based on wants rather than an assessment of needs linked to liability. As such, DVA considers that it has to work closely with the program to ensure that T4E course of study does not adversely impact the goals related to assessed needs under the DVA Rehabilitation plan. DVA report that the assessment and support of transitioning veterans in relation to undertaking higher education requires close communication between the two departments.

### **Opportunities for DVA**

Despite the number of veterans transitioning each year, the age of these veterans and the importance of higher education in the labour market, DVA largely conceive of education as part of a rehabilitation plan. DVA is aware of initiatives generated in individual universities to support student veterans and have held conversations with ASVA on these matters. There has, however, been no apparent policy development work undertaken in this area to date. DVA has worked to improve financial support for a limited number of eligible veterans and streamlined transition processes with Defence.

The importance of access to education as part of transition has also been highlighted by the Productivity Commission. The recent Productivity Commission report (2019, p. 345) into veteran transition identifies the importance of education and states that "... at present, many veterans receive no support for education, training (including apprenticeships and traineeships) or recognition of prior learning (RPL) when they leave the ADF, while others can access assistance as part of a DVA rehabilitation plan". Citing the Canadian and US programs, the Commission found that there is a strong in-principal case for Australia to provide more support for veterans' higher education and vocational training to assist with employment outcomes. The Productivity Commission recommended that a veteran education allowance be introduced, initially as part of a policy trial conducted by DVA, to provide non-means-tested income to veterans undertaking full-time education or training.

With education depicted as a key component of the wellbeing model adopted by DVA, the increase in veteran students undertaking higher education as part of their rehabilitation, as well as an unknown number studying independently of DVA support, government has an opportunity to be more proactive in promoting awareness of veteran needs in access to higher education.

A key statement in the DVA Corporate Plan 2020-2021 is "we will do our best to collaborate with other organisations and agencies on behalf of veterans and their families to ensure their particular needs are considered" (DVA, 2020a, p. 4). DVA also states that the Department works closely with other government departments including DESE (DVA, 2020a, p. 4). Added impetus is provided by the Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant. The Covenant provides DVA with an opportunity to raise awareness of student veterans in the higher education sector, given that businesses are encouraged to commit their support for the Covenant<sup>4</sup>. DVA could follow in the steps of the UK Government where the Universities Minister and the Defence Minister jointly wrote to universities requesting that they sign up to the Armed Forces Covenant and support student veterans in higher education. Suggested areas of support included ensuring admissions policies reflect the needs of the armed forces community and benchmarking military experience and qualifications against course entry requirements.<sup>5</sup>

Because DVA supports student veterans undertaking rehabilitation, there is an additional opportunity to work in a closer partnership with the higher education sector in terms of awareness raising. DVA has a long history of raising awareness of the potential impacts of military service and the needs of veterans with the health and community sectors and has a significant range of educational resources. These resources could support university staff in learning about this particular student cohort.

## Programs provided by DESE

DESE is also an important agency that addresses access to higher education. DESE allocate specific, and often substantial, funding to most of the identified equity groups. We could not identify any policies relating to veterans, but we believe that DESE should be engaged on student veteran support because of its recognition and support of equity groups.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://recognition.dva.gov.au/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-urged-to-boost-support-for-armed-forces>

## Section 4: Australian university-based support for student veterans

This section examines the current student veteran-specific entry pathways/programs and support services offered by Australia's 42 universities (i.e., both Australian universities and international universities with campuses in Australia). We have included the support offered by the ASVA. Our aim is to provide insight to what is currently offered by Australian universities, which could be adapted into nationwide guidelines to ensure the needs of student veterans—as an equity group—are met.

We undertook a desktop review of the websites of the 42 Australian universities (including international campuses). The information provided was current, as of September 2020. We searched websites for information about veterans and/or military. We then undertook a further search for the general entry pathways available to adult learners, with a particular focus on working out if each university had an entry program and what it was called. Additional searches were undertaken to retrieve information about any veteran-specific programs offered.

### Results

There are currently no government-funded schemes or nationally mandated programs to help military veterans' transition into higher education. But the Australian university sector is beginning to establish university entry pathways/programs and support services specifically for Australian military veterans. These initiatives are recent, generally being developed in the past couple of years. The increasing commitment by universities to acknowledging the needs of student veterans is demonstrated by over half of Australian universities (24/42) being members of the ASVA. It is noted that, as the programs have been developed relatively recently, there were no available published reviews or evaluations.

Since 2018, there has been significant action by several Australian universities in understanding and supporting student veterans. These have included:

*... the creation of veterans' support programs, dedicated contact officers, direct entry schemes, online resources, flexible timetabling, staff and student training, and medical, legal and careers support (Harvey et al. 2020).*

These reforms have been supported by DVA funding and interest in understanding and better servicing student veterans in higher education.

The recent La Trobe University-led university consortia research (Harvey et al., 2020) also developed national guidelines for professional and academic staff including:

- a central point of contact and provision of wrap-around support
- supportive transition arrangements, including development of outreach, pathways
- credit for prior service and learning, and approaches to managing disclosure of veteran status
- effective interaction with staff and students, including provision of leadership roles
- peer support and harnessing of classroom diversity
- broader university support, including disability and health services, financial support, career development, and flexible study arrangements.

The La Trobe University-led research has noted:

*... the urgent need for better data capture and provision, in order to monitor the access, success, and graduate outcomes of student veterans. Such data are critical to stronger advocacy and policy reform. Supporting military veterans in higher education is a moral, economic, and academic imperative. Individual universities can promote access and success by strengthening the evidence base and developing specific attraction and success strategies as outlined in this report. More broadly, the support of peak bodies in higher education would help to acknowledge the importance of veterans nationally and to promote consistent approaches, while the development of greater public financial support for veterans transitioning to higher education could substantially raise participation levels. Both institutional and national reforms are therefore required to transition more veterans from the military to the academy. Such reforms would benefit the veteran community, the higher education sector, and Australian society more broadly (Harvey et al., 2020).*

This research has provided the impetus for this study to investigate how these initial actions, policies and processes exist within the national context. The following discussion draws upon publicly available information from university websites, policies and documents.

### **Veteran-specific entry pathways and programs**

A small number of universities have developed veteran-specific pathways and/or specific university preparation programs.

The UniSA runs a veteran-specific preparation program, though this program is not a university entry pathway. Rather, student veterans who have either been accepted to a UniSA degree, or are already enrolled in one, are invited to complete the *Veterans Engagement and Education Program Uni Prep Briefings*. These briefings aim to help student veterans balance study with work and family commitments, recognising the unique challenges resulting from military service. In terms of gaining entry to a degree at UniSA (and therefore being eligible for the briefings), military veterans can have their ADF qualifications transferred/credited for a variety of courses. Without these qualifications, military veterans must enter using the regular adult entry pathways, e.g., by successfully completing a general studies program<sup>6</sup>.

The Flinders University *Military Academic Pathway Program* is unique because it acts as an entry program and an entry pathway. This program aims to prepare military veterans for university whilst simultaneously providing an entry pathway to 36 undergraduate degrees for successful completers. The four-week intensive program focuses on preparing the students academically and socially for their transition from the military into higher education. In addition to learning a range of academic skills, students are made aware of support services to which they can turn during their subsequent degree and are linked with a student veteran peer mentor who is already attending the university. Since being pilot tested in 2019 and run in 2020, the program has enrolled 87 students. Students who do go onto commence an

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<sup>6</sup> <https://i.unisa.edu.au/students/student-support-services/veterans-engagement-and-education-program/>

undergraduate degree can then apply to have their professional military qualifications recognised as course credit, though a minimum of a Certificate IV is typically required<sup>7</sup>.

Similarly, ACU invites accepted student veterans to complete a two-week intensive *Veterans Transition Program*. This program aims to equip student veterans with the ability to succeed in higher education by linking them to available support services and targeting academic, as well as personal (i.e., self-confidence, self-efficacy) and social (i.e., peer networks, sense of belonging), skills. A pilot version of this program ran successfully in July 2020<sup>8</sup>. In addition to the Veterans Transition Program, ACU has a *Veterans Entry Program* which converts military training and years of service into an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) that can then be used to gain entry to a variety of degrees.

Military experience—ATAR conversions, like the one offered by the Australian Catholic University, are being increasingly adopted across Australia following advocacy from the ASVA. Notably, in mid-2020, the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre added a “*Commissioned Officers and Related Qualifications*” section to their tertiary admissions form, providing a standardised conversion of military experience into an ATAR. For example, former Lieutenants (Colonel rank or higher) qualify for an ATAR of 88, while two years of armed service experience qualifies for an ATAR of 82. These entry scores are valid for undergraduate degrees at any Queensland university. In NSW and the ACT, the University Admissions Centre has recognised military rank and training since 1995 and has recently modified its application process to enable current and former ADF members to identify themselves.

The University of Tasmania has an *Australian Defence Force Higher Education Advance Standing* system, whereby all former (and current) military personnel, including reservists, can have their prior military learning recognised for university entry and course credit. Successfully completing Level III Defence vocational certificates (or above), or a Defence-provided Certificate of Eligibility, enables prospective students to meet general undergraduate entry requirements. But the extent of recognition of prior learning, and in particular how much course credit is granted, is determined case-by-case<sup>9</sup>.

Charles Sturt University has an *Experience Matters Entry Program* which converts military experience into an ATAR that provides entry to undergraduate degrees. This program is available for any former or currently serving member who has completed military training and has at least two years’ experience<sup>10</sup>.

However, for the majority of Australian universities, entry requirements for military veterans are the same as other adult learners. Some universities recognise prior workplace learning (typically a minimum of three years, e.g., Swinburne University, Edith Cowan University) which is a viable option for veterans with at least 3 or more years of work experience. The University of New England has a *Mature Age Entry Program*, which allows prospective students to apply for university by outlining (in a written document) their prospects for academic success. Almost all Australian universities have a general preparation program

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.flinders.edu.au/study/pathways/military-veterans>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.acu.edu.au/study-at-acu/admission-pathways/i-have-completed-military-service/veterans-transition-program>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.utas.edu.au/study/important-info/adfheas>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://study.csu.edu.au/defence>

which veterans could complete to gain entry to a range of undergraduate degrees. As the Flinders University *Military Academic Pathway Program* demonstrates, these general preparation programs could be easily tailored and/or expanded to meet the needs of student veterans.

### **Veteran-specific financial assistance**

Financial difficulties negatively affect student veterans' study (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019). To our knowledge, only two Australian universities have dedicated student veteran scholarships to assist with associated costs from attending university. Note that because university fees can be deferred using the HECS-HELP scheme, here we are referring to costs like the large income reduction from having a military career to being a student. The University of NSW *Veterans Scholarship* offers \$5000 per year to undergraduate or postgraduate students who are a former or transitioning military personnel, or their dependents<sup>11</sup>. The *Caloundra RSL Sub-Branch Scholarship* provides \$4000 per year to help cover the expenses of undergraduate student veterans (or direct family members) at the University of the Sunshine Coast<sup>12</sup>.

While financial support for Australian student veterans is limited, it is interesting to note that a reasonable number of universities advertise that American student veterans can use GI Bill benefits for study. However, while reaching out to overseas student veterans, the majority of these universities do not appear to offer any veteran-specific support programs.

### **Support services**

Only a handful of universities offer specific support services for student veterans. UniSA has established several student veteran support services. By registering for the *Veterans Engagement and Education Program* (which runs the aforementioned UniPrep Briefings), current and ex-serving military (including reservists and family members) are provided support services and connected with the wider university veteran community. The *Veterans Engagement and Education Mentoring Program* matches mentees with a mentor who is either: a current student or staff member who is also serving/ex-serving, former military and has transitioned into a civilian career, or working in defence-related industry. For more information on this mentoring program<sup>13</sup>. UniSA also has an *Invictus Pathways Program*, which focuses on using exercise to improve the wellbeing of current or former military veterans<sup>14</sup>.

ACU has a *Student Veterans Support Program* which provides access to a range of support and academic services to help ease the transition to university. This program is open to students who are currently completing a service term in the ADF (including reservists) but also those who served on international defence forces, and their family members<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.scholarships.unsw.edu.au/scholarships/id/1328>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.usc.edu.au/study/scholarships/merit-scholarships/caloundra-rsl-sub-branch-scholarship>

<sup>13</sup> <https://i.unisa.edu.au/students/student-support-services/veterans-engagement-and-education-program/veep-mentoring-program/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://unisa.edu.au/Business-community/Community-Engagement/invictus>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.acu.edu.au/study-at-acu/admission-pathways/i-have-completed-military-service/student-veteran-support>.

Charles Darwin University (CDU) openly welcomes military veterans and has established a *Student Veterans Group* to connect the student veteran community. They have a designated website which links to this group as well as other relevant support services<sup>16</sup>.

La Trobe University provides prospective students the option to disclose their military status on a supplementary enrolment form. This form provides a tick box for a student to disclose if they are a current or former member of the ADF. This disclosure allows the university to identify, and support, these students during their degrees. In line with this goal, university staff are given guidelines for working with student veterans<sup>17</sup>. La Trobe University also has a support coordinator to provide case management support to student veterans.

Western Sydney University recently established a Student Veteran Support Officer to help support the transition of veterans from the military to higher education and improve their university success. Students can contact the support officer from a designated *Support for Student Veterans* webpage, which also links them to a range of (non-veteran-specific) support services available at the university<sup>18</sup>.

### **The Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA)**

Much of the recent impetus for improving student veteran entry pathways, programs and support has come from the work of ASVA, a non-profit community organisation. ASVA was formed in 2016/17 by veterans in recognition of the increasing number of veterans seeking to undertake higher education and of the complexity of issues they faced in transitioning from military to university life. ASVA recognises that education is a key pillar of wellbeing and, in working closely with transition services in Defence, has a goal of engaging with discharging veterans 12 to 18 months prior to transition. ASVA takes an advocacy role with individual potential student veterans in supporting them in making decisions about higher education.

A key concern for ASVA is that the nature of a military career has changed in recent years with veterans primarily leaving in their 20s and 30s and looking to upskill or build upon their military education in order to transfer into the civilian labour force. These veterans have already received significant government investment in their rigorous physical, conceptual and theoretical military training and education, which is not currently universally recognised by academic institutions.

Because the states currently have different university entry requirements, ASVA is taking a key role in negotiating an ATAR score based on rank which has been successful in Queensland, NSW and the ACT. In addition, ASVA hope to engage with the Australasian College of Tertiary Admission Centres to develop a uniform admission schedule based on rank. ASVA is currently undertaking credit mapping with all defence courses (Defence is a Registered Training Organisation or RTO) and packaging up to send to all academic deans to map across for course credit.

Coupled with the small size of Australia's military force is a lack of awareness in the general community of the conceptual thinking required in military education, the positive skills and

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cdu.edu.au/adf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/cheedr/veterans>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/currentstudents/current\\_students/services\\_and\\_facilities/support\\_for\\_student\\_veterans](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/services_and_facilities/support_for_student_veterans)



experiences that veterans can bring to the higher education sector, and misconceptions of military experiences which are often generated by media. As such, another key area for ASVA is building the understanding and awareness of academic leaders of the skills, competencies, proficiencies and attributes that come with military training. ASVA's goal is to enable the university sector to recognise the opportunities that this cohort of domestic students present to higher education. In a competitive market, and in an environment impacted significantly by COVID-19, a university which recognises the value proposition and meets the needs of student veterans becomes an attractive pathway. As such, ASVA has worked closely with the universities that have introduced “veteran-friendly supports” such as student veteran liaison officers. However, academic leaders differ in their perceptions and experiences of military service and motivations to enact change which can be a barrier to or enabler of introducing specific services for student veterans.

ASVA hopes to address some of the challenges veterans face in transition to university, such as establishing social bonds on campus and gaining a sense of belonging, through shifting the campus culture to understanding and acceptance as with other equity groups. ASVA currently has chapters at 24 universities. These are student veteran initiated and led, providing connection with like-minded peers with whom they have shared values and backgrounds, and which mitigates the loss of military mateship. These chapters also have a role in “normalising” the notion of what a veteran represents to other students through engaging with other campus clubs and societies.

Through incrementally changing campus culture, ASVA's goal is for student veterans to transition to higher education as a place that is safe and familiar with programs that recognise the value that military service brings, with peers for support, and with teaching staff who are responsive to their unique needs.

## Summary

Programs and support services for veteran students are very recent initiatives in the Australian university sector. Much of the development has been instigated by the ASVA, as a grassroots student veteran organisation, in response to the unmet needs of this increasing student cohort. Only three universities currently offer a veteran-specific preparation program to support transition to higher education through addressing the challenges unique to this student cohort. However, almost all of the 42 universities offer a general university preparation program which could be tailored to the needs of student veterans. More universities are now offering ATAR conversions or RPL in recognition of military-based skills and prior military learning. This has recently been adopted on a state-wide level in Queensland, NSW and the ACT. ASVA is working to see the introduction of a nationally consistent entry assessment process for those who have served in the military based on their rank and service. A small number of universities offer veteran student support/liaison services primarily involving peer and/or mentoring support and advocacy. ASVA has found that difficulties in engaging with academic leadership is potentially a barrier to the development of services for student veterans. This may be due to the general lack of understanding of military service in the community, the skills and attributes that training provides, and the unique needs generated by transitioning back to civilian life. Initiatives have also been developed from research highlighting the need for action by universities (Harvey et al., 2018) and by a subsequent DVA-funded grant that provided explicit funding for several universities to develop veterans' programs in collaboration with ASVA, including La Trobe University, ACU, WSU, and CDU (Harvey et al., 2020).

## Section 5: Focus groups with university staff

We conducted focus groups with university staff in South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and NSW. Each group had a dual purpose: to raise awareness of student veteran issues, and to collect data to gain an understanding from university staff working in admission, transition, equity and diversity units about how the sample of universities included admit, recognise and support student veterans<sup>19</sup>.

### Methodology

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants through a letter sent to Pro Vice-Chancellors of Teaching and Learning (or equivalent) and/or the managers of the admissions/transition/equity units within the universities. We requested support and encouragement for staff in student admissions, support, equity and diversity roles to attend. Eighteen universities were invited and 12 took up the invitation to participate, with COVID-19 referred to as a distracting factor.

Each group met once, with each session taking approximately 60–90 minutes. Groups were conducted via Zoom and each was moderated by two members of the research team. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were provided with an Information Sheet (at Appendix B) and written informed consent was obtained prior to starting each group. Participants were asked to maintain confidentiality regarding the participants in their group. Each session commenced with a PowerPoint presentation outlining the aims of the research, the challenges facing student veterans and the initiatives developed in the US to promote a strong veteran-friendly campus. Participants were asked to describe their roles within the university. Following the presentation, participants were asked a series of questions in a semi-structured format under the following domains:

- *Does your university have any existing programs or support services specifically targeted to veterans? [If yes] Can you please describe these programs/services?*
- *How can we encourage more veterans to consider university? (Probe: outreach programs, financial support)*
- *What can we do to help veterans have a smoother transition to university study? (Probe: pathway programs, foundation courses, credit for prior learning)*
- *How can we make universities more ‘veteran friendly’? What pathways, enrichment programs, and support services could be provided?*

Data was analysed thematically, supported by NVivo 12 software, with the group as the unit of analysis.

### Results

A total of 19 staff from 14 universities participated in the focus groups. Each group had between four and seven participants, apart from Queensland which had two.

Participants were from the following universities:

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<sup>19</sup> Ethics approval for this part of the study was obtained from the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix X).

- South Australia: Flinders University, University of Adelaide, University of South Australia
- New South Wales: University of Newcastle, Australian Catholic University, Charles Sturt University, University of New England
- Queensland: Griffith University, James Cook University, CQUniversity
- Victoria: La Trobe University, Australian Catholic University, RMIT University, Monash University, Swinburne University of Technology, Victoria University.

The South Australian, Queensland and NSW groups were moderated by a principal researcher from Flinders University, and the Victorian group by a principal researcher from La Trobe University.

Participants described their roles as being in student services, including equity, admissions, pathways and secondary school outreach, and several mentioned their military background or military connection as their interest in participating in the group.

Awareness of student veterans and their needs is a recently emerging issue for Australian universities. For most participants, the information in the PowerPoint presentation exposed the participants to knowledge and ideas that were new to them. From the discussions the following key themes emerged:

- Importance of awareness of transition issues
- Enhancing the structures that already exist for equity groups
- Addressing cultural change/barriers
- Emerging opportunities for universities to promote a veteran-friendly campus

### **Awareness of transition issues**

A small number of universities have recently implemented veteran-specific programs. These programs were described as a mix of pathway programs, foundation courses, support services and credit for prior learning (CPL). Existing initiatives include the *Flinders University Military Academic Pathway Program* (MAPP), described as a "... transition program into university, a support program that specifically targets veterans or those transitioning". UniSA has a *Veterans' Engagement and Education Program* (VEEP), described as a student support program rather than a foundation or pathway program. ACU described a range of programs including an entry program:

*... which allows for veterans to apply and submit their military service record ... converted into an entry rank; a transition program aimed at targeting the three areas of academic shortfalls, the feeling of isolation and alienation and the loss of identity, which have been identified as areas which veterans were experiencing issues when transitioning into higher education; and a support program to address those extra demands that veterans will face when they come into higher education, such as having commitments outside, being non-recent school leavers ... gives students access to priority class allocation and assistance when putting in for special considerations, in particular for service commitments.*

ACU also described the student veteran officer, a student veteran themselves, as the point of contact which had been identified:

*... as very important for veteran's programs ... having a single point of contact for veterans to communicate with that would be ideally the constant throughout their academic journey.*

CSU described their work with the ASVA in developing a program called *Experience Matters* which it's about converting their rank into an ATAR and is linked to most undergraduate courses at the university.

Where, universities have developed veteran-specific responses it has been in the context of acknowledging and understanding the challenges that come with military to civilian transition and to the university environment. One participant explained:

*... we are constantly looking at programs that we could develop to support [student veterans] and their success, obviously understanding their transition challenges. We're looking at ways not only to get them into the university but to give them the skills required to succeed and to be able to progress through higher education.*

Predominantly, the initiative has come from the student veterans and/or staff with a military background or role with Defence education. Participants from different universities explained:

*... that director, actually is a veteran as well. It was just sort of a concept he came up with that would allow us to provide additional levels or align support services to target veteran students to help them get through university — get to university, through university and successfully transition from Defence career to a new career.*

*... seems to be at the moment reliant on individuals within a particular university wanting to stand up and be a champion in some way.*

*... hopefully get some buy-in from the most senior person .... Have a champion who actually cares about this issue, I think that can go a long way.*

The acknowledgement of “Champions”, often veterans or military connected staff, indicates the early stages of veteran awareness and support across the university sector.

Overall, participants revealed a current lack of national awareness of the emerging student veteran demographic and inconsistency in response to need. In some cases, participants had only become aware of the issues faced by student veterans when individuals approached student services for support.

*... the veteran question was coming out last year, because we were also having veterans approach us.*

Again, while universities had existing equity and support policies and processes in place generally, their awareness of veterans specifically was developing.

One participant, at a university with a significant local military student population, expressed a sense of embarrassment stating:

*We do a lot for serving military. We're quite — we can be quite flexible for people who are serving in the military now; however, the veteran aspect has been overlooked, sadly, embarrassing to say that.*

Another had a similar response:

*I'm still quite baffled by the idea that until this conversation, we haven't done anything specific, but I think that there would be some understanding.*

Awareness of student veterans, which includes the idea of recruiting veterans to university, was largely embryonic. However, each focus group demonstrated interest, engagement and willingness to enhance their institutional responses to student veterans. This demonstrated that the universities we spoke with had existing structures for any student with transition needs, but that those structures could be enhanced.

### **Enhancing existing structures**

A principal response across the focus groups from those universities yet to specifically install transition and study support for student veterans was that their existing structures were supportive but could be enhanced:

*... we don't offer things specifically targeted at veterans, but they would be able to access a lot of the support services that are more generally available. Just finding a way to make sure that the veteran students know about those, understand that they apply to that group of students, I think that's just a short-term improvement.*

Another participant explained that veterans were not a highly visible group on campus or in admissions. In order to identify and improve services, they suggested actually working with student veterans to identify areas for stronger support:

*Maybe working with veterans more we might discover — hey, we've discovered that there's this commonality so maybe we would need to beef up a certain area. I'd have to say that would come from doing, really. We would start with a cohort, run a pilot and see and we might realise actually, like many of the other groups, once they're in and going, they're fine.*

One participant stated that their “job with all our students is to make sure that they feel like they belong”. Some participants described the work they do to reduce barriers for students who do not fit into the current equity group list but could benefit from extra scaffolding:

*... we do have a whole lot of groups that we certainly support in different ways than our general student population and elite [sports] students [are] one of those like that. I imagine veterans would probably maybe fall into that category.*

Participants from the ACU and La Trobe University (two universities that have developed student veteran-specific approaches) described their approaches to supporting student veteran's study needs:

*... we have the support program, and the big selling point is it's effectively the elite athlete performer program, that's what it was based off. Then that has been replicated to some extent for student veterans, so they have access - once identified — as a veteran to priority class allocation ... and assistance when seeking extensions with special circumstances.*

Another participant explained:

*... priority access to timetables for student veterans, so that's something that doesn't cost anything, it could be a quick win, relatively easy to implement.*

These responses highlight that student veterans may have study challenges around managing health, family and other transition challenges that require flexible responses to assessment deadlines. There are smaller immediate support responses that can be organised.

Other participants explained:

*I think we can probably look at connecting the veterans to each other. So, I wonder — they probably don't know there's other veterans that are already at the university so we could probably look to doing something in that space for sure ... making sure they know that we can help them with their enrolment or any other timetabling thing like we do for the elite students.*

There was consensus around this response agreeing that that providing veteran-specific support should not be a challenge and should build on processes already in place. There were several responses along these lines:

*... it will be just a bit of a tweak, really, to strengthen something, or make it visible, because I think the supports probably exist but they're not labelled or targeted, so to make it visible would be — it wouldn't take too much. ... it's not absurd to think that we could make veterans an overt group and then recognise some of the unique — and that's probably the challenge now, is once we can make them — once we understand the group more and understand what are some of the more unique needs.*

*But it shouldn't be too difficult to build this into the development-type processes that we already have.*

*We've got the right capabilities to provide support and service, we just need to tie a bow around it and really make it visible, really make sure that we're reaching out. That's probably the piece that we're missing.*

All the universities that had not yet developed student veteran-specific support agreed their existing supports were adequate but that specific needs could also be addressed by designating a policy response for student veterans.

Within this part of the discussions, further enhancements to existing services were identified:

*So, using existing programs but having identifiers like that, that are about that transition through peers and colleagues as well. So, I think it's leveraging some of the things that we have, applying our understanding of our engagement with veterans and Defence and learning from the veterans who have come through, what's actually worked for them and then appropriately tailoring what we have or putting in place something new.*

Refining existing structures and processes was conceptualised as a holistic response including a veteran identifier, developing greater awareness of veterans through greater engagement with Defence and student veterans themselves.

The issue of identifying veterans highlighted the variability of veteran desire to disclose their service or present themselves as student veterans:

*... sometimes I wouldn't know until Anzac Day when for the dawn ceremony we'd go as a college to put the wreaths and then I'd be like, oh, I didn't even realise you had a history of service. So, I think we could do a lot better there ... they don't usually flag it .... Because universities are quite liberal, I think sometimes there's an apprehension to this backlash if I served in the service.*

The matter of disclosure and identification highlighted the phenomenon of the culture gap. Veterans in transition can find themselves in no-man's land — having left the military but not yet comfortable enough to identify and engage with civil society (in this case the liberal university).

Participants subsequently raised the importance of helping student veterans feel comfortable and safe in identifying as a veteran:

*... making veterans feel comfortable and safe enough to actually identify as a veteran so that if you want to target support at them, that you know who they are in the first place and they don't feel like there's going to be that stigma attached to identifying as a veteran.*

There was an understanding that veterans might be uncomfortable with being identified as a “special needs” group and that being identified as a veteran may expose them to unwanted attention.

Complicating the matter of identification is the different understanding of what the term “veteran” means for university staff and student veterans. This understanding can vary from the DVA definition—i.e., anyone who has served for one day—to the notion that the term is associated with active deployment. One participant described a perception of a veteran as “... someone who has trauma who needs treatment”, because of the discourse around veteran support needs generally.

One veteran participant stated that, although he had no issue with the term, not all ex-serving members would identify with it and that:

*A lot of the time I use the word ex-serving defence member because I'm — that eliminates possibly making somebody feeling uncomfortable.*

La Trobe University participants described the use of a supplementary form identifying students in equity or non-traditional groups:

*So, it's sort of on their enrolment form, it's a supplementary online form—voluntary—and so we capture a few of them that way. Carers is another one, and parents. So that's our approach to capturing them at La Trobe but there are also a number of issues around whether they're willing to come forward and identify themselves.*

Because veterans may not identify with the term “veteran”, La Trobe University prefers to ask whether an applicant is a current or former member of the ADF.

ACU participants described the importance of peer support in helping to identify veterans:

*I have a list of the student veterans who are registered within the student veteran's support program. But then I guess an added benefit of being ex-*

*...serving is it's much easier to identify—sometimes, to some extent—some of those tell-tale signs of somebody who's ex-defence, which is also great at a rapport level because a lot of the time by sharing that you have service history, a lot of the time that breaks that barrier of communication.*

ACU participants also described priority class allocation, as with their elite athlete performer program as an incentive, “a massive selling point to identify”. It was assumed that offering incentives like support for flexible study options would increase the likelihood of veterans identifying as such.

Other universities described their incentives for equity groups to identify that could be expanded to student veterans.

*I think maybe having some sort of scholarship in place would be another way, so that's an incentive for them to identify themselves as veterans. In the past we've had as part of our diversity and inclusion plan, one of the things was gender equality was high up the ranks, and as a result of that women in STEM was another program that has been launched. The scholarship is part of that. So, I think a similar approach could be taken for veterans too.*

Other current initiatives described included an identifier on applications to the TACs in Queensland, NSW and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in order for military rank to be converted to an ATAR. However, there is no nationally consistent approach to this at the time of publication.

### **Addressing cultural change/barriers to change**

Incentivising veterans to undertake higher education is multi-faceted, not only requiring supports to be in place but involving cultural or attitudinal change with the individual, other students, teaching staff, university leadership and Defence. Several participants mentioned a perception that higher education may not be considered by serving members as a viable transition pathway from the ADF. This position highlights the diversity of veterans as a group. Defence personnel may be categorised into three distinct groups in relation to university studies. Commissioned Officers often are exposed to university studies as part of their initial training, Senior Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCO) may be exposed to university studies as part of their advancement through the ranks into managerial roles and Other Ranks may not have been exposed to university because it is not deemed as relevant to their employment mustering at that time in their career:

*I think there's just an implicit assumption that veterans will do VET if anything after transitioning. So, I think as with many groups higher education is marginalised, both within the military and within higher education.*

Younger and lower-ranking members are often considered as only suitable for vocational education.

*I think a lot of young Army folks do experience that kind of pressure to not improve their lives through university. So, university may not be a popular choice for the actual target student that we're looking at, is that young veteran.*

It was recognised that recruitment and marketing university studies to this cohort would expose them to the ideal of university study.



This discussion extended to ways of building veterans' aspiration to study by engaging with them prior to transition as part of outreach activities:

*It has to be early level engagement with people in the service. The earlier we start showing the pathway into a university in their military career, the easier it is for them to start thinking, oh maybe this is what I'll do when I leave or when I finish my service, as opposed to very late — once they're actually looking to be discharged.*

This is where Defence articulates with the university sector on transition and student engagement. University offerings for example are presented at Transition Seminars which is often when they are about to separate from the military or just have separated:

*... if we're reaching out to them once they're at the end of their career in the Defence Forces, is that too late. Should we be reaching out to them when they're starting the career about what their options are when that career might finish.*

The participants shared an understanding that planning for university required a level of socialisation to the idea, and an articulation that all veterans can study at university — that is something that is very possible:

*... we also need to kind of rebuild that aspiration that they may not have encountered when they were deciding out of year 12 whether to join the Air Force or Navy instead of going to uni or going to TAFE. So, I think that if we took some of the principles and some of the - even like the STEM Connect and some of that work that's happening with year 12 students to connect them to STEM, those are some of the same exercises and activities we could use to build aspiration in veterans.*

It was acknowledged that socialising them to the idea of university would be more effectively earlier rather than later in their transition.

These ideas reflect an excursion of the university into the Defence transition space. Some participants described the importance of effecting attitudinal change with the ADF and DVA about the viability of higher education for discharging veterans:

*But there's an attitudinal piece of work where universities need to promote their veteran-friendly status and at the same time try to persuade the ADF and DVA and other groups that higher education is a positive and entirely possible option for veterans who transition.*

In some states, participants considered that the proximity to Defence bases and closer working relationships with Defence presented opportunities to promote the value of higher education and the specific services offered on campus to serving members before transition.

This indicated both the developing relationships between Defence and universities as well as the need to further enhance those relationships:

*... there's a much better increased conversation going on between universities and Defence and Defence's approach to people transitioning out as well that allows us perhaps to have more insight and position what we're doing to better. So the inroads and the ability to engage with at least Defence members that are still members or in the earlier phases of transition it's easy to have those conversations with that particular group of veterans.*

However, even as these relationships developed the participants noted the separation between civilian and military contexts. Discussions in the focus groups outlined the need to build stronger relationships with Defence.

In some other States, participants described the difficulties in getting access to military bases:

*... I think the biggest one with being involved with the barracks is the army — it's a who-you-know game. Getting onto the base is the hardest part.*

If it was hard to access potential student veterans other strategies were described.

One suggestion was that the biggest hook with the veteran cohort is by word-of-mouth:

*... somebody's word is probably the strongest referral, somebody who is doing it. Somebody might be drawing associations and saying, "oh, if he can do it then I can do it".*

This is indicative of the close community living of defence members, either living on base or working with each other for long periods of time.

Participants noted that the "language" of university — the terminology used can be interpreted differently by students with a military background.

*But the language that we use is so foreign.*

*So, I think it's about us making our language more accessible*

*So, I think there's a kind of cultural piece within universities and being able to use language, make it accessible, not use the complicated language, being able to have a bit of a glossary so that we aren't using complicated language and being able to make sense of those things for people. So, I think there's a lot that we can do.*

A key area of cultural change needed was in the language used on campus in order to promote a safe and comfortable environment for student veterans.

Participants discussed the challenges they perceived in effecting cultural change at the campus level and the importance of educating staff and students about the military experience. In developing initiatives to encourage veterans to engage with higher education, participants described the need to support their staff in supporting veteran students.

*... there are myths and misunderstandings. I think that even though some people are connected and feel very passionate and there are a whole portion of university staff and students probably who have no connection to Defence and really don't understand what we're talking about even.*

The focus on attracting students was contextualised by the participants in terms of orienting the university to understand the needs of student veterans:

*... we can't just say we want to encourage them to self-identify, we have to have a comfortable environment where everybody is a bit more understanding and aware of a student veteran.*

*... developing or establishing a common respect for different experiences and different viewpoints, allowing people to say their truth as they see it based on*

*their life experiences without judgement. Just expanding that organisational knowledge that we service different cohorts of people who do have different life experiences, all of which are valuable and need to be heard and to contribute to the learning experience.*

One way to build understanding of the skills and attributes that veterans bring to university is through staff learning and development. One participant stated that their university:

*...has a few modules like that around cultural diversity and gender inclusion and a few, I think one they just won an award for recently that staff and students are taking, so that could be something that you could add to something like this would be great.*

The participants noted that generally university understanding, awareness and knowledge of veterans wasn't that strong. Bringing student veterans to the university was only one part of the initiative, the other was to build awareness and sensitivity among university staff about student veterans.

### **Opportunities to develop a veteran-friendly campus**

The focus groups generated both discussion and motivation among the participants to effect change at their campuses. One participant stated that the timing is opportune given the shifting focus from international students to cohorts of domestic students:

*... a greater focus is starting to be shown towards adult learners, especially with what's happened now with COVID this year and international students and things of this nature. I think it's actually heightened everyone's attention on our domestic cohorts and what they need and require.*

Some of the ways this is occurring are evident in ACU's intention in:

*... developing relationships with national support organisations, national and local organisations in order to see how we can work collaboratively with them to expand services to student veterans.*

The ACU participants highlighted how having a veteran involved in developing supports as well as engaging university leadership was crucial:

*We're in a good space at the university, from our Vice-Chancellor down is incredibly supportive of this initiative so we're looking to capitalise and to do as much as possible with that support.*

Other participants identified champions within their universities as necessary to start conversations about developing support and identifying staff who could potentially support their ideas:

*I think now I might actually have a champion for this — just as I'm sitting here talking to you all, like — duh, she's just new in the piece and so obviously COVID has eaten up everybody's time but I'm thinking to myself, actually, she is one I'll bring along and get her to start forging some way forward. Because she's the real and she's — but she's very respected already in a short amount of time; very good operator, so it's nice having her in such a prominent position.*

While some champions may be situated in higher-level positions, it was also an opportunity for academic teaching staff to contribute to efforts to create veteran friendly campuses:

*... then having a chat and trying to get some academics and researchers on board with professional staff to look at what we could potentially do for this cohort:*

The interest generated in the group discussions and the opportunity to learn from other universities generated suggestions of a university network group with a specific focus on the needs of student veterans:

*I know I've been madly writing notes and ideas and I think we've got a lot to learn from ACU and the La Trobe in terms of the work they've already done. But maybe a network group where universities can start to talk to each other about what we're doing and learn from each other and then potentially we could run an event where interested students come to that and we could all talk at it. Or find out more about what they need, would just be one suggestion.*

Overall, there was tremendous interest and goodwill among the participants across all universities to engage with this population group and to actively develop university services in support of student veterans.

## Summary

The four focus groups revealed that only a small number of universities have active and specific policies and process supporting the admission, recognition and support of student veterans. The focus groups also showed that all universities are interested and motivated to improve their services for veterans. Student veteran support for many universities occurred within their existing process of admission, transition and support for non-traditional and equity groups. The focus group sessions raised awareness of issues facing student veterans in transition and generated discussion and motivation to effect change. Participants were able to identify existing services for equity and other groups that could be extended or modified for the veteran cohort. Discussion with participants from universities that had implemented veteran-specific services helped inspire participants to start conversations on their own campuses.

## Section 6: Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how Australian universities understand, serve and govern veterans as an equity group and to explore how understanding them as an equity group can assist universities to meet veterans' needs. In achieving this aim, we explored how veterans are recognised, understood and supported internationally, in Australian government policy and by individual Australian universities.

In this section we discuss the study findings and outline ways in which universities can improve institutional awareness of veteran students and their needs; undertake equity and diversity approaches; improve admission processes including recognition of prior learning, timetabling, veteran identifiers, and retention strategies; and provide transition and foundation programs.

Results from desktop reviews, focus group interviews and discussions with government employees indicate that, unlike international responses, Australia does not have a national policy which recognises higher education as a key domain in both promoting veteran wellbeing and enhancing opportunities to compete in the civilian job market. In addition, it can be argued that currently in Australia, the individual veteran deals with systems which operate distinctly. The ADF is one system; DVA is another with its own processes and eligibility criteria; universities are also individual systems. The DESE is also an important department that allocates specific, and often substantial, funding to most of the identified equity groups. DESE respond to the needs of educational equity groups. Student veterans are a priority group that could benefit from DESE attention. DESE could encourage universities to:

- support student veterans, consistent with the Australian Defence Veterans Covenant (ADVC)
- offer scholarships and other financial incentives for veterans in higher education
- work closely with Defence and DVA to develop a nationally consistent policy, (potentially including an Australian version of the GI Bill)
- encourage TACs and higher education institutions to collect and report on data related to access, success, and retention
- commission further research into this important student group.

### Government level

The ADF, DVA and universities provide some support for veterans seeking to undertake university study. The policies and processes, however, are not well coordinated across DVA and Defence. This can leave veterans with the challenge to negotiate these institutions and their divergences or unique approaches to higher education. Transition begins in Defence and flows over to DVA upon separation. Universities provide a transition pathway.

The opportunity for higher education is not consistently applied across Defence. Different groups of personnel have different access to university study. While in the ADF, veterans may have access to training and education depending on their work role and rank. Opportunities for higher education are principally vocationally oriented. Defence is focused on sustaining its workforce to maintain tactical dominance. Higher education participation is a functional opportunity for personnel in different roles to sustain that outcome. The outcome of this focus is that the opportunity for higher education is variable across services and

ranks. There appears to be a disjunction between service and separation in that transition planning occurs when personnel have submitted their intent to discharge or resign. Not all personnel intend long term service or careers and for those that may serve the average service period of around eight years, higher education could be a principal element of their transition plan. Depending on rank and role of the separating member their access to higher education is shaped by varying degree of support by Defence and DVA.

There is increasing activity and focus by Defence on military civilian transition. We argue that higher education could be developed more effectively as a transition pathway across the services, ranks and corps. Australia could learn from the US where there is a strong policy focus on access to higher education during military service. This focus not only enhances recruitment and retention but equips veterans for an increasingly competitive job market. The focus group participants discussed the need to build aspiration for education at an early stage, recognising that a young recruit may not consider themselves as suited to higher education at that point in life. Because higher education is becoming more accessible to the general population, it becomes an option for many who would never have considered it in past years. By encouraging members to believe that they are capable of higher education, attending university could then become an improved transition pathway. An element of this involves building the links between civilian universities and Defence as the source of transition. ASVA as a student veteran organisation also has a role in building aspiration. A key concern for ASVA is to ensure that Defence rehabilitation providers are aware of educational opportunities for veterans, pathways and supports through ASVA.

This relationship could also focus on the culture gap in credentials — the formal and soft skills and experiences of veterans are unmapped in civilian education and employment markets. As a RTO, Defence has the capacity to work closer with Australian universities to have military qualifications recognised and mapped. This work is being undertaken by ASVA but needs greater attention in the forthcoming years. Other Five Eyes nations has been more advanced than Australia in universities formally recognising and providing credit for military courses and training, and in matching them with civilian qualifications.

DVA is the government department with responsibility for the health and welfare of veterans once they separate from Defence, DVA policies emphasise education, employment and training as important aspects in a veteran-centric model of wellbeing. There is room for development in this area. There is variable support provided for education pathways, financial or otherwise. Research demonstrates that higher levels of education are associated with better outcomes across the life course, including health and social integration (Hawthorne, Korn, & Creamer, 2014). Support for higher education through DVA is based on assessment of the minimum opportunities required to enable an injured veteran to gain employment. There is no explicit financial support for veterans who do not have an injury accepted by DVA as related to their military service. DVA operate a liability system and the legislation and guidelines contain exclusionary factors which potentially act as further barriers to gaining financial support.

Other nations provide greater access to higher education for veterans. While the US has supported veterans for decades through the GI Bill, both the UK and Canada have recently developed initiatives that recognise higher education as a pathway to successful transition. In particular, Canada has a similar sized standing force (approximately 57,000) to Australia and with a similar number (approximately 5,000–6,000) discharging each year. In recognition of the relationship between wellbeing, education and employment, the Canadian government

provides veterans with access to funding for post-military education (Cathcart, 2019). Canada provides veterans with funding based on years of service through the Veterans' Education and Training Benefit (VETB). Interestingly, this initiative developed in part from reports that showed the difficulty in attaining post-service employment for veterans where their military role had no civilian equivalent (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2016a). This policy approach has been described as an honouring of the social covenant between nation and veteran rather than a needs-based approach (Cathcart, 2019). As a consequence of the VETB, there has already been a significant influence on the higher education sector with institutions launching initiatives to make their campuses veteran-friendly. Although the impact of the VETB has yet to be evaluated in terms of educational outcomes, this example highlights how government financial support can drive access to education and encourage universities to develop and promote specific services. In this way, a support scheme such as the VETB may contribute to the bridging of civil-military divides. Additionally, as progressive reform to the Australian higher education sector, including recent government changes to course funding, place a greater cost on individuals there is a greater need for a designated higher education support scheme for veterans.

The recent Productivity Commission (2019) inquiry, *Compensation and Rehabilitation for Veterans*, made some key recommendations around transition and higher education. Principally, the report argued that Defence must coordinate transitioning through a centralised entity, the Joint Transition Authority (JTA). This was established in 2020. It was also recommended that Defence “trial ... an education allowance for veterans undertaking full-time education or vocational training” (Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 283). This would culminate in a “package of transition support”. The report argued that supporting veterans in higher education would be nationally beneficial because skilled veterans would reduce future reliance on taxpayer funding (Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 339). The Commission also recommended the introduction of an income support scheme for veterans undertaking education arguing that the current student financial support (e.g., HECS-HELP) “are unlikely to provide the kind of encouragement for education and training that aligns with veterans’ long-term wellbeing” (Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 340).

## University level

In addition to needing the development of supportive government policies and programs, universities are only just starting to become aware of the student veteran demographic. University-based initiatives are small in number, limited, grassroots driven and yet to be evaluated. However, the findings from the focus groups indicated that staff in admission, outreach, and student services roles are motivated and inspired to provide veteran-friendly services when educated about the issues veterans face in transition to university.

The review of the literature highlighted the transition issues around veterans developing a sense of purpose, identity and belonging. These factors lead to successful social integration and wellbeing. The gap between military and university culture carries significant consequences to the veterans’ level of integration into campus environment. While the military experience enables veterans to develop valuable skills applicable to the academic setting, the difficulties they encounter in achieving a sense of belonging on campus can negatively impact their academic decisions, persistence, and degree completion. The literature reinforces that like other non-traditional student groups, higher education can be an important pathway for integration, an increase in opportunities and ultimately, for integration into civilian society (Jones, 2013).

The review of Australian university-based programs and focus group discussions revealed that some work is being done towards developing veteran-friendly campuses and in responding to student veterans as a non-traditional population group. However, it is also important to reinforce that as a student cohort, veterans are a diverse group with differing family backgrounds, military experiences, rank and status although sharing a unique fundamental experience. Need for support with entry, navigating university requirements for example may be more pronounced among other ranks who are less likely than commissioned and SNCOs to have previous university experience.

The issue of access and recognition of prior military service in assessing applications for university is being addressed locally. The review of domestic programs and supports provided for student veterans at universities highlighted the military experience-ATAR conversions that have been adopted by the Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) in Queensland, NSW and the ACT. Giving a standard entry score based on rank and years of service provides an equitable entry pathway into undergraduate degrees for veterans. However, this needs to be adopted nationally by TACs in all states and territories.

Identification as a veteran on campus is a significant issue, not only for the veteran but for university staff. This issue has been highlighted in the literature and the focus group discussions that revealed differing interpretations of the term. One university uses a supplementary form and prefers to ask if a person is current or former member of the ADF. In this way, there is no room for misinterpretation. The literature also suggests that contemporary veterans may be less likely to identify as a veteran than previous generations. This potential can be due to mistrust and misalignment with political culture on campus (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Elliott et al., 2011), fear of being stigmatised, treated “differently” and falling subject to stereotyping relating to mental illness (Ranson & Glennly 2020). While a safe, familiar and supportive campus environment could potentially mitigate some of these concerns, at a minimum there is a need for a nationally consistent approach. For example, universities could asking about ADF service rather than using the term “veteran” upon admission.

Our review of international policies and programs revealed that there remains a lack of reliable data and studies on veterans’ experiences of higher education study and the way they are supported by educational institutions. The few Australian programs in place are also yet to be evaluated. Despite lack of evaluation there appear to be components that could be included in a general model for a “veteran-friendly” campus. We draw upon some of the ideas in the *8 Keys to Success program* developed in the US, what is currently being provided in Australian universities and the findings from the focus groups:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote wellbeing and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralise campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organisations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
6. Utilise a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.



7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

## Section 7: Conclusion and recommendations

This study has identified that higher education can be a productive pathway for transitioning veterans. Internationally, support for veterans in higher education is uneven. In the US and UK, the place of higher education for veterans is reasonably well developed and enshrined in national policy. In other Five Eyes nations the development of this pathway is less consistent and robust. In Australia, higher education as a transition pathway is in early development with only a few universities explicitly addressing this matter. Nonetheless, Australian universities demonstrate tremendous goodwill and interest in developing and refining their policies and processes to attract, admit and support student veterans. Supporting veterans is an equity issue, though it is also broader. Where student veterans can be considered an equity group is in their relative overrepresentation as early school leavers, first in the family to attend university, students with disability or students facing compound disadvantage along other axes of difference (e.g., gender, ethnicity). Supporting veterans, however, is not only an equity matter but also a question of appropriately recognising prior learning, acknowledging national service, and understanding the potential benefits to other students of creating veteran-friendly campuses.

### Government, Defence and DVA

The key factors identified in the research include developing the relationship between the higher education sector and Defence (including the Defence sector). Defence could reassess the way that it conceives of higher education opportunities for serving personnel across service, rank and corps. This focus could develop in line with their evolving transition policies and processes. Opportunities for higher education could be more consistent and equitable across the defence membership. Defence and universities could develop their relationships to support veterans at university and also to align defence skills and experience with civilian credentials.

There are opportunities for Defence to ensure that rehabilitation providers are aware of the programs that support higher education in the military and of the ASVA. Defence only has one provider to educate and this learning could form part of the contract.

The UK, like Australia, has an Armed Forces Covenant. These Covenants are intended to encourage the general community to recognise and acknowledge the unique nature of military service and, hence, mitigate some of the military–civilian divide. Australia could follow the example of the UK and encourage the higher education sector to support student veterans in accessing the sector through developing veteran-friendly programs and services. Key recommendations are:

- Establish a national policy for veteran access to higher education (e.g., GI Bill).
- Defence to establish equal opportunity for higher education for all ranks and corps and to support all members to undertake higher education as part of their transition planning if desired.
- Develop a national framework for credential mapping between Defence and universities (higher education).
- Defence, DVA, DESE and the higher education sector establish a national student veteran working group to evolve veteran access and engagement in higher education.

- DVA and Defence to widen its engagement and support for higher education as an important transition pathway.
- Engage the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) in the assessment and support of student veterans.

## Universities and the higher education sector

Universities across Australia are developing their awareness of student veterans and their higher education potential. A smaller number of Australian universities are actively supporting student veterans through specific veteran entry programs and support mechanisms. There is room to continue evolving this support and to develop nationally consistent approaches to including all veterans in higher education. Consistent with recommendations from previous DVA-commissioned reports (Harvey et al., 2018; 2020) higher education institutions should offer specific programs and pursue veteran-friendly campuses. ATAR recognition could be easily adopted by TACs across all states and territories to provide an equitable university entry pathway for military veterans, regardless of which state they separate from the military and reside.

Not many Australian universities actively recruit student veterans. Admission processes, and transition support could be tailored more effectively to support veterans entering university. There are a number of Australian universities that have developed these policies and processes which can inform a national take-up of student veteran support. One ongoing challenge for veterans seeking to study at university is the recognition of their military skills and experience. A DVA-funded ACU project is addressing this matter with universities and with TACs. Once on campus, veterans are usually supported by existing transition and equity services if there are not veteran-specific supports. Universities, however, do not always know who a veteran is: veterans experience the culture gap between the liberal university and command and control of the Military and are not always comfortable to disclose their veteran identity. Subsequently, universities do not record data on student veterans which makes it difficult to plan and strategies for this population group. Universities could also work to reorient their dispositions to accommodate veterans more fully.

This reorientation could be developed by improving university leadership around student veterans. Existing academics who are veterans could take up these roles. Existing students could adopt mentor and liaison roles to support new and existing students during orientation and their first year of study. The campus climate could be enhanced for student veterans by supporting student veteran associations, peer support, and veteran designated spaces. Key recommendations are:

- Universities and TACs to develop a national tertiary admissions framework for veteran admission to university that equates with ATAR scores and recognises military skills and experience within university admissions policies and processes.
- Develop flexible timetabling and study plans for veterans to support university engagement, attendance, retention, and degree completion.
- Universities to establish veteran-specific entry programs.
- Develop a veteran identifier in university admissions processes.
- Provide student veteran access to transition skills and opportunities including financial, health, career and counselling support.
- Record demographic, study pattern, performance and completion data on student veterans.

- Reorient universities toward student veterans' needs, including study plan flexibility, staff education on student veterans and veteran-sensitive university processes.
- Emulate university support pathways such as "elite athlete programs" to identify, promote and support the needs of veterans studying at university.
- Universities to provide scholarships and financial support opportunities for student veterans.
- Support the presence of ASVA chapters on campus.
- Build university leadership support for supporting student veterans.
- Coordinate campus support for all veterans, including the establishment of veteran support officers.
- Universities to create designated spaces on campus for student veterans.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics approval for focus group interviews

From: Human Research Ethics human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au  
Subject: 8591 ETHICS approval notice (10 March 2020)  
Date: 10 March 2020 at 2:09 pm  
To: Ben Wadham ben.wadham@flinders.edu.au, Piper Bell piper.bell@flinders.edu.au, Aidan Cornelius-Bell aidan.cornelius-bell@flinders.edu.au

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Dear Ben,

Your conditional approval response for project 8591 was reviewed by the Chairperson of the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) and was approved. The ethics approval notice can be found below.

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### APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:

Project Title:

Principal Researcher:

Email:

Approval Date:  Ethics Approval Expiry Date:

The above proposed project has been approved on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided with the addition of the following comments.

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#### Additional comments:

1. [Permissions / Other Committee Approvals \(Conditional approval response #8 and item D8\)](#)  
A reminder to please submit a copy of the ethics approval from the Department of Defence and Veterans Affairs Human Research Ethics Committee on receipt.

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#### RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

##### 1. Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.
- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.
- the SBREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

## Appendix B: Participant information sheet



**Associate Professor Ben Wadham**  
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Social Work  
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ben.wadham@flinders.edu.au  
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### INFORMATION SHEET

(for University Staff / Focus Group)

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**Title:** 'Veterans in Higher Education'

#### Researchers

Associate Professor Ben Wadham

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work  
Flinders University

08 8201 3358

Dr Melanie Takarangi

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work  
Flinders University

08 8201 5405

Dr Brad West

School of Creative Industries

University of South Australia

08 8302 4545

#### Description of the study

This study is part of the project titled 'Veterans in Higher Education'. This project will investigate the ways in which South Australian universities admissions processes, including recognition of prior learning, timetabling, veteran identifiers, and retention strategies; and university transition and foundation programs, including their curriculum and targeted response to student veterans. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work and the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University.

#### Purpose of the study

This project aims to identify:

1. institutional awareness of student veterans and their needs;
2. university admissions processes, including recognition of prior learning, timetabling, veteran identifiers, and retention strategies; and
3. university transition and foundation programs, including their curriculum and targeted response to student veterans.

#### What will I be asked to do?

You are invited to attend a seminar presentation at Flinders University (City Campus) on the subject of "Veterans as an Equity Group" in higher education. The aim of the seminar is to facilitate discussion (in a focus group) about student veterans and university. This focus group will ask you questions about your institution's policies and practices related to the recruitment, retention and support of student veterans. The focus group will take about 45-60 minutes. The focus group will be audio recorded. The recording will be transcribed (typed-up) and stored as a computer.

#### What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?

inspiring  
achievement

The focus group will offer the opportunity to share your institutions practices around student veterans, and to learn about how other higher education providers are supporting student veterans. This activity will also provide you as a transition or equity officer in a university with valuable information and context on veterans as a student equity group.

**Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?**

Due to the nature of focus groups you cannot remain anonymous. All participants are asked to keep the names and details of other participants to themselves. In any resulting report and research publication, any identifying information will be removed, and your comments will not be linked directly to you. All information and results obtained in this study will be stored in a secure way, with access restricted to relevant researchers.

**Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?**

Other focus group members may be able to identify your contributions even though they will not be directly attributed to you. The researcher anticipates few risks from your involvement in this study.

**How do I agree to participate?**

Participation is voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions, and you are free to withdraw from the focus group at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate please read and sign the form and return to the researcher via email, or in person prior to the commencement of the focus group.

**How will I receive feedback?**

On project completion, outcomes of the project will be sent to all participants via email. Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### Veteran Equity Focus Group

*Does your university have any existing programs or support services specifically targeted to veterans? [If yes] Can you please describe these programs/services?*

1. How does your institution govern and service student recruitment and admissions?
2. How does your institution address student equity?
3. What kind of equity groups do you work with in your current role?

*How can we encourage more veterans to consider university? (Probe: outreach programs, financial support)*

1. What is a veteran? How do we understand veterans in Australian society?
2. Do you think that university is likely to be a popular option for veterans?
3. What sort of veterans would be likely to come to university? Do you think it would be open to every veteran?

*What can we do to help veterans have a smoother transition to university study? (Probe: pathway programs, foundation courses, credit for prior learning)*

1. Does your university host a veteran foundation course, or veteran entry pathway?
2. What roles does your university have for supporting student transition to university?
3. Are there special considerations you make for student groups beyond the standard equity groups
4. Are you aware of / do you work actively with veteran students?
5. How do you support student veterans to transition to university?
  - a. Are there any particular challenges you face when supporting veterans?
  - b. Are there any advantages to working with veterans?

*How can we make universities more 'veteran friendly'? What pathways, enrichment programs, and support services could be provided?*

1. Do you know of veterans that attend your university?
2. Does your university identify veterans when they are admitted?
3. Do you advertise to the veteran population?
4. Can you describe some of the institutional processes employed to support student transition, in particular any policy or practices around veterans?
5. Can you describe some things that you have found important in supporting students' transition? Are any of these specifically tailored to veterans?
6. Would you characterise veterans as an equity group?
7. Does your university have plans to develop or enhance services for student veterans?

## **Appendix D: DVA-funded grants**

### **La Trobe 2018 - DVA Supporting Younger Veterans Grant - Supporting younger military veterans to succeed in Australian higher education**

This research project was led by La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research. Funding was provided by the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs through the Supporting Younger Veterans grants program. The project was undertaken in collaboration with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA). The purpose of the project was to develop national research into younger veterans in higher education. The researchers sought to answer three research questions: 1. What barriers do younger veterans face in accessing higher education? 2. What are the experiences of younger veterans enrolled in higher education, including their strengths and challenges? 3. How can universities better support younger veterans to access, and succeed in, higher education? Data were collected via a national survey of ex-service personnel who had accessed higher education after serving in the ADF.

### **La Trobe 2019 - DVA Supporting Younger Veterans Grant - From the military to the academy: supporting younger military veterans in Australian higher education**

This research project was led by La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research. Funding was provided by the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs through the Supporting Younger Veterans Grants Program. The project was undertaken in collaboration with the ASVA, ACU, CDU, and Western Sydney University. While the project commenced in April 2019 and concluded in January 2020, changes have been embedded into university practices and policies to ensure impacts are sustainable.

The aim of the project was to increase access and support of student veterans in higher education. Student veteran support coordinators were recruited across the partner universities in 2019. The coordinators worked to: increase recruitment and identification of veterans on campus; provide tailored support and advice to student veterans; and embed support for student veterans in mainstream university practices. Institutional websites were developed, providing information and links about the range of support and services available for current and prospective student veterans. Case studies were prepared for each partner university, which document approaches and achievements. Higher education guidelines were also developed for academic and professional university staff working with student veterans. The team also advocated changes to university application processes so that ADF experience and prior learning could be more consistently recognised.

### **Flinders 2019 - DVA Supporting Younger Veterans Grant - Veterans at University**

The College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Flinders University in partnership with the William Kibby VC Shed, in South Australia, will develop and run a program to provide support for younger veterans seeking to undertake tertiary education. This project will establish the foundations for a long-term tertiary education support pathway for younger veterans. The process will involve research to contribute to national understanding of transition challenges, and the role of tertiary education for military personnel. The project team are experts in service transition experiences, PTSD, mental health and tertiary education. The William Kibby VC Veteran's Shed have a strong national reputation in reaching out to Veterans and supporting them across Australia. There were two key aspects

to this project which included 1) the development running of the Military Academic Pathway Program (a unique foundation studies program specifically for veterans) which included the establishment of the Australian Student Veterans Associate Flinders Chapter, and 2) interviews with student veterans on higher education as a transition pathway. The program was nominated as a finalist in the Defence Industry Awards 2020.

### **ACU 2020 - DVA Supporting Younger Veterans Grant - Credit where it's due**

This project will create an Australian-first tertiary credit mapping framework for assessment and recognition of military training within university-level studies. This will be achieved by assessing Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) within the ADF Initial Employment Training and promotion courses within a CPL framework. This will enable Veterans to have their ADF Record of Service assessed for CPL during entry into university studies, ensuring that Veterans receive tangible benefit for, and comprehensive recognition of, CLOs achieved under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) within the Defence Registered Training Organisation (RTO). This will enable accelerated graduation timelines, where appropriate, in recognition of learning achieved through ADF courses completed during service.

## Appendix E: Tabulated results of review of university-based programs

Table 1. Veteran entry and support programs offered by Australian universities

	Location	University	Veterans Entry Pathway?	Veteran-specific preparation program	Has the preparation program been run before?	General Preparation Program (especially if no veteran-specific program)	Veteran-specific support programs whilst at university?	ASVA member (Facebook page or on Vet Connect)
1	South Australia	University of Adelaide	N	N		Y - University Preparation Program	N	Y
2		University of South Australia	N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	Y - Veterans Engagement and Education Program Uni Prep Briefings	N - was scheduled to run in 2020 but now they are just linking people to online resources	Y - Foundation Studies	Veterans Engagement and Education Program, Mentoring program, SoldierOn Pathways networking event, Invictus Pathways Program	
3		Torrens University	N	N		N	N	N
4		Carnegie Mellon University	N (US campuses accept GI Bill benefits)	N		N	N	N
5		Flinders University	Y - via MAPP	Y - Military Academic Preparation Program	Y - twice	Y - Foundation Studies	Y - Mentoring programs	Y



6	Victoria	Australian Catholic University	Y - Veterans Entry Program (converts training and years of service into an ATAR)	Y - Veterans Transition Program	Y - pilot ran mid 2020	N - but do run some for specific programs (eg Tertiary Preparation Program for Health Sciences)	Student Veterans Support Program	Y
7		University of Melbourne	N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N		Y - Diploma in General Studies	Provide support for defence reservists, who can get study adjustments if called to serve	Y
8		La Trobe University		N - general application form has veterans tick box though	N	Y - Tertiary Preparation Program	guidelines for staff about working with student veterans and strongly recommend joining ASVA La Trobe chapter on veterans specific web page	Y
9		Victoria University		N	N	Y - Foundations at VU Program	N	N
10		Monash University		N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N	Y- Monash Access Program	N	Y
11		Deakin University		N	N	N	N	Y

12		Federation University (Ballarat)	Listed as Ballarat University on Equity grant documentation	N	N	Y - Foundation Access Studies Program	N	N
13		RMIT		N	N	Y - Foundation Studies	N	Y
14		Swinburne University		N - but recognise prior workplace learning	N	Y - Unilink diploma	N	N
15		University of Divinity		N	N	Y - Diploma of Theology	N - but provide special provisions (eg extensions etc.) for military service reasons	N
16	New South Wales	Western Sydney University	N	N		Y - Pathway Programs run by Western Sydney College	Y - Aug 2020 established a student veteran support officer. Also have a webpage outlining all available (though general) services	Y
17		University of Sydney		N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N	Y - Tertiary Preparation Certificate, University Preparation Program, Open Foundation Course	N - but recognise military service as a reason for special arrangements to be made re: assignments	Y
18		Macquarie University		N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N	Y - Next Step Program	N	N

19		University of Wollongong	N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N		Y - University Access Program, UniNow Enabling Pathway Program (for mature age students specifically)	N	Y
20		Charles Sturt University	Y - Experience Matters Entry Program (converts training + 2 years experience into ATAR for entry to most undergraduate courses)	N		Y - Charles Sturt University Pathway	N - but special considerations if studies interrupted by military service	Y
21		Southern Cross University	N	N		Y - Preparing for Success Program	N	Y (Gold Coast Chapter)
22		University of New South Wales	N - but do have UNSW Veterans Scholarship (and accepts GI Bill)	N		Y - University Preparation Program	N	Y

23		University of New England	N - but do have at mature age entry program where you can write a case showing your prospects for academic success	N		Y - Pathways Enabling Course	N	Y
24		University of Newcastle	N	N		Y - Open Foundation	N - but are an ASVA member	Y
25		UTS		N	N	Y - UTS InSearch	N	N
26	Queensland	Griffith University		Y - through QTAC	N	Y - Bridging and enabling programs, Griffith college	In development - dedicated Student Veteran Liaison officers to connect new students with other student veterans. Promotes ASVA	Y
27		University of Queensland	Y - through QTAC	N		Y - Tertiary Preparation Program	N	Y
28		Central Queensland University	Y - through QTAC	N		Y - STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies)	N - but do have a partnership with the ADF where they run Diploma and Bachelor of Logistics	Y
29		James Cook University		Y - through QTAC	N	Y - Tertiary Access Course	N	Y

30		Bond University		Y - through QTAC	N	Y - Bond University College Diploma Preparation Program	N	N
31		Queensland University of Technology	Y - through QTAC	N		N - but do have bridging programs in physics, chemistry, and maths	N	Y
32		Sunshine Coast		Y - through QTAC. Also have the Coloundra RSL Sub-Branch Scholarship to support a veteran with studying expenses ( <a href="https://www.usc.edu.au/study/scholarships/merit-scholarships/caloundra-rsl-sub-branch-scholarship">https://www.usc.edu.au/study/scholarships/merit-scholarships/caloundra-rsl-sub-branch-scholarship</a> )	N	Y - Tertiary Preparation Program	N	N
33		University of Southern Queensland	Y - through QTAC	N		Y - Tertiary Preparation Program	N	N
34	Western Australia	Murdoch University		N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N	Y - OnTrack & FlexiTrack	N - Have student support program to the ADF but only for current members	N
35		UWA		N	N	Y - Western Australian Universities Foundation Program	N	N
36		Edith Cowan University		N, but recognise prior work experience	N	Y - UniPrep course	N	Y

37		Curtin University		N	N	Y - UniReady Enabling Program	N	N
38		University of Notre Dame	N	N		Y - Tertiary Pathway Program	N	N
39	ACT	ANU		N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N	Y - University Preparation Program	N	Y
40		University of Canberra		N, though US students can use GI Bill benefits	N	Y - UC College Prep Program	N	Y
41	Tasmania	University of Tasmania		Y - Australian Defence Force Higher Education Advance Standing ( <a href="https://www.utas.edu.au/study/important-info/adfheas">https://www.utas.edu.au/study/important-info/adfheas</a> ). General entry met by successful completion of Defence issued vocational certificates	N	Y - University Preparation Program	N, but offers flexible study arrangements for ADF students	N
42	NT	Charles Darwin University	N - not sure the details but offer courses to current ADF and recognise prior military learning for former ADF	N		Y - Tertiary Enabling Program or Preparation for Tertiary Success (aimed at indigenous students)	Y -web page aimed at former and current ADF personnel outlining available services ( <a href="https://www.cdu.edu.au/adf">https://www.cdu.edu.au/adf</a> )	Y