

## UNSW Submission – Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

The University of New South Wales welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024 – Exposure Draft* (the exposure draft). This submission will focus on the components of the strategy where universities play a critical role.

### Recommendations

The Department of Education should consider the following as part of its consultation to inform the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:

#### Education and Skills Development

- Include in Goal 1 the engagement with relevant sectors, including higher education, to develop consistent frameworks for the integration of veteran support mechanisms, aimed at the prevention of mental health challenges.
- That DVA actively work with the higher education sector to share insights and better understand the challenges and the needs of members across their Defence and veteran journey.
- That DVA consider how to best enable family members to engage in further education, particularly as their veteran family member is posted to new locations throughout their service.
- That DVA and the Department of Education work together with the higher education sector to develop an Australian-wide framework to standardise RPL approaches for veterans based on their skills and experience.
- That DVA work with universities to design a veterans counselling specialisation for postgraduate counselling programs.

#### Research and Evaluation

- That DVA work with the Department of Education to develop a data collection approach to understand the number of veterans engaging in tertiary education.
- That DVA foster collaborative partnerships with the higher education sector to develop innovative, evidence-based approaches to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of veterans.

#### Veteran Entrepreneurship

- That DVA consider expanding initiatives that support veterans to start their own business through grant programs.

#### Community

- That DVA consider providing concrete examples like sport, mentoring and career support within Goal 4 to provide clearer pathways for building a positive and connected defence and veteran community.

## UNSW and Veterans

Founded in 1949 to tackle the societal and economic challenges of post-World War II Australia, UNSW has grown into one of Australia's leading universities and was ranked among the world's top 20 universities in 2024<sup>1</sup>. UNSW educates more than 70,000 students and employs more than 7,500 academic and professional staff across six faculties and one college, UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). Our researchers lead global innovation in fields such as quantum technologies, AI, advanced materials manufacturing, explosive materials, hypersonics, renewable energy, social sciences, international law, and medicine.

UNSW Canberra at ADFA specialises in high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate courses in all areas relating to military, strategic and defence studies and has been preparing future military leaders since 1967 as the official education partner for the Australian Defence Force (ADF). We also support the ADF Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) program, known formally as the Australian Joint Professional Military Continuum, by providing teaching from foundational education (JPME level 1) through to highly specialised and technical qualifications (JPME level 4/5). Our defence partnerships are crucial to protecting the security and safety of Australia and our allies. Other key defence initiatives of the university include the UNSW's Defence Research Institute (DRI) and UNSW's participation in the Australian Government's Trailblazer program. The DRI works across the university, connecting UNSW researchers and their research to government and industry to support Australia's national security. Defence Trailblazer is a collaboration between UNSW, the University of Adelaide and industry partners to strengthen Australia's sovereign defence capabilities by commercialising new technologies and solutions while helping develop specialised knowledge and skills in Australia's workforce.

UNSW uses the definition set out in the *Australian Veteran's Recognition (Putting Veterans and Their Families First) Act 2019*, with veteran meaning a person who has served, or is serving, as a member of the permanent or reserve elements of the ADF. At UNSW, we acknowledge that veterans comprise a very diverse community, with some veteran students in post-service civilian life having had a long deployment record, and others having transitioned after a short time of active service. UNSW Canberra is currently working towards implementing a UNSW Canberra Veterans Strategy that will identify how UNSW Canberra can best support veterans and their families throughout their military journey, including supporting their transition to civilian life at the conclusion of their service. Key focus areas are likely to be increasing veteran access to UNSW and its support programs, professional education, collaboration with industry, and research to support veteran's wellbeing and mental health. UNSW would welcome the opportunity to work closely with the Department of Defence and the DVA as we develop our own Veterans Strategy to understand how universities can best contribute to achieving the goals of the new *Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-29* (the strategy).

## About the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

The strategy aims to establish a foundation for mental health and wellbeing for veterans and their communities throughout their entire defence and veteran journey, from recruitment to post-service life, acknowledging the unique challenges at each stage. As drafted, the strategy deliberately invites comment from anyone significantly involved in veterans' lives. As a university with a substantial staff and student cohort of veterans, UNSW feels privileged to contribute to a culture that empowers and supports the mental health and wellbeing of veterans that are a part of our university community. Approximately 80% of the around 3000 undergraduate and postgraduate students at UNSW Canberra are serving ADF members, while the defence focused research at UNSW Canberra attracts academic

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<sup>1</sup> QS World University Rankings (2025). University of New South Wales

staff with a strong interest and experience in Defence, including staff with direct military experience. As an example, 15% of the former School of Engineering and Information Technology’s academic staff have military experience.

A key component mentioned in the exposure draft is a shared approach to mental health, where it is everyone’s responsibility to reduce stigma around mental health challenges. By promoting a proactive culture that destigmatises mental health struggles and ensures easy access to support services, the exposure draft aims to better equip veterans and their communities to improve mental health and wellbeing through identification, prevention and early intervention. The exposure draft identifies nine wellbeing factors that recognise the deep connection between mental health and overall wellbeing. It further addresses systemic factors that create and exacerbate stress among veterans that can be mitigated through these wellbeing factors. Moreover, the exposure draft notes the need to provide support right from the start for recruits and their families, with a focus that shifts during separation to offer specialised support when navigating a transition to post-service life. The exposure draft has a clear emphasis on the need for data-driven approaches and ongoing investment in research and evaluation. This ensures that all initiatives are based on the best available evidence, with a commitment to being transparent to build trust.

**Education and Skills Development**

The exposure draft highlights the importance of nine wellbeing factors to strengthen defence and veterans’ resilience and reduce the risk of mental illness. These factors include social support and connection, education and skills, employment and meaningful activity among other factors such as health, and home and housing. Universities play an important role in contributing to the factors that underpin the wellbeing of the defence and veteran community, enabling them to serve well, live well and age well.

*Role of the higher education sector in veterans’ mental health and wellbeing*

Education plays a vital role in enhancing mental health, wellbeing, and resilience by providing pathways for personal growth, economic stability, and a sense of community. Goal 1 of the exposure draft, Promote and assist wellbeing, focuses on engaging entities involved in the provision of support for those navigating wellbeing challenges. Expanding Goal 1 to engage more broadly with the education sector and others can support veteran health and wellbeing through prevention. This could include the provision of training for higher education staff about the unique experience of veterans that are part of their university community and provide insights into the ADF more generally (see case study below).

**Case Study: Veteran Student Cultural Competency Training for university staff**

*In 2024, UNSW developed and delivered cultural competency training for UNSW staff aimed at improving awareness of the ADF, the veteran experience and transition challenges veterans may experience. This will be an ongoing training package. The results from pre- and post-course surveys of the initial 149 participants indicate a marked increase in knowledge and skills related to Australian military culture, veterans’ transitions to civilian life, and their unique experiences in academic settings. Participants reported enhanced confidence, a greater sense of preparedness, and a stronger commitment to fostering an inclusive environment for veterans. 95% of participants indicated they would recommend it to their peers—underscoring its value in bridging the gap between military and academic cultures.*

Compared with the Australian population, suicide rates are 26% higher for ex-serving ADF males. The highest risk is in the under 30 and 30-39 age brackets, which are 70% and 50% higher than the

Australian population, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Overall, data show that ex-serving ADF males have a higher level of education than the general Australian population. This, however, is not the case in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups, where the general Australian population has a higher level of education. For example, in the 25-34 age group, the proportion of Australian males with a Bachelor degree or higher is 56% greater than the proportion of ex-serving ADF males.<sup>3</sup> To ensure that education is not only a pathway to success but also a foundation for comprehensive veteran support, UNSW would welcome the opportunity to work across the tertiary sector, the DVA and Defence to design a tertiary sector framework for the integration of support and wellbeing initiatives in universities.

**Recommendation 1:**

Include in Goal 1 the engagement with relevant sectors, including higher education, to develop consistent frameworks for the integration of veteran support mechanisms, aimed at the prevention of mental health challenges.

*Access to education*

Research shows that there are a range of barriers to veterans accessing higher education<sup>4</sup>. A lack of research and data in this space, however, hampers the ability to design and implement relevant and effective strategies to improve higher education access for veterans. The higher education sector has worked collaboratively to implement several initiatives aimed at improving defence and veteran access to higher education. This includes the development of the *Student Support for ADF Reserves* policy that was endorsed by the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee in 2007, and the adoption of an assessment schedule by the NSW Universities Admissions Centre to recognise military experience for the purposes of university admissions in 2018.

Veteran barriers to higher education are largely consistent across the sector, highlighting the value of a collaborative approach to better understand and address these challenges. UNSW would welcome Defence and the DVA working actively with the higher education sector to share insights and better understand the challenges and the needs of members across their Defence and veteran journey. To cater for the diversity in veterans' journeys, a higher education approach for veterans should cater for a variety of age groups and levels of experience to effectively tailor education products. A dedicated forum that brings together stakeholders across the university and VET sectors, Defence, DVA, ex-service organisations and veterans would be a good first step to discuss challenges, barriers, initiatives and success stories around the role of education in improving the health and well-being for Defence and veteran communities.

**Recommendation 2:**

That DVA actively work with the higher education sector to share insights and better understand the challenges and the needs of members across their Defence and veteran journey.

Moreover, it would be useful to explore what education opportunities could be offered to family members of veterans, particularly as they are posted to new locations throughout their family member's active service. The exposure draft includes families as key to the wellbeing of veterans, with families being there at every stage of a veteran's journey. By supporting family members that do not serve to acquire the requisite skills to grow professionally, the resilience of their family unit to weather challenging times and sudden changes in circumstances would be strengthened. An education

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/serving-exserving-adf-suicide-monitoring-2024/contents/analysis/age>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/wellbeing-characteristics-of-ex-serving-adf/data>

<sup>4</sup> Supporting Australian LA 20 Feb 2019

program could mirror the existing Partner Employment Assistance Program for ADF members and their families<sup>5</sup>.

**Case Study: Pat Tillman Veterans Centre**

*A great international example of how a university can empower and engage their military and veteran community with their academic and personal success is the Arizona State University's Pat Tillman Veterans Centre. The Centre serves veteran students and their families to succeed on their college journey and prepares them for life after they graduate. This includes a focus on spouses of military veterans, with a dedicated scholarship to cover the tuition and fees for ASU undergraduate students married to an honourably discharged veteran.*

**Recommendation 3:**

That DVA consider how to best enable family members to engage in further education, particularly as their veteran family member is posted to new locations throughout their service.

*Recognition of Professional Experience*

Experience matters, and veterans have developed a wide range of transferrable skills and knowledge during their military career. Through the military skill recognition process<sup>6</sup>, transitioning members can have their expertise recognised through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), leading to a Certificate IV or Diploma award. These qualifications can be used for the purposes of admission to university and provide credit towards a program of study. In the UNSW context, however, the high entry requirements for many undergraduate programs mean that a Certificate IV or Diploma alone would not meet the admission thresholds. Likewise, these qualifications do not satisfy postgraduate entry requirements, which traditionally require completion of an undergraduate degree. It is therefore critical to rethink the ways the higher education sector recognises professional experience as a pathway for granting access to higher education.

The tertiary sector has made moves to expand its recognition of professional experience with the adoption of the *Defence Forces – Senior Officers, Commissioned Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Other Ranks* (P2012) schedule by the NSW Universities Admissions Centre (UAC). Under this schedule veterans are eligible to receive a selection rank based on their military service. Defence members and veterans who have completed more than three years of service and reached the equivalent rank of Sergeant will now receive a selection rank of 92, opening access to a range of undergraduate programs. Not all of Australia's state-based tertiary admissions centres have adopted a military specific professional experience schedule, and while adopted by UAC, not all universities accept the schedule. At present, UNSW is the only Group of Eight university to accept P2012.

**Case Study: UNSW's Veteran Admission**

*Pathway 5 as it is informally known, is UNSW's postgraduate admissions pathway which allows Defence members and veterans to gain admission to postgraduate programs based on their military experience. Pathway 5 is a common pathway for veterans and includes a study pattern designed to support the student's successful progression.*

*Recognition of Prior Learning*

One key lesson from the evaluation of the *Defence Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-23* was that Defence provides structure and safeguards that help minimise suicide, drug abuse, and self-harm

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/family-programs-services/support-for-families/partner-employment-assistance-program>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/military-life-cycle/transition/military-skill-recognition>

among active personnel. Mental health challenges often escalate upon transition to civilian life once these protective structures are no longer available to veterans, making it paramount to implement preventative education and skills scaffolding while individuals are still in service, thus reducing the risk of people falling through the gaps post-transition. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as well as pathway programs are therefore key components of a preventative education and skills strategy.

To leverage insights from the DVA Tertiary Support Grant Program and to enable an Australian-wide definition of RPL for veterans, UNSW recommends that DVA and the Department of Education work with the higher education sector to develop a framework to standardise RPL approaches for veterans based on their skills and experience. UNSW would also welcome improved access to the Defence Learning Management Packages (LMPs) for the higher education sector to facilitate greater RPL arrangements. Following the 2024 grant round, UNSW together with other Round 1 DVA grant awardees established a Veteran in Higher Education Community of Practice (CoP). This CoP could serve as a starting point to work on the Australia-wide framework.

**Recommendation 4:**

That DVA and the Department of Education work together with the higher education sector to develop an Australian-wide framework to standardise RPL approaches for veterans based on their skills and experience.

*Boosting the veterans counselling workforce*

UNSW is in the process of developing new postgraduate programs in counselling, including graduate certificates and specialisations in veteran counselling. Support from DVA for the development of these types of programs will help expand the specialised mental health and wellbeing support available to the veterans' community. It is likely that many of the people that would consider enrolling in this type of program would have a background in defence service. Government support for these programs would therefore also help support the effective transition of veterans into meaningful careers, which we know plays an important role in helping to support veterans' mental health.

**Recommendation 5:**

That DVA work with universities to design a veterans counselling specialisation for postgraduate counselling programs.

## **Research and Evaluation**

The university sector plays a key role in researching problems associated with veteran mental health and wellbeing. As outlined in the exposure draft, having the right evidence-based tools and programs is crucial to evaluating the effectiveness of different interventions. Goal 6 of the exposure draft emphasises the need to use evidence and data to drive positive outcomes.

*Data to track veterans' journeys in higher education*

A key challenge UNSW faces in understanding the veteran journey in higher education is the lack of data on veterans pursuing higher education. While the Census data set captures veteran education and provides great insights, the lag time between censuses make it an ineffective tool to closely monitor and track veterans' engagement with tertiary education.<sup>7</sup> The census data also does not provide insights into the education level of current ADF members, and does not include the granular detail required to understand the education, training and support needs of veterans. Having a data set across all Australian higher education providers that collects veteran status would enable the university sector

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>

and the Government to track veterans progress, including if and when early intervention and bespoke support to ensure veterans succeed in further education is required. It is also not currently possible to evaluate the effectiveness of existing veteran initiatives in higher education, and the role education plays in improving the wellbeing of veterans. Data collection of veteran students could also be used to produce pre-post data on outcomes from the Suicide Prevention Plan and inform longitudinal tracking of sustained impact from mental health screening activities for those in active service.

**Recommendation 6:**

That DVA work with the Department of Education to develop a data collection approach to understand the number of veterans engaging in tertiary education.

*Investing in and expanding research and evaluation*

DVA's commitment to investing in and expanding veteran research and program evaluation to maintain high standards and best practice will be critical to delivering effective and safe initiatives. Veterans face unique mental and physical health challenges that require comprehensive and interdisciplinary solutions. By leveraging the full spectrum of academic capabilities – from social policy and the arts to health and science – universities are willing to partner with DVA to drive positive outcomes for veterans' health and wellbeing. There are also organisations beyond higher education that could be drawn together, including charities such as Invictus Australia and Soldier On. It would be worthwhile to explore how we can draw together and leverage data sets, and get the most from any research investment by working together.

**Recommendation 7:**

That DVA foster collaborative partnerships with the higher education sector to develop innovative, evidence-based approaches to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of veterans.

## **Veteran entrepreneurship**

Veteran entrepreneurship plays a significant role in fostering a positive and connected defence and veteran community, aligning with Goal 4 of the exposure draft which prioritises the growth of such communities. This is particularly relevant for veterans during their post-service civilian life, where veterans may experience a loss of connection and purpose. Initiatives supporting veteran entrepreneurship, such as those offered by the university sector like UNSW, directly address this by providing opportunities for meaningful engagement and community building. Programs like the *Supporting Veteran Owned Business Grant Program*<sup>8</sup> offer valuable pathways for veterans to upskill, establish businesses, and connect with a broader network, thereby enhancing their social and economic wellbeing. DVA could consider expanding and promoting partnerships with the university sector to leverage the innovation ecosystem at universities and provide avenues for veterans to contribute to Defence beyond their military careers, directly supporting the strategy's aim to empower veterans to live well.

**Case Study: UNSW Canberra Launch**

UNSW Canberra Launch is a collaborative workspace bringing together industry, government and university to grow innovation and capability in defence and security. Launch on Northbourne is attracting Australian businesses that are integral to the future of Australia's security. It's a precursor to the University's planned Defence and Security Innovation Precinct at the new UNSW Canberra City campus. Currently providing start-ups, enterprises, associations, academics and alumni with countless opportunities for collaboration, in an innovative, secure and social environment. Many of the businesses at Launch are founded by and for veterans with deep connections to Defence.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/budget2024-25-supporting-veteran-owned-business-grant-program.pdf>

**Recommendation 8:**

That DVA consider expanding initiatives that support veterans to start their own business through grant programs.

## **A Connected Defence and Veteran Community**

Goal 4 of the exposure draft aims to cultivate a positive and connected Defence and veteran community. This involves actively building community connections both within the Defence and veteran community and with civilian society, as well as focusing on managing positive interactions through respect, reward, and recognition. To further strengthen this goal, it would be beneficial to explore incorporating more tangible examples of how these communities could be fostered. For instance, leveraging the power of sport could provide a shared activity and sense of camaraderie. Similarly, mentoring programs could create valuable connections and support networks, particularly during career transitions. Furthermore, initiatives centred around career transition support could offer a platform for veterans to connect with each other and the broader community as they navigate post-service life. By including such concrete examples, Goal 4 could provide a clearer pathway for building the desired positive and connected community.

**Case Study: Partnering with Invictus Australia**

UNSW Canberra has been a partner of Invictus Australia since the first games took place in Sydney in 2018. The not-for-profit organisation delivers sport and recovery programs to improve the health and wellbeing of Australia's 600,000+ military veterans and their families. The Invictus Games highlight the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation and generate a wider understanding of those who serve their country. The Games also celebrate the crucial role played by family and friends in the recovery process.

**Recommendation 9:**

That DVA consider providing concrete examples like sport, mentoring and career support within Goal 4 to provide clearer pathways for building a positive and connected defence and veteran community.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this consultation.

# Appendix

Examples of UNSW research to inform veteran mental health and wellbeing spans the entire wheel of the wellbeing factors set out in the exposure draft. UNSW expertise includes the evaluation of veteran mental health, as [REDACTED], previously led the evaluation of *Defence Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2023* while he was at the University of Canberra. Some examples of UNSW research are listed below.

- **Health:**
  - The Black Dog Institute, an independent not-for-profit medical research institute affiliated with UNSW Sydney, investigates mental health across the lifespan. This includes the 2021 landmark report *Prevention through Connection: Supporting Veterans to Thrive when their Service Ends*<sup>9</sup> to report on the National Suicide Prevention Trial.
  - UNSW Professor [REDACTED] of the School of Population Health is a leading authority in population-based research using routinely collected data. This includes publishing on cancer and prescribed medicines in the veteran community using DVA data.
  - The UNSW National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) is at the forefront of national and international evidence-based responses to health challenges related to alcohol and other drugs. Deputy Director, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] research opioid and stimulant use disorders in veterans.
- **Social Support and Connection:**
  - [REDACTED] of the UNSW Canberra School of Humanities and Social Science leads an ARC Discovery Project on Veteran suicide: investigating the historical and social dimensions.
  - [REDACTED] is working with the ACT office of Seniors and Veterans and the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) on an innovative new program on dementia-friendly film screenings that will provide important opportunities for inclusion, connection and wellbeing to people living with dementia, their carers and families.
  - [REDACTED] and the team at the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre have deep experience in research and program evaluation for DVA including conducting research into service access needs, experiences and barriers of culturally and linguistically diverse Australian Defence Force veterans.
  - The Big Anxiety Research Centre (BARC) led by [REDACTED] is a unique transdisciplinary enterprise, dedicated to transforming thinking and practice in mental health through creative collaboration and cultural innovation. They research lived experience through a distinctive combination of trauma-informed, psychosocial research and creative practice, developing the rich communications and engagement practices we need to understand, connect with and support everyday experiences of mental health, trauma and suicidality, including for veterans.
- **Employment and meaningful activity:**
  - [REDACTED] at the UNSW Canberra School of Business conducts research in transitions for Australian veterans, including career transition challenges to civilian workplaces and self-employment. [REDACTED] has completed over 31 years of service as a Maritime Logistics Officer in the Royal Australian Navy.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/VeteransReport2021.pdf>

- **Meaning and spirituality:**
  - [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] of the School of Social Sciences at UNSW Sydney have expertise in grief and bereavement research that aims to better understand experiences of bereavement using sociological and social work approaches.
- **Home and housing:**
  - [REDACTED] was a lead researcher, along with the Social Policy Research Centre on the AHURI Inquiry into Homelessness Amongst Australian Veterans, funded by DVA, which offered the first-ever estimate of veteran homelessness based on primary data and the first accurate baseline to track changes in the rate over time.
  - [REDACTED] in the City Futures Research Centre researches wellbeing in place – how our environment supports healthy living as part of everyday life which is essential for minimizing the major risk factors for chronic physical and mental illness.
- **Recognition and respect:**
  - [REDACTED], Head of School of Arts & Media has extensive experience and publications in research-based theatre and arts with and for Ex-Military Personnel experiencing posttraumatic stress, to address the stigma of mental health in the military and encourage psychological help-seeking in the veteran and military population.
  - [REDACTED], Head of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at UNSW Canberra, has published extensively on Australian military history and operational analysis, including a history of the army cadet movement in Australia entitled The Torch and the Sword.