

ACU Response to Research and Evaluation Strategic Partnership (RESP) Consultation Questions

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Introduction

Australian Catholic University (ACU) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Veterans' Affairs' Request for Information (RFI) regarding the development of Research and Evaluation Strategic Partnerships (RESP). ACU also appreciates having had the opportunity earlier in the DVA's consultation process to have attended the Small Group Consultation meeting earlier this year.

Empowering veterans and their families after military service is a priority for ACU and is strongly aligned with ACU's mission. To achieve this, ACU has undertaken a range of activities, including:

- Developing and offering a suite of programs and services to help both current and ex-serving members of the Australian Defence Force, and their families, access higher education and succeed in their studies.
- Collaborating with industry partners in the veteran community sector to undertake crucial veteran-related research.
- Working with government and other stakeholders on other initiatives to benefit veterans and their families, including engagement with the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (DVSRC).

Following a background about ACU and our work in the veteran research and evaluation space, we have provided responses to the DVA's *Research and Evaluation Strategic Partnership (RESP) – Consultation Questions*.

ABOUT ACU

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a public university with a national presence, spanning across seven campuses across Australia (Blacktown, Brisbane, Ballarat, Canberra, Melbourne, North Sydney, and Strathfield) and one in Rome, Italy.

We are ranked in the top 2% of all universities worldwide and one of the top 10 Catholic universities globally. We are also a national leader in graduate employability with 95% of our graduates gaining employment once they leave university. Notably, ACU has strong ties to the veteran community and substantial numbers of veteran students enrolled in its courses.

Empowering veterans and families is an area of critical social importance to Australia and has been identified by the ACU as being one in which we can make a positive, durable, and measurable contribution. For that reason, it has been designated as an ACU Impact Priority. As an ACU Impact Priority Area, all veteran and families activities must complement and support ACU's strategic priorities and be integrated with the wider institutional/operational activities, have a high profile within the University and broader community, and have effective governance, oversight, co-ordination, and reporting systems.

ACU's new strategic plan, *ACU Vision 2033*, articulates the strategic ambitions for the University for the next 10 years. Among its core ambitions is the imperative to deliver change that advances human dignity and the common good, and to serve our communities with distinction. We also have a specific strategic initiative focused on serving defence force veterans and their families. Every three years, a university execution plan will identify and map the University's target outcomes, key performance indicators, programs of work, actions, capabilities, and timescales. These activities will include any programs of work undertaken as part of the Veterans and Families Impact Area.

In addition to these broader institutional processes, our Vice-Chancellor has established a Veterans and Families Taskforce which comprises of senior ACU staff members responsible for expanding and strengthening veteran and families related capability and focus across the university.

ACU'S VETERAN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION WORK

ACU undertakes research activities that relate to promoting the health and social wellbeing of veterans and families. Veteran Life Research, a research and enterprise incubator set up by the Vice-Chancellor, focuses on the post-service life experiences of Australian veterans. It undertakes research collaborations with community partners and provides fee-for-service consultancy projects focused on advancing an evidence-based understanding of the life challenges veterans and families can experience after they transition from service. It also seeks to find solutions to those challenges. We are now extending our veteran and families related research capability and establishing an ACU Veterans and Families Research Network which will take learnings from the incubator and harness the research abilities of academics across the whole university. As our research agenda increases, the resulting impact and revenue will reinforce the University's overall ability to serve the veteran community in a sustainable manner.

Current DVA Research Priorities (RESP Q1)

Overall, ACU regards DVA's current research priorities as mostly adequate, but offers several suggestions for further refinement and improvement to reflect the evolving research, policy, and industry perspectives relating to veterans and their families. These would involve (a) amending the "Wellbeing" priority; (b) adding an "Skills & Opportunities" priority; (c) adding a "Family" priority; and (d) signalling the need for longitudinal research.

AMENDING THE "WELLBEING" PRIORITY

ACU suggests that the current framing of the "Wellbeing" priority is inadequate because it does not sufficiently signal the multidimensional nature of veteran wellbeing. Given the strong historical tendency for veterans' needs to be framed from within an 'illness' model, there is a risk that the umbrella term "wellbeing" may be interpreted along similar lines, as strictly referring to veterans' mental and physical health. However, research literature acknowledges such important dimensions such as:

- Family wellbeing and community belonging;
- Economic participation and financial wellbeing (the latter was named a priority area in the Federal Government's *Veteran Transition Strategy*, hereby referred to as *VTS*);
- Residential security;
- Identity, respect, and recognition (the latter is also a *VTS* priority i.e., that transitioning veterans 'feel that their service is formally recognised and valued'.)

ACU regards these as crucial aspects of veteran wellbeing, ones that also interact with veterans' mental and physical health, and which are increasingly emphasised in the veteran policy space. These have been reinforced to ACU through our various ESO partners and connections with the veteran community, as well as our efforts to promote inclusion and wellbeing for our large cohort of veteran students. These broader wellbeing dimensions also better reflect the Australian Government's *Measuring What Matters* national wellbeing framework, and its components of *Healthy, Secure, Sustainable, Cohesive, and Prosperous*.

To some extent broader wellbeing dimensions are referenced in DVA's own *Serving Well, Living Well and Aging Well* framework, meaning there is a misalignment between that more complex framing of veteran wellbeing, and its less nuanced framing as a research and evaluation priority. The term 'personal wellbeing' may also inadvertently preclude a focus on the more social, familial, and relational aspects of wellbeing that are particularly critical for transitional and post transition outcomes of veterans.

Lastly, further research is required to determine how different aspects of veteran wellbeing relate to one another, their relative importance (i.e., for different veteran sub-groups, at different life stages and stages of transition,

ADDING A "SKILLS & OPPORTUNITIES" PRIORITY

The current priorities do not direct research and evaluation towards cultivating veteran-friendly social, educational, and economic opportunities in civil society, or ensuring that veterans are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to take up such opportunities. There are many examples of instances where DVA may wish to better understand how organisational practices and processes can become more inclusive of veterans and their families. For instance, the *VTS* contains a priority of enabling veterans and their families to "access employment and skill-based training aligned with their professional development goals". As a university with a significant number of student veteran cohort, ACU has insight into the critical role of tertiary institutions in addressing this priority. ACU notes that addressing this priority has required major adaptations as an organisation, in a range of areas, to better understand and address the needs of veteran students, to create a supportive environment for them and mitigate some of the unique barriers they may encounter, and to enable them to identify and further develop their skills and strengths. Currently the DVA priorities do not call for research or evaluation into what educational institutions are doing well and what could be replicated elsewhere in this space.

Moreover, education and training alone are insufficient for guaranteeing employment outcomes for veterans. In the employer space, veteran-friendly employment opportunities are also critical. ACU recently developed the ACU Maturity Model identifying best practices for veteran employers, which emphasises the types of practices required by employers in areas such as recruitment, support and retention, and leadership and public commitment, that can assist in creating meaningful improvements in veteran employment. Currently, if DVA wished to encourage research or evaluation on the extent to which organisations were employing best practices / achieving desired outcomes with respect to veteran education or employment, this does not fit clearly in any of its current research priorities. Veterans' wellbeing is contingent on creating opportunities for greater social, economic, and cultural participation, which requires research and evaluation into the ways in which ESOs, tertiary institutions, employers, or other social/community organisations, can best facilitate such opportunities. Therefore, we suggest dedicating a research priority to this.

ADDING A "FAMILY" PRIORITY

The term "Family" does not appear in any of DVA's existing research priorities considering the key outcomes in most of the priority areas are inextricably linked for veterans and their families. Veterans' service and transition experiences involve and impact on the lives of their spouses, children, parents, and extended family members, and in turn, these familial relationships have a critical, albeit informal, role in supporting veterans throughout these experiences. ACU believes the effectiveness of the supports and services provided by DVA and other agencies, as well as industry and ESOs, for veterans and their families can be enhanced through an improved understanding of these dynamics. Moreover, the VTS specifically prioritises empowering veterans and families, 'to engage family and other significant support people in the transition process'. ACU suggests that the inclusion of a "Family" priority would encourage this.

SIGNALLING THE NEED FOR LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

There is a major shortage of veteran-focused research and evaluation approaches that are designed to capture change over time longitudinally, in terms of the pathways and outcomes of veterans and their families. This shortage is at odds with an increasing emphasis on the need to better understand what veterans and families experience throughout the transition process rather than at any one point in time. Longitudinal research is critical for efforts to improve transition processes, such as the continuity of care that veterans receive across transition, as well identifying what can influence both the short-term and longer-term pathways and outcomes across the whole life cycle of veterans and their families. More generally, longitudinal research studies were one of the evidence-gathering tools explicitly recommended by the *Thodey Review* into the Australian Public Service (APS). Amending the wording of DVA research priorities can help to address this. For instance, the priorities could place greater emphasis on temporality, such as examining 'changes' or 'pathways' 'over time' and 'across the life course' or 'life cycle', as well as identifying 'mechanisms' and 'processes' that accompany these, so as to signal the need for approaches that are more longitudinal and causally focused in nature.

Combined Approach to Research & Evaluation (RESP Q2)

ACU strongly supports DVA's intention to integrate research and evaluation (R&E) to inform policy and practice in relation to veterans and their families. This approach is strong consistent with the approach being championed by the Australian Centre for Evaluation, which encourages evaluation practices which draw on partnerships with academic researchers.

NO SINGLE ORGANISATION CAN DO IT ALL – COLLABORATION IS KEY

First and foremost, ACU wishes to emphasise that this area (veterans and families) is one in which R&E is contingent on collaboration between multiple stakeholders. As a long-term solution, no one category of organisation in isolation can achieve all the objectives of R&E in a way that delivers sustained outcomes and value for money. Establishing **enduring cooperation between stakeholders** is a major determinant of the quality of R&E and the extent to which it can improve outcomes for veterans and their families. For this reason, ACU is proposing that DVA consider approaches to R&E that are predicated, in various ways, on such cooperation as a key principle (see further detail under 'Funding' below).

COMBINING RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

Universities with a strong focus on veterans and their families are uniquely suited to help drive this collaborative approach to R&E both due to their research infrastructure and linkages to the partner organisations within the broader research community. From ACU's experience, the benefits of integrating research and evaluation outweigh its challenges. Research and evaluation can have mutually reinforcing benefits when undertaken alongside one another using the same research infrastructure. High quality approaches to evaluation need to be informed by existing knowledge and evidence, to ensure that the most meaningful factors, processes, and outcomes are evaluated in the most rigorous way. When this is the case, evaluations produce high-quality, real-world evidence about what works, and about what meets veterans' and veterans' service providers' needs. This evidence in turn improves more fundamental understandings about veterans and their families, and about the mechanisms by which their needs can be better addressed.

In the university sector, integrating R&E on veterans and families helps to build capability in three key areas across the research infrastructure, through:

- **Strengthening expertise and collaboration:** for example, there is a possibility for collaboration between academics involved in pure and applied research, and evaluation, same researchers and research teams working across these areas ensures robust and multifaceted expertise in the veteran's space;
- **Expanding data possibilities:** data collection can be designed in a way that maximises value for both research and evaluation purposes, establishing platforms for data sharing between veteran researchers facilitates collaboration, is cost effective, and reduces research burden on veterans by expanding secondary analysis possibilities; and
- **Streamlining systems and processes:** such as ethics, research and data management, contracts and legal, procurement, IT, and software, in which shared processes can be established, and resources made accessible, to support personnel and projects involved in both research and evaluation.

Funding & Capability of Research/Evaluation Partners (RESP Qs 3 & 6)

ACU proposes for DVA to consider transitioning towards a funding model that encourages and supports sustained cooperation between government, universities, ESOs and other veteran-focused organisations, as well as business and industry, to undertake integrated R&E activities that improve outcomes for veterans and their families. Such a model as the one proposed below would also provide a mechanism for allowing DVA and other community partners to draw on research infrastructure and capabilities more effectively in the university sector.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION HUBS

In response to question 3.1, one potential approach would involve designating funding towards research and evaluation 'hubs', consisting of a consortium of stakeholders cooperating to undertake R&E activities that are organised around shared objectives that align with DVA priorities.

R&E Hubs can be envisioned as a 'hub-and-spoke' model, where each 'spoke' represents a specific veteran-focused research project, or program/service to be evaluated, each involving one or multiple stakeholder partners. The 'hub' represents a central body for coordinating activities and resources across projects and programs. Coordination would be governed by a steering committee with representatives from key stakeholder groups. This collaborative approach to governance encourages consensus around research priorities and activities. It also enables all stakeholders to more effectively draw on the research expertise, evaluation tools, and infrastructure that exists within universities. While specific projects and evaluations may vary in duration, the model provides a conducive 'ecosystem' in which knowledge, infrastructure and partnerships persist and evolve, driving progress around DVA-aligned priorities related to veterans and their families.

There are different possibilities for the role of universities in such a model, but the key notion would be that such hubs leverage universities' key research infrastructure as identified in the "Combined Approach to Research and Evaluation" section above (i.e., in terms of multi-disciplinary expertise and collaboration, data and data-sharing platforms, as well as systems and processes). Connecting veteran-focused research infrastructure to such hubs would further maximise the benefits of integrated R&E as outlined in 3.2. Initially, individual R&E hubs might be closely affiliated with a single partner university that has veteran-specific research expertise and community partnerships needed to address a key research priority area. Over time multiple R&E hubs could form a network with greater opportunities for collaborative linkages between them. R&E Hubs could also work with government evaluation units and initiatives (such as the Australian Centre for Evaluation) to facilitate their access to evaluation tools and expertise.

Some of the advantages of such a model would include:

- **Attracting broader funding** (as well as in-kind contributions required for research) from non-government sources, such as business and industry, larger ESO and veteran organisation partners, who will benefit from R&E that directly addresses their needs. Philanthropic funds are likelier to contribute to more sustained initiatives where their funding can be linked to ongoing benefits across multiple organisations and research projects/programs assisting veterans, rather than discrete, standalone projects with less impact potential.
- **Broadening participation in R&E** to smaller veteran organisations that do not otherwise have the time or resources to undertake evaluation of their programs, as this model may enable access to research infrastructure in return for participation in R&E that furthers the hub's shared objectives.
- **Ensures DVA funding has a 'ripple effect'** that extends much further than it would if directed towards singular research projects or evaluations. In addition to benefiting the one or more stakeholders connected to particular projects, the investment in R&E benefits all stakeholders in the hub, who have shared interest in research priorities that underpin all the hub's projects and programs.
- **Flexibility to scale funding up or down** based on the contributions of other relevant stakeholders.
- **Building enduring and evolving veteran-focused research infrastructure**, by enabling sustained engagement by individual and teams of researchers in relation to the priorities of the hub, thereby supporting developing expertise and capabilities to deliver improved R&E outcomes. Since projects will be conceived more collaboratively with external partners, they are less likely to be framed in accordance with single disciplinary approach or single capability area within the university. R&E Hubs would instead encourage universities to draw on a wider range of non-veteran-specific expertise, and to promote interdisciplinary approaches to veteran research.
- **Increased opportunities for data sharing** around the R&E hub priorities, thereby maximising the value from data already collected from veterans and their families. These should be built on the 'FAIR' principles for Research Data Management i.e., data should be Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable.
- **Enabling sustained contributions to knowledge**, extending beyond the life of individual projects or evaluations, as findings from specific projects contribute to an ongoing body of evidence developed across multiple projects.
- **Maximising impact and dissemination of R&E project findings** by providing a collaborative research environment in which the involvement of multiple stakeholders is encouraged at key stages of research, including co-design and findings translation.

BUILDING AND RETAINING EXPERTISE ON VETERANS' MATTERS

A funding model such as R&E Hub approach suggested above represents one avenue for building longer-term research expertise, capacity, and cooperation in relation to issues affecting veterans and their families, as it encourages a research ecosystem that is conducive to this. However, in response to questions 3.2 and 3.3, ACU acknowledges that there are other smaller scale opportunities for cultivating and retaining research expertise. These entail a greater emphasis on funding *people* rather than specific, discrete projects. Examples include:

- **Funding or part-funding of veteran-focused Professorial Chairs and similar positions at universities.** At ACU, the creation of the Industry Professor for Veterans and Their Families has allowed ACU to facilitate greater and deeper engagement with the veteran community, as well as DVA, Defence, and other key stakeholders. There is an opportunity for the DVA to replicate the success of this role by partnering with universities and other research institutions to create, develop and fund these positions and ensure that there are academic leadership positions for researchers in the veteran sector, who can help build the profile and capacity of veteran research and evaluation within their institutions.
- **Funding for veteran-focused postgraduate research scholarships**, such as PhD scholarships, can also to support and incentivise research training in veterans' matters at Australian universities. Through scholarships which support research students the DVA would be able to develop a cohort of early career researchers (ECRs) in Australia with an awareness of the issues facing veterans and their families in Australia and the research training necessary to contribute valuable research towards understanding and combatting those issues.

Data (RESP Q4)

Accessing and sharing datasets is a crucial component of research and evaluation in the veteran research sector. ACU is pleased that in its consultation questions 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 the DVA has shown an openness to expanding secure access to high-quality DVA and Defence datasets, exploring third-party datasets, and pursuing data linkage and sharing infrastructure.

DVA AND DEFENCE DATA

ACU considers that the general principle of expanded access to DVA and Defence data, as needed and with secure access conditions, will be necessary for R&E that fully addresses key veteran research priorities whilst maintaining privacy and security. There are several R&E examples or scenarios where ACU would expect that expanded access to DVA / Defence data access is needed.

- **Continuity of data and monitoring for transitioning veterans:** One of the key priorities of the Federal Government's *Veteran Transition Strategy* involves planning and preparing for transition early, which includes 'allowances for transitioning ADF members to attend civilian GP appointments to support the handover of any medical care needs from Defence Health to the GP who will manage their health care after transition.' As these and other preventative and early intervention initiatives begin to take effect, ACU believes it will be increasingly necessary to develop greater coordination between DVA, Defence, and R&E partners to evaluate the outcomes associated with such changes, including their wellbeing impacts for transitioning veterans, potential reductions in health care utilisation, and cost efficiencies to list a few.

For example, ACU has recently formed a research partnership with GO2 Health, the main Brisbane-based GP clinic specialising in veteran transition care. GO2 Health represent a useful example of the type of civilian GP clinic that would be likely to receive transitioning ADF members as per the initiative outlined above, due to their well-established transition care program for recently transitioned veterans, and their close existing linkages with Garrison health services at nearby Enoggera ADF base. Thus, any research and evaluation ACU might undertake in future for GO2 Health would require sufficient data coverage on transitioning ADF veterans' pre and post transition health status and health care utilisation to achieve its objectives, including access to their existing ADF medical / health care records, or potentially ability to collect new data from them prior to transition (such as questionnaires).

- **ADF Injury data:** ACU recognises that involuntary medical discharge from the ADF is a key risk factor for a wide range of post-transition wellbeing outcomes among veterans and their families. In general, this is an area in which greater access to Defence data would be useful for R&E activities, including ACU's plans for research on injury prevalence, prevention, and treatment, as well as design and evaluation of programs aiming to improve post-transition outcomes of medically discharged veterans (such as those with injuries accompanied by chronic pain). For instance, this may include facilitating access to PMKeyS personnel data or Workplace Health, Safety, Compensation and Reporting (WHCAR) dataset.
- **DVA DMIS data:** Another key data resource for R&E purposes is DVA's Departmental Management Information System (DMIS) which contains information on health care utilisation by veterans who are DVA clients. In some instances, the evaluation of health programs and treatments for ex-serving veterans can utilise such data to explore their costs and benefits in a way that is clear and tangible for health care planning purposes. ACU suggests further expanding such access (i.e., through the creation of a curated dataset as suggested) and promoting its usage by researchers in the veterans and families space.
- **Further detail on plans for The *Military and Veterans Research Study Roll*:** This resource would be incredibly valuable to researchers to recruit veterans for research projects, but there is scant information about it online besides information intended for ADF personnel themselves. The DVA website states that the *Military and Veterans Research Study Roll* is stored securely by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), but the AIHW does not publicise this anywhere on their website. Even if the *Military and Veterans Research Study Roll* is only intended for use by the AIHW itself, it would be useful for there to be greater transparency and opportunity for input on its usage from the broader research community. Furthermore, given the high public research value of such a resource, and the possibility that its existence narrows the recruitment pool of ADF members for researchers without access to the roll, serious consideration should be given to broadening access to research data from all studies that utilise the Roll as a recruitment source.

THIRD PARTY DATA SOURCES

ACU regularly utilises data and reports from third party data sources and regards these as an important resource for R&E work in the veteran sector. In response to question 4.2, we provide comment on the possibilities of several main sources below:

- **ABS** data are a key resource presenting many possibilities for enriching R&E on veterans and their families. The inclusion of an ADF service indicator in Census 2021 data was a major step forward in understanding the characteristics of the veteran population in Australia. Rich profiles of the veteran population have been released by the ABS, AIHW, and others, which can already help to inform R&E as well as DVA planning more generally, in particular by reducing gaps in our knowledge about the attributes and circumstances of the many veterans who are non-DVA clients.

ACU believes further value exists in utilising the spatialised unit information accompanying the Census data to undertake more detailed mapping of the veteran population, which can be combined with other data sources for a range of objectives, such as illustrating gaps in service provision, or targeting veteran-focused programs or services. ACU has already utilised this data for its work with the Defence and Veteran Suicide Royal Commission (DVSRC) to map the distribution of veteran service providers relative to the actual veteran population. ACU is also exploring the potential to learn more about the characteristics and distribution of ADF families using the Census data.

Accessibility of ABS data on veterans is an issue. The ABS' Data API project, for example, has been in various trials since 2021, and has only been progressing at a relatively slow pace. The potential of a project like the ABS's Data API is enormous – for example, the ability to build tools which access ADF service data from the Census datasets directly – but unfortunately unrealised. Currently, it remains difficult and time-consuming to access more complex configurations of ABS veteran data (such as geographic data required for mapping veteran characteristics) through other avenues such as TableBuilder.

- **AIHW** undertakes secondary, veteran-focused analyses of other available datasets, such as the ABS National Health Survey, National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Census 2021, as well as undertaking the important work of annual monitoring of suicide and self-harm among currently and ex-serving ADF members. AIHW reporting and analyses are an important source of contextual information on the veteran population, but are restricted to the parameters of the underlying primary data being used, in terms of questionnaire measures and samples. Understandably, these data mainly focus on indicators of veteran health status.
- **HILDA** contained a measure asking about ADF service for the first time in its Wave 21 survey, and this data has been analysed by the AIHW (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/veteran-social-connectedness/contents/a-profile-of-veterans-in-wave-21-of-hilda>). While this addition is a welcome step, we note that the raw number of ADF veterans in the HILDA sample (n=650) is very small, and likely prone to methodological issues due to the nature of HILDA sampling (which excluded non-private dwellings, in which a large proportion of current-serving ADF are located). As such, the HILDA data will not support generalised inferences about the broader veteran population. HILDA data may contain some further analytic value in retrospectively analysing the experiences and pathways of ex-veterans who identified as such in Wave 21, as well as their experiences in future. However, characteristics about the nature of their service (including when it ended) will not be known without the addition of further retrospective questions.

- **Other possibilities:**

DVA should consider utilising the *Survey of Trust and Transparency in Australian Public Services* (<https://www.apsreform.gov.au/resources/reports/taps-2022>), which is conducted by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). This monthly survey of individuals (n=1,000) who access Australian Public Services has been running since 2019 and likely contains a large sub-sample of individuals who have utilised DVA services. It also contains a range of contextual data that may be useful for R&E purposes, including data on respondents' life events and circumstances accompanying their service usage. Recently, in partnership with Monash University, ACU undertook work for PM&C to analyse the role of these life events in shaping service usage across all APS agencies. Future work could focus on veterans' services more specifically, and DVA may wish to confer with PM&C about the addition of measures flagging ADF service and/or DVA client status to expand analytic possibilities in future.

ACU's work for the DVSRC involved collating data from a variety of sources to map the landscape of veteran service providers in Australia. To this end, ACU's project was able to usefully draw on such sources as the *ABS Census 2021*, the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) Charity Register*, and the *Australian Business Register (ABR)*, amongst others.

DATA LINKAGES

- **The Data and Digital Government Strategy** provides opportunities for DVA (and by extension its R&E partners) to leverage broader data that exists and is collected by other Australian Public Service (APS) agencies. This may include data on veterans who are DVA clients, those who are not DVA clients, and their families. ACU encourages DVA to explore these opportunities for APS data linkage involving all individuals who have served, and their families.
- **The Draft National Digital Research Infrastructure (NDRI) Strategy** outlines a comprehensive, national approach to promoting secure and accessible access to data for research. While there are several components to this, one of the key principles is around working to create a NDRI ecosystem in which data meets the FAIR standard (i.e., it is Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and (Re)usable). ACU endorses these principles and suggests that these are *particularly critical* for data relating to veterans and their families, due to the various challenges of collecting such data.
- **Opportunities exist for data linkage** between data in Defence / DVA systems (such as those identified in 5.1.) and data collected by R&E organisations. While these are varied in nature the most likely scenario would be around combining individual-level data collected on veterans participating in programs or services, with existing administrative data such as ADF personnel records or DVA health care / service utilisation. In some instances involving a higher risk level, ACU is aware that such linkages may require the involvement of an Integrating Authority (such as ABS, AIHW or AIFS) to mediate data access and sharing. However, the circumstances in which this is required remain unclear, and the public register of data integrating projects to date appears to contain no Defence or DVA data integration projects.

DATA SHARING AND ACCESSIBILITY

Data sharing and accessibility is vitally important in ensuring that research and evaluation in the veteran sector continues to occur. Evaluation work in particular benefits greatly from having access to robust and extensive comparative data. In general, ACU strongly endorses the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC) principles of FAIR data, that is, ensuring that research data is **Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and (Re-Usable)**.

ACU acknowledges the recent introduction of the **Data Availability and Transparency Scheme (DATA)** for sharing Australian Government data. It is anticipated that many universities (ACU included) will undertake the accreditation process under this scheme. Accreditation involves demonstrating a capability to handle public sector data and minimise risk of unauthorised access or use. Such accreditation can provide a reasonable expectation that organisations involved in R&E work have appropriate systems and processes in place for managing such data.

Most universities have the capability in responsibly manage sensitive research and evaluation data. Such capabilities include storage, retention, accessibility, use, reuse, and disposal of research data in a variety of different contexts. ACU's *Research Data Management Policy*, for example, provides guidance in all these areas as well as clearly defining responsibility within the university organisation for various data management roles. Other universities will have similar policies and procedures.

The broader research community have processes in place for securely enabling access to sensitive research data. The Australian Data Archive (ADA), for example, is a service hosted by the Australian National University which collects and preserves digital research data, enabling it to be disseminated to academic researchers and the public across Australia for further analysis. The ADA conceptualises itself as a 'dataverse', consisting of datasets which combine descriptive metadata, data files, documentation, and code into a discrete package.

The ADA allows for datasets to be published with varying layers of accessibility:

- **Special Access:** datasets where the dataset's depositor (or their representative) must approve each request to access and use the data, as well as approving the publication of any research outputs interpreting the data.
- **Restricted Access:** datasets where the dataset's depositor (or their representative) has to approve each request to use the data and can either give or withhold permission.
- **General Access:** datasets which can be accessed by anyone who agrees to general terms and conditions of using the dataset.
- **Open Access:** datasets which have no access restrictions and can be accessed by anyone.

A similar approach to the classification and access conditions accompanying veteran related data may be worth considering.

Impact and Dissemination, Intellectual Property (RESP Qs 8 & 13)

In ACU's view, any R&E work in relation to veterans and their families should be undertaken with a view to maximising both its academic significance and more applied benefits (e.g., DVA and government policy impacts, implications for clinical practice, service delivery improvements). As noted elsewhere in our responses, such as in Section 3.2, these benefits are mutually reinforcing and equally important. ACU shares DVA's commitment to open access to data from publicly funded projects. ACU offers several suggestions for DVA to consider in formulating its approach in this area:

- **Discuss potential academic and public benefits of R&E projects during contract negotiations**, with greater emphasis placed on removing obstacles to timely academic publication in open-access outlets (e.g. reducing or removing embargo periods, establishing processes for internal review of findings data to identify what can and cannot be published etc.).
- **Ensure that R&E projects have clearly identified all relevant stakeholders and potential beneficiaries.** Not all R&E projects need benefit a wide range of players, and some may have a narrower focus, such as providing confidential research analyses to DVA or Defence. However, funding discrete, standalone projects with only one stakeholder substantially increase the risk that the work will have a limited impact. The more collaborative approach to funding proposed by ACU (see 4.1. R&E Hubs) mitigates this risk by providing a collaborative research environment in which barriers to participation of key stakeholders are reduced.
- **Include research translation practices or materials in R&E projects** that maximise engagement with the research and its findings by all relevant stakeholders. Examples include co-design workshops to incorporate stakeholder input during the project set-up and design phases; interim briefings or reports during the life of the project; and translation workshops and materials designed to maximise the longer-term take-up and application of project findings impacts (e.g., policy translation workshops with representatives from different government agencies, best practice handbooks to disseminate for organisations etc.).

Community Connection, Engagement & Lived Experience (RESP Q9)

ACU sees research and evaluation as an extension of the partnership and collaboration that needs to exist between universities and the veteran community to support the wellbeing of veterans and their families. In our experience, the social license and 'buy-in' for research and evaluation grows out of such cooperation and from our organisational efforts to become a more veteran-friendly educational institution. ACU has steadily built a reputation as a destination of choice for veterans embarking on higher education, with supportive initiatives such as Veteran Entry Program (VEP) and Veteran Transition Program (VTP), and a highly effective Student Veteran Support Program with strong linkages to ESO partners. ACU's Student Veteran Services manager, Aaron Cornwall, was recognised this year as the Veteran Employee of the Year at the Prime Minister's National Veterans' Employment Awards.

In January 2022 ACU appointed Mr Andrew Condon (CSC) as its inaugural Industry Professor for Veterans and Their Families. Mr Condon's role has been to consolidate and expand ACU's partnerships and collaboration with industry, with a view to increasing educational and research opportunities that benefit veterans and their families. ACU has signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with several organisations in the veteran community, including Mates4Mates Limited, SoldierOn, RSL Queensland, and other ESOs. Through these MoUs, ACU has pursued research projects with these organisations and deepened our formal partnerships and engagement with the veteran community. We have worked with the DVSRRC to perform research mapping the veteran services sector including ESOs and other veteran-focused organisations. We have begun to work more with DVA on research, evaluation, and consultancy work.

ACU believes that cooperation of this nature, the veteran and ESO community, DVA, and other key stakeholders, presents major opportunities for DVA as it works to integrate and improve its research and evaluation. These include:

- **Helping to refine and improve DVA's research priorities:** Our suggested changes to DVA research priorities in Section 2 emphasise areas in which ESOs, business and industry, and other non-government organisations can make a difference in terms of promoting social and financial wellbeing, creating more veteran-friendly educational and employment opportunities, and supporting family of veterans.
- **Collaborative approaches to funding and conducting research**, such as the 'R&E Hubs' outlined in Section 4.1, would have numerous benefits for DVA, in terms of broader and more sustained research impact in its priority areas, cost savings through more diversified funding sources, and leveraging and enhancing veteran focused research infrastructure in universities. Such an approach is predicated on the kind of broad partnership and collaboration demonstrated above.
- **Address a clear need for evaluation in the ESO and veteran services sector:** ACU's research for DVSRRC into the veteran services sector indicated a major lack of evaluation of service delivery among service

providers. In large part, this is due to lack of resources and expertise. A collaborative approach, including DVA as well as veteran community partners, is best placed to identify areas and programs in particular need of evaluation, for instance where there is the greatest potential for scalability/replicability and benefit to veterans and their families.

- **Involving non-DVA clients:** Universities cooperative ties with the veteran community can help enable DVA's integrated R&E activities to include, and have broader relevance to, veterans who are not necessarily current DVA clients (as noted approximately half of the ex-serving veteran population).

Whole of Lifecycle of Veteran, including Transition & Post-Transition (RESP Q10)

As noted in Section 2, ACU emphasises that there is a strong need for new longitudinal research with an explicit focus on the whole lifecycle of veterans and their families. Longitudinal research studies are necessary for capturing data that is important for evaluating veterans' affairs policy and veteran wellbeing outcomes, particularly because they allow for more robust analyses of mechanisms and processes of change, including those which may be influenced by specific programs, treatments, interventions, or policies.

DVA's *Transition and Wellbeing Research Program*, which delivered the *Impact of Combat* report and the *Mental Health Changes over Time: a Longitudinal Perspective* report, are prominent examples of such research DVA has commissioned in the past. However, there has been no major new veteran-focused longitudinal research (DVA-funded or otherwise) undertaken since 2015. While undoubtedly valuable, the TWRP studies only observed changes across 2-3 time points, experienced very high sample attrition between these time points, and was mostly focused on health-related outcomes rather than veteran wellbeing understood in a more holistic, multidimensional sense.

ACU believes that the meeting the DVA's research and evaluation priorities requires a commitment to funding and supporting longitudinal research projects. Such projects were identified in the *Thodey Review* as important and much needed evidence-gathering tools for improving APS service delivery. In addition to our suggested changes to DVA's current research priorities to emphasise the need for longitudinal research, ACU suggests that DVA (and Defence) should encourage and support longitudinal research which:

- **Collaborative design of a 'ADF Life Pathways' data collection instrument**, with input from Defence, DVA, academics, and the veteran community, that will consistently measure key events, circumstances, and outcomes across a range of life domains of veterans and their families over time. The design process should consider how any new longitudinal data to be collected can be integrated with data that is already routinely collected on currently ADF members during their service, and on ex-serving ADF members who are DVA clients following their service, including data from Defence, DVA, and other government agencies.
- **ADF to collect 'Life Pathways' data on all ADF members from as early as possible** in the recruitment process. Maximising enrolment of currently serving ADF members is the best way to safeguard against attrition and non-response over time, which can affect the quality and representativeness of the data. By the time an individual has already separated from the ADF, or is beginning the transition process, it is already too late to capture data on many factors to how they will fare. Enrolling ADF members as early as possible addresses this, by ensuring that all individuals who eventually go on to transition early are included. It also ensures that data is collected on attributes and life circumstances that precede ADF service, further improving the robustness of analyses that can control for such factors.
- **Administer the 'ADF Life Pathways' data collection module at regular intervals**, at least every two years, to ensure adequate tracking of changes. Most analyses that capitalise on the longitudinal dimension of the data require at least three time points to begin to model individual level pathways over time and the risk / protective factors associated with these.
- **DVA to support continuation 'ADF Life Pathways' data collection following separation:** at separation, a 'handover' occurs for data collection and management responsibilities from internal ADF data monitoring of outcomes to a 'civilian' data monitoring e.g., as part of a DVA funded continuation of the longitudinal study.
- **Examine possibilities for maximising access and use of this data** to the broader research community, with appropriate data management precautions.

Regarding question 10.2 on the issue of the relatively small size of the Australian cohort of ex-serving ADF members and their families, and minimising respondent fatigue, ACU offers the following suggestions:

- **A comprehensive, long-term approach to monitoring veterans' life pathways**, from recruitment onwards, addresses this issue by ensuring critical data on veterans' life events, circumstances and outcomes is available on as much of this cohort as possible. By aligning with, and linking to administrative data capture,

and making the data resource as widely accessible as possible, this will lessen the need for duplication of similar research - thereby minimising respondent fatigue and improving R&E cost-effectiveness.

- **Expanding the accessibility of DVA / Defence data sources** such as those indicated above in 5.1.
- **Greater utilisation of secondary data sources** such as those explored in 5.2.
- **Greater transparency and dialogue with the research community** around the most effective utilisation of recruitment resources such as the *Military and Veterans Research Study Roll*.
- **Strategy and systems to ensure reusability of new data produced by R&E projects**, such as the necessary consent arrangements, standardised measurements encouraged where possible, data sharing a requirement etc.
- **Improving the purposeful and incidental data collection during ADF service** at during key administrative touch points e.g., recruitment, deployment, when identified for separation, and at separation.
- **Smaller, qualitatively richer studies** (including longitudinal qualitative research) using strategically selected case studies, can also offer great potential for illustrating key experiences, mechanisms, and processes of change, with lower research cost and participant burden. The main downside is in terms of limited generalisability.

Ethics Process (RESP Q11)

The Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs Human Research Ethics Committee (DDVA HREC) plays an important role in ensuring research involving the veteran community is conducted in an ethical manner. It is invaluable to have a human research ethics committee with domain-specific knowledge of the veteran community and military life. The DDVA HREC generally supports research into veterans and the veteran community well, and ACU itself has received much valuable feedback from the DDVA HREC across the many research projects which they have reviewed. In response to question 11.1, ACU hopes that this constructive ethics process continues, with the following suggestions to ensure this:

- **Command Approval process:** The current command approval process should be reviewed against what is strictly required by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, particularly considering the growing urgency for research and evaluation involving transitioning veterans (where projects may involve individuals both pre and post separation). ACU believes that in some instances, command approval requirements pose an additional barrier that may unnecessarily deters or delay important research involving currently serving or transitioning veterans. It is often unclear who will be the most appropriate person within ADF Command to provide approval for a particular proposal. Nor is it abundantly clear which guidelines, frameworks, or considerations they will use to evaluate risk, or if a standardised approach to risk evaluation is available to them at all. Greater clarity on these matters could help researchers of veterans to better anticipate potential concerns and engage with ADF more directly in the development of their research. Ultimately, there may be possibilities for more nuanced, streamlined assessment and designation of risk in projects involving currently serving ADF, such that projects involving very low or negligible risk could proceed through the standard DDVA HREC review process without additional Command approval.
- **Streamlining assessment of scientific merit:** The current ethics approval process is a constructive one for researchers in the veteran space, consideration should be given to ways in which the assessment of a proposal's scientific merit could be streamlined, such as when merit can be demonstrated through other avenues e.g., funding has been granted through a competitive review process where this has been assessed. The requirement to provide a literature review tailored to the DDVA HREC's review purposes may be unnecessary in some cases.

Opportunities to Broaden Partnerships (RESP Q12)

ACU is interested in leveraging other research funding mechanisms, such as the ARC and NHMRC to further research and evaluation projects in the veteran sector. We would strongly encourage DVA and Defence to consider partnering with the university sector to apply for funding through schemes overseen by both organisations. The number of veteran-related projects funded by the ARC or NHMRC in recent years has been very low. This is most likely due to a lack of applications for such projects (rather than applications being made unsuccessfully).

One of the barriers to applying is that most applications require a level of project detail that cannot be developed without DVA or Defence cooperation at a very early stage. Being competitive schemes, they entail a degree of uncertainty in terms of whether funding will be awarded, and what amount will be awarded. This may pose challenges for the planning purposes for all parties involved. However, there are compelling reasons to consider such schemes despite these challenges.

The ARC's Linkage scheme is well suited to the participation of multiple partner organisations in research that guarantees an applied benefit for veterans and their families. There are past examples of DVA, Defence, and other veteran-related organisations have collectively participated in Linkage Projects. Such projects can attract higher funding over a longer period due to the contributions (both cash and in-kind) of all partners, in addition to funds provided by the ARC. This is one avenue to support longer-term projects that can generate a sustained research benefit or impact. Since many of the challenges facing veterans and their families require cooperation between multiple stakeholders, the Linkage scheme provides a funding framework that acknowledges and places value on this. **The ARC's Linkage Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities (LIEF) scheme** also represents a possible avenue to attract funding for important research and evaluation infrastructure to benefit future work in the veteran sector, such as data monitoring projects / infrastructure in relation to veteran service delivery.

The ARC's Discovery scheme may also enable opportunities to address the increasing need for veteran related research with less of an explicit health focus. Though there is less of a requirement for formal participation in the project by DVA or Defence, though support and planning would still be required. For this scheme, the ARC has recently shifted to a 2-stage process (EOI then full application) which may help to remove the barrier to collaboration (i.e., DVA/Defence could indicate conditional support for a proposed project) and engage further on specifics only if EOI succeeds.

The NHMRC has funded relatively few veteran-focused research projects over the past decade, and most of these have focussed on research into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). ACU believes there may be opportunities to pursue NHMRC funded research on other prevalent conditions amongst transitioning veterans, such as musculoskeletal conditions related to service injuries. While the narrower focus by the NHMRC on medical research may be conducive for larger scale veteran health-related research projects they may be less well suited to shorter term or smaller scale evaluations of interventions or treatments.

Whole-of-Government Approaches

ACU recognises that the multidimensional nature of veteran wellbeing calls for whole-of-government approaches, both in terms of service delivery and in the R&E work that underpins this. In response to questions 14.1, 14.2 and 14.3, we provide several suggestions that may help to facilitate such approaches:

- **Revising DVA's current research priorities along the lines suggested** (e.g., incorporating broader dimensions of wellbeing, emphasising skills and opportunities) would more clearly signal the need for involvement of multiple agencies and jurisdictions in R&E projects. Additionally, it would also more clearly signal the areas in which partnership with other organisations in the community (such as ESOs, veteran service providers, employers) are called for.
- **DVA's implementation of the Data and Digital Government strategy** should enable data sharing and linkage opportunities across APS agencies that are consistent with a 'whole-of-government' approach to R&E work involving veterans and their families. The
- **DVA should consider utilising the *Survey of Trust and Transparency in Australian Public Services*** (further detail provided above under Data) which may provide useful, frequently updated data on the public service usage and experiences of veterans who interact with DVA services. Including a veteran indicator in future waves of this survey would enable expanded data capture on veterans who are not DVA clients but who interact with other APS services.
- **Opportunities exist for universities to support the Australian Centre of Evaluation in this area.** The centre, developed in response to the Thodey Review, provides a potential avenue for DVA and other government agencies, including at a state and federal level, to work more closely with the university sector and leverage its academic expertise and research infrastructure in relation to issues impacting veterans and their families.