



ROYAL COMMISSION INTO DEFENCE AND VETERAN SUICIDE

October 2023

University of the Sunshine Coast submission

Contents

1. Introduction	1
About UniSC	1
UniSC mental health research, clinical services and education.....	1
2. Government investment in mental health	2
2.1 Government investment in preventative mental health research.....	2
2.2 The need for improved mental health screening tools	2

1. Introduction

The University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) welcomes the opportunities to provide a brief submission to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Government funding of mental health services and treatment, including research, has been increasing in recent years and must continue to be a priority. However, the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges in the general community, as well as among Defence personnel and veterans, compels governments to invest in getting ahead of this growing impact on our community and health system.

UniSC's submission therefore argues that government expenditure on mental health research, including the research budgets of the Department of Defence and Department of Veteran's Affairs, should have an increased focus on projects pursuing evidence based mental health prediction tools.

UniSC would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect of our submission. If this is of interest, please contact Jason Mills, Head of Government Relations, on jmills3@usc.edu.au.

About UniSC

UniSC was founded by its community in 1996 after Sunshine Coast residents campaigned for locally provided tertiary education opportunities. Consistent with our mission to improve access to higher education in underserved locations, we have strategically expanded our footprint, encompassing campuses and facilities from Moreton Bay to the Fraser Coast. We also collaborate closely with all levels of government, regional leaders, industry, and other partners to ensure our programs, research and support services align to create greater opportunities for all.

UniSC mental health research, clinical services and education

UniSC has well-established programs in health education and research. Relevant to this submission, our Thompson Institute¹ is a world-class hub for research, teaching and clinical services for Australia's most pressing mental health issues, including suicide, depression, PTSD and dementia. Its work is framed around: clinical services provision; advocacy for patients and carers; conducting ground-breaking translational research; and education and teaching. A critical attribute of the Institute is the unique integration and co-location of specialised clinical services within a cutting-edge research environment that allows for the rapid translation of research into clinical practice, ultimately improving outcomes for the community.

The Thompson Institute's research is focused on identifying neurobiological predictors and ways to prevent mental illness in order to manage conditions before they become severe, complex and therefore more difficult to treat. Importantly, our research is underpinned by advanced neuroimaging which uncovers valuable new insights into how our mental health is linked to the structure and function of the brain, including markers for *emerging* mental health conditions. Our clinical trials investigate novel treatments, for example on the efficacy of oral ketamine in reducing chronic suicidal ideation².

UniSC's new National PTSD Centre, opening in early 2024³, seeks to address this significant health issue by pursuing innovative discovery research that is focused on mechanisms that underpin this disorder, and integrating PTSD research outcomes into everyday healthcare. With the Sunshine Coast home to approximately 12,500 veterans⁴, one of the largest veteran populations outside of our capital cities, the PTSD Centre will continue to welcome the support of veterans in our research, clinical services and community engagement programs.

¹ <https://www.usc.edu.au/thompson-institute>

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41398-021-01230-z>

³ <https://www.usc.edu.au/thompson-institute/research-at-the-thompson-institute/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/national-ptsd-research-centre>

⁴ <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/316>

2. Government investment in mental health

With the increasing prevalence of mental health conditions being reported in Australia in the last decade, government expenditure on mental health-related services has in turn been increasing, from \$9.3 billion in 2016-17 to \$11.6 billion in 2020-21 (annual average increase of almost 6 per cent, in real terms). Over the same period, Australian Government spending increased by an average annual rate of 4 per cent and state and territory governments by an average annual rate of 3 per cent (in real terms)⁵.

Within this overall expenditure, Australian Government funding for Department of Defence mental health programs has matched this overall average annual rate of 4 per cent (in real terms) between 2016–17 (\$52.7 million) and 2020–21 (\$60.7 million). This spending covers a range of mental health programs and services delivered to Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel. When the number of permanent ADF personnel is taken into consideration (59,569 people; Department of Defence 2021) this equates to about \$1,018 per permanent ADF member in 2020–21⁶.

2.1 Government investment in preventative mental health research

Pleasingly, Australian Government expenditure on mental health research has increased by almost 60 per cent since 2016-17, from \$76 million to \$132 million in 2020-21. However, this was off a low base, with the \$76 million in 2016-17 being the lowest of the previous five-year period.

As a university with a strong interest and reputation in supporting improved mental health outcomes for all Australians, particularly via our Thompson Institute, we welcome this increasing investment in mental health research. However, we believe that there continues to be an under investment in *preventative* mental health research.

Despite the best efforts of clinicians and researchers, we still do not fully know why some people develop mental health disorders and others do not. Given the increasing prevalence and associated burden on society, investing in research to help reliably predict who may develop a mental health disorder must become a higher priority for governments.

2.2 The need for improved mental health screening tools

Amongst a myriad of health system uses, improved evidence based mental health prediction methods and tools have the potential to strengthen screening programs beyond psychological testing and other more subjective methods. Organisations such as the Department of Defence, as well as agencies like police and emergency services, would be significant beneficiaries of evidence-based screening tools. For such agencies we note that such prediction tools could also be used during service life, pre and/or post deployment, during transition and post service.

For example, UniSC research undertaken at our Thompson Institute has found the uniqueness of adolescents' brain "fingerprints" predicted subsequent psychological distress (four months later)⁷. In a recent paper published in the journal *Futures*⁸, we describe how brain "fingerprinting" shows great promise as a predictor of mental health outcomes and propose that it could be the future of personalised mental health care.

We envisage that pre-emptive / preventative mental healthcare will be a critical component of efforts to address mental health issues. With our recent advances, there is now an opportunity to expand this research into the efficacy and feasibility of broad screening programs, such as offering free brain scans to all young people (aged ~12 years) and to candidates for Defence roles or other occupations with a high risk of exposure to trauma, in order to predict mental health risks and provide targeted, more effective prevention and treatment.

⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/expenditure>

⁶ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/expenditure>

⁷ <https://www.usc.edu.au/thompson-institute/research-at-the-thompson-institute/youth-mental-health/longitudinal-adolescent-brain-study/research-outcomes>

⁸ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016328723001155>