

Australian Catholic University

Submission to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

June 2022

ACU submission to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

Table of Contents

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
2. RECOMMENDATIONS	2
3. HOW ACU SUPPORTS VETERANS	4
4. BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR VETERANS	6
ATTACHMENT A: AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY PROFILE	8

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (the Royal Commission).

ACU's submission focuses on the following term of reference:

d) the role of non-government organisations, including ex-service organisations, in providing relevant services and support for defence members, veterans, their families and others.

As an expert witness recently told the Royal Commission, "What we know from transitioning into university is that university provides a pathway to regenerate identity, purpose and belonging, which is absolutely what is missing when we leave the Services."¹

Improving access to higher education will not stop veteran suicide, but it can significantly help to address the underlying problems faced by veterans when they leave the service by providing a new sense of identity within a structured environment that leads to new and fulfilling employment opportunities.

ACU has developed a nation-leading program to:

- (a) enable veterans and their families to access higher education, including by recognising their contribution and transferrable skills developed in the military; and
- (b) support veterans and their families throughout their university experience to ensure the best possible chance of completing their studies and finding employment in any number of industries.

Transitioning from the Australian Defence Force can involve a loss of identity and structure that the services provide. This can be compounded by a lack of recognition or respect for the unique skills veterans have learnt in the service. ACU is committed to supporting Australia's veterans and their families in overcoming those obstacles and improving their education, career, health, social connection, and wellbeing.

Higher education as a transition pathway for veterans is in its early development in Australia, and ACU is leading the way. **ACU has the most veteran students of any Australian university** and is the only university in the country to develop comprehensive plans and programs to meet the needs of not only veterans but their families as well. (See section 3). ACU submits that its program has the potential to be implemented in universities across the nation as a best practice tool for improving veteran health and education outcomes.

Higher education can be a key plank in helping veterans to survive and thrive, and successfully navigate civilian life. Research shows that successful completion of higher education is correlated with higher levels of health and wellbeing,² and with successful integration into civilian society for veterans in particular.³ **Given these findings, greater access to higher educational opportunities for veterans should be a priority for the Australian Government, as it is in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.**

¹ Associate Professor Ben Wadham's evidence to the Royal Commission given in Brisbane on 29 November 2021. Wadham is Director of a Veteran Transition, Integration, and Wellbeing research initiative at Flinders University

² Zajacova, A & Lawrence, E. "The relationship between education and health: reducing disparities through a contextual approach", 2018.

³ Wadham et al, "Australian universities and educational equity for student veterans", 2021.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

ACU makes four recommendations:

- i) Implement the veteran education allowance that was recommended by the Productivity Commission in 2019.*
- ii) Introduce a living stipend for veterans while they complete their education (like the U.S. G.I. Bill).*
- iii) Create an additional, separate pool of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) for veterans, with additional support for veterans enrolled in postgraduate study.*
- iv) Prioritise research on the impact of higher education for veterans, including the evaluation of current veteran education programs available for Australian veterans.*

Context for recommendations

(i) Veteran education allowance

The Productivity Commission's report, *A Better Way to Support Veterans*, was publicly released on 4 July 2019. Among other findings, the report found that stewardship of transition remains poor and that supports have not improved in ways that are tangible to veterans.

The report acknowledged the importance of education for veteran transition. Citing Canadian and U.S. programs, the Productivity Commission found that there was a strong in-principle case for Australia to provide more support for veterans' higher education and vocational training to assist with employment outcomes.

The Productivity Commission recommended (in recommendation 7.3) that a veteran education allowance be introduced, initially as part of a policy trial conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), to provide non-means-tested income to veterans undertaking full-time education or training.

The Australian Government has not yet implemented this recommendation. In its latest May 2021 update on its response to the Productivity Commission report, the Government said that its response to recommendation 7.3 was "pending further consideration." The Government also noted that it "will finalise any outstanding matters from the Productivity Commission report at the completion of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide".

The Interim National Commissioner on Veterans' Suicide, Dr Bernadette Boss, advised the Australian Government in September 2021 that implementing this recommendation should be a priority. Recommendation 3.3 of her preliminary interim report stated that the DVA trial of an education allowance to provide a source of income for veterans who wish to undertake full-time education or vocational training should be implemented quickly.⁴

Clear and supported transitioning pathways into higher education, and thereafter into the community, improves economic, social and health outcomes for veterans and is an appropriate policy response for Australia, as it has been in many other countries.

⁴ Interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention, "Preliminary Interim Report", 29 September 2021. Recommendation 3.3 and p. 121.

(ii) A living stipend for veterans, particularly those with a family to support

Australia should consider introducing its own version of the U.S. G.I. Bill, which provides a tuition voucher as well as a living stipend, depending on whether the veteran has a family to support during his or her education.

Higher education in Australia is generally less expensive than in the U.S., but students must still make contributions and have on-going living expenses, particularly if they have families.

Australian veterans are eligible for Austudy or Youth Allowance, but the allowance cuts out if the veteran earns more than approximately \$1,400 per fortnight (depending on whether they are single or have children).

Veterans find this is not enough to live on, particularly if they are receiving no other payment and have added tuition costs.

The GI Bill covers all tuition, including a living wage. Australian veterans warrant the same as a special group needing and deserving of support, through an education pathway into a new career.

(iii) Provide separate CSPs for veterans

A CSP offers enrolment in a program at a university or higher education provider where the government has paid part of the student's fees. The subsidy does not cover the entire cost of study, and the remaining portion is called the "student contribution amount".

Under the "demand driven system", which operated from 2012 to 2017, the Commonwealth provided CSPs to all domestic students enrolling in a bachelor-level course. Today, the availability of CSPs at each university is capped, rationing access to higher education.

The only remaining uncapped cohort is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in regional and remote Australia. These students are able to enrol in a CSP at a public Australian university without counting towards that university's CSP cap.

ACU proposes that CSPs for veterans also be placed outside universities' CSP caps. ACU's first and second recommendations for a veteran education allowance and a living stipend assists veterans with the expenses associated with higher education. ACU's third recommendation covers the government component and incentivises more universities to offer more places to veterans.

A second limb of this recommendation is to provide additional support for veterans who choose to pursue, and have the initial qualifications required for, postgraduate qualifications. Most postgraduate programs do not have CSPs allocated to them, so students must be able to cover the full costs themselves. A contribution towards veterans enrolled in postgraduate degrees would lead to more veterans enrolling in these degrees and, in many cases, achieving the qualifications required for professional accreditation.

(iv) Prioritise research on the impact of education for veterans, including the evaluation of current veteran education programs available for Australian veterans.

Scholarship on student veterans in Australia is very limited compared with other countries, such as the U.S., where organisations such as the Institute for Veterans and Military Families based at Syracuse University undertake extensive research on the factors leading to success for veterans in their post-service lives.

Evaluation of veteran education programs must develop beyond its current state of infancy to determine the predictors of educational success for veterans and create more empirically based programs that target veteran resources more effectively. As one of the few overviews of veteran education in Australia notes, “University-based initiatives are small in number, limited, grassroots driven and yet to be evaluated.”⁵

3. HOW ACU SUPPORTS VETERANS

To date in 2022, 198 veterans have enrolled at ACU, an almost ten-fold increase from 2019, when just 21 veterans were enrolled.

Of the veterans currently enrolled at ACU:

- 76% are under the age of 32;
- 74% are studying health sciences (especially nursing and paramedicine);
- 72% are from the army;
- 69% are male; and
- 59% are enrolled at ACU’s Brisbane campus.

ACU sees potential for growth in both the number and type of veterans seeking entry, and would like to enrol more veterans who are:

- older;
- female;
- based in New South Wales, Victoria (including regional Victoria) and the ACT – where ACU campuses are also located;
- from the navy and air force;
- Commissioned Officers;
- interested in studying law, IT, business, education and arts; and
- interested in pursuing postgraduate degree programs.

Veterans have proved to be very capable students with the right support. They come to university with a wealth of knowledge and life experience, from a culture of individual and collective continuous learning, have proven themselves capable at handling some challenging tasks, and can be very valuable to employers when they graduate.

Veterans also have skills that are highly applicable to the academic setting, such as discipline, organisation, determination, and task-commitment.

Despite better time management skills and higher levels of academic participation than the average student, however, veterans’ academic performance is not assured. This is because veterans face significant difficulties transitioning out of the defence force, including a loss of identity, feelings of alienation and isolation, and academic shortfalls due to negative experiences at school, or the time elapsed since their last experience of formal education.

⁵ Wadham et al, op. cit., 2021.

To combat these deficits, ACU has introduced nation-first programs that assist veterans make a successful transition to university life. These include:

(a) ACU's Veterans Entry Program (VEP)

The VEP was the first program by an Australian university to offer consistent entry requirements for veterans. The VEP allows service members to have their military service recognised and converted into an 'Entry Rank'. In general, two-years of service with basic training provides an entry rank of 82, which will allow members entry into many courses offered at ACU and be considered for some postgraduate study, if applicable.

(b) VEP – Family Expansion

In another Australian-first, ACU sought to increase the accessibility of higher education to family members of veterans (partners, spouses, and children over 18). This pathway recognises that, for families of veterans, education and employment outcomes can be adversely affected by service. Family members can apply directly to the university irrespective of ATAR and be assessed through an interview process, providing a unique avenue to higher education.

(c) Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Credit where credit's due

Through a DVA grant, ACU developed a unique framework for assessment of formal defence training to individual units of study in higher education. This gives ADF members the option of receiving significant RPL towards their university study. This is a substantial offering for current and previous serving personnel; in some cases, members can receive up to 120 credit points (1.5 years) of study recognised, without these units being charged to the student.

(d) Veterans Transition Program (VTP)

This two-week intensive program assists veterans transition from life in the military to life as a student and focuses on the academic skills veterans need for study and the knowledge to fit into campus life. The emphasis is on acclimatisation to the higher education environment in a low risk, supported setting. Students can also receive a credit for this unit towards their academic transcript.

(e) Student Veteran Support Program (SVSP)

The SVSP provides ongoing support while veterans are enrolled. It establishes a single point of contact for support on campus, provides priority class allocation to balance university around external commitments, family, and work, and highlights the services available for veterans, including guidance and assistance to access these services.

(f) Veteran First Year Peer Mentoring Program

This mentoring program partners commencing students with second- and third-year student veteran peers to help guide and provide support throughout their transition into study. This offers students an informal support network where they can receive assistance with university-related questions. The program is developed around best practice demonstrated in the literature for similar peer programs run in the U.S.

(g) Awards, Grants and Scholarships

ACU currently offers several grants and awards for student veterans to encourage engagement and ease their transition into study. The 'Student Veteran Commencing Student Technology and Book Grant' allows students to apply for assistance purchasing technology and books during their first year of study, while the 'Student Veteran Impact Award' recognises academic achievement and the contributions student veterans have made to the community whilst studying, with this award presented annually at an awards event.

(h) Student Veteran Exercise Lifestyle Program

This program provides veterans and their families with access to clinical exercise physiologists and health professionals on campus. This program is facilitated within the existing facilities on campus that are equipped with high performance rehabilitation and training equipment. For student veterans, this is a unique offering as they can access the facility when it is most suitable for them, allowing for better time management when balancing study demands whilst maintaining health and fitness.

4. BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR VETERANS

ACU developed the programs set out in Section 3 in alignment with its mission and ethos, with a view to being inclusive and providing access to higher education to cohorts with specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Higher education is an internationally established pathway to assist veterans to successfully transition from the military into civilian life and rewarding employment.⁶ The proven benefits of further study include improved employment prospects⁷ and a range of positive psycho-social outcomes.⁸ Because higher education is more likely to lead to financial stability, services that provide veterans with tools that strengthen their educational background and employability can lead to positive and sustainable long-term outcomes.⁹

Veterans are not a recognised disadvantaged group, but they do have specific needs and vulnerabilities, as recognised by The Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant, which acknowledges the unique nature of military service and the contribution of veterans and their families. For example, new recruits to the military tend to be young and from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the U.K., non-commissioned recruits tend to have low educational attainment and come from poor communities, with it being reported that the average reading age of trainees at the Infantry Training Centre is ten.¹⁰ The majority of recruits surveyed also came from a broken home, had left school with no academic qualifications, and were classified as being from a deprived background.¹¹ Similar results were found in the U.S., with Army and Marine Corps

⁶ Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). "I am a post-9/11 student veteran. IVMF and Student Veterans of America", 2017

⁷ Norton, Cherastidham, & Mackey, "University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion?", 2018

⁸ Department for Business Innovation and Skills. "The benefits of higher education participation for individuals and society: Key findings and reports," "The Quadrants." BIS Research Paper No. 146., 2013

⁹ Wadham et al, "Australian universities and educational equity for student veterans", 2021

¹⁰ Gee, D. "Informed choice? Armed forces recruitment practice in the United Kingdom", 2008

¹¹ Ministry of Defense, "Analysis of socio-economic and educational background of non-officer recruits", [memorandum to the house of commons defence committee, 2004], cited in House of Commons Defence Committee (2005) (Third Report of Session 2004-05) Duty of Care, 2. Ev 255-257.

recruits coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than youths in the general population.¹²

Higher education can help. Research on veterans in the U.S. shows that being a college graduate is associated with reporting an easier transition to civilian life.¹³ The economic and health benefits of higher education are well documented. Increased knowledge leads to better understanding and access of health information, better health choices, and improved management of ill-health. This has led many countries to prioritise education in helping veterans transition into wider society.

An example of such assistance is the provision of educational subsidies through the G.I. Bill in the U.S., which began in 1944 and continues to the present day. Fears of massive unemployment from millions of working-age males returning from the second world war led the U.S. Congress to pass the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 that instigated a major educational and social transformation. Several versions of the G.I. Bill have passed since that time, each one having larger benefits.

The financial and health benefits of higher education, as well as the stability of future employment, is well recognised internationally and should be a priority for the Australian Government. In 2019, this was recommended by the Productivity Commission report. ACU supports recommendation 7.3 from that report for a veteran education allowance, together with a living stipend while veterans complete their education (like the U.S. G.I. Bill), dedicated CSPs for veterans and research on the benefits to veterans of higher education.

¹² Booth, S. J., & Schmiegel, K. M. "Socioeconomic status and performance in the US Army and US marine Corps", Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School. 1998

¹³ Morin, R. "The difficult transition from military to civilian life", Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2011.

ATTACHMENT A: AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY PROFILE

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with seven campuses across three states and one territory. Campuses are located in North Sydney, Strathfield, Blacktown, Canberra, Melbourne, Ballarat, and Brisbane. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world. In 2020, ACU had over 33,000 students and 2,300 staff.¹⁴

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. ACU is the number one university in the country, public or private, when it comes to graduate employment outcomes three years after graduation, with a 94.2 per cent employment rate.¹⁵ ACU is the second highest university in the country when it comes to employer satisfaction of its graduates, with an employer satisfaction rate of nearly 90 per cent.¹⁶

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia¹⁷ and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. Under the demand driven system, ACU sought to focus and build on these strengths through four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy.

As part of its commitment to educational excellence, ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on research areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good. To underpin its plan for research intensification, ACU has appointed high profile leaders to assume the directorships, and work with high calibre members, in six research institutes.¹⁸

In recent years, the public standing of ACU's research has improved dramatically. The 2021 Shanghai world rankings in subject areas, based primarily on scores for research citations and international research collaboration, had ACU ranked:

- 18th in the world for nursing, and 7th in Australia
- 22nd in the world for sport science, and 4th in Australia
- top 50 universities worldwide for education, and 3rd in Australia
- top 150 universities in the world for psychology
- top 200 universities in the world for law

The Times Higher Education (THE) ranks ACU in the global top 300 universities overall and in the top 250 for arts and humanities. The most recent THE ranking was the Young University ranking in which ACU is now placed in the top 40 overall. ACU's rapidly growing reputation in research is in line with its steady expansion.

¹⁴ ACU Annual Report 2020.

¹⁵ QILT (September 2021), *2021 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L)*

¹⁶ QILT (February 2022), *2021 Employer Satisfaction Survey*

¹⁷ Department of Education and Training, *2019 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses*. Section 8, table 8.3

¹⁸ Australian Catholic University, *ACU Research*, acu.edu.au/research