



Journal of Veterans Studies

Supporting Military Veterans in Australian Higher Education

Lisa Andrewartha & Andrew Harvey

Abstract

Veterans often face difficulties during the transition from military to civilian life, with relatively high unemployment rates and mental health risks. Higher education represents an important pathway to navigate this transition successfully. Research from the United States shows that veterans bring unique strengths to the classroom, but also face specific challenges and barriers in accessing higher education. In Australia, military veterans have been largely invisible in the higher education sector. There is little national evidence on their access, success, and graduate outcomes. To begin to address this gap, we conducted a national survey of 240 student veterans who had enrolled in Australian higher education. In this article, we outline the barriers participants faced in accessing and transitioning to higher education, and their subsequent experiences at university. We provide recommendations to help universities develop more effective programs and policies to promote the success of student veterans.

Keywords: higher education, student veterans, widening participation, student equity, cultural comparison

Introduction

Transitioning out of the military can be difficult for many veterans, with high rates of unemployment (WithYouWithMe, 2017) and mental health issues (Department of Veterans' Affairs [DVA], 2017a). Higher education is an internationally established pathway to assist veterans to successfully transition from the military into civilian life and rewarding employment (Institution for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2017). In the United States, there is a growing body of research that explores student veteran experiences and there is a range of support available for this group. There is, however, a dearth of research on student veterans in Australian higher education, and we know little of the experiences of this group. To address this gap, we undertook the first major national research study into student veterans in Australian higher education (Harvey, Andrewartha, Sharp, & Wyatt-Smith, 2018). In the study, we sought to explore the following research questions: What factors influence military veterans' access and transition to higher education? What are the experiences of student veterans enrolled in higher education?

We begin this article by providing context on veterans in Australia. We highlight the often difficult transition from the military to civilian life, and the paucity of recognition and support for student veterans in higher education nationally. We then provide international comparative context, focussed on the United States of America (USA). While several countries have developed support for military veterans in higher education, the US provides a particularly valuable comparator given the relatively large size of the military, the substantial body of connected research, and the considerable policy, legislative, and institutional support for student veterans in higher education.

Subsequently, we explore the findings from our own original research, focused on a national survey of 240 student veterans who had enrolled in Australian higher education. These findings underline their unique experiences, strengths, and challenges. We conclude by arguing the need for more targeted programs and policies to promote the success of student veterans in Australia.

Context: Australian Military Veterans

There are an estimated 641,300 living veterans who served in the Australian Defence Force, either full time or in the reserves (DVA, 2018). Approximately 5,500 members discharge from the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and return to civilian life each year (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). For some veterans, the transition to civilian life can be difficult.

One Australian study found the veteran unemployment rate to be as high as 30 percent, approximately five times higher than the national average (WithYouWithMe, 2017). Furthermore, 19 percent of veterans were found to be underemployed—doing work that did not make full use of their skills—which is approximately twice the national average. Veterans are also at increased risk of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and somatic problems (DVA, 2017a).

Higher education represents an important pathway for veterans to navigate the transition to civilian life. The proven benefits of further study include improved employment prospects (Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018) and a range of positive psycho-social outcomes (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013). Despite these benefits, there has been a surprising lack of Australian research and policy directed to improving higher education participation rates. For the purposes of our research, we define a student veteran as any person who has served in the military who is in higher education (Australian Student Veterans Association, 2018).

While the ADF and the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs contribute financially to education for some individuals, this support is often invoked for short-term vocational education and training rather than higher education (Department of Defence, 2018; DVA, 2017b). Within the higher education sector itself, there are only a small number of individual institutional scholarships and bursaries for veterans.

Historically, there has also been little peer-led support for student veterans in Australian higher education. The Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA) was established in 2016, based on the US equivalent Student Veterans of America. ASVA provides and promotes peer support, along with a range of opportunities for student veterans including professional experience and employment (ASVA, 2018). Australia currently has 37 public universities, and ASVA has official chapters at eight universities and an informal presence at an additional 27 universities.

One factor contributing to the inaction of the Australian higher education sector towards student veterans is the relative inflexibility of the national student equity framework. Established in 1990, the national framework identifies six target groups, namely: people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People; women, particularly in non-traditional courses such as engineering and postgraduate study; individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds; people with a disability; and individuals from regional, rural, and isolated areas (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990).

Access, participation, success, and retention data are collected for each equity group. Most groups are supported by dedicated funding streams. However, while veterans are often members of one or more of these groups, research suggests they face specific challenges and issues by nature of their veteran status. By prioritizing certain groups, other groups are necessarily excluded from student equity policy, data collection, and funding arrangements (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett 2016).

Comparative Context: Student Veterans in the US

Compared to Australia, the US has a large veteran population, comprising approximately 18.2 million (US Census Bureau, 2018). The US also provides a relatively high level of policy, legislative, and institutional support for student veterans in higher education. In 1944, the US Congress legislated the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill, to support returning

World War II veterans through the provision of educational and other benefits. In 2008, the GI Bill was updated to provide further educational benefits to veterans who served in active duty since September 11, 2001 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). The Post-9/11 GI Bill facilitates Government payment of in-state tuition rates and fees to the institution attended by the student veteran, or dependent spouse or children, and provides a monthly stipend to pay for supplies and housing. By 2017, approximately 2.9 million veterans of the Post-9/11 generation had entered higher education after service (IVMF, 2017). The Forever GI Bill, signed into law in 2017, expands education benefits for veterans and their families (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018).

In the US there is a range of institutional support for student veterans. This support includes targeted outreach strategies, academic support and student services, counselling services, academic credit for military training and experience, and financial assistance in the form of discounts and scholarships (Cook & Kim, 2012). Studies have also shown the value of considering student veterans in higher education curricula and pedagogy; for example, developing first-year transition programs for student veterans (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016), and incorporating semester-length peer groups in classrooms with student veterans and non-veteran students (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). Student Veterans of America also provides programs, resources, and support to veterans in higher education. Established in 2008, the association includes over 1,300 local chapters, which provide peer-to-peer support (Student Veterans of America, 2017).

Research from the US shows that student veterans develop a range of skills through military experience and training that prove useful in higher education, including discipline, leadership, organization, and persistence (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Lechuga & Woodruff, 2016; Lim, Interiano, Tkacik, & Hewitt, 2016; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Additionally, US research shows that student veterans who transition to higher education often experience a unique combination of challenges, which can include: financial stress; extensive family and work obligations; relatively high rates of disability and mental health issues; difficulties associated with an extended gap in engagement with the education system; a cultural clash between military and university life; issues with self-identify; isolation and invisibility on campus; difficulties connecting to (often younger) civilian student peers; feelings of not belonging on campus or in the classroom; stigma and a lack of institutional understanding or appreciation of military experience (American Council for Education, 2015; Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Elnitsky, Blevins, Findlaw, Alverio, & Weise 2018; Flink, 2017; Jenner, 2017; Kranke, Weiss, & Brown, 2017; Lechuga & Woodruff, 2016; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Petri, Jenson, Day, & Gotto, 2016).

While there is a substantial and growing body of US research that explores veteran experiences and challenges on campus and within the classroom, we know little about the experiences of student veterans in the Australian context. In our own research, we sought to survey student veterans in Australian higher education to explore two main questions: What factors influence military veterans' access and transition to higher education? What are the experiences of student veterans enrolled in higher education?

Method

We undertook the first major national research study on student veterans in Australian higher education. We developed a national survey, informed by members of the Australia Student Veterans Association (ASVA). As the survey was, to our knowledge, the first of its kind in Australia, we designed it to explore as many facets of the subject matter as practical. The electronic survey covered topics such as: geo-demographics, ADF experience, university study undertaken post-service, the transition to university, experiences at university, awareness and views of the ASVA, and advice for

veterans considering university. The survey was reviewed by specialists from ASVA prior to administration. No statistical analysis has been conducted on the reliability or validity of the survey to date.

The survey comprised 42 questions, including both closed and open-ended. The categorical responses to closed questions are presented in frequency distribution tables in our Findings section, while example quotations from the qualitative responses have been chosen to illustrate, and expand on, common themes. A number of survey questions mirrored those in the Student Experience Survey (Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning, 2017), which allowed some comparisons between our student veteran sample and the broader Australian higher education student population. We compared the results of the two surveys using percent positive ratings (i.e., the proportion of participants responding “quite a bit” or “very much” to each statement). The study was designed to be descriptive in nature and no statistical testing was conducted on the findings.

All survey questions were optional, meaning that participants could skip questions they did not wish to answer. Non-responses were excluded from analysis. Ethics approval was granted by the Australian Government Departments of Defence and Veterans’ Affairs Human Research Ethics Committee (DDVA HREC) (007-17). La Trobe University subsequently endorsed the externally approved project.

The survey was administered via Qualtrics and was open from January to March 2018. Survey participants were recruited via social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and via the ASVA website. Recruitment materials targeted ex-service personnel who had accessed higher education after serving in the Australian Defence Force, and who were no longer serving in any capacity, including reserve service. The resultant sample was one of convenience. Survey participants were also able to share the survey link with their social media networks, facilitating the recruitment of additional participants, which provided an element of snowball sampling. A total of 240 survey responses were obtained. Table 1 presents a summary of participant characteristics.

Table 1 (next page) shows that the majority of participants (80 percent) were men, which is broadly consistent with the gender composition of the ADF (83 percent men) (Department of Defence, 2017). A relatively large proportion of our sample had served in the Army (68 percent), as opposed to the Navy (21 percent), or Air Force (12 percent). To compare with permanent full-time ADF personnel in general, approximately half (52 percent) serve in the Army, one quarter (23 percent) in the Navy, and one quarter (25 percent) in the Air Force (Department of Defence, 2017). A relatively large proportion of student veterans (36 percent) reported having a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition that might affect their studies. In general, only six percent of the Australian domestic higher education student population reported having a disability (Department of Education and Training, 2017).

Table 1
Participant characteristics

	Number of participants	Proportion of participants
Gender (n=239)		
Male	192	80%
Female	46	19%
Other	1	0%
Age range (n=239)		
20-29 years	51	21%
30-39 years	83	35%
40-49 years	67	28%
50 years and over	38	16%
Residential state/territory (n=238)		
Australian Capital Territory	13	5%
New South Wales	45	19%
Northern Territory	6	3%
Queensland	88	37%
South Australia	12	5%
Tasmania	8	3%
Victoria	42	18%
Western Australia	24	10%
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (n=237)		
Yes	9	4%
No	228	96%
ADF branch served (n=240)		
Navy	50	21%
Army	162	68%
Air Force	28	12%
Year discharged from ADF (n=232)		
Up to 1999	35	15%
Post-1999	197	85%
Medical discharge (n=237)		
Yes	61	26%
No	176	74%
Disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition that may affect studies (n=237)		
Yes	85	36%
No	152	64%
Condition caused by service (n=84)		
Yes	77	92%
No	7	8%

Findings

RQ1: What factors influence military veterans' access and transition to higher education?

Motivations for attending university

As shown in Table 2, student veterans were commonly motivated to attend university to improve their career prospects. Many student veterans reported difficulty securing employment directly after leaving the military, particularly if they did not have university qualifications. The link between higher education and career outcomes was reflected in comments from student veterans:

Like it or not, employers are looking for uni quals [university qualifications] and good jobs are competitive.

...

When first attempting to secure a job post Defence, I must have applied for [approximately] 50 different jobs with less than five progressing to an interview or even call back. It was extremely frustrating, and was the main catalyst for applying to university, to secure a professional qualification that would make me more employable.

Table 2

Motivations for attending university

	Number of participants	Proportion of participants
Reasons to attend university (n=224)		
To improve career prospects in general	133	59%
To pursue a particular career	117	52%
To study an area of interest	95	42%
To increase earning potential	73	33%
To meet new people	13	6%
People who encouraged university study (n=223)		
Family	94	42%
Friends	64	29%
Veterans	17	8%
Active duty ADF personnel	17	8%
University staff	7	3%
No one	90	40%

Table 2 (above) shows family members and friends as the individuals most likely to have encouraged student veterans to go to university. Notably, 40 percent of student veterans had not been encouraged by anyone to go to university. This finding could suggest that these student veterans had high levels of self-motivation, but it could also reflect social isolation, or low expectations of family and friends.

Applying to university

Our survey provided some evidence of student veterans not receiving appropriate credit for their military service, training, and qualifications. Approximately half of participants (51 percent) had earned civilian qualifications from ADF service, covering a range of certificate and diploma-level awards. Only one fifth of these students (20 percent), however, received credit for prior learning towards their university degrees. This finding is concerning, given that a lack of credit for military

accomplishments, could unnecessarily extend the time taken to complete a degree and prove demoralizing for some veterans.

Support for transitioning to university

Student veterans were less likely than other students to feel prepared and supported during their transition to university. Table 3 (below) compares the results of our survey with equivalent items from the Student Experience Survey, which captures the broader higher education student cohort, using per cent positive ratings (i.e. the proportion of participants responding “quite a bit” or “very much” to each statement) (QILT, 2017).

Table 3

Transition to university for student veterans and the higher education student population—percent positive ratings

	Student veterans	Higher education students
At university, to what extend did you...?		
Feel prepared for study	39%	67%
Receive support from your institution to settle into study	38%	60%
Feel induction/orientation activities were relevant and helpful	35%	58%

The transition to university may be relatively difficult for student veterans, in part, because they are older than most of their peers, and have experienced a longer period of time between school and university study. Indeed, the Student Experience Survey comprises a relatively young sample, with 77 percent of respondents aged under 25 years. More than age, however, it was evident that it was the perceived differences between military life and university life that left student veterans to feel underprepared for study; for example:

Transitioning [out of the military] is hard enough without the added pressure of attempting to fit into an institution that generally promotes an experiment completely opposed to the military (i.e., do it yourself, individual effort, no support, no teams, etc.).

...

As ADF members we are taught to operate in a team environment, which can cause much anxiety when transitioning into self-directed learning.

...

The ADF has imposed discipline. University is self-discipline; nothing is prepared or organized for you.

A few student veterans recommended bridging courses to aid both social and academic preparation for university study:

Do a bridging course first, it'll set you up for the basics and help ease you back into civi [civilian] culture.

Disclosure of veteran status to university

Approximately two thirds of student veterans (65 percent) did not disclose their veteran status to their university during application or enrolment processes. Commonly cited reasons for not disclosing this information included not being asked, not viewing it as relevant, and seeing no benefit

of disclosure. The tendency not to disclose veteran status limits the capacity of institutions to direct student veterans to potentially useful resources, such as financial assistance and counselling, and to monitor their success and outcomes. Of the one third of student veterans (35 percent) who had disclosed their veteran status, most had done so in the course of providing routine employment history, applying for credit for prior learning, or seeking access to support services.

RQ2: What are the experiences of student veterans enrolled in higher education?

Perceived value of university study

Student veterans placed a high value on university study. The vast majority of participants (94 percent) indicated that they would recommend university to other veterans. Comments from student veterans showed that university study was seen to have a range of psycho-social benefits, including helping them develop a new self-identity and a sense of purpose after leaving the ADF:

[University is] very challenging and gives you a huge sense of achievement when you finish. Also helps you move forward and realize that your military service doesn't necessarily define you.

...

University study allowed me peace in a time where every other part of my life there was mess, instability and uncertainty.

...

[University is] a great way to move on from trauma and build yourself a new identity and healthy focus in life.

The value of university education in improving career prospects was also emphasized, for example:

University is a fantastic opportunity to grow both personally and professionally.

Developing and refining skills like critical thinking, evaluation of information, academic writing and oral arguments can unlock significant potential in veterans... Not only will they benefit [you] as an individual, it is a great way to build new networks and expand your career prospects.

Transferable skills and qualities

Student veterans developed a range of skills through military experience that were helpful at university, with time management and discipline being the most commonly mentioned (see Table 4 next page). Many student veterans described how skills developed through military experience helped them excel in higher education:

We receive the top grades because we use what we were taught in the military regarding time management and discipline.

...

[The Army] did give me a vast number of skills, like self-discipline and time management, which gives me a heightened advantage when it comes to completing and being organized with assignments.

Table 4
Skills and qualities developed through military experience that helped at university

	Number of participants	Proportion of participants
Useful skills and qualities (n = 210)		
Time management	68	32%
Discipline	61	29%
Leadership	29	14%
Organization	21	10%
Teamwork	17	8%
Adaptability and flexibility	16	8%
Determination	14	7%
Communication	14	7%
Work ethic	12	6%
Confidence	12	6%
Perseverance and persistence	11	5%
Attention to detail	10	5%

Several participants also noted how the presence of student veterans on campus could be beneficial to the education of other students:

...the skills and attributes developed in the ADF will make you very competitive at an academic institution. The values and life experience you bring will also benefit all around you.

Challenges at university

Despite their strengths, student veterans reported experiencing many barriers to university success. More than half of the student veterans (54 percent) reported that their study was negatively affected by financial circumstances. The next most common barriers to success were: mental health issues (44 percent) —including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), paid work commitments (39 percent), and family responsibilities (34 percent), followed by physical health issues (22 percent), and living arrangements (16 percent).

Interactions with peers

Our survey provides evidence that student veterans can feel isolated within higher education. Only 30 percent of our survey respondents felt they belonged to their institution, either “quite a bit” or “very much,” compared to 53 percent of the higher education students captured in the Student Experience Survey (QILT, 2017). Student veterans were also less likely than their peers to interact with other students both within and outside of study requirements. Specifically, 53 percent of veterans worked with other students as part of their study, compared to 67 percent of the wider student population. Furthermore, only 28 percent of student veterans interacted with students outside of study requirements, compared to 46 percent of higher education students (QILT, 2017).

Not surprisingly, the level of interaction differed by mode of study. Approximately one third of student veterans were studying fully online (30 percent), and just over two thirds of these students (69 percent) never interacted with students outside of study requirements. The fact that most student veterans were mature-age students, and many had competing outside commitments, likely

contributed to reduced interaction with their (typically younger) peers. In addition, differences in life experiences, attitudes, and political perspectives affected interactions with other students. Two participants highlighted the often-striking differences in perceptions:

(Try) not to get involved with political conversations as many students who haven't served, and haven't seen the world, hold very immature view points, and don't understand how veterans think.

...

From what I have seen at [my university], they are very left wing and full of political correctness where students are spoon fed.

Approximately one fifth of veterans (22 percent) were not at all comfortable discussing their military experience at university and nearly one third (29 percent) felt that their university was not at all "veteran friendly" (see Table 5).

Table 5

Comfort discussing military experience and feeling that university was "veteran friendly"

	Number of participants	Proportion of participants
Felt comfortable discussing military experience (n=218)		
Not at all	48	22%
Very little	56	26%
Some	63	29%
Quite a bit	27	12%
Very much	24	11%
Felt university was "veteran friendly" (n=219)		
Not at all	64	29%
Very little	60	27%
Some	59	27%
Quite a bit	23	11%
Very much	13	6%

A number of student veterans had encountered students and lecturers with little understanding or appreciation of their military experiences, for example:

Negative preconceptions about the military and defence in general were quite pervasive within the student body and academia ...

...

Forget that you are a veteran because it means nothing to 90 percent of the other people there.

University support for veterans

Only five percent of participants reported that there were veteran-specific support services, programs, or organizations at their university. Most of these participants were specifically referring to chapters of the ASVA. The majority of participants (85 percent) stated that they would be involved in the ASVA if there was a chapter at their university. The ASVA was described as being very helpful. With one participant stating:

[The ASVA] have 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 veterans were asked to rate the helpfulness of the mainstream university support services they utilized. The most commonly used support was academic in nature (used by 70 percent of participants), followed by financial assistance (53 percent), career services (52 percent), health services (47 percent), student unions (46 percent), counselling services (45 percent), and disability services (38 percent).

As well as being commonly used, academic support was also rated as the most helpful type of support service (see Table 6 below). More than half of participants who used academic support, rated these services as either somewhat helpful or very helpful. There were fewer positive ratings for the other mainstream services. In particular, relatively few student veterans found student unions to be a helpful resource. These findings suggest that mainstream support services are not consistently meeting the needs of student veterans.

Table 6
Helpfulness of mainstream support services

	Very unhelpful	Somewhat unhelpful	Neutral	Somewhat helpful	Very helpful
Mainstream support services					
Academic support services (n = 154)	8%	8%	25%	32%	27%
Career services (n = 113)	12%	9%	39%	28%	12%
Counselling services (n = 99)	9%	9%	46%	19%	16%
Financial assistance (n = 117)	11%	14%	42%	10%	23%
Health services (n = 102)	9%	9%	50%	20%	13%
Disability services (n = 84)	10%	5%	57%	8%	20%
Student union (n = 100)	19%	9%	51%	17%	4%

Discussion

Our findings showed that Australian student veterans place a high value on university study. These students tend to bring many strengths into the classroom, yet face considerable challenges. Overall, we found that there is currently little targeted support available to student veterans in Australian higher education. In developing strategies to increase that support, Australia could look to international comparators such as the US. For instance, US institutions typically provide a much higher level of support for student veterans, including targeted outreach strategies, academic support and student services, counselling services, academic credit for military training and experience, and financial assistance (Cook & Kim, 2012).

We found that military service, training, and qualifications are not consistently recognized or credited by higher education institutions. This finding highlights the need for a systematic process of converting ADF qualifications and experience into university entry ranks across all Australian states and territories. In recommending course credit for military service and training, Naphan and Elliot (2015) stated “Not only would this be more efficient for student veterans seeking to become credentialed in the civilian world, but it would also validate student veterans’ experiences rather than discount them” (p. 45).

Student veterans were less likely than other students to experience a smooth transition to university, often struggling with the perceived contrast between military and university life. Studies from the US have also highlighted the “culture clash” student veterans can experience, especially due to differences between the rigid and hierarchical structure of the military environment and the relatively loose structure of the higher education environment (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza

Mitchell, 2009; Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009; Lim, Interiano, Nowell, Tkacik, & Dahlberg, 2018; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). This finding highlights the need for more veteran-specific support programs to ease the transition to university.

Ideally, transition support could be provided on an ongoing basis to student veterans throughout the first year of their studies. A number of institutions in the US have introduced first-year transition courses for student veterans, which aim to provide: orientation to campus; introduction to campus resources; academic skills; connection to support staff; reflection on personal challenges and identity issues; connection to peers; and identification of goals (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016). Undertaking bridging or foundation courses before commencing degree study might also prove helpful for some student veterans.

Student veterans reported a low level of appreciation and understanding of military experiences throughout the broader university community. Research from the US indicates that a lack of understanding about student veterans can lead to strained interactions on campus (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011). A large-scale survey of 14,673 academics and other staff from colleges and universities across the US, found that 58 percent of staff did not feel adequately prepared to manage a classroom discussion around a veteran-sensitive issue, and 44 percent did not feel knowledgeable about the common challenges facing the student veteran population (Albright & Bryan, 2017). The level of institutional awareness of student veterans' unique strengths and challenges could be improved through internal communications strategies and professional development activities. As highlighted by Kranke, Weiss, and Brown (2017), institutional education and training should aim to shift the burden so "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).

Two thirds of student veterans had not disclosed their veteran status to their university; many had not been asked about it or saw no benefit to disclosure. Student veterans could be encouraged to disclose their veteran status—for example, via a "tick-box" on application and enrollment forms—These students could then be provided with information about a range of university support services at an early stage. Higher levels of self-disclosure would help universities to collect and track information on student veterans, including geo-demographics, retention, success, completion, and graduate outcomes. More broadly, the Australian Department of Education and Training could collect specific data on the number of veterans enrolled in higher education, and their success and outcomes. As has been witnessed with other groups of students who are under-represented in Australian higher education, a strong evidence base is needed to drive policy change and raise educational expectations and outcomes (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016).

Once enrolled, Australian student veterans were positive about their university experiences. Participants reported utilizing a range of military-related skills that were helpful at university, especially time management and discipline. This finding corresponds with research from the US, which also found that student veterans adapted to university by applying their previously acquired skills (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Lechuga & Woodruff, 2016; Lim, Interiano, Tkacik, & Hewitt, 2016; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014).

Given these strengths, student veterans have the potential to improve the broader student higher education experience. In the classroom, for example, the strengths of student veterans could be harnessed through the creation of formal peer groups. In an autoethnographic study, Blackwell-Starnes (2018) found that the creation of semester-length peer groups encouraged student veterans to develop academic connections with other students. Peer groups helped student veterans gain a sense of belonging and provided leadership opportunities. Furthermore, the peer group structure

encouraged student veterans to model their leadership and problem-solving skills imitated by non-veteran students.

Finally, our research shows that student veterans often encountered challenges in higher education. Specifically, many student veterans felt isolated during university study and reported high levels of financial distress, extensive competing commitments, disabilities, and mental health issues. Research from the US also shows that such challenges are relatively common (e.g. Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Flink, 2017; Jenner, 2017; Kranke, Weiss, & Brown, 2017).

There is a clear need for a range of wrap-around support services specifically targeted to student veterans in Australian higher education. Targeted financial support measures would be beneficial, including tuition fee waivers and cost-of-living scholarships. Universities could also consider providing preferential access to university timetables, and flexible study arrangements, to increase attendance and engagement among student veterans juggling competing responsibilities. To counter feelings of isolation, universities could identify student veterans who have made successful transition to higher education and employ these students as mentors. Expanding and strengthening chapters of the ASVA on campus would also promote the wellbeing and success of student veterans.

Our project has some limitations and opportunities for future research. The lack of national data about student veterans in Australian higher education means we do not know the overall size of this group or their geo-demographic characteristics. As such, we have no way to gauge the representativeness of our sample of 240 student veterans. Our use of social media as the primary recruitment tool, for example, may have attracted a relatively young and online-active sample of student veterans. There is a need for further research that captures the voices of Australian student veterans nationally, to inform higher education policy, and which actively involves student veterans in the design and conduct of the research. Additional research is particularly warranted in the area of mental health, due to the pervasiveness of mental health issues among student veterans and the wider veteran community. Future studies could also investigate specific issues around credit for prior learning for qualifications obtained in the ADF.

Conclusion

Higher education represents an important pathway for military veterans. There is a lack of Australian policy, legislative, and institutional support for student veterans, which is clear when comparisons are made with countries like the US. Our research confirms that barriers to university access are considerable, and military experience is not consistently recognized or rewarded. Veterans often enter university with a collection of skills, experiences, and perspectives that differ from those of other students. Such differences can have broad social and academic value for all students, if well understood and incorporated into university curricula and pedagogy. There are clear ethical, practical, and policy grounds for supporting student veterans to access higher education, succeed in their studies, and move into rewarding post-military careers.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge advice and support from Matthew Sharp and Matthew-Wyatt Smith from the Australian Student Veterans Association.

Funding

This article is based on selected findings from a research project funded by the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs through the Supporting Younger Veterans Grant Program.

References

- Ackerman, R., DiRamio, D., & Garza Mitchell, R. L. (2009). Transitions: Combat veterans as college students. *New Directions for Student Services*, 126, 5–14.
- Albright, G. & Bryan, C. J. (2017). Are faculty and staff ready to support student veterans? Kognito and National Center for Veterans Studies, The University of Utah.
- American Council for Education. (2015). By the numbers: Undergraduate student veterans. Retrieved from <http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/By-the-Numbers-Undergraduate-Student-Veterans.aspx>
- Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA). (2018). Who is a veteran? Retrieved from <http://www.asva.org.au/>
- Barry, A. E., Whiteman, S. D., & MacDermid Wadsworth, S. (2014). Student service members/veterans in higher education: a systematic review. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 51(1), 30–42, DOI: 10.1515/jsarp-2014-0003
- Blackwell-Starnes, K. (2018). At ease: Developing veterans' sense of belonging in the college classroom. *Journal Veterans Studies*, 3(1), 18–36.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). The constant battle: Suicide by veterans. Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee. Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House. Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/VeteranSuicide/Report
- Cook, B. J., & Kim, Y. (2012). From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members. Washington, DC: American Council of Education.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills. (2013). The benefits of higher education participation for individuals and society: Key findings and reports "The Quadrants." BIS Research Paper No. 146. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf
- Department of Defence. (2017). 2016-17 defence annual report. Canberra: Department of Defence. Retrieved from http://www.defence.gov.au/AnnualReports/16-17/Downloads/DAR_2016-17_Complete.pdf
- . (2018). About the career transition assistance scheme. Retrieved from <http://www.defence.gov.au/PayAndConditions/ADF/Chapter-2/Part-2/Div-1.asp>
- Department of Employment Education and Training. (1990). A fair chance for all. National and institutional planning for equity in higher education. A discussion paper. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Department of Education and Training. (2017). Higher education statistics: 2016 equity groups. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/45206>
- Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). (2017a). Understanding the veteran experience. Retrieved from <https://at-ease.dva.gov.au/professionals/client-resources/mental-health-advice-book/11-understanding-veteran-experience>
- . (2017b). Tertiary education. Retrieved from <http://clik.dva.gov.au/rehabilitation-policy-library/9-vocational-rehabilitation/98-retraining-and-further-education/981-tertiary-education>
- . (2018). Annual report 2017–18. Retrieved from <https://www.dva.gov.au/about-dva/accountability-and-reporting/annual-reports/annual-reports-2017-18>
- Durdella, N., & Kim, Y. K. (2012). Understanding patterns of college outcomes among student veterans. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 2(2), 109–129.
- Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). US military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(3), 279–296.

- Elnitsky, C. A., Blevins, C., Findlaw, J. W., Alverio, T., & Weise, D. (2018). Student veterans reintegrating from the military to the university with traumatic injuries: how does service use relate to health status? *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 99(2 Supp 1), S58–64.
- Flink, P. (2017). Invisible disabilities, stigma, and student veterans: Contextualizing the transition to higher education. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(2), 110–120.
- Glasser, I., Powers, J. T., & Zywiak, W. H. (2009). Military veterans at universities: A case of culture clash. *Anthropology News*, 50(5), 33.
- Harvey, A., Burnheim, C. & Brett, M. (Eds.). (2016). Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of A Fair Chance for All. Singapore: Springer.
- Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Sharp, M. & Wyatt-Smith, M. (2018). *Supporting younger military veterans to succeed in Australian higher education*. Report for the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.
- Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). (2017). I am a post-9/11 student veteran. IVMF and Student Veterans of America. Retrieved from <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/I-AM-A-POST-911-Student-Veteran-REPORT.pdf>
- Jenner, B. M. (2017). Student veterans and the transition to higher education: Integrating existing literatures. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(2), 26–44.
- Kranke, D., Weiss, E. L., Brown, J. L. C. (2017). Student veterans with invisible disabilities: Accommodation-seeking in higher education. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(2), 26–44.
- Lechuga, V. M. & Woodruff, T. (2016). Adapting to college life after military service: A motivation perspective. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Columbus, Ohio.
- Lim, J.H., Interiano, C.G., Tkacik, P.T., & Hewitt, D. (2016). Reclaiming pride and purpose: Identity reintegration of student veterans in transition. Paper presented at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, Washington, D. C.
- Lim, J.H., Interiano, C. G., Nowell, C. E., Tkacik, P. T., Dahlberg, J. L. (2018). Invisible cultural barriers: Contrasting perspectives on student veterans' transition. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(3), 291–308.
- Livingston, W. G., Havice, P. A., Cawthon, T. W., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(3), 315–331.
- McMenamin, R. & Kurzynski, K. (2016). How are institutions of higher education implementing first-year transition courses for veterans? *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 1, 33–51.
- Naphan, D., & Elliot, M. (2015). Role exit from the military: student veterans' perceptions of transitioning from the US military to higher education. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 36–48.
- Norton, A., Cherastidham, I., & Mackey, W. (2018). Mapping Australian higher education 2018. Melbourne: Grattan Institute.
- Olsen, T., Badger, K., & McCuddy, M. D. (2014). Understanding the student veterans' college experience: An exploratory study. *The United States Army Medical Department Journal*, 101–108.
- Petri, A., Jenson, R., Day, A. & Gotto, G. (2016). Transition and the troubled giant: Opportunities for colleges and universities to invest veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 1, 1–32.
- Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning (QILT). (2017). 2016 Student Experience Survey national report. Retrieved from <https://www.qilt.edu.au/about-this-site/student-experience>
- Student Veterans of America. (2017). Our study. Retrieved from <http://studentveterans.org/aboutus/history>

US Census Bureau. (2018). Veterans day 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2018/veterans-day.html>
US Department of Veterans Affairs. (2017). Education and training: Post-9/11 GI Bill. Retrieved from https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911_gibill.asp
---. (2018). Forever GI Bill. Retrieved from <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/forevergibill.asp>
WithYouWithMe. (2017). Veteran employment report. Sydney: WithYouWithMe.

Lisa Andrewartha

Senior Research Officer and Senior Project Coordinator
Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research
La Trobe University
l.andrewartha@latrobe.edu.au

Andrew Harvey

Associate Professor and Director
Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research
La Trobe University