Open Research Online

The Benefits of the Disabled Veterans' Scholarship Fund at the Open University, UK.

Journal Item

oro.open.ac.uk

The Benefits of the Disabled Veterans' Scholarship Fund at the Open University, UK.

Abstract

The Disabled Veterans' Scholarship Fund (DVSF) was set up by the UK Open University (OU) to meet the needs of those who were injured in UK military service or medically discharged by providing 100 free places to study for a degree.

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the experience of study and the benefits of the Scholarship Fund for veteran scholars, as well as identify what they needed to be successful in their studies.

Methods: This study took a qualitative participatory research approach, which involved twenty-four semi structured telephone interviews with 14 veteran scholars over a period of five months, followed by an live online event to feedback the findings of the interviews and look to the future of study for the veterans.

Results: The two main benefits of the Scholarship Fund were that the OUs open entry system meant that a lack of formal qualifications was not a barrier to study, and through the DVSF, study was free. Although the University offered a range of supportive services there was a perceived misalignment between the support the veterans were used to during their military service and the support that was provided by the OU, which led to frustrations. Despite this finding there was a perception by the support service at the OU that the veterans were a hard-to-reach group, and recognition that a community of support was needed.

Both of these issues were partly addressed through an online Student Hub Live event. The support services at the OU worked alongside the evaluation project team to devise a bespoke programme that brought many of the veterans together for the first time.

Conclusion: The DVSF has been successful in providing study to disabled veterans. The next step is to build a community of peer support for the veterans as they progress in their studies to meet their career goals.

Keywords: veterans, injured, transition, study, community, support

Background

Unlike colleagues who make plans for retirement, veterans who are discharged due to disabilities have to deal with an unexpected end to service life. Consequently, they are less likely to be prepared for a new life outside of the military and, according to the UK Career Transition Partnership annual statistics, veterans are significantly less likely to have a degree than non-veteran counterparts, which could leave them at a disadvantage in the jobs market (Ashcroft, 2014). Finding a fulfilling, sustainable job is an experience that 44% of disabled veterans find difficult according to Deloitte's Veterans Work: Moving On report (Deloitte, 2018). They identify obstacles such as: matching their existing

skill set to civilian roles, having insufficient or unrecognisable qualifications, and writing CVs or job applications.

The Open University (OU) launched the Disabled Veterans' Scholarships Fund in 2018 as a first of its kind scheme, providing both free education and specialist, tailored support to the ex-military population. In the first year 54 disabled veterans were enrolled for study. The Fund was created specifically for disabled individuals injured in or due to military service. The Ministry of Defence (MOD), along with many military charities and organisations, have provided the Open University with help and guidance to design the Fund such that it meets the needs of disabled veterans and reaches them effectively.

The scheme was set up with two key objectives:

1. To make education free to up to 100 military service or medically discharged disabled veterans
2. To understand the emotional and professional impact that access to higher education has on their lives and the outcomes for each scholar.

The aims of this project were:

1. Explore the experience of the veteran scholars during their study at the OU
2. Identify the benefits of the fund for veteran scholars
3. Identify what veteran scholars need to be successful in their studies.

This project was planned after the first cohort had been studying for one year.

Literature Review

When commencing this literature review, it became clear that the literature exploring student veteran perceptions of learning in UK higher education, reflecting the findings of Cable et al., (2021) is sparse, therefore it was appropriate to extend the review to other *western* contexts of university learning. Although this study focussed upon the experiences of Veterans in one UK university, it is clear due to the paucity of literature (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018) in this field, that this study can make a demonstrable contribution to knowledge of UK veterans and their experiences and needs in relation to university study.

This review comprises six articles, which reaffirms the paucity of literature in this subject. In light of the distinct dearth of literature in this subject, the recommendations of Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016) and Aveyard et al (2016) were followed and were included for this review. The 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)' guidelines proposed by Page et al., (2021) were followed to retrieve appropriate data which was subsequently analysed using the PROMPT (Open University, 2021) evaluative framework.

An adapted summary matrix was completed, enabling an adapted thematic analysis of the data collected drawing upon the approach suggested by Aveyard, et al., (2016), where 'a priori themes' are developed from the emerging objectives of the research generated by the search strategy. This adapted form of thematic analysis (Aveyard, et al., 2016) demonstrated the presence of two key themes:

Military Experience

Cable et al.,(2021) comparing the response of Australia, USA, Canada and the UK suggests that student veterans enrolling on a university course are presented with transformative experiences, that challenge their culture and identity. Universities are bastions of freedom of thought, independent thinking and individualism; this is in contrast to the structure of the military dominated by collectivism, order and control. Cable et al., (2021) go on to suggest that this personal tension generated by the conflict between individualism and collectivism is the root cause of dissonance between the university and the student veteran. Andrewartha & Harvey (2019), illustrate that even though student veterans have many transferable skills and qualities developed in the military that were helpful at university, paradoxically, 22 percent of their participants were not comfortable discussing their military experience and 29 percent commented that universities were not veteran friendly. The results of the Andrewartha and Harvey survey found that only five percent of participants reported that there were veteran-specific support services reflecting, they assert, a lack of understanding and appreciation of the veteran's skills, and needs. This lack of understanding of military experience is also reflected by the observation that although 51 per cent of participants had earned civilian and equivalency qualifications and awards only 20 per cent received formal credit for prior learning. Developing this line of inquiry, Rattray et al., (2019) allude to the lack of understanding that universities have of military experience and the disassociated culture may lead to misunderstanding and possible stigmatisation of student veterans resulting in a disconnect between student and university.

Berlangeret al., (2021) provide an informed reflection of a five-year observational programme aimed at addressing student veterans' needs and assisting their transition into university education. They report that veterans struggle with integration into the university culture typified by feelings of alienation, and experience challenges with access, lack of prior learning recognition, and financial challenges that inhibit degree completion. In part, they imply this is a consequence of the universities' lack of knowledge and understanding of military experience and its impact on civilian life.

Using a qualitative approach, Jenner, (2017) explored the experiences of 22 student veterans in a USA college and found that progression and academic attainment were viewed as traditional indicators of success, however more nuanced factors were also identified. Recognising the lack of military centred support, student veterans, had a desire to use and share their military expertise and educational benefits to help other veterans progress in their academic

journeys. These findings align with that of McReynolds (2014) who explored the culture shock experienced by veterans who had to adapt to student life.

Support

A prominent large-scale study by Andrewartha and Harvey (2019) enabled a direct comparison with non-veterans by collecting the data of 240 veterans from a survey constructed to reflect the national Survey of Australia (Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning, 2020). This comparison demonstrated that Student veterans are less likely than non-veteran students to feel prepared and supported during their transition to university, and furthermore, felt largely unsupported during their studies. Distinctly, Andrewartha &Harvey (2019) demonstrated financial challenges and barriers were identified by 54% of their sample as the most significant barrier to successful study, followed by psychological well-being (44%) and current work commitments (34%). However, despite student veterans typically felt isolated during their studies, it was noted by Andrewartha and Harvey (2019) that 94 percent of veterans would recommend university study to other veterans, as the benefits are well recognised. Family members and friends are suggested to be the most likely to have encouraged student veterans to go to university and that the main drive for motivation was to improve career prospects, or to pursue a particular career. Examining their findings in the Australian context, it is clear that policy, legislative, and institutional support for student veterans is lacking, replicating the current state of affairs in the UK.

The literature review, although limited in scope, clearly illustrates that much of the available literature pertains to the USA context, with emerging literature from Australia mainly through the efforts of Andrewartha &Harvey (2019) and Harvey et al., (2018) presenting some informative evidence-based recommendations. The UK however, is at the start of this journey, but drawing upon the available research from USA and Australia, it is clear that there are distinct barriers to a successful university education, military experience is not recognised or at best undervalued.

Methodology and methods

This study took a qualitative participatory research approach. Participatory research encompasses research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by an issue being studied for the purpose of action or change (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Interviews with veterans were undertaken, during which a number of veterans volunteered to participate in the study. This involved for some undertaking a second interview later on in the academic year and for others becoming involved in the Student Hub live event in order to provide encouragement and support to fellow veterans. This participation enriched the study's authenticity but also increased the likelihood of engagement from other veterans.

Approvals Ethics

The project received approval from the Open University Student Research Project Panel and was reviewed by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee and gained full approval.

Sample

The participants were recruited from the Faculty of Well Being Education and Language Studies at the university who had registered on the Disabled Veterans Scholarship Scheme during the period Sept 2017-July 2020. The data includes the first and second DVSF cohorts in the interviews and included some from the third cohort in the Student Hub Live event, as it acted as an induction event for them.

Data collection

The veteran scholars (n=55) were invited to take part in the study interviews via email. They were sent a Participant Information sheet and if willing to participate, had the study explained to them in full by the interviewer at the time of the interview and informed consent was gained. Twenty-four interviews were undertaken in total with fourteen veterans. Each participant was given a pseudonym, in the form P (participant) and allocated interview number (1-14). Any individuals mentioned by the participants within their interviews were also given a pseudonym. Data was also collected on the attendance at the Student Hub live event as well as the results of a number of polls run during the event and the comments made by the veteran scholars.

Semi-structured digitally recorded telephone interviews were conducted with each participant using an interview template comprising four open ended questions as a consistent way of collecting date from each of the participants. (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The semi-structured interview approach enabled the flexibility and focus necessary to adapt to any responses that required further exploration. Having a pre-determined set of questions and areas to be addressed in the form of an interview template enables the modification of pace and questioning technique based on the interviewee responses or explanations. The interview questions were designed to cover the key research objectives, with flexibility to adapt according to the participants' responses. The interview schedule was constructed using Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interview strategy, subsequently adopting three key phases of the interview: 1 understand the participant's background and significant moments in their learning; 2 identify significant moments and events that occurred within their learning experience and 3 explore the participant's experiences during those events. The interview guide reflected the objectives of the research and those questions that arose from the utilisation of a conceptual framework based on the three gains learning model proposed by Kellet &Clifton (2017). The template was submitted for peer review, by the research team and minor amendments were made; for example: the order and structure of questions were modified to ensure greater fluency.

This exercise contributed to the validity and credibility of the data collection tools (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Telephone interviews were chosen for data collection as they are considered to be an effective alternative face to face interview. (Hanna, 2012; King & Brooks, 2017). Whilst they may lack some of the features of face-to-face interviews such as physical interaction and nonverbal cues, they provide adequate information and enable effective data collection where time resource is an issue. This study took place at the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic were physical face to face was not allowed due to the restrictions placed on society. Consequently, this approach contributed to successful recruitment as this enabled interviews to take place within the period of the study and also proved to offer greater flexibility when arranging appointments and enabled greater anonymity and privacy for the participants. This provided a richness of data that may have otherwise been diluted by more traditional face-to-face interviewing.

Data Analysis

All interview data were collected using a digital voice recorder, anonymised and protected during the process of data transcription and analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Following transcription, template analysis was used as a method for data analysis (King & Brooks, 2017). Template analysis was chosen as the preferred method to analyse the findings as it provides structure to the analysis process concurrently maintaining a flexible approach which would complement the overall approach to the study. Template analysis (TA), developed by King (2012), is based on the thematic analysis of experience; and provides a coding frame or template to structure the analysis process. Use of the template enables the researcher to use 'a priori' themes. These are identified prior to commencing the analyses of data, based on the phenomenon and experience under investigation. Within TA individual accounts are analysed in greater depth before integrating separate cases; thereby reducing the length of time to undertake the analysis if analysing large amounts of data (King, 2012).

 Development of the template

The transcripts were read initially to increase familiarity with the participants' experience and following some preliminary coding, a priori themes were developed and formed an initial template which was revisited at significant stages as new themes changed or emerged, key themes were identified and some integrative themes emerged which underpinned the main themes Having read and re read and analysed the transcripts, four main or 'a priori' themes were developed based on the research question, objectives, conceptual framework and the interview guide. To ensure reliability and credibility of the template (King, 2012) two members of the research team interrogated the data independently and cogently developed and arrived at the same themes. These were: Military experience, motivation, impact and support

Managing data

Analysis of the transcripts was undertaken manually and analytical memos in the form a diary provided an audit trail of the decisions made to the processing of the data, (Snowden, 2015) thereby providing strength and transparency to the coding process. The use of a Microsoft word document combined with a hard copy of the transcripts enabled thorough review of the data in completing the coding process. This enabled immersion in the data, creating an informed and insightful analysis, (Robson & McCartan, 2016) that fully encapsulated the data. In the development of themes and sub themes an analytical strategy that adopted an iterative inductive process was adopted, this enabled the relationship between themes and sub themes to be conceptualised. To ensure rigour and enhance credibility a systematic process based on Attride-Stirling's (2001) framework was used to provide structure to the analytical process.

In each transcript and document set, relevant text was highlighted and categorised under appropriate themes and sub themes. Notes, in the form of an active diary were also developed while reading and rereading the transcripts, then themes and sub themes were identified by manual highlighting, adopting a cyclical process and adding diary notes. Each transcript and data set was identified based on the participant.

Findings:

Of the initial 55 veterans in the DVSF, 50 stated that their motivation for study was career related, with 16 (29%) looking to move into employment, 24 (44%) were looking for a new career and 10 (18%) seeking to progress in their current career. The subjects studied were very varied. The most popular choices were science (16), social science (10), business or law (10), psychology (6) and social care (4).

The analysis of the interviews with the veterans resulted in four themes.

1. The lasting impact of Military experience
2. Motivation for study
3. Impact of studying at the OU through the DVSF
4. Support

Theme 1:   The lasting impact of military experience

This first theme highlights the unique nature and complexity of the veteran scholar, regardless of the branch of the military they had served.

The interviews provided an insightful view of their experiences on leaving the military. There was a consensus within the participants that support for transitioning from military to civilian life is incongruent with expectation, evidence was presented from the interviews that they felt unsupported on leaving the military:

> *As soon as you walk out the gates the government don't care and when you try access support and civvy street again people really don't care and even some of the service charities…… don't care as well. And there is a sort of*

degree of prejudice to people who have come out the military. It's like they don't have much else to go into…part of the problem when they employ people who are not military don't quite understand what you do/ have in terms of skills. (P10)

This feeling of not being understood was reinforced by another veteran and offers some insight into the complexity of leaving the military;

'(People) don't understand….You've gone from being institutionalised within the military world, you get health care and looked after… ` (P9)

Another veteran expressed frustration at fellow students who were not veterans:

'….they (other non-military students) didn't like my outlook. Because, like I say it how I see it. And if you don't like it… that is your issue not mine. You'll find that about a lot of military people. We just got to say it straight, and if you don't like it, kind of question. This you realise. I mean it's a different world.' (P11)

A number of veterans expressed the need to be understood by their tutor:

` ….when you have a teacher who's no military background, they haven't a clue, like a therapist who talks about empathy – you think you understand but you don't because you haven't done it! (P11)'

Another veteran emphasized the importance of a shared experience and empathy from their tutor, who, it was suggested, should have;

been along that same experience on the same road…So they know what they will… what they found difficult, and they can point you in the right direction where I'll tell you what, I use this and I've found it superbly beneficial to my studies.(P1)

And another participant suggested that;

'I think the best thing to do is to have somebody in place like a veteran you could approach. So, you could have somebody who's already gone through the system. So, like a buddy… and maybe help navigate them through any issues… with help or home or studies.' (P2)

One veteran appeared to have the sort of support that his peers had been describing:

'One thing I have used well is my mentor, who's my teacher and is a veteran he's really good for disabled veterans.' (P6)

Another veteran alluded to the lasting impact of being in the military;

'You know, because even though I left the military, I'm still thinking military in the way I think… and I'm not, I'm not sure I'll ever get rid of that fact.' (P1)

Theme 2: Motivation for study through the DVSF

Participants were very positive about the DVSF scheme and felt lucky or privileged to be supported by it. They provided clear explanations for their motivation to study with the Open university. Many veterans had extensive knowledge and skills in their field but did not have recognisable qualifications to reflect this, which meant they did not meet the entry criteria for many universities. The OU open entry policy made study accessible to them. Motivations for study ranged from a diversion that contributed to pain management, a desire to make a difference within society and a wish to support others. Several participants commented that the unique flexibility, the opportunity to work independently and autonomously were important key factors for engagement and continued motivation for OU study. As one veteran comments:

> *'Well, the major thing was the flexibility and everything else.'(P12)*

And reinforced by a further veteran who states:

> *'[I've] chosen to [study] part time, because the time, so the times really good to me'(P9)*

The desire to help and support others was a key driver for many veterans, many wanting to explore psychology and aspire to providing counselling services to fellow veterans:

> *'I want to go into something and do something that can help because of what happened to me'(P8)*

> *'Yeah. Because actually, bizarrely I thought maybe this could be an opening for me to become that mentor having gone through that and then pass that experience on'(P12)*

This last comment illustrates a wish to provide a credible role model, based on the observation that few counsellors are veterans, and their ability to empathise is largely based upon a theoretical construct. Each veteran interviewed also displayed an altruistic trait by offering to act as a mentor/study buddy to new veteran scholars.

Theme 3: Impact of the Disabled Veterans Scholarship Fund

The benefits of study expressed by the veterans were wide and varied and included the development of study skills such as: planning, writing, referencing. Alongside these study skills there were specific benefits of the scholarship scheme that the veterans identified, in particular the ability to look at things differently and an enhanced critical awareness of self and societal issues, as illustrated by one veteran who describes how study has made him more perceptive and enquiring, for example when walking around the high street:

> *'Look(ing) at things going on (Pawnbroking) and ask why - so they've always been around but why they suddenly increased, you know? And*

basically, I'm not thinking more about how things are and why they are, instead of walking around blind really… the course has given me more information, you know, and given me a better understanding.' (P2)

Further supported by the following comment;

'having this scholarship is a great thing for us because it allows us to continue that mind stimulation that you can't get… It allows us to have that.' (P11):

Promoting and developing a critical view on life and how military experience may influence criticality was encapsulated by one respondent who commented that:

'One of the things that it teaches, is to question the status quo but that doesn't go down very well in the military.' (P8)

This comment is distinct as it challenges the normative view of thinking and acting within the military mindset; typically characterised by hierarchal, rigid thinking that values technical knowledge and skills, and expects conformity and unquestioning obedience to orders.

Another veteran asserts, it can be empowering*:*

'to get the envelope back from the instructor going, you know, you've done that really well…that I found quite empowering' (P6)

A further benefit of studying is associated with symptom control as a form of diversion therapy, to manage psychological stressors or to assist in the management of pain. Many veterans experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). One veteran describes in detail how study helped in the management and coping mechanisms of PTSD:

'The PTSD, the problems I have and I'm sure other people have as well, is my brain is constantly thinking. If I'm going on a walk in the woods, I'm constantly thinking, where is the best ambush site? You know, what would I do if somebody jumped out of here, what could I do if they attack? So, it's incredibly exhausting and draining and I found when I studied, I could mask that and focus on my studies and also, I could… PTSD is all about coming up with strategies. So, if I was being overwhelmed by hyper-vigilance, I would actually go to my(studies) maths, because it then took, if that took all my brain power so I didn't have any brain capacity to be hyper-vigilant, so I used that as a bit of a coping tool.' (P14)

Another veteran illustrated the value of the scheme and its potential impact upon self and understanding:

'Within two minutes, it opened my eyes up to PTSD myself and to think, to why you do things and everything like that….it makes me understand me.'(P9)

The student-centeredness, flexibility and autonomy of OU study is supported by the comment that:

> *'Studying with the Open University allows me that comfort of being in my own environment where I'm not forced to go out if I don't feel up to it, I'm not forced to phone calls to him (tutor).' (P5)*

Indirectly, several respondents explained study enabled the veterans to cope more effectively with pain by using study as a distraction.

Impact of Covid 19 pandemic Lockdowns

This study commenced in March 2019, at the very beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic in the UK. Although the majority of the interviews were conducted prior to the UK government implementing societal restrictions, seven interviews took place during the period known as "Lockdown". The seven participants were asked a supplementary question regarding the impact of Covid 19 upon their studies. Comments were consistent with the view that Covid 19 lockdowns had little impact for example:

> *'Not really, no. To be honest with you I found the whole COVID thing actually quite a liberating thing for me, because it's allowed me to actually, you know, relax a little bit more and enjoy free time.' (P11).*

And another veteran stated in relation to the impact of the pandemic restrictions on their study was:

> *'Nothing at all to me.'(P10)*

Theme 4: Support

The veterans received support mainly from their family or partner as well as through their assignment feedback and their tutor, although this was reported as variable. Some veterans valued the OU's autonomous learning structure, preferring to study on their own. However, a number of participants expressed frustration due to their inability to find a key person at the OU who could provide the support they needed. They expressed a desire to have a tutor who understood their circumstances so that if they did request an extension it was understood that, due to their situation, it was a very genuine request and should be treated in an empathetic way by their tutor, who understood the general reluctance of the veterans to seek support in the first place. Generally, there seemed to be some degree of reticence to access available support.

Participants emphasized that they seldom approached the tutor, or even considered the need to do so:

> *'No, no, no. No, I tend not to do that. Okay. Yeah… like asking people or the tutor' (P3)*

And another who stated that :

> 'I'm aware that there is support centrally but I haven't needed that.'(P11)

However, the likelihood of accessing the support through the tutor was, as illustrated by the following quotes, dependent upon the nature or personality of the tutor. For example access would:

> 'depend upon personality of the tutor….I've had a good relationship with my tutors over the last few years One I would have found easier to approach than the other' (P11)

And this was reflected by the comment:

> 'I'm quite bad at trying to get support, sometimes I've had to, you know, ask for some help and asked for it…it depends on your tutor, how you feel about your tutor' (P12)

reflected by the suggestion:

> 'I sometimes turn to my tutor but not all the time, so I would go to my tutor - but it depends on confidence' (P6).

This lack of confidence appears to stem from perceptions. The veterans were consistent in their preferences re accessing support, and they placed emphasis upon the value of shared experience and helping each other. Several suggested that this could be in the form of a mentor or 'study buddy' which offers a strategy that could bridge the gap between the lack of military experience of most tutors. One suggestion that promotes the notion of self-help and bridging the gap was suggested by:

> 'One thing I would like is maybe…you can meet other students, with veterans and meet up for coffee' (P1)

For example, when asked specifically about access to support, one veteran comments:

> "I think the best thing to do is to have somebody in place like a veteran you could approach. So, you could have somebody who's already gone through the system… we can be paired up with somebody, say if you have come through this year, then you pal up with someone like myself who has been with O U. for quite some time, and maybe help navigate them through any issues that have got issues with help or home or studies, I think, you know, there needs to be a sort of… holistic approach or something.' (P7)

Reinforced by a further veteran who stated:

> 'a lot of veterans would prefer somebody who's got some form of direct connection with the military.' (P1)

And by another

> *'I believe it will be beneficial to have somebody you can call on like a mentor… my tutor was more like a mentor'* (P2)

Despite the interviews not exploring or attempting to clarify the role of the mentor, there was some illustration that there was lack of clarity in the tutor's role, ranging from simply someone to *'mark your work'* act as a *'friend' o*r someone who was there to '*bounce ideas off'.*

Support from informal sources also plays a critical role, especially partners and families of the veterans. Four participants mentioned their partners directly for example: '*my wife found the link; my wife is very supportive; my missus knows what to do*….' Encapsulated by comments such as;

> *she's got to deal with any fallout that comes with my injury and she does that on a daily basis. So, having that support is very important'(P11)*

and;

> *"Yeah motivation, my partner helps quite a lot, and knowing that, because she helps with my mindfulness and puts me in the right place for that.' (P12)*

The interviews provided insight into the experience of a range of veterans studying through the DVSF. The veterans were positive about the opportunity to study through distance learning and felt that the OU, through its open entry policy offered a route to study that other universities did, not due to the entry criteria. Distance learning study also suited many veterans who did not want to attend face to face delivery.

Student Hub Live event

Following the interview analysis, a bespoke Student Hub Live (SHL) event was planned exclusively for veteran scholars. Student Hub Live events are live interactive online events planned for key points such as induction and are usually available to all students, but it was deemed necessary to have this as a closed event to provide veterans the ability to relate to each other and gain from peer interaction.

The project team met with the Academic Services and Careers and Employability teams at the Open University, who were providing tailor made support for the veterans, to share the interview findings. This was to ensure that the content of the SHL event could be responsive to the needs of the veteran scholars. The core theme for the event was a focus on how disabled veterans could be successful in their studies

In response to many veterans articulating the need to be understood and supported by someone who was also ex-military, an ambassador for the DVSF, an ex-Air Marshall and Commander in Chief was approached to give the keynote speech during the event so as to make the programme more relevant and attractive to the veteran scholars. This speaker was also a pioneer graduate of the

OU, which aligned well with veterans reporting the need for empathy in relation to being a veteran who had experience of studying at the OU. This keynote speaker was followed by sharing the findings from the interviews, which led onto a session by two veteran scholars who shared insights from their experience and tips for success. The final session was delivered by a representative each from Academic Services and the Careers and Employability team who shared what they had learnt supporting veteran scholars and provided tips for new veteran scholars to enable them to succeed. There were 88 veterans who attended the event, many of whom engaged in the online chat facility, accruing 365 messages during the session.

The live chat messages reinforced earlier findings about the veterans' reluctance to ask for help, challenges with leaving the military and the desire to establish a support network.

The text chat was downloaded and analysed. Three themes emerged that ran throughout the event and had resonance with the views expressed in the one-to-one interviews with the veterans:

1. The transition from military life to civilian life
2. The challenge of asking for help
3. The need for a community of veteran scholars

1. The transition from military life to civilian life

The challenge of transition from life in the armed forces was touched on in various ways; the veteran scholars have to adapt to civilian life as well as their disability, and to cope with the challenge of OU study too. Veterans expressed the view that at the start of an OU module, the material and information can be overwhelming. There seemed to be a lack information in relation to higher education given to the servicemen and women before they left military service.

Frustration was also expressed regarding the challenge of transferring military skills and education into civilian skills in relation to using that knowledge to gain credit in the Higher Education system.

2. The challenge of asking for help

Some of the messages illustrated the challenge of 'asking for help,' which was mentioned by the speakers, with reference being made to soldiers not knowing how to ask for help, or even being too scared to ask for help.

A veteran commented on the new scheme of veteran champions and was pleased to have a key person to contact when needed. This information was well received by other veterans.

Surprise was expressed by one veteran at how many other veterans were part of the DVSF and a suggestion was made about setting up a disabled veterans band.

3. The need for a community

Participants were quick to recognise the value of the SHL event as a way of establishing group culture and to highlight the need to establish a community amongst the veterans. The veterans felt it was good to see the support being provided by the University, stating that there was a lack of a DVSF community at the beginning of the scheme. The hope that the SHL event could be the first step was expressed.

Appreciation was expressed for the OU staff, but the need for community was reiterated. What was helpful to observe (and part of the reason for the SHL event) was veterans offering to help build a community of support.

The presenters of the event were much appreciated, in particular the current DVSF veteran scholars who presented, sharing their experience, as well as the keynote speaker, ex-Air Marshall and Commander in Chief, who the veterans found to be inspiring.

The tone of these messages was supportive, helpful and positive, with the session ending with many messages of thanks.

Discussion

This evaluation of the DVSF unearthed a number of challenges that the veteran scholars have when transitioning from military service and the long-lasting impact their experience in the military has on them as civilians undertaking study. The veterans also reported the positive impacts study has had for them as well as the need for a community of support.

Challenges of transition
A veteran is defined in the UK as anyone who has served at least one day, regular or reserve, in the Armed Forces (Ministry of Defence, 2011). The term 'transition' is used to describe the period of (re)integration into civilian life from the Armed Forces. Every year in the UK approximately 15,000 Armed Forces personnel leave regular service and transition into civilian life (Ministry of Defence, 2019).

This transition is carefully planned for prior to leaving military service, however it was found that found that the veteran scholars who were interviewed expressed challenges they experienced since leaving the military and also articulated the long-standing impact that the military mindset had on their lives as civilians, in particular, in relation to others' perception of their views such as fellow students. Latter et al. (2018) conducted a large study on the public perceptions of the UK population of veterans and the armed forces and found that just under half of people (47%) think that serving in the UK Armed Forces leaves people in a worse mental, physical or emotional position than when they started serving.

An American study by Babcock (2016) reported the narratives of a small number of veteran scholars, identifying themes of the need for structure, networking and camaraderie, and a military mindset. Babcock goes on to suggest that practitioners and educators can better understand how to support veterans

through these themes and narratives that show how each veteran internalized these ideas.

Downey et al. (2021) explains first-hand the experience of leaving the army at the end of a term of service and the subsequent challenges she faced during her transition to civilian life:

> *I was incapable of grasping the magnitude of struggle, rejection, adversity, and indifference that would collide with my so far effortless lifestyle. I was so ready to go. I was a soldier after all, so adapt and overcome was a motto that I embodied in my mentality. I was ignorant and fool-hearted and lacked the essentials of civilian existence. (p241)*

This insight is helpful in understanding just how momentous the transition from military service to civilian life can be. The transition for our veteran scholars would have been very much compounded by being injured or medically discharged meaning the transition would have been perhaps sudden and unexpected, making it more daunting and very likely a more difficult adjustment.

Recognition

Another challenge that was expressed by the veteran scholars was the lack of recognition of their many years of military in-service training and skills, leading to them not being able to build on them to access higher education. Current systems that are available are credit transfer where potential applicants gain credit for courses taken at one Higher Education Institution (HEI) when transferring to another, but there does not appear to be a system that would credit military in service training. This challenge has been recognised by Lord Ashcroft (2014) who authored the Veterans Transition Review, stating the need to;

> *'Reinforce the strategy for translating and accrediting skills, experience and qualifications gained in the Forces for the civilian world by harmonising tri-Service efforts; identify and make available additional modules necessary to convert a military qualification into a civilian one; emphasise this to employers and personnel through the PDP' (p19)*

None of the veterans interviewed were aware that such an option was available to them, and some expressed frustration as a result. Deloitte (2018), in their report on veterans leaving military service, identify obstacles such as: matching their existing skill set to civilian roles and having insufficient or unrecognisable qualifications. The DVSF provides veterans with the ability to gain recognisable qualifications.

Disabled Scholars

For the veteran scholars on the DVSF they have not only to deal with the ongoing adaptation to civilian life but have the issue of having been injured in service and/or being medically discharged, with a number of veterans reporting ongoing health issues such as PTSD or chronic pain.

The Armed Forces Covenant, which was enshrined in UK law in the Armed Forces Act (2011), has at its core the principles that Service Personnel, Veterans, and their families are not disadvantaged by their Service and that special provision is made for those who have sacrificed the most, including those who have been injured. The DVSF was set up specifically to meet the needs of this group of ex-service men and women.

A number of veterans reported on the benefit of the scheme for them with most studying TO either further their career or move into employment. Another perhaps unexpected benefit reported was the confidence receiving positive feedback from their tutor gave them, as well as for some the distraction that immersion in their study provided, in particular in relation to PTSD. Simons et al. (2020) who interviewed 51 distance learning graduates found that students used their studies as a positive in their lives during times of stress.

The longstanding impact of military service coupled with either being injured in service or medically discharged, is likely to compound the veteran scholars' sense of being different from other civilian scholars and in need therefore of fellow veterans' support, however asking for support was something many veterans struggled with. McReynolds (2014) found that:

> Former military will almost always see themselves as better off than others and will defer to anyone they see as more in need of help than they perceive themselves to be.

In relation to difficulties faced in civilian life Latter et al. (2018) found that a relatively significant issue that affects ex-members of the UK Armed Forces was loneliness. For this reason, as part of the set-up of the DVSF the OU provided tailor-made support for the veterans but had found them difficult to reach at times. The bringing together of the support services and the veterans in the Student Hub Live event enabled effective communication that provided more insight for the support services as well as a platform for the building of a community of veteran scholars.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation of the DVSF afforded a previously unseen insight into the value veterans placed on the scheme. The first two apparent benefits were that the Open University's open entry system meant that a lack of formal qualifications was not a barrier to study, and through the DVSF, study was fully funded. Both facets were appreciated by the veterans. However, there was a perceived misalignment between the support the veterans were used to during their military service and the support that was provided by the OU, which led to frustrations. There was also a perception by the support service at the OU that the veterans were a hard -to-reach group, and a recognition that a community of support was needed.

Both of these issues were partly addressed through the considerable care and attention that went into the organising of the Student Hub Live event at the end

of the evaluation. The support service at the OU worked alongside the evaluation project team to devise a bespoke programme that brought the veterans together for the first time, by engaging an inspirational ex-military Commander in Chief as the keynote speaker, and a targeted and concerted effort to invite the veterans to attend, which resulted in a high level of attendance. The engagement of the veterans with each other throughout the event and the feedback they provided demonstrated that they could see the university was responding to their needs and facilitating a community of support from which to build upon going forward.

References

Andrewartha, L., & Harvey, A. (2019). Supporting military veterans in Australian higher education. Journal of Veterans Studies, 4(1), 94–109. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i1.82

Ashcroft, L. M. (2014). *The veterans' transition review. Available at: https://www.veteranstransition.co.uk/vtrreport.pdf*. Accessed 13th August 2021

Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. Qualitative Research. 1(3), pp. 385-405

Aveyard, H., Payne, S., & Preston, N. (2016). A Postgraduate's Guide To Doing A Literature Review In Health And Social Care Maidenhead. Open University Press.

Babcock, A. (2016). A Narrative Approach to Uncovering the Veteran Student's Voice: From Soldier to Student. Sage Research Methods Cases in Education. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473950207 accessed 08.05.21

Belanger, B., Steele, A., & Philhower, K. (2021). Tailoring Higher Education Options for Smaller Institutions to Meet Veterans' Needs: Enhancing Inclusion in Higher Education: Practical Solutions by Veterans for Veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *7*(1), 138–147. DOI: http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.229

Blackwell-Starnes, K. (2018). At Ease: Developing Veterans' Sense of Belonging in the College Classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *3*(1), 18–36. DOI: http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v3i1.2

Booth, A.,Sutton, A., & Papaioannou, D. (2016) Systematic Approaches to a Successful Literature Review. 2nd Edition. London. Sage.

Cable, G., Cathcart, D. G., & Almond, M. K. (2021). The Case for Veteran- Friendly Higher Education in Canada and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *7*(1), 46–54. DOI: http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.225

Deloitte (2018). Veterans' Work Moving On 2018 Available at: https://www.veteranswork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Veterans-Work-Moving-On-Report.pdf Accessed 13th August 2021

Downey, S., Helmer, D., & Kamdar, N. (2021). Shannon's ETS (Expiration of Term of Service) Experience: How Engaging with Veterans Informs Researchers and Shapes Practice. Journal of Veterans Studies, 7(1), pp. 241–244. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.237

Finlay, L., & Ballinger, C. (2006). Qualitative research for health professionals: challenging choices. Chichester, John Wiley Publishers.

Hanna, P. (2012). Using internet technologies (such as Skype) as a research medium: a research note. Qualitative Research. 2012;12(2):239-242. doi:10.1177/1468794111426607

Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Sharp, M., & Wyatt-Smith, M. (2018). Supporting younger military veterans to succeed in Australian higher education. Report for the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs. Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University. Available at: https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/933492/La-Trobe-Veterans-in-Higher-Education-Report.pdf Accessed 21st July 2021

Jenner, B. M. (2019). Veteran success in higher education: Augmenting traditional definitions. Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, 14(1).

Kellett, M, and Clifton, G. (2017) Measuring gains and employability for part-

time students. WONKHE. Analysis Available at:

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-measuring-gains-and-employability-for-part-time-students/ Accessed 11th February 2021

King, N. (2012). 'Doing template analysis', in G. Symon and C. Cassell (ed.) Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and Current Challenges. London: Sage.

King, N., & Brooks, J. (2017). Template Analysis for Business and Management Students. Mastering Business Research Methods. Sage, London

Latter, J., Powell T., & Ward N. (2018). Public perceptions of veterans and the armed forces. YouGov https://s31949.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/public-perceptions-of-veterans-armed-forces.pdf

McReynolds, J. (2014). Lessening the culture shock: Military life vs Student life. Available at: https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Lessening-the-Culture-Shock-Military-Life-vs-Student-Life.aspx Accessed 13th August 2021

Ministry of Defence. (2011). The Armed Forces covenant. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49469/the_armed_forces_covenant.pdf Accessed 13th August 2021

Ministry of Defence. (2019). UK Armed Forces quarterly service personnel statistics. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/847640/1_October_2019_SPS.pdf

Accessed 13th August 2021

Open University (2021). Advanced evaluation using PROMPT. Available at: https://www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/documents/advanced-evaluation-using-prompt.pdf Accessed 11th February 2021.

Page, M.J., McKenzie J.E., Bossuyt, P.M, Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C.D., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning (QILT). (2017). 2016 Student Experience Survey national report. Available at: https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses) Accessed: 13th June 2021

Rattray, N. A., True, G., Natividad, D. M., Salyers, M. P., Frankel, R. M., & Kukla, M. (2019). The long and winding road to postsecondary education for US veterans with invisible injuries. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 42(3), 284–295. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000375

Robson, C., & McCartan, K. (2016) Real World Research, 4th Edition. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Rubin, H.J., & Rubin, I.S. (2012). Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data. 3rd Edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Simons, J., Leverett S., &Beaumont K. (2020) Success of distance learning graduates and the role of intrinsic motivation, Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 35:3, 277-293, DOI: 10.1080/02680513.2019.1696183

Snowden, M. (2015). 'Use of Diaries in Research' Nursing Standard, 29 (44), pp. 36-41. ISSN 0029-6570

Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. Journal of Participatory Research Methods, 1(1). https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244