



The Case for Veteran-Friendly Higher Education in Canada and the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the case for greater effort to encourage former armed forces members, otherwise known as veterans, to access and thrive in higher education institutions in Canada and the United Kingdom (UK). By looking at existing research, almost exclusively conducted in the United States (US) and Australia, it proposes that similar efforts should be applied in Canadian and UK contexts. Whereas the US has developed educational opportunities and policies for this community since the inception of the 1944 GI Bill, Australia and Canada seem only now to be increasing attention in this area, while the UK appears not to be doing so at all. Building on this lengthy, primarily US research base and attention, along with nascent investigation and recommendations in Australia, the authors consider how both Canada and the UK might develop similar initiatives. These include targeted marketing and financial packages aimed at veterans, improved monitoring and support for them, and the creation of student veteran and staff associations and other peer support mechanisms. It is argued that this will not just benefit the student veterans concerned, but also the institutions they choose to study with, and the wider Canadian and UK societies they inhabit.

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Research conducted in Australia and the United States (US) indicates that former members of the armed forces, of any rank and from any background, can both struggle to access and thrive in higher education institutions (HEI), yet can also use that previous professional experience to enable them to successfully complete and benefit from programmes of study, as well as add value to the wider HEI community (Albright & Bryan, 2017; Cate, 2014; Flink, 2017; Harvey et al., 2018). However, in the Australian, Canadian, and United Kingdom (UK) contexts at least, further research is required to explore how student veterans—that is those who are serving or have served, full or part-time, in the armed forces, and at any grade—might better be attracted into and then supported through HEI programmes. The lack of such support, it is contended, risks depriving student veterans of the growth opportunities that access to HEIs can bring, as well as limiting the prospect for HEIs to benefit from the experience they can offer. These missed mutual opportunities not only affect the potential veteran student and associated HEIs, but also the wider national community in which they reside; communities that might otherwise profit from the growth potential arising from a better targeted support system.

Just as in the US, where, since 1944, governmental and institutional attention has been focused on ensuring that students with an armed forces' connection and their immediate family members can access and thrive in HEIs (Harvey et al., 2018), we argue that Canadian and UK societies might similarly benefit from a more focused veteran support system as is currently advocated in Australia.

CONTEXT

Student veterans are confronted with a duality of challenge upon enrolment in HEIs as they face a shift in culture and identity and a transformative experience. In general, the structure of military service is rigid, which is influenced by control, uniformity, and a collective approach to assignments, albeit that both within and across the separate armed forces that comprise the military (generally army, navy, and air forces), the degree of rigidity differs according to role, function, and rank. Juxtaposed against this general rigidity however, is higher education (HE), where freedom of thought, independence, and choice is encouraged. Stated differently, the tension between individualism and collectivism presents a shift in veteran-student orientation. Stone (2017) found “military training and culture effect such deep-seated psychological change in military service members” (p. 366), such that it is reasonable to expect that institutional academic and social

support models will address this move, thereby contributing to overall student well-being. Cultural implications are not limited to focusing on the student alone, rather orientation workshops and programmes aimed at faculty and staff are required with a view to increasing organisational knowledge and understanding. To grow traditional student awareness and mitigate misconceptions, a veteran-focused communication strategy should be considered.

The difference between military service and HE can be seen through identity formation and cultural expectations. Societies writ large can easily misinterpret the purpose of the military including the function, roles, missions, and the impact of service on its members. These elements are further shaped through the historical lens of a specified period. Collectively, these factors can be a substantial hurdle when entering HE. To effect change, a reconciliation between the needs of student veterans who often manage employment and family related demands alongside HE (Cate, 2014), and who also contend with leaving service and integrating into society, must be balanced against an institutional desire to provide barrier-free access and organisational support for all programmes. Current scholarly literature provides only a limited view of what is required to develop a customisable HE academic and social support model within new environments and is almost entirely centred on the US.

Potential avenues of student veteran support must simultaneously consider the individual, organisation, and community. Support is categorised in two separate domains: social and academic. Within the social domain, HE should identify the resources available for student veterans. Thompson et al. (2017) classified military-to-civilian transition as “one of the most intense of major life transitions” (p. 25), meaning it is reasonable to assess that an increased need of attention be granted in developing organisations within HEIs aimed at maintaining veteran personal well-being. Moving forward, HE should consider the shifting requirements of student veterans to provide a spectrum of social and academic support options. The desired outcome is to reduce the potential marginalisation of student veterans within the HEI environment.

The implication for student well-being in HE is the organisational understanding that the life experience student veterans possess is vastly different to that of traditional students. For HE, there should be an expectation that students will present in the HEI context with greater familial challenges, physical and mental health concerns, social stereotyping, and societal reintegration issues (Cate, 2014; Lim et al., 2018; McCann & Heber, 2017; Veterans Affairs Canada, 2017). In turn, the framework required to contribute to the well-being of student veterans must consider the unique aspect of serving military members

and the shift to civilian life. Service in the military comes with inherent physical risk, the potential of invisible injuries such as mental health distress, moral injuries, and exposure to military sexual trauma. For student veterans entering academia, there is the potential for stigmatisation and societal misunderstanding for some, whilst simultaneously amplifying the hero persona of uniformed service in others (Caddick et al., 2020).

Physical injuries are an overt reminder of sacrifice and honour that contributes to the male-dominated notion of military service, with little attention paid to other wounds, injuries, or genders. While a powerful symbol of duty, physical injuries can misrepresent the demographic of military service and unduly influence how staff in HE approach this group of students. Additionally, those student veterans who suffered mental health or moral injury face stigmatisation leading to real or perceived barriers to HE (Doehring, 2019; Elliott et al., 2011; Schrader, 2017).

In the HE context, a non-typical approach of peer-to-peer support may better suit the inclusion of student veterans. Drebing et al. (2018) noted that the shift between the military and academia is “more dramatic because it reflects a transition between two cultures, with different norms and expectations” (p. 135). Several considerations are absent from current research that require further interrogation: (a) the requirement for a tailorable, scalable support framework to address the needs of a heterogenous student veteran population; (b) the development of a strategy which addresses access challenges of student veterans; (c) an increase in the understanding of this phenomenon in HE; and (d) a need to review and address potential curricular implications that may trigger unpleasant memories or physical reactions in student veterans.

THE US APPROACH

In the context presented above, student veterans tend to be well supported in the US (Harvey et al., 2018). A significant amount of relevant scholarly literature comes in the form of US research where student veterans have been attending sponsored education since 1944 and enjoying the benefits of continuously evolving federal legislation. The US’s Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018) provides the foundation upon which American service members have been attending post-secondary education. The original education sponsorship bill evolved throughout the years in concert with shifting political pressure and societal change. The most recent update, called the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, otherwise known as

the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Walton Radford et al., 2016), resulted in a robust benefit for active duty and reservist armed forces personnel as well as members of the National Guard (Hammond, 2017). Further, the flexibility of education benefits enables familial transfers to occur, support for spouses, and consideration for living expenses and test fees (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020a; US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020b; Walton Radford et al., 2016).

This incentivisation led to federal initiatives such as the Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members legislation, which was an Obama-era executive order (Federal Register, 2012) and is often referred to as the Eight-keys to Success. This order was considered a framework for governments and institutions to work together to support the one-million military connected students pursuing education (Lim et al., 2018; Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter, 2018). The US maintains a substantial investment in veteran education and collective support that warrants attention when considering the development of a suitable model. The Student Veterans of America Association also offers support in many HEIs (Harvey et al., 2018), while US research additionally points to the beneficial deployment of military generated skills such as self-discipline and perseverance in the HE environment (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Livingston et al., 2011; Olsen et al., 2014).

However, US literature (Harvey et al., 2018) also indicates the potential for student veterans to experience: financial strain, conflicting professional and family commitments while attempting to access and cope with HE studies, in addition to possibly managing health issues and a perception of cultural distance between themselves and the civilian student and staff population (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Barry et al., 2014; Cate, 2014; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011; Elnitsky et al., 2018; Flink, 2017; Hart & Thompson, 2020; Jenner, 2017; Kranke et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2011; Petri et al., 2016). It is also reported that US HEI staff sometimes comment that they feel inadequately prepared to discuss the challenges encountered by student veterans (Albright & Bryan, 2017; Hart & Thompson, 2020). While it is recognised that this student community cannot be considered a homogenous entity (Hart & Thompson, 2020), sufficient evidence of commonality of challenges exists for Boettcher et al. (2017) to recommend that HEI staff need to support student veteran transition into the US HE environment more effectively, by developing an understanding of their “needs, experiences, and [common] challenges” (p. 52).

Furthermore, US research outcomes consistently find that financial support is not a significant retention tool, therefore a number of observations focus on building

applicable support programmes for student veterans (Alschuler & Yarab, 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Southwell et al., 2016). A recent study by the Congressional Budget Office (Bass, 2019) underscored the impact of the Post-9/11 Bill where, annually, \$5 billion is paid directly to institutions. While most HEIs provide prior learning credits (Bergman & Herd, 2016; Sikes et al., 2017) based on military experience, arguably a tension is created between receiving federal funding and supporting students. Accordingly, a reasonable conclusion is that financial support alone does not guarantee academic success. Consequently, future initiatives must be aware of this finding. Finally, the role of peer-support emerged as a unifying theme throughout several analyses to aid retention, satisfaction, and course completion among student veterans (Drebing et al., 2018; McCaslin et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2018).

THE AUSTRALIAN APPROACH

As noted by Andrewartha and Harvey (2019), there is scant researched evidence to indicate student veteran experience in joining and undertaking HE programmes in Australia. However, in reporting on a survey of 240 student veterans who had enrolled in Australian HEIs, the same authors and their colleagues highlighted that accessing HE in that country can be a “difficult and even demoralising” experience (Harvey et al., 2018, p. 6). Despite that, the same research determined that students with experience of serving in the armed forces demonstrated motivation and self-discipline which helped them succeed in their studies, although they often also felt isolated and misunderstood by both fellow students and some staff members (an issue similarly noted in the US literature described above). As a result, and among other recommendations, the study concluded that HEIs would do well to “develop more inclusive campus climates, in which the strengths [of student veterans] can be both acknowledged and harnessed” (p. 6).

Other barriers to joining and progressing through Australian HEIs were found to be centred on issues of finance, mental health conditions, and “juggling study with paid work commitments and/or family responsibilities” with limited support offered to alleviate these concerns (Harvey et al., 2018, p. 25). Neither were some former military students comfortable discussing their veteran status, possibly as they felt that the HEI environment was not “veteran friendly” (p. 26). These, again, were issues previously noted in the US context.

In highlighting the sense of isolation felt by some student veterans engaged on HEI programmes in Australia, Harvey et al. (2018) observed the positive role the

Australian Student Veterans Association (ASVA) formed in 2016 played, mirroring the support provided by the Student Veterans of America Association in the US. Whereas some students from a military background reportedly found it difficult to connect with their non-veteran peers and staff members, the presence of ASVAs in some Australian HEIs allowed for a form of military mutual support in the absence of a sense of broader institutional connectedness (Harvey et al., 2018).

Despite this, the same research found that 94% of the 240 former military students surveyed would recommend university to other ex-military peers and were thus positive about their experience. Among the suggested benefits advanced were that engagement with HEI programmes helped transition away from an identity rooted in the military, while also replacing the sense of purpose formerly enjoyed while serving in the armed forces (Harvey et al., 2018). In line with Neimeyer’s (2004, 2006) theory of posttraumatic growth, students surveyed during Harvey et al.’s (2018) research also commented that an HEI programme provided “a great way to move on from trauma” and “grow both personally and professionally” (p. 23; see also Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

THE CANADIAN APPROACH

There is a lack of national investigation and research in—or approach to—student veterans in Canada. However, there are a few localised HEIs that have started to consolidate efforts. For Canadian colleges and universities, a recently announced federal government (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2018) stipend enables a group of underrepresented students to attend post-secondary education in a manner not witnessed in over seven decades (Neary, 2004). The implications of the recently introduced Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) Education and Training Benefit (ETB) spans all levels of HE. For qualifying veterans, this benefit ranges from \$40,000 to \$83,000 in potential support and is offered to all successful applicants regardless of prior military rank or level of education. The intended outcome is to provide flexibility for student veterans during the pursuit of HE goals.

Given the lack of empirical evidence surrounding this student population there is a need to simultaneously highlight scholarly gaps, understand national historical approaches, evaluate the reasoning for previously implemented post-military training and education programming, and develop a framework that supports this group. Currently, the availability of financial stipends may contribute to the individual encouragement of academic exploration; however, a greater opportunity is presented for HEIs to develop tailored offerings, investigate

innovative curricular initiatives, and foster collaboration that leads to a positive learning environment. The expected outcome of addressing this question is that a holistic and multidimensional inclusionary structure can be developed for colleges and universities.

THE UK APPROACH

In common with the Canadian experience, and distinct from the US and Australia, the UK also lacks evidenced research into the veteran experience in HE. The UK armed forces community is considered to consist of regular (full time) personnel, those serving in the reserve (part time) forces, the ex-regular and reserve veteran cohort, and immediate family members. It is estimated that this encompasses 10 million people in the UK (Ministry of Defence, 2011). Approximately 14,000 regular personnel leave service every year, with a significant proportion entering training or education, as 50% will have served less than six years and be under 30 years of age (Ministry of Defence, 2020a; Ministry of Defence, 2020b). Universities UK (2019) identified 165 HEIs with 2.38 million registered students; however, veteran status was not recorded.

All UK military recruits, be they other rank (enlisted) or officer entrants, are automatically enrolled into an Enhanced Learning Credits (ELC) Scheme, which can be used by both serving personnel and veterans (up to a maximum of five years after leaving) to fully fund the tuition costs of an eligible first degree, or a proportion of any other qualifying HE course (Enhanced Learning Credits Administration Service, 2020). Given that a first degree is not a requirement for officers to be commissioned into the UK military, and some will leave without having attained one in-service, many HEIs target this other rank and officer Service Leaver community, and several offer courses tailored to the military experience. Many also sign the Armed Forces Covenant (Ministry of Defence, 2011), which commits them to treating student veterans and staff fairly but does not require additional benefits to be offered. Many HEIs, in the spirit of the Covenant, also pledge to support the employment of veterans and provide work placement and briefing days for injured former service personnel to raise awareness of employment and study opportunities.

Among the devolved nations which constitute the UK, there are slight differences in approach to HE in general, as well as veteran support specifically. The Welsh Government (n.d.) has, in its commitments to the Armed Forces Covenant, made available a Further and Higher Education Scheme, which supported student veterans with £131,891 of funding during the financial year 2018–2019 for “day-

to-day living costs during term time, regardless of where in the UK they choose to study” (n.p.).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Contemporary student veterans possess a vast array of unique experiences that span domestic security and assistance, international humanitarian intervention, crises response, peacekeeping, and warfighting. As found in the US context, many of these experiences might help fill a national “skills-gap”, particularly in the field of technology, security, languages, and culture (Cate, 2014, p. 64), thereby potentially improving not just individual veterans’ employment prospects, but also benefitting national incomes and economies.

Given research into veteran engagement in HE is almost entirely reliant on US veteran data, is in its infancy in Australia, and has barely begun in Canada and the UK, it is instructive for the Canadian and British governments and HEIs to begin to look at their own veteran support, funding, and structures. The authors of this report note the recommendations made by their Australian counterparts, as they are reflective of the nascent interest and areas of concern in all three national contexts.

The cultivation of appropriate structures that aid student veterans in HE must examine the role of organisational policies and develop tailored and scalable programmes. In doing so, the harmonisation of financial support and development of attraction and retention strategies that enable successful graduation, reduce barriers, and offer multidimensional methods of peer-support are clearly required. Adjusting and apportioning organisational resources to mitigate potential risk increases the likelihood of degree completion. The desired outcome remains an increased sense of purpose for all student veterans while gaining a new skillset in an effort to be more competitive in the civilian labour market.

Accordingly, and as recommended by Harvey et al. (2018) in the Australian context, it is our view that that Canadian and UK agencies charged with or interested in supporting student veterans access HE programmes might consider a range of measures designed to facilitate this. These could include expanding information available to student veterans to emphasise the range and benefits of HE programmes available to them and the provision of financial support to assist them in accessing courses and sustaining themselves while studying. Just as in the US, the latter might include tuition-fee waivers and cost-of-living scholarships, and be extended to immediate family members.

In terms of the HEI environment itself, we recommend that the sector target and encourage student veterans or applicants to disclose their military background so that institutions and the wider sector can monitor their progress, adjusting support where appropriate. This should include consideration of any specific or military-related health concerns, just as for any member of the student population. As highlighted here, the potential difficulties for student veterans to identify with the broader student and staff population suggest the development of some form of local or national Veteran Student Association would be of benefit. In effect, the development of a peer-support model must be flexible to address a complex weave of veteran and traditional students, engage the intragroup potential of this population, and harness an authentic relationship with HEI staff.

HEIs might identify veteran staff already present within their faculties, or broader staff membership, and use this experience to help further develop a veteran identity, thus fostering a mutual support network. Again, this might be bolstered by the formation of veteran student/staff associations as indicated above. Furthermore, HEIs might also consider promoting greater awareness and recognition of the strengths and potential challenges faced by student veterans, doing so via internal communications strategies and professional development activities, as recommended in the Australian context (Harvey et al., 2018). This could include the identification of those student veterans already studying or having successfully completed programmes and using them as case studies to promote benefits. These student veterans might also potentially be employed as mentors to support those who follow.

Finally, and at a national level, we recommend that an advisory committee, comprised of veterans and educators, be formed to advise HE policy makers on how best to conceive of and develop policy and regulations in support of encouraging veterans into HEIs and to support them once there. Looking to the US in all these areas, including attendance at national conferences and visits to HEIs, might inform an approach in the Canadian and UK contexts. However, account would need to be taken of the cultural and political variations across all nations concerned.

CONCLUSION

We advocate that research be undertaken to better understand the experiences, motivations, expectations, and outcomes of student veterans involved in HE in Canada and the UK, to inform and expand the rationale for the above recommendations. As advanced in the Australian

environment, this research should include current and former student veterans in the design and conduct of this research (Harvey et al., 2018). Again, just as reported by Harvey et al. (2018), we find that despite the importance of student veterans to “national security and prosperity” (p. 6), Canada and the UK are largely blind as to the engagement and success of such students within the HE environment. Accordingly, we also argue that new HEI strategies and investment are required to recognise and reward such service by better understanding and supporting the needs of this under-researched population. It is contended that such investment will not just benefit the student veterans concerned, but also the institutions that encourage and enrol them as well as the Canadian and UK student populations and nations more broadly.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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