

Empowering student military veterans through higher education

It was during his tour of Afghanistan during 2015-2016 that Australian Army veteran Michael Addis decided he wanted to be a nurse.

Though the bases he was stationed at in Kandahar and Kabul were subject to shelling and rocket fire, Michael didn't fight on the front line against the Taliban forces. However, the 20 year-old saw the horror of war first hand in the hospitals and clinics where he worked as part of a security detail tasked with protecting coalition trainers.

It was while observing the trainers that he became inspired to pursue nursing as a profession on his return to Australia. After considering his options, Michael decided to enroll in a Bachelor of Nursing at Australian Catholic University (ACU) Brisbane Campus.

"In war, it's the civilian population that really suffers. But watching how much the coalition trainers made a difference in the lives of the local population gave me the desire to want to help people," said Michael.

"After I was discharged from the army, I started to look around at different universities in Brisbane. I finally chose ACU over other institutions because of its welcoming and inclusive culture."

ACU is part of a network of Australian universities that work to support students who are also Australian Defence Forces (ADF) veterans.

The University has partnered with the Australian Student Veterans' Association (ASVA) and several other Australian universities on a major national project to increase access to and support of younger military student veterans in higher education.

The project builds 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.

As part of its initiatives to support student veterans, ACU and the ASVA sponsored Michael to attend the 2019 US Student Veteran Association's National Conference (NatCon) in Orlando, Florida. NatCon is the largest annual gathering of student veterans, advocates, thought-leaders, stakeholders, and supporters in higher education in the world.

Michael 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.

"They described how they felt under prepared and isolated once commencing higher education. This is an issue I also experienced and seek to overcome for future Student Veterans at ACU," said Michael.

Michael is now President of ACU's Student Veterans chapter and ACU's first Veteran Administration Officer, located within ACU Engagement Brisbane. In an initiative supported by Pro Vice-Chancellor Engagement, Vice-President, Chief Operating Officer, and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education and Innovation, Michael is working with Kimberley Fort in the ACU Engagement team to develop and implement a comprehensive program to support student veterans at ACU.

"I hope the program can offer a range of benefits alleviating transitional issues for veterans within higher education," said Michael.

"The goal is for more veterans to enjoy success at university."

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