Higher education entry is difficult for many veterans because little or no account has been taken of the experience or qualifications accrued while serving.

Jill Rowbotham
Higher Education Writer
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Veterans who have served two years in the Australian Defence Force after completing training are now eligible for direct entry to the Australian Catholic University in what the institution says is a national first.

Pro vice-chancellor (engagement) Sandra Jones said veterans would generally receive a selection rank equivalent to an 82 Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank for ACU campuses in NSW, Queensland, ACT and Victoria.

ACU is also considering recognising prior learning. “If someone is applying to study to be a paramedic and they’ve been a paramedic in the army for five years, what credits do they get for the subjects they’re not going to need to do because they already have that knowledge?” Professor Jones said.

Many veterans have found it difficult to gain entry to higher education because little or no account has been taken of the experience or qualifications accrued while serving. Only the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre and NSW-based Universities Admissions Centre offer an alternative measure to the ATAR. In the latter case, not all institution employ the measure.

ACU, the Australian Student Veterans Association and La Trobe, Charles Darwin and Western Sydney universities received a $180,000 Department of Veterans Affairs grant this year to help veterans gain access to and support in higher education. A previous La Trobe study established the magnitude of the problem.
Working out how many veterans are in universities has been notoriously difficult because there has been little data collection and some veterans have been reluctant to identify themselves.

“There is a perception that there’s a stigma attached with having been in the defence forces in Australia,” Professor Jones said. “But we know there are many. More than 5000 leave the ADF every year. Some go to work, some study, but their unemployment rate is five times the national average.

“There’s probably an under-recognition among employers and the education sector about the extent of the skills that they have because they don’t necessarily come out with that piece of paper.”

ACU’s recently appointed veteran administration officer to ensure that veterans receive help with aspects of university of life ranging from applying and enrolling, to timetabling and orientation, and academic, counselling and financial support.

ASVA chief executive Matthew Wyatt-Smith, who is ex-army, said the veteran community had “outstanding talent”.

“I’d argue it’s Australia’s best renewable resource: veterans have received a huge investment from the government in training and skills and in order to unlock that military experience in the civilian sector a degree is often required,” Mr Wyatt-Smith said.