

Title: The Australian Veterans' Scholarship Program (AVSP) Through a Career Construction Paradigm

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Abstract:

In Australia, 6000 military personnel leave the military each year, of whom at least 30% become unemployed and 19% experience underemployment, figures five times higher than the national average (Australian Government 2020). Believed to be one of life's most intense transitions, veterans find it difficult to align their military skills and knowledge to the civilian labour market upon leaving military service (Cable, Cathcart and Almond 2021; AVEC 2020).

Providing authentic opportunities that allow veterans to gain meaningful employment upon (re)entering civilian life raises their capability to incorporate accrued military skills, knowledge, and expertise. Despite acknowledging that higher education is a valuable transition pathway, Australia has no permanently federally funded post-service higher education benefit supporting veterans to improve their civilian employment prospects. Since World War II, American GIs have accessed a higher education scholarship program (tuition fees, an annual book allowance, monthly housing stipend) (Defense 2019). A similar offering is available in Canada, the UK, and Israel.

We are proposing that the AVSP would be the first comprehensive, in-depth study investigating the ongoing academic success of Australia's modern veterans as they study higher and vocational education. It consists of four distinct components:

- **Scholarships: transitioning/separated veterans apply for one of four higher education scholarship options (under/postgraduate):**
 - 100% tuition fees waived
 - \$750/fortnight living stipend for the degree duration
 - 50/50 tuition/living stipend
 - Industry-focused scholarships.
- **Research:** LAS Consulting, Open Door, Flinders University, over seven years, will follow the scholarship recipients to identify which scholarship option is the most relevant/beneficial for Australian veterans. The analysis of the resultant quantitative and qualitative data will demonstrate that providing federal financial support to student veterans studying higher education options:
 - Improves the psychosocial and economic outcomes for veterans
 - Reduces the need for financial and medical support of participants
 - Reduces the national unemployed and underemployed statistics for veterans
 - Provides a positive return of investment (ROI) to the funder
 - May increase Australian Defence Force (ADF) recruitment and retention rates
- **Career Construction:** LAS Consulting will sit, listen, guide, and help build an emotional connection around purpose, identity, education and employment opportunities back into society. So, the veteran can move forward, crystallise a life worth living, and find their authentic self, which is led by their values in the civilian world.

- **Mentoring:** Each participant receives a mentor throughout their academic journey.

This paper matches the conference themes:

- Fostering lifelong learning
- Promoting equity and inclusion
- Inspiring innovations.

Introduction

This paper addresses the conference themes of fostering lifelong learning, promoting equity and inclusion, inspiring innovations, and Sustainable Development Goal 4.4 (Quality Education: increase the number of people with relevant skills for financial success (Global Goals 2022)). In addition, the **AVSP** addresses the need to support transitioning and separated veterans to gain meaningful employment upon returning to civilian life.

Currently, transitioning out of the Defence Force is viewed by many as a transactional process that forgets to consider the humanistic factor. This process, coupled with the loss of identity and circumstances around transitions, can leave military members feeling lost. In Australia, 6000 military personnel leave the military each year, of whom at least 30% become unemployed and 19% experience underemployment, figures five times higher than the national average (Australian Government 2020). Those who find employment tend to change jobs at least twice within the first three years due to the unsuitability of the job to their skill set or a lack of personal investment in the position or organisation (Australian Government 2020). Creating a detrimental effect on the psychosocial health of the veteran and their family network (Romaniuk and Kidd 2018, Wells et al 2021), veterans find it difficult to align their military skills and knowledge with the civilian labour market (Cable, Cathcart, and Almond 2021; AVEC 2020).

Securing meaningful employment after leaving military service can be hampered by several issues, including difficulty in having unique skills and suitably recognised training by employers and tertiary providers (AVEC 2020, Harvey et al 2018, Kemp and Klempin 2016, Wadham et al. 2021). This is despite research clearly showing that veterans bring the following abilities, attributes, and characteristics that are rare, valuable, and differentiated to the civilian workforce:

- Entrepreneurship
- High levels of trust
- Ability to transfer skills across various contexts and tasks
- Advanced technical training
- Comfortably adept in discontinuous environments
- Advanced team-building skills
- Strong organisational commitment
- High levels of resiliency
- Cross-cultural experiences
- Experience and skill in working in diverse work settings (Haynie 2016).

Veterans also bring experience and existing high-level capabilities in leadership, decision making, problem-solving, critical thinking, risk management, communication, integrity, loyalty, self-discipline, and perseverance, skill sets that are difficult to obtain and expensive to cultivate in new employees (Haynie 2016).

The Australian Productivity Commission (2019) acknowledges that higher education opportunities for veterans are a priority for competing within the civilian employment market (Wadham 2021). However, globally firm evidence is challenging to find and a key research component of the project.

The Literature Review

This project does not correlate with existing legislation, regulations, policies, and specific funding streams at the government or department level. Nor does any previous activity address the issue of supporting student veterans to access higher education scholarships to support their gaining meaningful, long-term employment opportunities when they leave the ADF. The responsibility and a key priority for the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) is the enhancement of veteran wellbeing. DVA is currently limited to a legislatively defined role of providing financial support for veterans with service-related health conditions who have been assessed as suitable to undertake higher education as part of their rehabilitation plan. Unfortunately, emphasising education, employment, and training as essential aspects in promoting a seamless transition to civilian life is not currently their remit.

Harvey et al (2018) surveyed 240 Australian veteran students to explore their higher education experiences. Of those who responded, 94% said they would recommend other veterans study a higher education qualification because of the positive benefits of employment and community reintegration afterwards. Fifty different career pathways were identified, including nursing (14%), teaching/education (8%), paramedicine (7%), IT (6%), law/legal (6%), psychology/counselling (6%), and policing (6%) (Harvey et al. 2018).

Supporting younger military veterans to succeed in Australian higher education (DVA, 2018) discovered that student veterans are often invisible within Australia's higher education space because they are unwilling or unable to identify as veterans during enrolment. As a result, accessing university can be difficult for veterans. In addition, the skills and qualifications they bring are not recognised. The authors acknowledged that further research is required to explore graduate success rates and outcomes for student veterans, one of the aims of the longitudinal study of this proposal (Wadham et al., 2021).

In *Veteran Transition Integration and Wellbeing* (Wadham et al, 2020), university administrators were interviewed about how universities acknowledged, governed, and service veterans transiting to higher education. One of the key recommendations was establishing a national policy for veterans accessing higher education, like the US GI Bill, especially as many Australian universities host American GIs studying in Australia as part of that program.

Career Construction Paradigm

Daniel Vincent states, "The first day of service is the best time to think about your transition. The next best time is now." This is one of the critical pillars when building a successful transition plan. The possibility of increasing ADF recruitment and capability, contributing to force retention, and supporting a successful transition to civilian life after an ADF career requires a structure that looks at the development of higher education pathways from a career construction paradigm. Career construction implies that everyone knows what they want to do in life, employment, and education, acquired through their life journey. Career construction is a communication pathway for the veteran moving forward and crystallises a life worth living with the ability to find an authentic self, led by their values in the civilian world. It is not a directive; it is about the veteran. Our goal is to sit, listen, guide, and help build an emotional connection around purpose, identity, and transition back into society (Sharf 2016, Savickas 2005).

The construction of one's career can be a powerful tool (Inkson, Dries, and Arnold, 2015). Shifting the responsibility to individuals to self-educate and connect with the process while receiving guidance from others during the learning phase improves the psychosocial, health, and academic standards and economic wealth of the ADF community and all Australians.

The methodology focuses on:

1. Seeing transition as a new lease on life
2. We consider life and family situations.
3. We document Defence experience - skill set, education, years of service, etc.

4. Exploring experiences in Defence - likes and dislikes
5. We investigate and establish drivers, motivations, personality, etc.
6. Document perceived purpose
7. Repeat steps 3 – 6, discovering the educational requirements, potential career pathways, network potentials, and what life would look like.

Overseas success

Opportunities that allow veterans to gain meaningful employment upon (re)entering civilian life raise their capability to incorporate skills, knowledge, and expertise during their time in the defence force. For example, American GIs have accessed a higher education scholarship program since the end of World War II. First introduced as the *Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944* and colloquially referred to as the GI Bill, World War II veterans assimilated into American Society by gaining a tertiary degree upon returning from military service (Stickels 2015). Providing tuition, housing, and living stipends to all US military members with at least 90 days of full-time service, more than 2.9 million veterans have benefitted from the scheme since 2011.

In 2019, 80% of the 714,000 veterans who participated were under 34 years after their first degree (Absher 2021). A total of 4% of all undergraduate students in the USA (Harvey, Andrewartha, Shar and Wyatt-Smith 2018), veterans tend to study business, liberal arts/general, IT, criminal justice, and health profession majors. These lead to high-paying civilian jobs where their expertise and experience are acknowledged and sought (Kofoed 2020).

The United States Government's Subcommittee on Education and Health of the Joint Economic Committee (1988) reviewed the GI Bill to understand its total economic impact. Conducted over 35 years and identified a return on investment (ROI) to the US Federal Treasury of between \$5 - \$12.50 for every dollar spent.

Since 2018, the Canadian government has committed to funding the *Veterans' Education and Training Benefit* (VETB). As a result, those who have served for more than six years and honourably released since 1 April 2006 can access between \$CA40,000 – 80,000 to study at a college, university, or technical school. Proving to be highly successful, 4,391 veterans have benefitted from \$CA47.7 million of investment since the program's inception. The forecast is that by 2024-5, at least 2,560 additional veterans will benefit from the scheme for \$CA34.7 million (Veterans Affairs Canada 2020).

In the UK, veterans can pay £20 per month to join a co-contribution scheme. Generally targeted at officer retraining, it is available for up to ten years after leaving military service. Honourably discharged Israeli soldiers have up to three years to access almost a full scholarship for academic or vocational studies, with the final amount depending upon their length of service (Gross, 2016). New Zealand is investigating how a similar scheme could be implemented.

Australia's current response

Currently, Australia has no permanently federally funded post-service higher education benefit that supports veterans to navigate the transition to civilian life and improve their employment prospects, despite higher education being acknowledged as a priority by the Australian Productivity Commission (2019). A similar scheme in Australia to those offered overseas would improve the psychosocial, health, and academic standards and economic wealth of the ADF community because *Education is the critical component in transitioning to civilian life and employment for many new veterans* (Karp and Klempin 2016: 1).

The *Defence Force Transition Program* (DFTP) facilitates members' transition to civilian life. It includes \$5320 for Career Transition Training and an ADF Transition coach to help navigate the process and associated paperwork (Department of Defence 2019). In addition, the New South Wales and Queensland State governments recognise the

importance of supporting veterans to (re)enter civilian life and provide access to free vocational programs (Casben 2021, Queensland Government 2021).

Higher education options include the *Step Up Program* (DVA) for eligible former ADF members studying full-time. The program's purpose is to ensure that former members undertaking a approved full-time study as part of their rehabilitation program can focus on their studies and not be concerned about reducing their incapacity payments. Concluding mid-2023, there is no indication that the pilot will be extended.

The *Defence Assisted Study Scheme* enables current members to access higher education while still serving. Subject to a available funding and operating on a tiered arrangement, serving members undergoing medical discharge from the ADF and commissioned officers wishing to build upon existing university qualifications are often given priority. The *Defence University Sponsorship* is for those studying when joining the ADF. In return for payment of tuition fees, members commit to serve for the time spent in study, plus one extra year. Eligible degrees include healthcare, science, engineering, and business administration. In addition, defence Officer Cadets often study at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) as part of their initial training.

Methodology

It is the first comprehensive, in-depth study investigating the ongoing academic success of Australia's modern student veterans as they study. The seven-year research component, conducted by Open Door, Flinders University, explores the positive benefits and challenges faced by scholarship recipients, reporting on:

- Participant demographics
- Academic achievement
- Support services utilised while studying
- Economic outcomes post studying
- All other findings were identified during the research period.

Anecdotal evidence from the mentors will complement the evaluation surveys and semi-formal interviews to determine the successes and challenges faced during the scholarship period and beyond. In addition, every veteran could receive an honorarium of \$50/per interview.

The data will be incorporated into the quarterly and annual reports for all key stakeholders, partners, and funders and presented at national and international conferences. In addition, published journal articles and conference proceedings will help disseminate the results.

Measurements of success will include:

- An improvement in participants' psycho/social wellbeing
- Reduction in un- and under-employment statistics of veterans from five times higher than the national average
- Increase in the gaining of meaningful, long-term employment
- Reduction in the call upon DVA, ESOs and other organisations.
- Possible increase in the retention and capability of ADF personnel

Ethics approval will be sought through Flinders University, with a medium risk due to the cohort under investigation.

The Scholarship Scheme

The scholarship scheme allows the Federal Government to pilot a program to achieve the commitment made in point 6.48 of the *Defence White Paper* (Australian Government 2016:158).

The Defence will partner with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Australian defence industry, and other ex-Service organisations to support those who have been affected by their service to our country to find a new career, ... (to) enable our veterans to continue making valuable contributions to their communities once their military service is completed.

The program intends to mirror the highly successful offerings of the USA, Canada, the UK, and Israel. Each ally has successfully created a national veteran scholarship program that provides higher education opportunities that prepare for a new career beyond the Defence Force, as stated in SDG4.4.

(Education) is the key to prosperity and opens a world of opportunities, making it possible for each of us to contribute to a progressive, healthy society (Global Goals 2022).

Private companies will also sponsor scholarships with a reciprocal cadetship by collaborating with Australian universities that have donated various fee-waived scholarships at under- and postgraduate levels in several study areas.

Delays to the program's implementation will continue in the decline of some service personnel and their ability to re-join civilian life upon separation from the Defence force. Statistics of those unemployed and underemployed will continue to be unacceptably five times higher than the national average. Support services will continue to provide high levels of financial and medical support well into the future. If enacted, the benefits will be evident to veterans, their families, and the broader Australian community and seen in positive statistics for the Departments of Defence, Veteran Affairs and Education, Skills, and Employment.

Proposed Project Scope

The proposed project consists of three parts:

1. Scholarship program - transitioning and separated veterans study a university/corporate donated under- or postgraduate degree.
2. Mentoring program – each student receives a mentor. In addition, student veterans become mentors upon graduation.
3. A 7-year longitudinal research study (five years of research against three cohorts) will follow scholarship recipients to determine student veterans' successes and challenges during their academic journey.

The aim is to identify the most beneficial financial support option for Australian student veterans - fees waived, stipend, 50/50 fees/living stipend, and no financial support.

In the United States, a favourable return was recorded within nine years of the GI Bill's introduction (Defense, 2019). However, we expect an ROI within seven years as we can develop trends after the first cohort and adjust accordingly.

Participants

The Australian pilot is expected to involve three cohorts of 20. Student veterans are highly motivated, self-disciplined, and draw upon the military qualities of discipline, leadership, time management, persistence, and networking during their studies. However, despite their high motivation, many veterans are academically unprepared for higher education for several reasons. Including a gap in time between initially leaving school and their return to education and an acknowledged culture clash between life in the military demands rigid teamwork that conflicts with the higher education drivers of self-learning and motivation. Financial stress, physical and mental health issues and juggling study with paid work and family commitments are other potential barriers (Cable, Cathcart and Almond 2021, Wadhwa et al. 2021, Karp & Klempin 2016).

Receiving Credit in Learning (CIL) and Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) for the many years of service and training also supports veterans on their academic journey (Australian Government 2021). *Credit Where Credit Is Due*, available to all higher education institutions in Australia, is an accreditation tool developed at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and provides veterans with easy recognition of their military experiences and training.

Eligibility criteria:

Applicants must be:

- Australian citizens and permanent residents
- Transitioning and separated Australian veterans
- Australian Indigenous veterans
- Planning to enrol/are enrolled in a degree of one or more academic years duration at an Australian university
- DVA Incap 75% wage (fee waiver only)
- Class A pension/Comm Super recipients (fee waiver only).

Those not eligible are:

- Serving veterans
- Reservists
- Served less than two years
- Family members
- Participants already receive funding from other education programs (e.g. *Step-Up Program*).

Application & selection process

Managed by LAS Consulting, candidates supply the following documentation:

- Resume
- Academic record (where applicable)
- Proof of Defence service
- **Executive Summary: Answer**
 - Who are you (BIO)?
 - What do you want to study and why?
 - What will this scholarship allow you to accomplish in the future?
 - How will this scholarship enable you to achieve your short and long-term goals? (500 words/question).
- Professional references (2)

Vetted by LAS Consulting and external parties, the shortlisted candidates receiving a score of 70+% proceed to the interview panel:

- LAS Consulting
- University representative (2 if there is no corporate sponsor)
- Corporate sponsor.

Once concluded, scholarships are awarded, and all legal documents are signed, including ROSO of one+ year/s for the mentoring component and participation in the longitudinal study.

Academic risk mitigators

The candidate must pass all courses to receive funding for the next semester. In addition, candidates will be monitored and counselled to ensure their progression throughout their studies.

Budget

There are three funding streams:

- Federal Government
- In-kind
- Scholarship Partners: Universities and corporates.

In the United States, a favourable return was recorded within nine years of the GI Bill's introduction (Defense, 2019). However, we expect an ROI within seven years as we can develop trends after the first cohort and adjust accordingly.

Academic Mentoring

Providing emotional support to a cohort making decisions for themselves is extremely important as many military personnel find this an alien concept. However, most of Australia's universities have veteran support measures in place.

LAS Consulting will provide the first mentors. After that, graduates will give a minimum of one year's mentoring to another student veteran. After that, corporate scholarship providers supply their mentors.

Academic mentors will support studying veterans throughout their educational journey and meet their mentees utilising a blend of in-person and online.

Conclusion

Utilising the Career Construction Paradigm, providing higher scholarships, and integrating military expertise with tertiary learning to study an undergraduate or postgraduate degree significantly increases a veteran's psychosocial and economic worth within the employment market. It also removes the financial burdens for many, crystalising a life worth living and an ability to find their authentic self, led by their values in the civilian world when following this path.

In addition, mentoring support ensures that student veterans are supported emotionally during their academic journey (Kemp and Klemplin 2016). The result is more competitive veterans within the civilian workforce, which leads to a more productive life after service, reducing the support required from DVA, ESOs and other Companies over time.

Transitioning out of the Defence Force is considered one of life's most intense experiences for veterans. Upon leaving military service, they find it difficult to align their military skills, knowledge, and education to the civilian labour market. These wrap-around concepts proposed here in this paper offer solutions when examining how to make the transition process more human focussed and seamless. While simultaneously increasing the psychosocial and economic worth of those leaving the Defence Force.

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