



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

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ENQUIRIES

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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	Student Veterans Support Program
Charles Darwin University	Australian Defence Force
Charles Sturt University	Experience Matters
La Trobe University	Support for Student Veterans at La Trobe
Murdoch University	Student Support Program to the Australian Defence Force
University of Tasmania	Australian Defence Force Higher Education Advance Standing (ADFHEAS)

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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