Credit where it’s due for defence veteran and support group

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HIGHER EDUCATION WRITER

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Matthew Wyatt-Smith, chief executive of Australian Student Veterans Association. Picture: Lyndon Mechelsen

Matthew Wyatt-Smith always wanted to join the army, so, aged 20, he enlisted as soon as he could, entering officer training school at Duntroon. Many soldiers suffer injuries in the course of battle, the twist in Mr Wyatt-Smith’s story is that his career-ending wound happened during training.

He was out of the Australian Defence Force by the time he was 23 and immersed in painful, lengthy rehabilitation. He subsequently enrolled in a bachelor of global affairs degree at Deakin University, after the Department of Veterans Affairs funded the “recognition of prior learning” process needed to convert his skills and training into the diplomas and certificates required to gain entry.

In late-2016, he came across some other veterans via social media who were studying at Griffith University and operating a support group there. The Australian
Student Veterans Association was formed and by late-2017 Wyatt-Smith was full-time chief executive officer.

This week he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship that will help with his new mission: to enable any former veteran to have the best chance of gaining access to and completing tertiary education.

“Ultimately, all ADF members who have served, and completed their training, have earned the opportunity through their service to attend university should they choose to do so,” Mr Wyatt-Smith said.

It is new territory, and complicated terrain. Numbers are hard to come by. A 2018 report funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs revealed only about 20 per cent of former personnel received any formal recognition for their qualifications.

Some former service personnel have enough credentials, as Mr Wyatt-Smith did, to gain entry. However some choose not to enrol, because financial and family responsibilities are too pressing to allow them to pursue study. ASVA wants to make this possible.

Those who enrol need support through their university years, as mature-age students who stand apart from the school-leaver cohort and can feel alienated if the others are negative about their military background.

“ASVA is trying to make education a positive opportunity for all ADF members irrespective of their rank, method of discharge, their post-discharge location, or whether they deployed or didn’t deploy,” Mr Wyatt-Smith said.

ASVA has set up chapters on nine campuses to offer support and has an informal presence on another 24. Association members include those who have recently left the ADF, those currently studying and some graduates now working, known as the alumni network, who have a mentoring role.

Then, according to Mr Wyatt-Smith, there are the many enlisted servicemen and women — that is, non-officers — who complete some units towards certificates and diplomas without finishing the entire qualification. That can leave them without credentials to gain entry.

“Without support, certain members, who either left school early or didn’t receive an ATAR or an OP equivalent, would have to go through an extended program to gain entry or would be unable to gain entry,” he said.
The recent good news for them is that a couple of tertiary education admission centres are offering Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking equivalents. NSW-based University Admissions Centre offers a “UAC rank” starting at 79; Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre offers 82.

UAC recently introduced a means by which veteran applicants can identify themselves in the application process. In the eight months to March, 404 applicants has answered “yes” to the ADF question and offers were made to 333.

ACU, the Australian Student Veterans Association and La Trobe, Charles Darwin and Western Sydney universities received an $180,000 Department of Veterans Affairs grant this year to help veterans gain access to and support in higher education.

Australian Catholic University recently announced direct entry would be available to veterans, in what the institution thinks is an Australian first.

Now Mr Wyatt-Smith wants to push for credentials or part credentials achieved during defence force service to be mapped across a civilian skills matrix, acknowledged broadly and given credit at universities.

The Churchill Fellowship will enable him to travel to see what can be learnt from the US, the UK, Canada and Israel about how their recruitment, retention and transition policies affect post-service education.

“I received so much support due to my injury and extended rehabilitation, whereas the vast majority of transitioning ADF members don’t separate under these circumstances and receive significantly less support,” he said. “It’s very important to democratise the opportunity to undertake education and capitalise on ADF skill sets to meaningfully retrain, for all members.”