Let’s encourage former soldiers to enrol in university courses

- By Christopher Niesche
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For military veterans, higher education can provide the foundation for a successful return to civilian life, yet many struggle to gain admission to university and don’t feel as if they belong on campus once they get there.

The veterans’ difficulties were outlined in the first significant national report about veterans at university, Supporting Younger Military Veterans to Succeed in Australian Higher Education, by Andrew Harvey, director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University, and his colleague Lisa Andrewartha.

Dr Harvey said veteran university students in Australia were “a strangely invisible group”.

“There’s no data collected on veterans in Australia in higher education. We don’t know how many veterans are in higher education. We don’t know how they achieve, how they perform. We don’t know what their outcomes are,” he said.

One of the major issues facing veterans wishing to go into higher education was that university admission processes generally did not recognise their military study and experience.

The report, which was funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs, reveals only about 20 per cent of former personnel received any formal recognition for their qualifications. There is also the broader issue of how should universities measure the skills that somebody has learned in the military. “We’re talking about leadership, management, discipline, working in pressure situations — all of those skills that veterans need to work in the military — how do we measure those at admission? How do we count those admissions?” Dr Harvey said.

The only exception was Queensland, where veterans with Australian armed services general training and two years post-training experience were assigned an entry rank of 82 — and this was accepted by all universities in the state.

Matthew Sharp used the provision to gain entry to Griffith University to study criminology in 2013. “It was the determining factor of why I actually went to uni,” said Mr Sharp, who left school before he finished Year 10 to become a rifleman in the infantry.

“When I found out about this entry rank system, that made me want to put my discharge papers in and go to university.”
The Queensland entry rank system is not very well known, Mr Sharp said — he discovered it only during a deployment to Afghanistan in 2012, when he was researching his post-service options.

Making more personnel aware of their options was a key motivator for him to found the Australian Student Veterans Association, said Mr Sharp, who has since taken on a law degree in addition to his degree in criminology and will take a graduate job at Herbert Smith Freehills when he finishes his studies at the end of the year.

The report recommends that universities in other states adopt similar policies.

Mr Sharp and ASVA chief executive Matthew Wyatt-Smith co-authored the report.

The report notes that once enrolled, the student veterans surveyed drew on specific strengths to succeed, including discipline, leadership, and time management and, that most respondents were highly motivated and positive about their potential to explore successful career paths following their studies.

“Nevertheless, many student veterans did not feel a sense of belonging on campus,” the report says.

“Some respondents felt isolated, many felt that university culture was not respectful or appreciative of military service, and only one-third of respondents disclosed their military status to their institution.”

Some veterans reported that campus did not feel “veteran-friendly” and they felt “some students were anti-military, quite left-wing and not always understanding of their role in the military, Dr Harvey said.

Universities should promote institutional awareness and recognition of the unique strengths and challenges of student veterans and provide targeted financial support measures for them, including tuition fee waivers and cost-of-living scholarships, the report states.

Veterans have unemployment rates five times those of non-veterans and getting more former military personnel into higher education would improve their job prospects, La Trobe’s Dr Harvey said.

There is also a moral argument that “people who defend the country should be respected and looked after in their time post-service”, he added.