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Staying the Course: Strategies for Australian Student Veterans in Transition

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The transition from military to civilian life is often challenging for veterans. International research shows higher education to be an important pathway that can help veterans navigate this change and improve their psycho-social wellbeing and career prospects. In this article, we examine how student veterans are being recognised and supported in the Australian higher education context. Our research finds the range of governmental and institutional support for student veterans to be limited, and in contrast to nations such as the United States. Nevertheless, we find recent examples of veteran-specific pathways and programs, and a growing momentum for change among university staff. Along with clear opportunities for the expansion and coordination of existing support, we highlight the need for a national framework that recognises higher education as an option for all those who have served in defence of the nation. We argue that supporting veterans is not only an equity issue, but also a matter of recognising how the skills and experience gained in the military make veterans valued members of the university community.

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Transition from the military is often a difficult time for veterans. Challenges may include the loss of community, friendships, and status, as well as dealing with the impacts of service on psychological and physical health. The radical change from being part of a cohesive and structured environment within a military institution to an individual in an open civilian society is also a significant challenge (Albertson, 2019; Black & Papile, 2010). When leaving that institution, the veteran seeks a new pathway to a new life. Higher education is one pathway available to veterans to successfully transition to civilian life.

The Australian higher education sector can provide veterans with access to a wide range of career possibilities. Higher education in Australia is provided through registered higher education providers, including universities. The bachelor's degree is the main type of undergraduate qualification and typically involves three years of full-time study. The Australian Government operates the Higher Education Contribution Scheme–Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP), which allows students to defer the costs of tuition and not make repayments until income reaches a certain threshold (Parliament of Australia, 2017). The Indigenous, Regional, and Low Socio-Economic Status Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) is a supplementary grant program that funds universities to implement strategies to improve the access and participation of students from specific equity groups, namely Indigenous students, students from regional and remote areas, and students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment [DESE], 2022).

Veterans typically bring significant strengths to their studies, including strong discipline, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. These skills prepare many veterans to succeed at university, and their experiences and perspectives can also contribute to a richer learning experience for all students (Harvey et al., 2018). However, universities can also be a difficult place for veterans to integrate. University and military settings have a starkly different ethos and way of life.

In 2018, research by Harvey et al. revealed veterans to be largely invisible in Australian higher education. The researchers highlighted that, despite the unique nature of their experiences and needs, veterans were not identified as an equity group within the student equity framework, and thus did not receive specific support. In this research, it was further noted that veterans were a diverse group in terms of the skills and experience they brought to university, changing across service, corps, and type of enlistment. Further, universities, like industry employers, tended to have inadequate approaches to recognising the prior learning of student veterans. Since this research, a number of new initiatives have been introduced at selected universities across the nation.

In this article, we examine how student veterans are currently recognised and supported in Australian higher education and highlight opportunities for improvement. We begin by framing our research within the Australian context, noting the dearth of literature on student veterans nationally. We then explore international research that documents common challenges faced by veterans when transitioning from military to civilian life and, in particular, into the higher education environment. Subsequently, we describe the mixed-methods approach of our own research, which included: a review of government policy and support programs, a desktop review of university websites, and focus groups with university staff. Our findings confirm that support for student veterans remains limited and inconsistent. Nevertheless, we find recent examples of veteran-specific schemes, along with strong motivation for expanding this support. Finally, we discuss the implications of our research and provide insights for improving policy and practice.

CONTEXT

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) has responsibility for the health and welfare of veterans once they separate from the Australian Defence Force. The DVA defines a veteran as anyone who has served in uniform in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) full-time, for at least one day (Ashcroft, 2014). Australia has a relatively small Standing Force (approximately 58,000), which contributes to veterans being less visible as a group than in countries such as the United States, where a much larger percentage of the population undertake military service. While some Defence members are exposed to higher education during their training or through their careers (e.g., commissioned officers), others have no exposure to this environment at all (e.g., other ranks in some corps).

Approximately 5,500–6,000 veterans annually discharge from the military and transition back to civilian life. Most of these discharges are voluntary, with the largest proportion of transitioning members having less than 12 years of service (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2018). Some veterans, for example, those with long-term illnesses or permanent injuries accepted by DVA, can receive a range of support in the form of pensions, financial support, compensation, healthcare, rehabilitation, and counselling. Education and training are emphasised as important aspects in promoting the transition to civilian life. Education support is often vocationally oriented, however, and aimed at getting

transitioning members into the workforce in a short time frame. There is less support directed at assisting student veterans in higher education. University is then somewhat at odds under these current arrangements. The process of studying at university is also a process of rediscovering a new sense of identity, purpose, and belonging—more than just finding another job.

Research shows that student veterans comprise a unique group requiring targeted assistance during the shift to university culture and student life (Ackerman et al., 2009; Harvey et al., 2020). Literature also highlights the significant strengths that veterans bring to the university setting, including discipline, leadership, organisation, and persistence (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). A common consideration in the research is that student veterans can be hesitant to disclose their veteran status. This reluctance can be partly attributed to a lack of clear benefits of disclosure, but also due to mistrust and misalignment with political culture on campus, and fear of being stigmatised, treated "differently," and falling subject to stereotyping (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Elliott et al., 2011).

From an Australian perspective, research by Harvey et al. (2018) found a scarcity of government and institutional support for student veterans. The research revealed a low level of understanding and appreciation of military experience in university communities. In general, universities were not adequately recognising military service, military qualifications, or civilian qualifications undertaken during service. The researchers also highlighted that, within the higher education equity framework, there was no national policy or dedicated funding stream for student veterans.

The lack of focus on student veterans in Australia contrasts with international trends. The best-known veteran university participation model is the GI Bill in the United States. The GI Bill, established in 1945, enhances veterans' access to education. The original policy was primarily motivated to avoid the situation that followed the end of World War I: mass unemployment of veterans and a rise in social problems (Serow, 2004). In 2008, the GI Bill was amended to give additional educational benefits to those who had served since September 11, 2001 (United States Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2017). The amendment provided total funding for public four-year undergraduate education to a veteran who has served three years on active duty, including a living stipend. If the veteran had served ten years, they could transfer this benefit to their spouse or children, something added to the initial legislation to enhance recruitment and retention, rather than being a source of transition assistance. This intent is also reflected in the eligibility period to using the benefit being extended to 15 years after leaving active duty. With an increasingly competitive job market post 9/11, the GI Bill has seen an increasing number of veterans enrolling in higher education in the United States (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). There is also a range of institutional support for student veterans in the United States, including targeted outreach, academic support, counselling, academic credit for military training and experience, and financial assistance (Cook & Kim, 2012).

THE MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION

The literature on military to civilian transition is rich and growing. Yet, definitions of the term "veteran" vary between nations as they derive from particular historical and socio-cultural contexts (Dandeker et al., 2006; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Within nations, definitions can differ depending on the source and purpose. For example, use of the term can differ between government agencies responsible for determining who is eligible for support due to their service, current and former service personnel, and broader society. Criteria might be more or less inclusive in terms of the nature, location, timing, and length of military service (Dandeker et al., 2006).

The military to civilian transition refers to both separating military members pursuing work in similar sectors, as well as those diverging into different sectors of society or the workforce (Black & Papile, 2010). Regardless of the type, veteran transition is recognised in the literature as an impactful process, and veterans often face difficulties in areas of employment, education, health, social integration, and identity (Albertson, 2019; Black & Papile, 2010).

Military to civilian transition leads to uncertainty and may affect personal roles, beliefs, and relationships (Bichrest, 2013; Livingston et al., 2011). Upon leaving the military and entering civilian roles, veterans often experience what has been described as 'reverse culture shock' (Bergman et al., 2014), an experience of rupture or collision when encountering a field vastly different from the one previously familiar (Cooper et al., 2016). Veterans can experience disorientation, loss, and stress navigating this change (Bergman et al., 2014). The service members cannot return to civil society as a civilian, they return as a veteran.

Higher education plays an important role in civilian acculturation and can positively impact veterans' prospects in society (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Jones, 2013). However, the difficulties associated with transition prove to be a major obstacle to degree attainment among student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; DiRamio et al., 2008; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Vacchi &

Berger, 2014). While some scholars argue that military and academic institutions share similarities in their structure (Higbee, 2010), the vast majority of studies indicate significant differences between the two environments. Student veterans move from a value system centred around principles of rank, order, compliance, and sacrifice, to one where the focus is placed on individuality, self-gain, intellect, and questioning (Bichrest, 2013; Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012).

The military provides individuals with a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging, that consequently shapes their experience upon entry into higher education. While the military itself can be viewed as a profession, its influence extends beyond its institutional realms and into members' personal lives (Cozza et al., 2005). The importance of peer and social support is a fundamental aspect of military culture and day-to-day life (Black & Papile, 2010; Cooper et al., 2016). In this sense veterans constitute a distinct class within society: their identity goes beyond a person-based social identity and is instead a group-based social identity (Gade & Wilkins, 2013). The military has often been a service members' primary community and source of support (Black & Papile, 2010).

STUDENT VETERAN EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Unlike many of their university peers, veterans often arrive with an already well-established identity that varies significantly in background from the traditional student. Although some veterans are able to gradually disassociate from their previous roles and loyalties (Naphan & Elliott, 2015), the majority find that the military shapes their perceptions and attitudes well after the transition to higher education (Hutchison, 2019). These students must redefine their narratives of self in an environment where military culture is often little or misunderstood (Hall, 2011). In Australia in particular, civil society for the most part does not engage with the military (Wadham & Morris, 2019).

Military connected students also tend to be older than the average incoming non-veteran student (DiRamio et al., 2008). They are also more likely to carry nontraditional student roles, like extensive family and work responsibilities outside of campus, which can negatively impact their academic performance (Durdella & Kim, 2012). The inability to find common grounds in purpose and identity can cause veterans to feel like they are alone and "in a different atmosphere" in the academic community (Demers, 2011, p. 173). Military connected students often tend to feel unsupported and that their institutions do not understand them or their unique needs (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). In this context, social and peer support groups on campus are especially important (Black & Papile 2010; Elliott et al., 2011), but many student veterans avoid developing peer relationships on campus. This avoidance can hinder veterans' own sense of belonging as well as their social acceptance by fellow students and faculty (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

A major reason for student veterans' social avoidance stems from their characteristics as a distinct group. Veterans' decisions to enter higher education are purposeful, and they may feel detached from traditional-aged students who might lack the same psychological readiness and levels of independence (Vacchi, 2012). Research has found that student veterans can perceive higher education as an anti-military environment, where students and staff members hold predominantly liberal and left-wing political perspectives and worldviews that might differ from their own (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Osborne, 2014). In research by Harvey et al. (2018), student veterans reported that higher education institutions were "very left wing and full of political correctness" and mostly comprised students "who haven't served, and haven't seen the world, [and] hold very immature viewpoints" (p. 26). Student veterans can be concerned about encountering derogatory and overly simplistic opinions about the military, as well as negative preconceptions about their mental health and general wellbeing (Osborne, 2014).

Veterans can feel uncomfortable in the classroom, particularly when singled out as representations of the military (DiRamio et al., 2008; Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016), or when faculty members seem disrespectful of veterans' past service or first-hand accounts of military history and events (Persky & Oliver, 2010). Military experienced students may also perceive negative viewpoints expressed on campus about military involvement in current conflicts and world affairs as anti-military, which further contributes to feeling unwelcome and marginalised (Persky & Oliver, 2010). As a consequence of this misalignment with political culture, they often choose to either conceal their identity as veterans or downplay their previous role when interacting with non-veteran students and faculty (Borsari et al., 2017). Student veterans are in practice what may be described as invisible members within the campus community (Livingston et al., 2011). Invisibility impacts the level of support that student veterans seek and receive, and their ability to adjust socially and academically (Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann et al., 2011).

Given the challenges described above, it is clear that student veterans require dedicated support and attention from both policymakers and academic programs. Acknowledgment of the civilian–military divide is a crucial step toward mitigating student veteran transition, and

efforts should be directed toward assisting veterans in developing a sense of belonging on campus and negotiating the discord between military habitus and higher education institutional culture.

METHOD

Our research adopted a mixed-methods approach to examining how student veterans are recognised and supported in Australian higher education. The project included: a review of government policy and support programs; a desktop review of university websites; and focus groups with university staff. Ethics approval for the focus groups was obtained from the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University (8591). Informed consent was obtained by supplying participants with an Information Sheet detailing the nature of the research and collecting signed Consent Forms prior to commencement.

We reviewed Australian government policy and support programs for student veterans. We examined publicly available policies and processes on higher education provided through the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs. We also undertook a desktop review of the websites of 42 Australian universities (including international campuses). Websites were systematically searched for information about veterans and the military. We then undertook a further search on the general entry pathways available to adult learners, with a particular focus on determining if each university had an entry program. Additional searches were undertaken to retrieve information about any veteran-specific programs offered. We included the support offered by the Australian Student Veterans Association. The information from our reviews was current as of September 2020.

We conducted focus groups with a total of 19 staff members from university admission, transition, and equity divisions. We sought to gain an understanding of existing support for student veterans and identify opportunities for improvement. Participants represented 14 different universities across four states (South Australia, Victoria, Queensland, and New South Wales). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants through a letter sent to the Pro Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning (or equivalent) and/or the relevant division manager. Eighteen universities were initially invited, with COVID-19 cited as a complicating factor for the universities who did not participate.

The focus groups were conducted via Zoom, with each session taking between 60 and 90 minutes. Two members of the research team moderated each focus group. Participants were asked a series of questions in a semi-structured format under the following domains: the current level and nature of support for student veterans; improving access to university; ensuring smoother transitions to university; creating veteran-friendly institutions; and improving pathways, enrichment activities, and support programs. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed thematically, supported by NVivo 12 software.

FINDINGS

Our review of government policy and support programs spanned three relevant government departments: the Department of Defence (DoD); the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA); and the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). The transition process begins in Defence and flows to DVA upon separation. Depending on rank and role of the separating member, their access to higher education is shaped by varying degrees of support by Defence and DVA. Separately, the DESE is responsible for national strategies to help Australians access higher education. We did not identify any DESE policies relating to veterans, but this department has the potential to support student veterans in line with its current support of specific equity groups.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE

The Department of Defence (DoD) in Australia provides the *Defence Assisted Study Scheme* to support pursuit of education. This scheme enables a serving member to access higher education while they are still serving. In practice, the scheme has limited funding for allocation and looks at proposed study in relation to the member's line of work. The scheme tends to benefit commissioned officers, who want to add to existing university qualifications, as opposed to other ranks. Tiered measures are utilised, where members who are being medically discharged are prioritised, depending on funding availability.

Defence University Sponsorship may be available to those already studying who join the ADF while at university. Recipients commit to serve for the time spent studying and an additional year. The ADF list a range of eligible degrees including healthcare, science, engineering, and business administration. This scheme is reported to favour those members undertaking study in longer courses such as medicine and dentistry. Defence Officer Cadets often study at the Australian Defence Force Academy as part of their initial training.

Prior to 2020, the DoD provided the *Career Transition Assistance Scheme* (CTAS) based on "an obligation to assist personnel to make the transition from military to civilian

life, regardless of whether the means of separation is voluntary or involuntary" (Australian National Audit Office, 2004, p. 11). This was a short-term scheme highly focussed on getting transitioning members into the workforce rather than higher education. There was some flexibility to pay a small amount towards a technical and further education (TAFE) course of study. In 2020, CTAS was replaced with the *Defence Force Transition Program* (DFTP), which is depicted to be a wider and more versatile scheme (Department of Defence, 2022). This program is again centred around securing employment after discharge. This particular program includes access to vocational education and training and the *Transition for Employment (T4E),* which aims to provide long-term vocational and career support to medically transitioning members with complex circumstances. Educational support is highly dependent on the individual circumstances, chain of command, unit culture and, for those members undertaking rehabilitation, the knowledge of the system by the rehabilitation provider.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

When veterans leave the Australian Defence Force (ADF), responsibility for providing income support, information, financial compensation, health treatment and rehabilitation services to eligible veterans moves from Defence to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). The DVA Corporate Plans 2020–2021 (DVA, 2020a) and 2019–2023 (DVA, 2020b) give substantial consideration to the transition period and the need to collaborate with Defence to promote veteran wellbeing in a holistic manner. The value of education, training, and employment in facilitating a successful transition is highlighted.

One notable DVA initiative is the Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant. This Covenant allows businesses and community groups to commit to offering discounts, employment, and/or support in recognition of military service (DVA, 2019). Benefits provided through the Covenant, however, do not extend to higher education.

Indeed, DVA plays a limited role in supporting veterans in higher education. The role of the Department is currently limited to one defined legislatively in the Acts that govern DVA's provision of services. These Acts include the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004 and the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988. The role is limited to financial support for veterans with liability accepted by DVA for a service-related health condition and who have been assessed as suitable to undertake higher education as part of their rehabilitation plan (DVA, 2016).

Higher Education as part of a Rehabilitation Plan

DVA provides medical, psycho-social, and vocational rehabilitation, subject to an assessment of needs by a contracted rehabilitation provider. DVA reports that approximately 60% of veterans who medically discharge from the ADF are on a rehabilitation plan. Higher education as part of a vocational rehabilitation plan is typically only supported with the aim of returning a veteran to the workforce and typically only up to the bachelor's degree level. DVA (2016) declares that "the aim of a vocational rehabilitation program is to return a person to the workforce to at least the level of their pre-injury employment" (Section 9.1). Qualifications above the bachelor's level are "not typically in scope of what can be funded by DVA, as a client with an existing education at bachelor's degree level is considered to be competitive within the civilian employment sector" (Section 9.8.1).

While higher education is primarily supported for the purpose of securing employment, some potential social and psychological advantages are noted within DVA policy (2016). The rewards that are described include tapping into existing motivation, providing time to adapt to changes in circumstances, and improving social connections and confidence (Section 9.8). The Rehabilitation Policy Library notes that some assistance could potentially be supplied where education is assessed as realising a psycho-social objective (Section 6.9). According to the guidelines, this assistance would typically be restricted to diploma-level qualifications.

DVA (2016) reports that it only provides financial support for veterans assessed as suitable for higher education and where this education aligns with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The requirements for assessment, approval, and ongoing support for a veteran undertaking higher education as part of rehabilitation are detailed (Section 9.8.3). Emphasis is on cost-effectiveness and ensuring that funding is put towards achieving suitable and sustainable employment (and thus decreasing financial dependence on DVA). From DVA's standpoint, the strict requirements are also incorporated so veterans are not set up to fail. After approval, ongoing evidence regarding study progress is required. In line with the DVA guidelines, veterans who encounter challenges with their studies are expected to take full advantage of the support services available at their university.

Support Provided by DVA

Whether undertaking study under a vocational rehabilitation plan or independently, student veterans are able to access a range of DVA services subject to eligibility requirements. This support covers counselling, medical, psychological, allied health, home support, aid, and appliances. Within policy guidelines, DVA (2016) details the financial assistance provided and the obligations for ongoing financial support for the duration of courses (Sections 9.8.4 and 9.8.6).

When a request for tertiary education is approved by DVA, the student contribution fee, tuition fee, and/or student services and amenities fee are paid by DVA. The veteran's incapacity payments are paid at 100% of their normal earnings if studying full-time. Until November 2018, payments were reduced to 75% after 45 weeks. During this time, DVA launched a pilot program called *Step-Up* (from November 2018 until June 2022) by maintaining payments at 100% while veterans study full-time as part of their plan. The pilot program has since been extended until June 2023 (DVA, 2022). This measure precludes support for study at the post-graduate level. The intention is to support veterans studying full-time by providing financial security. As reported by Wadham et al. (2021), DVA saw a flood of requests for study approval from veterans on rehabilitation plans as a result of the pilot program.

Student Veteran Data

The DVA does not collect data on the overall number of veterans who are studying. However, the department does collect data on the number of veterans who have had study approved as part of their rehabilitation plan. As reported by Wadham et al. (2021), between 1 November 2018 and 1 June 2020 approximately 450 veterans were approved to undertake study as an activity in their rehabilitation plan, with the numbers trending higher each year since 2017. DVA advised that nearly 230 approvals had been given up until 1 June 2020. However, DVA cautioned that the 2020 data was not sufficient to enable valid comparisons, and that the potential impact of COVID-19 on student veteran numbers was unknown at the time. In addition, DVA advised that this dataset does not include veterans studying as part of their rehabilitation plan who are not in receipt of incapacity payments (approximately 100) and veterans studying part-time. Overall, the indications are that a growing number of veterans with medical conditions are participating in higher education study. The completion rates and graduate outcomes of this group are unknown at the current time.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND EMPLOYMENT

The Department of Education, Skills, and Employment (DESE) is responsible for national policies and programs to help Australians access higher education. Our review did not identify any DESE policies relating to veterans, nor does the department collect data on the student veteran group. One factor contributing to inaction towards student veterans is the relative inflexibility of the Australian student equity framework. In 1990, as part of the equity framework, the Australian Government identified six equity groups, including people from low socio-economic, regional, and non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous people, people with a disability, and women in nontraditional areas. For decades, these equity groups typically attracted discrete funding and/or policy priority (Harvey et al., 2016). From 2021, equity funding is being more specifically focussed on students who are from regional and remote areas, are Indigenous, and/or are from low socio-economic backgrounds (DESE, 2020). While some student veterans may fall within existing groups, they have never received dedicated support from the DESE in their own right (Harvey et al., 2018).

UNIVERSITY-BASED SUPPORT FOR STUDENT VETERANS

Our review showed that the Australian university sector is beginning to establish university entry pathways, programs, and support services specifically for Australian military veterans. Since 2018, there has been significant action across the nation. Many of these university-level reforms have been instigated by the Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA), which is a non-profit community organisation, and supported by DVA funding. Given the recent introduction of these reforms, our review did not uncover any published evaluations of their efficacy. Our focus group discussions found there to be significant interest and motivation from university staff to improve support systems for student veterans.

Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA)

The ASVA has been at the forefront of the drive to enhance entry pathways and support programs for student veterans. In 2016–2017, ASVA was established by veterans in response to the growing number of veterans seeking to access higher education and the complicated factors associated with the transition to student life. Education is viewed as an important aspect of veteran wellbeing and, through collaboration with transition services within the Department of Defence, ASVA aims to connect with veterans 12 months to 18 months before their transition. The team at ASVA advocate for prospective student veterans and offer support and guidance about higher education study options.

A central concern for ASVA is that military training and education are not consistently recognised by academic institutions. Because Australian states currently have different university entry requirements, ASVA is taking a leading role in negotiating an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) based on military rank and experience. The ATAR indicates an individual's position relative to other students and is used by universities to select students for courses. This veterans' conversion system has been successfully adopted in three Australian states, namely

Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory. At present, ASVA is advocating for a nationally consistent admission schedule based on military rank. Since Defence is also a Registered Training Organisation, ASVA is also mapping Defence courses to send to academic leaders so credit can be awarded towards university courses.

Just over half of Australian universities are members of ASVA (24 universities), which is evidence of their commitment to student veterans. The ASVA chapters at these universities are led by student veterans, providing connection with peers who have shared values and backgrounds. These chapters also aim to normalise the concept of what a veteran represents to other students by working with other campus clubs and societies. Another key area for ASVA is promoting understanding among academic leaders of the competencies and attributes acquired through military training. ASVA has directly liaised with the universities that have launched veteran-friendly initiatives, such as student veteran liaison officers.

Entry Pathways and Programs

A small number of universities have developed veteran specific pathways and/or specific university preparation programs. The University of South Australia, for example, delivers a veteran-specific preparation program, though this program is not a university entry pathway. Instead, student veterans who have been accepted to a University of South Australia degree, or are already enrolled in one, are invited to complete the *Veterans' Engagement and Education Program Uni Prep Briefings*. Acknowledging the distinct difficulties that can stem from military service, these sessions are designed to assist student veterans to juggle study with work and family commitments, For additional support, student veterans are also paired with a mentor who has military experience. Veterans can have their ADF qualifications transferred/credited for a range of courses. Without these qualifications, however, military veterans must enter via standard adult entry pathways, such as completing a general studies program (University of South Australia, 2020).

The Flinders University *Military Academic Pathway Program* is unique because it acts as an entry program and an entry pathway. This program aims to prepare military veterans for university whilst simultaneously providing an entry pathway to 36 undergraduate degrees for successful completers. The four-week intensive program focuses on preparing the students academically and socially for their transition. In addition to learning academic skills, students are informed about support services to which they can turn during their subsequent degree and are linked with a student veteran peer mentor who is already attending the university. Since being pilot tested in 2019, and now formalised and run over five iterations, the program has enrolled 127 students. Students who continue onto commence an undergraduate degree can then apply to have their professional military qualifications recognised as course credit (Flinders University, 2020).

Similarly, Australian Catholic University invites student veterans to complete a two-week intensive *Veterans Transition Program*. This program aims to equip student veterans with the ability to succeed in higher education by connecting them with available support services and targeting academic and social skills. A pilot version of this program was delivered successfully in July 2020 (Australian Catholic University, 2020). In addition to the *Veterans Transition Program*, Australian Catholic University has a *Veterans Entry Program* which converts military training and years of service into an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) that can then be used to gain entry to a variety of degrees. Similarly, Charles Sturt University has the *Experience Matters Entry Program,* which converts military experience into an ATAR that provides entry to undergraduate degrees. This program is available for any former or currently serving member who has completed military training and has at least two years of experience in the ADF (Charles Sturt University, 2020).

Along with developments at the institutional level, processes for recognising military experience have also been introduced at the state level. Notably, in mid-2020, the Queensland Tertiary Admission Centre added a *Commissioned Officers and Related Qualifications* section to their tertiary admissions form, providing a consistent conversion of military experience into an ATAR. For example, former Lieutenants (Colonel rank or higher) qualify for an ATAR of 88, while two years of armed service experience qualifies for an ATAR of 82. These entry scores are valid for undergraduate degrees at any Queensland university. In New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, the University Admissions Centre has recognised military rank and training since 1995 and has recently modified its application process to allow current and former ADF members to identify themselves.

Despite recent progress, at the majority of Australian universities, entry requirements for military veterans are the same as for other adult learners. Some universities recognise prior workplace learning, including Swinburne University and Edith Cowan University, which is a practical option for veterans with at least three years of work experience. Almost all Australian universities have a general preparation program which veterans could complete to gain entry to a range of undergraduate degrees. As the Flinders University *Military Academic Pathway Program* demonstrates, these general preparation programs could potentially be adapted and/or expanded to meet the needs of student veterans.

This program is currently being developed in a national format within a multi-state consortium including University of the Sunshine Coast, The University of Newcastle, and Central Queensland University, to achieve reciprocal recognition across Australian universities. In 2022, another three Australian universities are establishing veteran entry pathway programs.

Additional Veteran-Specific Support

In addition to the programs described above, a handful of universities offer other forms of support for student veterans. In terms of financial support, our review found evidence of two Australian universities having dedicated student veteran scholarships to assist with the costs associated with attending university. While university fees can be deferred through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme–Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP), there is a large income reduction between having a military career and being a student. The University of New South Wales *Veterans Scholarship* offers $5,000 per year to undergraduate or postgraduate students who are former or transitioning military personnel, or their dependants (University of New South Wales, 2020). The *Caloundra RSL Sub-Branch Scholarship* provides $4,000 per year to help cover the expenses of undergraduate student veterans (or direct family members) at University of Sunshine Coast (University of Sunshine Coast, 2020).

Four universities have developed veteran support initiatives as part of a multi-state consortium that was funded by DVA and supported by ASVA (Harvey et al. 2020). This collaboration included La Trobe University, Australian Catholic University, Western Sydney University, and Charles Darwin University. La Trobe University provides support for students who disclose their military status on a supplementary enrolment form. This form provides a tick box for a student to disclose if they are a current or former member of the Australian Defence Force. This disclosure allows the university to identify and therefore support these students during their degrees. In line with this goal, university staff are given guidelines for working with student veterans. La Trobe also has a support coordinator to provide case management support to student veterans (La Trobe University, 2020).

Australian Catholic University has a *Student Veterans Support Program* that provides access to a range of support and academic services to help ease the transition to university. This program is open to students who are currently completing a service term in the ADF (including reservists) and those who served on international defence forces, as well as their family members (Australian Catholic University, 2020). Charles Darwin University explicitly welcomes military veterans and has established a *Student Veterans Group* to connect the student veteran community. The university has a designated website which links to this social group as well as other relevant support services (Charles Darwin University, 2020). Western Sydney University recently created the role of Student Veteran Support Officer to support the transition and success of veterans. A designated *Support for Student Veterans* webpage also links to a range of (non-veteran specific) support services offered by the university (Western Sydney University, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Due to the social, cultural, and psychological factors associated with transition out of the military, student veterans comprise a unique group in higher education. As such, these students benefit from suited programs to assist in transition to university culture. Our research identified a range of governmental and institutional support programs for student veterans, along with clear limitations and opportunities for improvement. We found that the nature and type of educational support available to veterans through the DoD and the DVA can be complicated to navigate and dependent on individual circumstances. Further, there is often a focus on vocational education and training, and the specific goal of gaining employment, as opposed to higher education. Within the higher education sector, the DESE does not specifically cater to student veterans in equity policy and funding arrangements. Taken together, these findings suggest an opportunity for government departments to expand the level of support offered to student veterans, and to work in a coordinated manner to support all veterans to undertake higher education as part of their transition planning if desired.

In recognition of service, it would be logical to extend initiatives such as the Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant to include benefits for higher education. The Covenant recognises military service and the significant implications it has for post-service life. The DVA and DoD policy frameworks are a practical form of transition, ignoring the symbolic elements of transition that include developing a new sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. Moreover, the veteran is conceived as an individual unit, not as part of a family and not as moving into a new community. Social disconnection is a key challenge in transition and there would be great benefits to widening the understanding of transition to a process of identity and life transformation rather than an administrative function. The DoD and DVA are moving in this direction with the recent establishment

of a Joint Transition Authority to reinvigorate military civil transition, as well as the development of the Defence Members and Family Support organisation.

More broadly, our findings suggest that Australian student veterans could benefit from a national framework that recognises higher education as a key domain in both promoting veteran wellbeing and enhancing opportunities to compete in the civilian job market. For guidance on developing this framework, Australia could look to the United States where the place of higher education for veterans has been comparatively well developed and embedded in national policy. The United States has supported veterans for decades through the GI Bill, which was originally established in 1945 and subsequently amended to provide additional education benefits for veterans and their families. Institutional support that caters to student veterans is also well established in the United States (Cook & Kim, 2012).

At the institutional level, we found evidence of recent progress in developing veteran-friendly campuses and in responding to student veterans as a nontraditional student group. Much of the development has been instigated by ASVA, as a grassroots student veteran organisation, and by individual university staff members and researchers, and several initiatives have been supported by funding from the DVA. Despite this progress, however, universities are currently recognising and supporting student veterans in different ways and to varying degrees. Only three universities currently offer a veteran-specific preparation program to support transition to higher education. However, almost all universities offer a general university preparation program that could potentially be tailored to the needs of student veterans. A small number of universities offer other forms of support for veterans, such as scholarships and peer support. While progress has been slow, we found evidence of genuine goodwill and intent within university communities to improve support for student veterans.

Supporting veterans is an equity matter for some groups of veterans. Some ranks are often dissuaded from undertaking university studies, or university is not deemed to relate to their core employment (e.g., rifleman), and initial assessment suggests they often are the first in their family to study at university and/or they do not possess the secondary schooling completion qualifications. But supporting veterans is not only an equity matter, it is also a question of appropriately recognising military experience and prior learning. We determined that, since 2018, there has been a concerted effort on improving methods for recognising and incorporating military skills and experience into university admission decisions. Indeed, ASVA is working towards the introduction of a nationally consistent process for converting military experience into a university admission rank. Statistical modelling of the subsequent higher education performance of veterans would strengthen the evidence base to inform appropriate entry ranks. In addition, ASVA is mapping a system for universities to award credit for the completion of courses provided by Defence. These measures will be important for improving access to higher education, reducing time taken to complete degrees, and increasing awareness of student veterans as a valued student group.

Looking forward, a critical step in forming and evaluating strategies for student veterans will be improved data collection. DVA collects data on those who have had study approved as part of their rehabilitation plan, and the indications are that an increasing number of veterans with medical conditions are undertaking higher education. It is not known, however, how many student veterans fall outside this scope. Furthermore, most Australian universities do not know who their student veterans are and do not collect data on their demographics, wellbeing, study patterns, performance, or completion rates (Moeck et al., 2022). Accurate data are essential to inform policy and practice.

A major reason for the lack of data collection is the fact that student veterans are not classified as one of the Australian Government's student equity groups. Universities are required to collect and report data on the equity groups, such as students who are from regional and remote areas, Indigenous students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. These groups receive specific funding and their access, participation, success, and retention rates are monitored. Structuring the equity framework around discrete groups means other students can be overlooked, despite having their own support needs.

A related consideration is the issue of self-identification as a veteran. Research shows that veterans can be reluctant to disclose their veteran status due to fear of being stigmatised and stereotyped (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Elliott et al., 2011). We found that one university prefers to ask if a person is a current or former member of the ADF (rather than a veteran). A consistent and sensitive approach to asking about military experience is needed. Some concerns could also be mitigated by creating environments in which veterans feel safer and better understood. University staff, for example, could be offered professional development that provides best practice in working with student veterans.

CONCLUSION

Student veterans warrant specific attention due to the unique nature of the military to civilian transition,

their particular educational needs, and their national service. In the Australian context, however, our research uncovered limitations to existing support structures at the governmental and institutional levels. We also identified and detailed notable developments in improving entry pathways and support programs for student veterans. There remains a particular urgency to introduce consistent and sensitive methods of collecting data on student veterans in Australia. Such data will help to accurately determine the size and characteristics of this group and to monitor their higher education access rates, academic performance, and employment outcomes. It will also be important to actively collaborate with student veterans in the design and evaluation of effective policies and programs. There remains a need for a whole-of-system approach to supporting student veterans nationally, which coordinates the role of higher education alongside governmental policies and processes.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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