



## **From the military to the academy: supporting younger military veterans in Australian higher education**

January 2020

### **ENQUIRIES**

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# Executive Summary

In 2018 we conducted the first major national research into the experiences of military veterans in Australian higher education. That research revealed that veterans typically 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. Despite these strengths, we found a number of barriers that impede access to higher education. Veterans have relatively high rates of unemployment, and many have suffered physical injuries and/or experienced trauma during their service. Formal support to transition from the military to higher education is relatively low, and many veterans spoke of the complexity of university admissions processes, and of a paucity of information and advice. Others addressed the issue of campus climate, believing that universities were not welcoming places for those who have served in the military.

In addition to these challenges, our research identified that Australian 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. At a policy level, we also noted that Australia had no GI Bill like the United States, nor an Armed Forces Covenant to which many universities had committed, like the United Kingdom. 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 simply not been documented.

In this project we sought to address the aforementioned barriers and challenges through institutional change and advocacy. As a consortium of four universities, in collaboration with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA), we developed strategies to improve university access, achievement and experiences. Generously supported by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and involving the employment of student veterans throughout the project, we changed our admissions processes to recognise and reward service; increased our academic, financial and pastoral support to veterans on campus; and worked to create new ASVA chapters to facilitate peer support. While focussed on change within our own institutions, we also continued to advocate for consistent and supportive admissions approaches by the state-based tertiary admissions centres, and for further support to veterans transitioning out of the military. At the time of writing, multiple tertiary admissions centres have either progressed or concluded processes to acknowledge military service as a formal admissions criterion.

This report outlines our strategies, including 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. Based on sectoral consultation and the voices of student veterans, we have also developed national guidelines for professional and academic staff. These guidelines address the need for: a coordinated institutional approach, 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; and broader university support, including disability and health services, financial support, career development, and flexible study arrangements. We also note 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.

# Section 1: Introduction

## Project background

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, Australian Catholic University, Charles Darwin University, 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 Australian Defence Force experience and prior learning could be more consistently recognised.

## Report structure

Our report begins by providing brief context around the strengths and needs of student veterans in Australian higher education. We then present case studies for each partner university. The case studies outline the approach taken by each university to increase support for student veterans, and document project achievements and learnings. We subsequently provide higher education guidelines developed for academic and professional university staff working with student veterans. The guidelines are designed to be read and shared as a standalone document.

## Context

Approximately 5,500 members discharge from the ADF and return to civilian life each year (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). We do not know how many veterans transition to higher education nor the subsequent success and outcomes of those who do, but our previous research suggests that veterans are under-represented, and historically there have been limited incentives for them to pursue university pathways (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018). One of the major policy challenges is a paucity of data around veterans in higher education, and addressing this challenge is central to further reform.

Younger veterans – those who served in the Australian Defence Force after 1999 – are often considered to be a unique group (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2019). The year 1999 marks a time when military operations started to change and intensify, with deployments to East Timor, followed by other major deployments, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. There are an estimated 316,900 living Australian veterans, including 58,300 who served in post-1999 conflicts in East Timor, Solomon Islands, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2017a). The younger veteran cohort has grown substantially over the past decade, while the overall veteran population has decreased. For younger veterans in particular, who have many years of civilian life and employment ahead, higher education can be an important pathway to assist with this transition.

For the purpose of this report, we define a student veteran as any person who has served in the Australian Defence Force (Navy, Army, and Air Force) and who is in higher education (Australian Student Veterans Association, 2019). We use the term collectively to include members who have discharged, as well as currently serving members and reservists.

Our previous research highlights that student veterans bring a range of valuable skills, experiences, and perspectives to their studies in higher education (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018). These findings are consistent internationally, with a number of studies confirming the specific skills and characteristics held by student veterans (Lechuga & Woodruff, 2016; Lim, Interiano, Tkacik, & Hewitt, 2016). As a group, student veterans are typically skilled in time management, discipline, leadership, organisation, and teamwork. Those who regularly interact with other students of different backgrounds and beliefs are also likely to have relatively high levels of civic engagement and positive attitudes to learning (Tilman & Eagan, 2016). Equally, the presence of student veterans can add to the diversity of ideas and beliefs within the student body and result in a richer intellectual environment.

Despite possessing valuable strengths, student veterans face substantial obstacles to accessing and succeeding at university. Transitioning out of the military can be difficult for many veterans, who face an increased risk of unemployment, disability, and mental ill health (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2017b; Van Hooff, 2018).



Australian universities do not recognise prior service and military and civilian qualifications acquired with transparency or consistency across the sector (Harvey et al., 2018). There is no equivalent GI Bill in Australia to provide tuition waivers and cost of living support, and the career transition assistance provided to veterans has typically not sufficed to support higher education pathways. Once enrolled, veterans also often experience identity dissonance during the transition from the role of soldier to the role of student, and may experience feelings of isolation and invisibility on campus (Lechuga & Woodruff, 2016). It is therefore important to create 'veteran-friendly' universities, which are supportive and welcoming to student veterans and designed to harness their strengths and capabilities.

At one level, the desire to raise veteran access to, and success in, higher education reflects acknowledgement of the importance of service to the nation. However, there are also important arguments of fairness, social cohesion, learning value, and economic value that inform the need for policy reform. Our previous research highlighted that many veterans possess both formal credentials and informal skills that are not being appropriately recognised by higher education institutions (Harvey et al., 2018). Easing access barriers to university is partly a matter of better documenting and translating the skills and credentials acquired in service. US research suggests that veterans have similar university completion rates to non-veterans once enrolled (Cate, 2014), suggesting that access is often limited by formal and informal barriers rather than any lack of academic preparedness or capacity.

On the question of social cohesion, it is notable that transitioning veterans face disproportionate risks of mental health issues and are over-represented among people with a disability. Indeed, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2019) found that the age-adjusted rate of suicide is 18 per cent higher for ex-serving men than Australian men. This trend is particularly concerning since men who are currently serving in the ADF have a suicide rate that is 48 per cent lower than Australian men (AIHW, 2019). The individual and community costs of mental health issues are well documented, as are the health benefits of higher education. Providing clear and supported transitioning pathways would improve the overall mental and physical health outcomes for the veteran community.

Less well documented is the value that student veterans bring to the learning community and climate of university campuses. US research on minority influence theory and inclusive excellence confirms the importance of diverse perspectives and experiences to the richness of learning and classroom discussion (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). Similarly, our own previous research with Australian student veterans revealed that many veterans are aware of how their experiences can strengthen classroom discussions, intellectually challenge students, and enrich the learning environment (Harvey et al., 2018).

Finally, the need to raise veteran access to university is an economic imperative, both for veterans and the broader society. Internationally, higher education is proven to improve employment prospects and earnings, and American research reveals that veterans with Bachelor degrees earn an average of \$17,000 USD more each year than their non-veteran counterparts (Institution for Veterans and Military Families, 2017). The graduate wage premium in Australia also remains substantial (Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018). There exist multiple arguments for increasing veteran access to university, and institutional action is now required alongside policy reform. In the following section we highlight our individual institutional approaches to meeting this ethical, social, learning, and economic imperative.

## Section 2: University case studies



### Student veterans in higher education

#### Case study: La Trobe University

##### About La Trobe University

In 1967, 552 students enrolled at La Trobe University, the third university to open in Victoria. Located in Melbourne's north, the Bundoora campus now caters to over 26,000 students. La Trobe's multi-campus network also extends throughout regional Victoria, with campuses in Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Mildura, Shepparton, as well as Melbourne city (Collins Street) and Sydney. The University is structured around two colleges - the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce, and the College of Science, Health and Engineering.

La Trobe is a member of the Innovative Research Universities, a coalition of seven comprehensive universities committed to inclusive excellence in teaching, learning, and research. The University has a long history of commitment to social justice. The Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) is specifically dedicated to exploring student equity within and beyond the institution.

## A coordinated approach

### Research

In 2018, La Trobe's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) conducted the first major national research project on student veterans in Australian higher education. The project, '[Supporting younger veterans to succeed in higher education](#)', was undertaken in collaboration with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA). Funding was provided by the Department of Veterans' Affairs through the Supporting Younger Veterans Grants Program. As part of the research project, 240 student veterans completed a survey about their strengths, needs, and experiences.

The research highlighted how student veterans bring a range of useful skills, experiences, and perspectives to their higher education studies. Student veterans were found to be skilled in time management, discipline, leadership, organisation, and teamwork. At the same time, many student veterans faced obstacles to accessing and succeeding at university, including financial stress, mental health issues, and competing priorities. The final report provided recommendations for higher education institutions and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to improve the recognition and support of student veterans in higher education.

### Central point of contact

From 2019, La Trobe University has employed two designated Student Veteran Support Coordinators to: act as a single point of contact for student veterans; provide general information and advice about university life; offer individualised academic support; provide direct referrals to university support services; and organise social events and facilitate connections between student veterans. The Support Coordinators are situated at La Trobe's Bundoora and Albury-Wodonga campuses.

### Student veteran webpage

La Trobe University has developed a webpage that details, and links to, the support that is available for student veterans both on and off campus. The [Support for Student Veterans at La Trobe](#) webpage includes: contacts details for the Student Veteran Support Coordinators; advice on how to apply to the institution; links to financial support for which student veterans can apply; links to academic support services and resources; links to a range of additional support services; and links to external organisations that can provide additional assistance and support, including the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA).

## Transition to university

### Applications and admissions

La Trobe successfully advocated for the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) to introduce a tick box on its 2020 course application form to capture data on current and former members of the Australian Defence Force. In 2019, the University has also developed processes for identifying student veterans, including an optional veteran tick box on direct application forms, as well as within the StudentOnline system. As of January 2020, 25 student veterans had indicated their veteran status via these means.

### Student Excellence Academy

La Trobe recognises the strengths that student veterans bring to their studies and will automatically invite them to join the [La Trobe Student Excellence Academy](#) from 2020 onwards. The Student Excellence Academy recognises and rewards diverse forms of excellence and provides enrichment opportunities. Benefits include: tailored leadership development programs; targeted careers support; priority access to industry mentoring and work placements; opportunities to represent the University at national and international events; and connection to a network of outstanding students at the University.

### Disclosure of veteran status

La Trobe has processes to allow individuals to disclose their veteran status at application, enrolment, and after commencement of study. The University proactively contacts student veterans to provide information about the range of enrichment activities and support available. With permission, data are collected on student veterans, including their geo-demographic characteristics, course preferences, success rates, and outcomes, which can help design and tailor support systems.

### Preferential access to university timetables

La Trobe implements preferential access to university timetables to increase attendance and engagement for student veterans.

## Interactions with staff and students

### Peer groups

La Trobe University has a dedicated [Vet Connect](#) online forum for student veterans, which is administered by the Australian Student Veterans Association. Student veterans studying across all campuses of La Trobe can engage in online discussions and provide support and advice to each other.

### Professional development

Throughout 2019, La Trobe has established a network comprising approximately 20 academic and professional staff members who have worked closely with student veterans, and/or who are veterans themselves. Opportunities are also being sought to invite prominent veterans to give guest presentations in 2020.

### Career development

La Trobe recognises that student veterans can struggle to fully articulate their skills and experience to attract employers in diverse fields. Student veterans are specifically encouraged to participate in events and activities designed to increase their employability, for example:

- [Incl\(us\)ion Forums](#), where employers showcase internship and graduate pathways for students from diverse backgrounds;
- the [Industry Mentoring Program](#), where students are matched with an industry professional in a 12-week mentoring relationship;
- [Unitemps](#), which provides flexible paid work opportunities across La Trobe campuses and with industry.

## University support

### Financial assistance

Student veterans studying at La Trobe can apply for various forms of financial assistance, including:

- The Australian Student Veterans Association and Melbourne Legacy's [Education, Training and Upskilling Grant](#) for student veterans who are studying in Victoria and require direct family support.
- La Trobe University's [Mildura Returned Services League \(RSL\) Scholarship](#) for students studying at the Mildura campus who are veterans or descendants/spouses of veterans.
- The [La Trobe Access Scholarship](#) for students who can demonstrate financial hardship and/or educational disadvantage.

The University's Alumni and Advancement team is also sourcing additional funding for student veterans from philanthropic organisations and individual donors.

## **Student veterans in higher education**

### **Case study: Australian Catholic University**

#### **About Australian Catholic University**

Established in 1991 after amalgamating four eastern Australian Catholic tertiary institutes, Australian Catholic University (ACU) now has seven campuses, from Brisbane to Melbourne, and welcomes students of all beliefs. Specialising in arts, business, education, health sciences, law, theology and philosophy, ACU encourages its students to think critically and ethically and bring change to their communities.

ACU is committed to supporting the dignity and well-being of people in a manner that is sustainable and builds capacity at individual and/or organisational levels. There is a particular focus on working with communities who have experienced disadvantage and/or marginalisation. Student veterans experience significant disadvantage and are less likely to achieve higher education and/or employment than their same-age peers.



## **Collaborative approach**

Reflective of ACU's holistic commitment to our student veterans, all units of the University collaborate to develop, provide and promote our student veteran program. The advisory group includes the Vice President, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education and Innovation, Chief Operating Officer and Pro Vice-Chancellor Engagement. We provide regular updates on the program to the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Senate and Executive Planning Group.

## **Central point of contact**

From 2019, ACU has employed designated student veteran administration staff to: act as a central point of contact for student veterans and prospective students; provide information and advice about balancing studies and university life; provide referrals to the University's support services. ACU's student veteran administration staff are primarily based on ACU's Brisbane campus.

## **Student veterans web content**

ACU has developed web content that explains, and connects to, the support initiatives available to student veterans on and off campus. The Veterans Entry Program [webpage](#) includes a direct application pathway for student veterans. Future students can apply to study for courses on all ACU's campuses, including postgraduate studies. The Student Veterans Support Program [webpage](#) provides information on support services, resources, advice on how to apply to the institution, and links to academic support services and resources. Information about the student-run Student Veterans Association (SVA) can be found on the internal Student Portal website. As members of the SVA, students will be involved in decision making about student veteran affairs both on their local campus and nationally.

## Transition to university

### Veterans Entry Program

ACU's Veterans Entry Program (VEP) enables current or former members of the Australian Defence Force the opportunity to apply directly online to ACU. Once students have applied, their military service is individually assessed, which is then converted to a rank (similar to an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank - ATAR). This rank is then matched with the requirements of an undergraduate or postgraduate course and an offer is made. Completion of general training in the Australian Defence Force with two years' experience (regardless of military rank held) will provide entry into most ACU bachelor degrees. Additionally, in recognition of leadership and management capabilities of officers in the Australian Defence Force, ACU offers unconditional entry into the:

- Graduate Certificate in Business Administration;
- Graduate Certificate in Occupational Health, Safety and Environmental Management;
- For unconditional entry, applicants will need to hold the equivalent rank of O-1 or above, Chaplain, or E06 or above for non-commissioned officers.

### Prospective students and admissions

All future students who apply through the Veterans Entry Program (VEP) are identified as a student veteran and automatically become eligible for the Student Veterans Support Program (SVSP). Students have the option of remaining anonymous and all information is kept confidential. Current student veterans can register for the SVSP through ACU's Student Portal or through sending proof of service to the SVSP email address. As of December 2019, a total of 34 prospective students have applied to study at ACU through the VEP. Over 30 current students have registered for the SVSP.

## Support

### Student Veterans Support Program

Launched on Monday 26 August 2019 on ACU's Brisbane campus, the national Student Veterans Support Program (SVSP) provides ACU student veterans with access to a range of support services and academic resources to help ease the transition into university life. The program is open to all who have completed or are in the process of completing a term of military service. As part of the Program:

- students can negotiate their study around external or service commitments;
- requests to lecturers and course coordinators for academic adjustments will be supported (where evidenced) by the SVSP team;
- students will have access to early timetabling;
- students can apply for an extension on assignment deadlines where needed, with support from the SVSP team;
- ACU Health Clinic offers ACU student veterans an initial free Physiotherapy assessment and treatment, as well as ongoing discounted treatment;
- the Career Development Service offers career planning, job search, application reviews, interview coaching and more;
- student veterans get access to Wisewould Mahony Lawyers for basic legal advice at no cost. Wisewould Mahony Pty Ltd is an Australian law firm with over 150 years of experience in providing individual and corporate legal services.

## Engagement with staff and students

### Student veteran employment

From 2019, ACU has employed a designated student veteran to: work as a single point of contact for other ex-service students and prospective students; develop student veteran support initiatives; organise and run social events for students; refer students to other student support services on campus; network with external organisations; develop quarterly newsletters; and manage student veteran administration. The student veteran employee is currently located at the Brisbane campus and works three days per week.

### Student development

ACU acknowledges the attributes that student veterans bring to the university community and encourages them to engage in on-campus events and leadership opportunities. Student veterans have been sponsored to attend NatCon, the Student Veterans of America National Conference, including one student veteran in 2019 and two student veterans in 2020. NatCon is the largest gathering of student veterans in the world and runs a number of management workshops. On returning to Australia, students are equipped to facilitate the running of the Student Veterans Association and assist other student veterans to navigate their studies.

From 2020, ACU will offer student veterans specific academic skills workshops, giving students the knowledge and skills relevant to their degree. These workshops also familiarise student veterans with campus resources and facilities to support them throughout their studies.

### Career development

The Student Veteran Support Program is committed to student career development and will host events in 2020, in collaboration with ACU's Career Development Service. Queensland students may also be referred onto QLD RSL to participate in their employment program. This program helps ex-Defence members and their partners who are looking for work through career counselling, training and development, and helps with interpreting selection criteria, writing CVs, application letters, interview coaching, and developing their social media profiles.



## **Student veterans in higher education**

### **Case study: Charles Darwin University**

#### **About Charles Darwin University**

In 2014 Charles Darwin University celebrated 25 years of higher education in the Northern Territory (NT). Encompassed within this history was the opening of the NT's first university, the Northern Territory University (NTU) in 1989. The NTU was Australia's first ever dual sector university – helping deliver vocational education and training, and higher education. In 2003 it was decided that a new university would be created by merging the NTU, Centralian College in Alice Springs, and the Northern Territory Rural College in Katherine, and a partnership with the Menzies School of Health Research to form Charles Darwin University (CDU).

CDU has established itself as a progressive research-intensive university with a regional focus that prioritises the complex issues and challenges facing Northern Australia and the Asia-Pacific. CDU has developed cross-disciplinary research teams, as well as partnerships and collaborative relationships with external agencies to build world-class research capability.

CDU is one of the fastest growing, modern dual sector tertiary education institutions in Australia. Over 20,000 enrolled students are located throughout Australia, over 11,000 of them are in higher education, and over 7,000 of them study externally and online. CDU provides flexible and innovative programs and partnerships built on social justice, sustainability, creativity and collective effort. These principles provide a strong foundation for processes and procedures that release potential for student veterans' careers post-service.

## **The military landscape in Australia's Top End**

The Northern Territory has been of strategic importance to the Australian Defence Force (ADF), including during the Second World War and the Bombing of Darwin. At present, NT is home to all of the ADF's three services – Navy, Army and Air Force. The Top End of the NT also plays host to approximately 2,500 US Marines from the USMC Air-Ground Task Force.

The Top End, also encompassing the Katherine region, is host to many Australian Defence Force (ADF) members and their families. Approximately 12,000 ADF members, or 8.1 per cent of the total ADF and their families, call the NT home. To house many of these members and their families, there are over 1,800 Defence-managed properties in the NT, mainly situated in Darwin and Katherine. Moreover, the wider NT community benefits from Defence industry, with more than 5 per cent of national Defence expenditure in the NT.

CDU is ideally placed to meet the learning needs of the military community, the student veteran community, and military family. It is located in a modern garrison city, Darwin, with a footprint in Sydney, another large garrison city. The University is a dual sector institution, delivering mixed mode (face-to-face and online) learning. This flexible mode of delivery suits many serving members and their families, during times of military exercises, deployment, or postings. For those no longer in the military, CDU provides online learning as they navigate post-discharge life at their own pace.

## **A coordinated approach**

### **Existing research**

Prior research leading to this consortium approach to case studies of student veteran transitions into higher education noted that student veterans bring a range of useful skills, experiences and perspectives to their higher education studies. Student veterans were skilled in time management, discipline, leadership, organisation and teamwork. At the same time, many student veterans faced obstacles related to higher education access, success, and completion (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019), including financial stress, mental health issues and competing priorities. The final report provided recommendations for Australian higher education institutions and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to improve the recognition and support of student veterans in higher education. Many of these recommendations have provided the foundation for Charles Darwin University's coordinated response to supporting younger veterans in higher education and leveraging external partnerships, research and employment opportunities for younger veterans.

This case study was also guided by the following:

- the *Northern Territory Charter for Veterans* that ensures an approach grounded in the realities of veteran assistance in the Territory;
- research that indicates education is central in times of transition: home to school; between education institutions; from school to work; taking up roles in community; and, within and between workplaces, as exemplified by the transition experienced by student veterans;
- the University's strategic plan and the role of the military in Australia's Top End;
- Darwin to be the site for one of six potential Veterans' Wellbeing Centres currently under discussion.

### Central points of contact

Universities and military organisations are complex, their internal workings are not always transparent to outsiders, and this adds to the complexity of pathways and partnerships. Significant restructuring produced a Strategic Plan *Connect Discover Grow* (2010) based on an integrated approach to teaching and learning, research, engagement, Indigenous leadership and internationalisation. Each of these five pillars supports the potential for greater engagement with student veterans and their families. Within the consortium of case studies Charles Darwin University is somewhat unique. No other single Australian university serves such a large area of the continent, in such a remote location and with such a small population to sustain it. It is a dual sector University and the only university based in the Northern Territory. This arrangement of economic, educational, business, and cultural factors requires coordination of the flow of legislative and policy information, which spans both the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education sectors, as well as navigating distinct differences between the two sectors' annual scheduling calendars.

Embedding the project across the pillars of *Connect Discover Grow* was critical if student veteran support was to be a whole of University realisation rather than a project outcome. The aim was to clarify existing entry points, foster current networks and build collaborative dynamics that would be sustained long after the project ended. Meetings supported staff to concentrate on the deliverables from this project – enhancing student veteran enrolments and the student veteran experience – while keeping the long-term goal in mind: a student veteran friendly university culture that would encourage collaboration and grow student veteran pathways.

To achieve this goal, we established a close working relationship with CDU's *Student Engagement and Success* (SES) portfolio. The portfolio covers a wide range of services including student support, counselling, career services, student group governance, access and inclusion, and policy matters related to these areas. The portfolio is central to creating an environment that addresses core stages of the student veteran lifecycle: recruitment and access to university; retention during a

program of study; engaging with university life and successfully graduating; and post-graduation issues such as employment, career development and ongoing alumni opportunities.

Early project activity connected staff across the higher education and VET sectors, meeting with CDU 'old hands' who drew on a wealth of experience and inducting recent staff appointments to the specific context of CDU's veteran-friendly aspirations. To achieve this, early meetings followed the flow of information associated with the student veteran lifecycle within the University, in order to:

1. Understand the roles and functions of internal stakeholders at CDU;
2. Map staff's internal knowledge of the admissions and enrolment processes;
3. Identify aspects of those processes that worked for and against student veterans;
4. Provide updates from the national project consortium where relevant;
5. Convene meetings with CDU staff, student veterans and Defence stakeholders;
6. Establish relevant goals across internal departments;
7. Establish essential conditions to improve student veteran pathways.

In total four project officers, three of whom were younger student veterans completing studies at CDU in Engineering, Exercise and Sport Science, and general doctoral studies, were employed to develop four related components of the overall project:

1. Consultation, networking and clarification of existing practices internal and external to CDU;
2. Development of a student group (CDU Student Veterans Group) within the overall framework of CDU's governance structures, legal requirements, financial support for student groups and social media (Facebook page);
3. Refresh a dormant Australian Defence Force CDU website which had lost its currency; and
4. Develop a closer relationship with CDU's alumni office to leverage future opportunities.

CDU had existing relationships with Defence stakeholders, including membership on the NT Government Veterans' Advisory Council, research networks, and other interstate networks and partnerships, including with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA).

Political, economic and education interests are significant drivers in achieving this inter-institutional knowledge exchange to respond to student veterans' needs within a larger Territory framework of building the economy for northern Australia.



## CDU's Australian Defence Force website

The scope and layering of the above relationships underscored the need for a whole of cycle approach to supporting student veterans and adopting a 'student veteran friendly' interface in a context where the decision-making in each institution – Defence or education – is largely obscure to their outside worlds. Hence the project was also underpinned by an ethos of promoting the cultural knowledge of organisations and sharing how they can support younger student veterans with accurate information to make sectoral, career and personal transitions.

The [CDU ADF webpage](#) provides a landing platform for student veterans, academics, researchers, veterans' families and serving members to access accurate and current information about higher education (and pathways to higher education) in the context of CDU's dual sector, transformative approach to learning based on engagement across the full range of supports available to university students.

## Transition to university

Meetings with senior staff in the SES portfolio provided a profile of challenges faced by a regional university. CDU sits squarely at the centre of one of the nation's most ambitious plans for future development in growing northern Australia's potential as a trade gateway to Asia and supporting a range of Defence initiatives. A focus on people capability *and* the human infrastructure required for successful access, success, graduation and post-completion draws on knowledges from across professional units, has explicit and shared structures and processes to share knowledge, and disseminates accurate information via accessible digital platforms.

## Applications and admissions

Collaborative centralisation relied on working closely with the SES portfolio and their *Student Administration* team to understand insider and outsider perspectives on the student veteran experience. This involved tracking processes with staff, identifying points of data capture, reflecting on the specific organisational characteristics of CDU and mapping existing points of contact. Four successes were achieved or are in progress pending approvals: tertiary admission policies; accurate and relevant information; equity policies; and scholarships.

## Tertiary admissions policies

CDU has a long history of supporting credit transfer, advanced standing and recognised pathways into VET or higher education courses (<https://www.cdu.edu.au/student-central/advanced-standing>). VET staff have progressed Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mapping for Defence and RPL packages. However, initiatives for automated recognition of qualifications for military service (such as that progressed in Queensland and NSW) provided new avenues for higher education courses. As a result of internal policy discussions, and the dissemination of information from this project, CDU senior admissions staff have acted as follows:

- drafted a policy change which takes a prospective student veteran's highest military rank and assigns an ATAR equivalent;
- pending approvals, initiated a time frame for policy implementation prior to CDU's 2021 South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) schedule deadline.

## Accurate and relevant information

CDU's whole of cycle approach includes procedures that provide support to younger veterans, their families and external stakeholders who employ them. At each point in their engagement with the University they can now:

- engage with admissions staff who are more informed on how to support younger veterans;
- access information and funding available through the national association ASVA;
- join (in 2020) a CDU Student Veterans Group (SVG) to support their voice regarding student veteran affairs;
- contact 'champions' who have expertise about student veteran pathways through CDU.

Enrolled student veterans, and those who attend recruitment sessions, have access to the ASVA flyers and sign-up sheets located at:

- all CDU Student Central shopfronts at Casuarina, Waterfront, Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs;
- Student Central stalls during CDU's Discover CDU community open day.

Professional and academic staff provided advice in development of the webpage content on the refreshed ADF link on the CDU homepage.

## *Equity*

In keeping with CDU's cross-professional approach to student veteran support, meetings often include a cross-section of departments. Equity Services sits within SES and their team works with other SES teams responsible for access and inclusion leadership, career and employment advice, and the accumulated expertise to systematically address gaps in equity, career advice and inclusion knowledge. This cross-professional approach was further consolidated by connecting with Defence stakeholders such as the Defence Community Organisation (DCO) and Defence Families of Australia (DFA) (NT). This approach produced a new lens for reviewing the extent to which student veterans were indeed included in equity policies. This was particularly relevant given that some access and inclusion services such as study 'Access Plans' are only activated upon self-identification as a member of an equity group. Suggested actions from these meetings covered:

- an equity self-registration process, whereby at registration students can identify as a 'student veteran';
- equity policy wording which is more explicit about serving and ex-serving members as students (e.g. remove 'Defence Reservists' wording) as a stand-in for current military identification;
- attendance of CDU staff at DCO-hosted Defence-related events such as 'Welcome to the Top End,' and ADF Transitions Seminars, to improve awareness of challenges military members and their families face during transition and particularly when posted to the NT;
- conduct events with organisations such as Open Arms Counselling Service, DCO, and the Soldiers Well-Being Centre to consolidate University and external agency support for student veterans and military families.

## *Scholarships*

CDU's dedicated Scholarships webpage

(<https://www.cdu.edu.au/scholarships/scholarships-finder>) provides access to a range of generic scholarship opportunities supporting younger veterans. Meetings with the Scholarships team identified ways to promote this information more visibly to veterans, through CDU's refreshed ADF webpage and the CDU SVG. Scholarships are at the discretion of external agencies and during the life of the project we have identified additional avenues of support for student veteran scholarships including ex-service organisations such as Soldier On, and the United States GI Bill, which provides opportunities for US veterans to study in Australia, thus opening up options for international partnering. The Scholarships team have noted an additional 'location' category – defence – which can be added to the page pending access to information about relevant scholarships.

## Peer support

This whole of cycle approach requires a range of support mechanisms, sometimes just in time, sometimes formally embedded in structures to address the needs for all involved in the student veteran journey.

### *CDU Student Group*

CDU supports student groups with many objectives – in this case the information flow that provides voice for student veterans and to a certain extent the broader veteran community. Defence initiatives, as well as the employment possibilities involved in northern Australian economic and social development, mean the latter is always an important part of CDU's student veteran experience. According to University by-laws student groups are recognised once applications have been approved by University Council. A formally constituted veteran group was not part of the CDU Student Group infrastructure prior to this project. This presented another gap in the flow of information between students, available resources within the University and access to national resources such as those provided by ASVA.

The SES portfolio steered the successful development of governance paperwork to propose a *CDU Student Veteran Group*. The group held an inaugural meeting in November 2019. CDU has a largely online student community, and operates on a three semester system, which meant that, while there was substantial interest, many members could not attend an on-campus meeting due to either residence or class scheduling conflicts. The inaugural meeting comprised a mix of current CDU student veterans, staff with a military background, and student veterans based in Darwin but studying through a different institution. The project officer leading this work developed a *CDU SVG* Facebook page @CDUStudentVeterans. There were four outcomes from this meeting:

1. Confirmation that SES would support the *CDU Student Veteran Group* in its early transition;
2. A second meeting in January 2020 to formalise the application to SES, approval by University Council and clarification of the group aims, required infrastructure, SES financial support for the 2020 activity program (required in February 2020) and consolidated action plan for future development;
3. Expressions of interest for office bearer positions and a decision to delay formal constitution of the group until the second meeting in January;
4. Interim feedback to SES and the project team regarding support for student veterans across the University:
  - a) clarification of fee waiver conditions and scholarship conditions for VET courses such as food and trades;
  - b) create self-identification processes for student veterans;
  - c) establish student veteran reciprocal membership with other universities with delivery responsibilities in the Top End (e.g. Flinders University medical program);

- d) explore mentoring programs with military units located in Darwin to support serving members considering pathways to higher education; and
- e) identify and recruit foreign nationals in line with University policy and sustainability of the group.

### *Alumni*

CDU's Alumni unit reaches out to past students to support their ongoing professional development and engagement with the University community. Alumni Relations is a small portfolio within SES, and they worked with this project to explore the potential for communication with CDU student veteran alumni. Using LinkedIn's Sales Navigator software and search terms such as 'Past Company' (for example: Australian Army; Royal Australian Air Force; Royal Australian Navy) and 'School' (for example: Charles Darwin University) returned a result of 232 matches. A project officer will undertake one-on-one follow-up and provide the Alumni Office with a list of past students with military connections. In combination with University-wide progress towards a student veteran friendly institution, this strategy will enable CDU to build mentoring connections between alumni and current student veterans, as well as the broader military community.

The baseline of alumni contacts, a regular insert in CDU's Alumni Newsletter, and the emergent database of self-identified contacts from this project and from future admissions, will provide more systematic methods of communication between the University, Defence stakeholders, and veterans. The success of this initiative will rest on the degree to which alumni are attracted to potential benefits such as post-graduation online learning, access to online library services and mentoring and career development programs, which have already received substantial interest in surveys administered by the Alumni Office.

### **Networking**

Student veteran support consists of many networks. To kick start a broader conversation, in October 2019 over 50 people were invited to a networking breakfast hosted at CDU. More than thirty attendees participated, including the NT Government Assistant Minister for Veterans' Affairs, student veterans – both CDU and non-CDU – CDU academics with a military background or interest, senior staff from Robertson Barracks, representatives from the DCO, CDU senior managers and professional staff in operational areas including marketing, equity, careers, and access and inclusion. Course guides, flyers and University research and promotional material were provided. Four student veterans, the Commander 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and the NT Assistant Minister for Veterans' Affairs were all invited to speak about: the importance of veteran and student veteran pathways; military qualities that helped their approach to study; how CDU, or Defence, assisted their studies; how CDU and ASVA can assist prospective student veterans; and advice for prospective student veterans thinking about university study.

Feedback from the event included the need for:

- more regular networking events to attract prospective student veterans;
- more information on CDU courses and information on how full-time military members can make part-time study viable e.g. flexible study options;
- opportunities for Defence industry to collaborate with CDU researchers;
- collaboration with DCO – guest speakers, seminars, events that include military families and children;
- active involvement with the ADF Transitions Seminars;
- opportunities for CDU staff to visit Robertson Barracks;
- scheduled study periods, with academic supports, for current serving student veterans at Robertson Barracks; and
- VET programs for military spouses to achieve RPL.

Feedback was collated and returned to participants with a commitment to begin 2020 with another networking event.

### *Discover CDU Day*

Discover CDU is a community day where the University opens up to the public and displays the range of expertise, partnerships, and teaching and learning collaborations generated from a local university. Displays of material and resources, speakers, and the Student Central unit play an important part in distributing information. In 2019 ASVA flyers and a sign-up sheet were available to prospective students and student veterans. Three CDU student veterans volunteered their time to talk with interested visitors and prospective students on the day.

### *ADF Transitions Seminar*

ADF Transitions Seminars are an important means of hearing issues military members face in the period of transition and enabling University staff to have a greater awareness of how to respond to these issues. The project team worked with University events and recruitment staff to share news of the project, its aims, and to advertise the upcoming CDU ASVA Networking Breakfast taking place the following week. Attendance also generated networks with other organisations who support veterans and military families.

## Engagement with staff and students

### *Research seminars*

Drawing on the research conducted at CDU, academics advised on: initiatives to strengthen Defence-University partnerships and create a culture of active pathways between courses; and research and industry partnerships to support student veterans and their families in transition or through times of mobility.

Seminars and meetings with University staff responsible for research partnerships raised the following:

- Technology, health and wellbeing, and information processing are key partnership areas;
- Partnerships provide opportunities for casual employment for undergraduate and graduate student veterans and provide an inside view of employment opportunities within the University;
- CDU staff participating in meetings agreed that a University/Defence webpage was a good starting point for information about Defence-related events, the CDU SVG, updates on Defence-related projects, and a way to connect researchers with Defence interests, potential doctoral candidates and industry collaborators.

### *Student veteran employment*

The University has no specific database to identify employees with military service, however in assembling information and conducting events for this project we identified ways to build a database without breaching privacy. While the project is primarily about supporting younger veterans into higher education, CDU, as a dual sector University, provides a contemporary way of linking traditional concepts of training and education through innovative pathways that seem to be attractive to serving members and veterans. Engineering, accounting, business administration and health and human science are examples uncovered during this case study.

In terms of employment during 2019, CDU employed three student veterans on this project. Additional student veteran and military staff have been employed as guest lecturers, invited speakers, doctoral supervisors and casual marking assistants in a range of CDU colleges. While these are mostly casual appointments, the consolidation of a database of student veterans will assist staff working on Defence and other projects to access research assistants and project officers. Launching the CDU student group in 2020 will provide a further portal to build this database.

## **Creating the conditions for a student veteran friendly university**

A university committed to developing a student veteran friendly culture involves drawing together some unusual partnerships between academics, researchers, student recruitment teams, admissions staff, content managers and marketing and media. The scope of these partnerships is consistent with contemporary ideas about the role of universities as engaged sites of teaching and learning (extremely relevant when providing student pathways) and the importance of research translation to stakeholder communities in the digital world.

### **Deliverables**

The project achieved five deliverables which will be approved and publicly accessible in early 2020:

- A CDU Student Veteran Group;
- A Defence-related website on CDU's main portal;
- A flyer advertising the proposed CDU ASVA chapter;
- Proposed amendments to admissions, equity and policy documents, and terminology; and
- More systematic networking with military stakeholders, CDU staff and external veteran support agencies.





## Student veterans in higher education

### Case study: Western Sydney University

#### About Western Sydney University

Western Sydney University (WSU), spread across eleven campuses (Hawkesbury, Penrith, Parramatta City, Parramatta South, Bankstown, Liverpool, Lithgow, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney City, Campbelltown and Nirimba), caters for the Greater Western Region of Sydney. WSU has nearly 50,000 students and 3,500 staff. It is currently ranked in the top 300 universities globally. The University comprises a number of schools including: Business; Computing, Data and Mathematical Sciences; Education; Engineering; Health Sciences; Humanities and Communication Arts; Law; Medicine; Nursing and Midwifery; Psychology; Science; and Social Sciences. WSU is also home to seven research institutes and five research centres. The mission, vision and values of WSU are tied to its location in Greater Western Sydney. Serving a population that is diverse in terms of demographics, culture and ethnicity, WSU is committed to securing success for students through innovation in research and teaching. Equity and inclusiveness, social responsibility and the primacy of the student experience are key to the mission and success of the University. Veterans and their families are well represented in the Greater Western Sydney Region. We recognise the strengths and contribution that they can make and are committed to optimising the student experience at WSU for their future success.

## Underpinning principles

The project has adopted a strengths-based approach; thinking about what student veterans have to offer as well as what their needs might be. Student veterans may experience some challenges but also bring rich skill sets and leadership capability. These assets can be utilised in a number of ways to assist building employability and supporting the transition from serving in the Australian Defence Force (for example through engagement in mentoring other students).

*Student Veterans in Higher Education @WSU* is a project that builds on existing initiatives. Committed to social justice and inclusion, the University has existing policies and practices that reflect this commitment. This commitment means that the potential responses to the needs of student veterans need not be dramatic; nevertheless, they do need to be responsive to the particular contexts in which the student veterans find themselves (for example, working full time while studying; juggling work, study and family commitments). In this spirit, we have a focus on early wins, with a natural evolution into broader changes. Ongoing refinement and development of the student veteran experience will be shaped by ongoing data capture, feedback and continuous improvement.

Finally, a student-centred approach is critical. Only student veterans themselves understand the experience of transitioning into civilian and academic life. The University needs to create opportunities for student veterans to tell academic and professional staff what they need, remembering that not all student veterans want to identify themselves or get involved.

## A university-wide approach

WSU is adopting a university-wide and systemic approach to ensure focus and success in supporting veterans. This includes advocating for tailored support and advice for veterans and embedding support in mainstream university practices to promote sustainability of these practices across time. Within specific activities, including admissions, enrolment and course advising, supporting student progression and success, a number of tactics will be employed, including:

- a systematic approach of outreach to veterans as potential students using a range of marketing and media strategies (e.g. a dedicated contact webpage);
- providing infrastructure to develop student peer-to-peer support mechanisms;
- raising awareness of the value of veterans' service and skills and how they can add value to their course choices and progression.

Sustainability of these activities rests on driving innovation in a measured and evolving way. This approach is accomplished by firstly ensuring that the policy frameworks of the University accommodate the specific needs of veterans. Secondly, the University will develop and implement processes characterised by the ease of accessibility by veterans. Thirdly, work will be directed towards creating

awareness amongst staff so they are able to be responsive to the unique challenges for student veterans. These changes will touch many business units of the University. Building networks and commitment to shifts of policy, practice and language is proving to be a gradual process. Over time, the changes that we are seeking to make will transition from something new to business as usual.

## **Pathways for student veterans**

WSU has well-defined tertiary education pathways, with the potential capability for early offers to student veterans based on prior qualifications and work experience. The challenge for veterans is in some cases to provide evidence of prior experience. Some changes to policy and wording of templates may be required.

Ongoing internal advocacy and consulting in the area of tailoring current application and enrolment systems for veterans will continue through the first half of 2020. These discussions will include consideration of what sort of supporting information the Australian Defence Force is able to provide and how that fits with Advanced Standing/Recognition of Prior Learning requirements. Underpinning this advocacy is a consideration of what policies will best position student veterans for success.

## **Data on student veteran applications**

NSW Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) has an identifier for veteran applicants. WSU direct admissions are processed through UAC so are also covered by this identifier. WSU is currently introducing a new SMS - student database, and veteran status is now flagged for inclusion. This step will be useful for data collection.

It is estimated that there are currently 60-70 veterans studying at WSU. In the period 2016 – 2019 inclusive, 14 WSU offers were made to veterans, behind Macquarie University at 17 and UNSW at 16. Applications and offers in 2019 were down on previous years.

## **Progress on early wins with deliverables**

### **Introducing and strengthening peer support networks**

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

Discussions between ASVA and WSU are well advanced for the creation of a formal student group – an ASVA chapter. Contingent on numbers, this chapter will commence operation in early 2020. It will provide a strong peer community for student veteran support as well as a reference and advocacy group for service improvements across the University. The chapter mechanism and process is in place and successful registration is contingent on identifying 10 current student veterans as foundation members. Contact has been made with identified student veterans. Two of these students have provided written feedback on their experience as a student at WSU.

### *Web presence*

In early 2020, a [web page](#) is being launched as an initial contact point, and evolving into a 'go to' access point for student veterans to access services and opportunities at the University.

## **Focus on tailored and embedded support**

### *Staff and student training*

We have secured in principle agreement with the Student Counselling Service for inclusion of student veteran-relevant material in a staff training module. A Mental Health and Wellbeing Module has recently been created, under the umbrella of Student Experience, aimed at professional and academic staff, to enable effective engagement with students. It is envisaged that this module will be adjusted to include veteran specific references/resources. Advice has been sought and received from a veteran psychologist clinician on this matter.

Discussion will follow in relation to other modules aimed at professional and academic staff to assist in dealing with student wellbeing and safety.

### *Student Veteran Coordinator*

In early 2020, we are recruiting for a Student Veteran Coordinator position to sit within the Office of Employability and Graduate Success. This position will maintain the web page, and provide a point of contact, information and advice, and referrals to services across the university.

### *Career Transitions for Student Veterans*

The WSU Career Education unit offers a workshop for student veterans, focusing on transferable skills, career options, and building resume and LinkedIn profiles.

## **Support and collaboration across the University**

Creating a policy and cultural change across the University touches on all business units and schools. We are engaging in advocacy across the University and this is ongoing. Supporters and collaborators at the time of writing range across the Office of Student Experience, Counselling, Careers, Admissions, Marketing and Schools. Marketing has provided a project plan from a Marketing perspective.

## **Exploring new sites for university outreach activities**

### **LinkedIn alumni search**

In conjunction with Office of Employability and Graduate Success, both LinkedIn Navigator and manual searches have been deployed to locate WSU alumni/ADF veterans in the work force. Alumni veterans have been identified, and invited to participate via our Alumni Mentoring program and as an advisory group.

## Defence Community Organisation Transition Seminars

The Defence Community Organisation is running 30 one-day seminars nationally throughout 2020 for exiting ADF personnel (commencing May 2020). WSU Marketing has been approached to support these events through provision of relevant materials.

## Timeline

The School of Education will continue its role in promoting this project through Semester 1 2020. A draft report with recommendations will be completed by June 2020, for approval by the University Executive. The intention is to hand over the ongoing operationalisation of the initiative to the Office of Student Experience midway through 2020.

## **Section 3: Higher education guidelines**

### **Guidelines for professional and academic staff working with student veterans**



## Higher education guidelines for professional and academic staff working with student veterans

January 2020

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# Higher education guidelines for professional and academic staff working with student veterans

The following guidelines are designed for professional and academic staff working with student veterans in the Australian higher education sector. For the purpose of these guidelines, we define a student veteran as any person who has served in the Australian Defence Force (Navy, Army, and Air Force) who is in higher education (Australian Student Veterans Association, 2019). We use the term collectively to include members who have discharged, as well as currently serving members and reservists.

The guidelines are informed by the national project, 'From the military to the academy: supporting younger military veterans in Australian higher education' (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, Wyatt-Smith, Jones, Shore, & Simons, 2019). The project was led by La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR), in collaboration with the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA), Australian Catholic University, Charles Darwin University, and Western Sydney University. The guidelines have also been shaped by a previous research project, '[Supporting younger veterans to succeed in higher education](#)', conducted by CHEEDR in collaboration with ASVA (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018). As part of the research project, 240 student veterans completed a survey about their strengths, needs, and experiences. While both projects were focussed on public universities, many of the recommendations in these guidelines could also be applied to non-university higher education providers.

## Background

The Department of Veterans' Affairs considers younger veterans - those who served in the Australian Defence Force after the year 1999 - to be a unique group (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2019). The younger veteran cohort has grown substantially over the past decade, while the overall veteran population has decreased. For younger veterans who have many years of civilian life and employment ahead, higher education can be an important pathway to assist with this transition.

Increasing the access and support of student veterans in higher education is beneficial for student veterans, university communities, and broader society. Student veterans bring a range of valuable skills, experiences, and perspectives to their studies in higher education. As a group, student veterans are typically skilled in time management, discipline, leadership, organisation, and teamwork (Harvey et al., 2018). The presence of student veterans can add to the diversity of ideas and beliefs within the student body and result in a more stimulating and creative intellectual environment.

At the same time, student veterans face obstacles to accessing and succeeding at university. Transitioning out of the military can be difficult for many veterans, who face an increased risk of unemployment, disability, and mental ill health (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2017a; Van Hooff, 2018). It is important to create 'veteran-friendly' universities, which are supportive and welcoming to student veterans and designed to harness their strengths and capabilities. With the appropriate support systems in place, higher education can become a valuable pathway to assist veterans to successfully transition into civilian life and rewarding employment.

# A coordinated approach

## Wrap-around support

It is important for university services to work together to provide wrap-around support for student veterans. Wrap-around support requires strong links between a range of services, including academic, career, financial, student union, disability, health, and counselling services. Effective support is embedded into broader, sustainable practices where possible. Developing support services for student veterans requires understanding where support can be most effectively targeted, and it is best to include student veterans in consultations about their support needs and preferences.

The combination of wrap-around and embedded support can:

- provide sustainable support services for student veterans;
- encourage student veterans to utilise support services to promote student success;
- raise awareness about the strengths and needs of student veterans among university staff;
- raise the profile of student veterans within the student body; and
- create an inclusive environment and foster a sense of belonging for student veterans on campus.

## Central point of contact

Some universities have a designated Student Veteran Support Coordinator who is typically employed to:

- act as a single point of contact for student veterans;
- provide general information and advice about university life;
- offer individualised academic support;
- provide direct referrals to university support services; and
- organise social events and facilitate connections between student veterans.

Current student veterans and graduates can be ideal candidates for these roles given their firsthand experiences of navigating the university environment as student veterans.

## Student veteran webpage

It is useful to have a university webpage that details, and links to, the support that is available for student veterans both on and off campus. The webpage could include:

- contacts details for the Student Veteran Support Coordinator;
- advice on how to apply to the institution, including pathway programs such as bridging/enabling/foundation courses;
- links to financial support for which student veterans can apply, including bursaries and scholarships;
- links to academic support services and resources, including details about academic advisors;
- links to a range of additional support services, including career services, disability services, counselling services, and childcare services; and
- links to external organisations that can provide additional assistance and support, including the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA).

Examples of university webpages for student veterans:

Australian Catholic University	<a href="#">Student Veterans Support Program</a>
Charles Darwin University	<a href="#">Australian Defence Force</a>
Charles Sturt University	<a href="#">Experience Matters</a>
La Trobe University	<a href="#">Support for Student Veterans at La Trobe</a>
Murdoch University	<a href="#">Student Support Program to the Australian Defence Force</a>
University of Tasmania	<a href="#">Australian Defence Force Higher Education Advance Standing (ADFHEAS)</a>

# Transition to university

## Outreach

Universities can specifically tailor outreach activities to veterans, especially at the point of transition out of the Australian Defence Force. Staff and students can deliver a range of university-related activities at off-campus locations to increase understanding of higher education study options. Activities that bring participants to university campuses can help familiarise participants with university environments and inspire interest in specific disciplines.

Activities can be designed and delivered in collaboration with the Australian Defence Force, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and/or organisations, such as the [Australian Student Veterans Association](#), [Soldier On Australia](#), [Mates4Mates](#), and other [ex-service organisations](#).

## Pathways

Student veterans can be less likely than other students to experience a smooth transition to university, often struggling with the perceived contrast between military and university life.

(Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019)

Student veterans often struggle with differences between the rigid and hierarchical structure of the military environment and the relatively loose structure of the higher education environment. These differences can leave student veterans feeling under-prepared for university.

Pathway programs, including bridging/enabling/foundation courses, which are completed before commencing study, might prove helpful for some student veterans. Flinders University has a veteran-specific pathway program, the [Military Academic Pathway Program \(MAPP\)](#).

Transition support can be particularly useful for student veterans and can include:

- orientation to campus;
- connection to support staff;
- introduction to peers; and
- identification of study and career goals.

## Applications and admissions

Research shows that as many as half of student veterans apply to university via tertiary admission centres and half via direct application. The Australian Student Veterans Association is working with state-based tertiary admission centres to develop a consistent national scheme for converting Australian Defence Force experience into university entry ranks. At the time of writing, methods for assessing the experience and qualifications of veterans in university applications differ between states and universities.

For veterans applying to university through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC), Australian Defence Force experience is converted into a specific entry rank, which is accepted by all Queensland universities. For example, veterans who have Australian armed services general training and two years post-training experience are assigned an entry rank of 82. The Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) administers the NSW Veteran Education Schedule, which recognises military service in university admissions. At the time of publication, however, the converted entry ranks are not universally accepted by all universities. The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) includes a tick box on its course application form to capture data on current and former members of the Australian Defence Force. At the time of writing, however, VTAC does not employ a system for converting military service to entry ranks.

Some universities consider student veterans a priority group within admissions and have developed processes for identifying and rewarding military experience. Examples include:

- Australian Catholic University has an additional [Veterans' Entry Program](#) where military service is converted to an entry rank, similar to an ATAR.
- ADF personnel and reservists applying to the University of Canberra are eligible for [bonus points](#) to compensate for the manner in which ADF commitments have affected study.
- La Trobe University includes an optional veteran tick-box on direct application forms, as well as within the StudentOnline system, to offer support to these students and monitor their success.

## Disclosure of veteran status

Several higher education institutions have processes to allow individuals to disclose their veteran status at the point of application and/or enrolment to university, or after commencing study. These universities can pro-actively contact student veterans with information about the range of enrichment activities and support available. With permission, data can be collected on student veterans, including their geo-demographic characteristics, course preferences, success rates, and outcomes, which can help design and tailor support systems.

Introducing a method of identifying student veterans through application and/or enrolment processes requires the coordination and approval of staff across university divisions, including staff from senior management, admissions, and student information systems.

Consideration should be given to terminology, as not all veterans identify with the term 'veteran'. A question such as 'Are you a current or former member of the Australian Defence Force?' is likely to capture more students, than a question such as 'Are you a veteran?'.

Student veterans may consider identifying themselves for a variety of reasons, such as obtaining access to specific support services and joining peer groups. Some student veterans, however, might prefer not to disclose their veteran status to staff or other students. Please also refer to the section on 'Classroom discussion and organisation'.

Australian research found that approximately one third of student veterans disclosed their veteran status to their university (Harvey et al., 2018). Common reasons for disclosing this information included supplying standard employment history, seeking credit for prior learning, and seeking access to support services. The remaining two thirds of student veterans who had not disclosed their veteran status cited reasons such as never having been asked, not viewing it as relevant, and seeing no benefit to disclosure. These findings underline the need for universities to offer clear and tangible benefits to veterans, and to develop veteran-friendly campuses.



## Credit for prior learning

Research has found that student veterans are not consistently receiving appropriate credit for their prior learning in the ADF (Harvey et al., 2018). Approximately half of the student veterans we surveyed had earned civilian qualifications from ADF service, yet only one fifth of these students received credit towards university study (Harvey et al., 2018).

Student veterans should be proactively encouraged to apply for advanced standing or recognition of their prior learning. They should be supported through the relevant processes by appropriately skilled staff such as Student Veteran Support Coordinators, academics, and/or other support staff.

At the time of writing, the Australian Student Veterans Association is working on a national mapping project to streamline the credit for prior learning process across all universities.

## Preferential access to university timetables

Most student veterans are mature age students (i.e. over the age of 21), who are juggling extensive work and family commitments, with increased risk of mental health issues, disability, and complex medical needs. Institutions could consider preferential access to university timetables to increase attendance and engagement for student veterans.

# Interactions with staff and students

## Leadership roles

Student veterans often possess strong leadership, organisational, and teamwork skills (Harvey et al., 2018). These established skills can be harnessed through roles of responsibility and governance. Encouragement can be given to student veterans to contribute, and model, their skills by becoming:

- student representatives on university committees;
- members of student union councils;
- formal mentors to other students;
- participants in student ambassador programs.

Experience in the above roles can also support career development and be viewed favourably by future employers.

## Peer groups and social events

Many student veterans feel isolated during university study, and feel they have different experiences and perspectives than other students.

(Harvey et al., 2018)

Some university campuses have worked with the Australian Student Veterans Association to set up formal chapters to provide peer-to-peer support. These chapters are led and organised by student veterans. Friends and family members of student veterans, and supportive university staff, can also be encouraged to join and extend student veteran networks. Informal events, such as coffee catch-ups and barbeques, can help form social connections in a relaxed atmosphere. It can also be helpful to identify student veterans who have made the transition to higher education successfully and invite these students to consider roles such as being mentors.

Networking online can be useful for student veterans, many of whom study online and/or have little time to spend on campus. The Australian Student Veterans Association administers [Vet Connect Forums](#) where student veterans studying at the same university can engage in online discussions and provide support and advice to each other.

### **Student voice**

*"ASVA has been a useful support service and sort of "brains trust" of people in similar situations who can advise on issues they have similarly faced."*

- Student veteran

Student veterans can also be encouraged to join other clubs and societies through student unions and associations. Clubs and societies foster relationships with a wider student group based on shared cultural, political, spiritual, musical, sport, and discipline-related interests.

## **Professional development**

Student veterans report a low level of appreciation and understanding of military experiences throughout the broader university community.

(Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019)

Evidence from the United States highlights the value of providing training for academic and professional staff to reduce confusion and stigma relating to the student veteran population (American Council on Education, 2018). Such training can prepare staff for managing the common strengths and challenges that student veterans bring to their study.

Student veterans can share insights from their own experiences, for example via meetings, workshops, and presentations. However, as highlighted by Kranke, Weiss, and Brown (2017), institutional education and training should aim to shift the burden so that "student veterans are not expected to don a cloak of responsibility for continually educating non-veteran students, faculty, staff, and administration" about their experiences (p. 33). Academic and professional staff members who have worked closely with student veterans, and/or who are veterans themselves, can also share their knowledge and experiences. Prominent veterans, who are external to the university, can also be invited onto campus for seminars and question-and-answer sessions.

There are some online training materials available that have been developed in international contexts. For example, [Student Veterans of America](#), in partnership with a company called [Kognito](#), created an online tool to improve military cultural competency among academics, professional staff, and students. The [PsychArmor Institute](#) also offers online courses for educators and support staff who engage with student veterans.

## Classroom discussion and organisation

Student veterans can be an asset in the classroom due to their high levels of motivation, maturity, and varied life experiences. Where a safe and understanding learning environment is created, student veterans may choose to share their military background and experiences with their fellow students. It is beneficial for discussions and activities involving student veterans to harness transferable skills developed through military experience, including time management, discipline, leadership, organisation, teamwork, and adaptability. Student veterans can be encouraged to model their leadership and problem-solving skills, for example, through group work that builds collaboration with other students.

### **Student voice**

*"The skills and qualities that I developed during my service in the Australian Army have assisted me immensely at university. These skills and qualities include:*

- *self-discipline*
- *strong work ethic*
- *a goal-focussed approach to tasks*
- *an ability to confront complex and difficult challenges*
- *an ability to adapt*
- *an ability to use initiative*
- *an ability to work as part of a team and lead teams."*

- Student veteran

It is important to use the learning environment to foster connections between student veterans and other students. Most student veterans have extensive work and family commitments, which can reduce opportunities for interaction with their peers outside of formal study time. Such circumstances can contribute to feelings of isolation and a sense of not belonging at university.

Differences in life experiences, attitudes, and political perspectives impact interactions with staff and students. Research shows that student veterans who share their military experiences in conversations with peers and staff, can feel stigmatised, undervalued, and misunderstood (Harvey et al., 2018). Any misconceptions and discriminatory views about student veterans that are shared during discussions should be engaged with critically. Respectful and considerate interactions with student veterans can encourage other students to challenge their beliefs and expand their worldview.

Consideration should also be given to appropriate content and physical arrangements when teaching student veterans, including those who have a disability and/or mental ill health. Staff can seek advice from disability services and health services who can work with student veterans and assess their needs. In general, it is best to notify students before the use of loud noises, sudden movements, or flashing lights. Such activities have the potential to agitate and distract student veterans and can trigger a stress response in individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (Sinski, 2012). It is also recommended that student veterans be allowed to sit where they feel most comfortable and secure, which may be near an exit or with their back against a wall. Preferential seating might be required for student veterans who have a disability. Students should be explicitly informed that they are free to leave lectures and tutorials at any time. Please also refer to the sections on 'Flexible study arrangements', 'Disability' and 'Mental health'.

## Terminology

Some terms and abbreviations that could be relevant in discussions with student veterans include:

'Active Reserve'	Status of a discharged individual, on 'Active Reserve' usually for a period of up to 5 years post-discharge i.e. can be called back to uniform
ADF	Australian Defence Force
Administrative discharge	Discharge from the Australian Defence Force via 'resignation'
ADC	Australian Defence College
ADFA	Australian Defence Force Academy
ADFTC	Australian Defence Force Transitions Cell
ARA	Australian Regular Army
ASVA	Australian Student Veterans Association
'Civi'	Abbreviation of 'Civilian', a person who is not a member of the Australian Defence Force
CTAS	Career Transition Assistance Scheme
DCO	Defence Community Organisation
DFA	Defence Family Association
DoD	Department of Defence
DRCA	Updated Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act (SRCA) legislation
DVA	Department of Veterans' Affairs
'Full track'	Colloquial term for Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO)
Medical discharge	Discharge from Australian Defence Force due to health (physical/mental) reasons
MRCA	Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NTS	Notice to show
OTS	Officer Training School (Royal Australian Air Force)

'Open Arms'	Veterans and Families Counselling (formerly VVCS); the Defence counselling service
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
'Re-tread'	Colloquial term for junior ranks or SNCO equiv. who have commissioned to Officer
RMC	Royal Military College
SNCO	Senior Non-Commissioned Officer
SRCA	Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence-related Claims) Act 1988
VEA	Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986
Veteran	In Australia, there is no universal definition of 'veteran'. For the purpose of these guidelines, we define a veteran as any person who has served in the Australian Defence Force (Navy, Army, and Air Force).

# University support

## Financial assistance

Approximately half of student veterans report that their study is negatively affected by financial circumstances.

(Harvey et al., 2018)

Student veterans in financial hardship might benefit from scholarships and bursaries to assist with the costs associated with studying. A small number of institutional scholarships exist, including:

- The Australian Student Veterans Association and Melbourne Legacy offer the [Education, Training and Upskilling Grant](#) to student veterans who are studying in Victoria and require direct family support.
- La Trobe University's [Mildura Returned Services League \(RSL\) Scholarship](#) is awarded to La Trobe students, studying at the Mildura campus, who are veterans or descendants/spouses of veterans.
- The [Gowrie Scholarship Trust Fund](#) is a postgraduate research scholarship which preferences past and present members of the Australian Defence Force. Gowrie Scholarships are managed by Australian National University and are tenable at universities in Australia and overseas.
- University of Tasmania's [RSL Women's Auxiliary \(Tas\) Honours Bursary](#) is open to Tasmanians who are descendants of Australian military veterans commencing Honours.
- The University of Melbourne offers the [John Balfour Memorial Scholarship](#) to Masters students in select disciplines, with preference given to current and ex-service personnel and their children.
- University of New South Wales offers an [Australian Graduate School of Management Military Scholarship](#) for its Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. The scholarship is open to applicants who are current or ex-serving members of the Australian Defence Force with a minimum of five consecutive years of service.



Financially subsidised accommodation services might be beneficial for some student veterans. On-campus accommodation services can potentially set aside a number of rooms for student veterans for each enrolment period.

Alumni and advancement teams may be able to source additional funding for student veterans from philanthropic organisations and individual donors.

## Career development

Careers services can be particularly important to student veterans who can struggle to fully articulate the valuable skills and experience gained in the Australian Defence Force to attract employers in diverse fields. Careers advisers can also help students to plan an approach to balancing work, study, and other commitments.

## Flexible study arrangements

Where academic staff provide flexibility for student veterans, this can provide a sense of understanding and autonomy, and reduce potential stress and anxiety associated with academic workload.

Many classes are recorded for students to listen to online. Students not wishing to attend meetings face-to-face could be offered alternative arrangements via telephone or video conference (e.g. Zoom, Skype).

## Special consideration

Some student veterans may be eligible for special consideration. At many universities, special consideration is provided and 'specifically intended to support students who have recently experienced **short-term**, adverse and unforeseen circumstances that substantially impacted on their ability to complete an assessment task to the best of their potential' (Special Consideration Policy, La Trobe University).

Special consideration forms, and other forms designed to enable compensation for educational disadvantage during exams and assignments, can require supporting documentation. It can be useful to familiarise and assist student veterans with special consideration processes.

Several universities have adopted special provisions for students who are members of Australian Defence Force Reserves to ensure they are not disadvantaged academically or financially as a consequence of participation in Reserve activities. These provisions include flexibility with attendance and assessment requirements, availability of study materials, and refund of fees.

## Disability

A relatively large proportion of student veterans (36 per cent) reported having a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition that might affect their studies.

(Harvey et al., 2018).

Disability support may be provided for long-term illness, whereby a reasonable adjustment may be sought. Some students may be able to access disability support, or an equivalent, rather than lodging a special consideration application for multiple assessment tasks.

## Mental health

Nearly half of student veterans (44 per cent) have mental health issues that negatively affected their study, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

(Harvey et al., 2018).

All students, including student veterans, should be made aware early in their studies that counselling services are available. Students should be encouraged to meet with a selection of counsellors, if possible, to find a good match.

Mental ill health may or may not be clinically diagnosed or documented. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression often manifest in unpredictable ways, preventing students from attending class, completing set tasks or sitting for exams.

When required, students may be put in direct contact with someone from the university's counselling services or Open Arms - Veterans and Families Counselling.

Open Arms - Veterans and Families Counselling – call 24 hours

1800 011 046

<https://www.openarms.gov.au/>

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