

## Empowering student military veterans to enjoy academic success

With a strong family history of service, including a great-grandfather who was a POW in Malaysia during the Second World War and made it home, a career in the military seemed like a natural choice for Nicholas Stanford.

Nicholas spent four years in the army as an infantry soldier and was discharged in February 2019. He then enrolled in a Bachelor of Paramedicine at Australian Catholic University (ACU) after a friend who was studying at ACU told him it had “an awesome” paramedicine program.

In joining the university, Nicholas had access to ACU’s innovative Student Veterans Support Program (SVSP), which was established by the university to support student military veterans, as they make the transition from military to university life.

“I think the biggest issue faced by student veterans is the culture shock of going from a very disciplined environment where everything is planned for you and it’s all very structured and regimented, to an environment where it is very individually driven and casual”, said Nicholas.

“Not having studied in a university sense in a very long time meant I had to learn how to reference and structure assignments all over again. The SVSP helped me understand that I wasn’t alone, and that I had someone to talk to about university stresses that can be unique to student veterans.

“Also, the opportunity to travel to Los Angeles in January this year to attend the Student Veterans of America National Conference was a hugely beneficial experience.”

As part of its initiatives to support student veterans, ACU sponsored Nicholas and another SVSP participant to attend the 2020 US Student Veteran Association’s National Conference (NatCon) in Los Angeles, California. NatCon is the largest annual gathering of student veterans, advocates, thought-leaders, stakeholders, and supporters in higher education in the world.

Nicholas said that he planned to implement much of what he had learnt at the conference and that there were common experiences with the US Student Veterans that transcended national boundaries.

“NatCon has given me many tools and skills to help build and develop ACU’s Student Veterans Program into a key part of the university system and help others understand that veterans aren’t there to be helped, that we can help and can be an integral part of the university.”

ACU’s work in empowering student veterans to realise their academic goals saw the university launch the Veteran’s Entry Program (VEP) in 2019, with more than 30 military veterans enrolling to commence in 2020.

The SVSP and VEP reflect ACU’s commitment to promoting the academic success, empowerment, and professional development of student veterans through advocacy and supporting resources. These initiatives aim to alleviate transitional issues for veterans and help them achieve their study and career goals.

ACU Academic Registrar and Director of Student Administration, Kathryn Blyth said, “In 2018 ACU identified that veterans and Defence Force personnel were an unrecognised equity group within higher education. To address this, ACU established the VEP to acknowledge the formal and non-formal learning accrued during years of service. The design of the scheme allows assessment on a case- by-case basis, recognising the skills and knowledge acquired in service to our country.”

ACU Pathways Director Marta Skrbis said the SVSP is currently being enhanced with a veterans-specific transition program enabling students to enter, transition and adjust into tertiary study.

“We are designing face to face and online workshops, seminars and interactive sessions developing academic literacies and study skills, supporting mental health and wellbeing and providing opportunities for social interactions. Dedicated staff, also student veterans themselves are available five days a week to offer advice, support or guidance. This enhanced program will be fully available from July 2020.”

VEP is part of the wider SVSP that aims to provide ongoing support to veterans, from applying and enrolling, to timetabling and orientation, as well as academic, counselling and financial support. ACU Vice President Father Anthony Casamento csma said, “At ACU we recognise the challenges faced by veterans re-entering education, but also the strengths of our veterans and the skills and personal qualities developed through military service. Our student veterans share ACU’s commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person and the common good.”

ACU Pro Vice Chancellor (Engagement) Professor Sandra Jones said, “ACU has a long-standing commitment to student veterans, and the SVSP brings together a range of supports and activities from across all areas of the university. The VEP and SVSP ensure that student veterans at ACU are supported in their studies from enrolment to graduation.”

### **Background to ACU’s Student Veterans Support program (SVSP)**

In early 2019, ACU partnered with the Australian Student Veterans’ Association (ASVA), La Trobe University, Charles Darwin University and Western Sydney University on a major national project to increase access to and support of younger military student veterans in higher education.

The project built on findings from previous research by La Trobe University’s Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity (CHEEDR) with the ASVA, which found that most student veterans were not identified within higher education institutions, and many felt marginalised and unsupported.

The team successfully applied for a grant to fund a major national project to increase access to and support of younger military student veterans in higher education.

The Department of Veterans Affairs funded the capacity-building project, ‘From the Military to the Academy’, which enabled ACU to develop a framework to bring together activities across the University to support current and future student veterans.

Through this framework ACU appointed its first Student Veteran Administration Officer who worked with staff across the university to develop a comprehensive program to support student veterans across all ACU campuses, beginning with the establishment of the first ACU Student Veterans Association chapter.

The SVSP has already made considerable progress in exceeding the goals of the funded project and has laid the groundwork for a smooth transition for military veterans enrolling in the Veteran’s Entry Pathway (VEP) scheme for 2020.

The launch of VEP made ACU the first Australian university to offer consistent entry requirements for veterans, regardless of state of residence and study. The pathway scheme allows for adjustment factors following two years of military service; veterans are eligible to receive a Selection Rank in Queensland, NSW and ACT; using a table of equivalence for service undertaken in the different Forces.

**Media contact: Georgina Bible, 0475 963 606, [georgina.bible@acu.edu.au](mailto:georgina.bible@acu.edu.au)**