

1 February 2023

### **Re: Submission to Senate Inquiry**

On behalf of the Invictus Pathways Program (IPP) at the University of South Australia (UniSA), we wish to submit the following information to the Senate Inquiry into the role of adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans in addressing issues identified by the ongoing Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

#### **Invictus Pathways Program**

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The IPP was founded at UniSA in 2017 and focusses on the use of sport, exercise and participation in community adaptive sports to assist serving and veteran defence force personnel and first responders to improve their physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing. The IPP provides participants, and in some cases their families, with access to a range of activities in the community as well as to allied health services provided by UniSA. The services provided by UniSA include baseline health and fitness testing and profiling, access to state-of-the-art exercise training facilities, access to student-led UniSA Allied Health clinical exercise physiology, physiotherapy, podiatry and occupational therapy services, and access to the expertise of UniSA's leading health professionals.

The IPP structure consists of two pillars: the student-led Exercise & Performance Program (EPP), and the Community Adaptive Sports Program (CASP). The EPP program consists of a two-year participation in exercise training sessions that are led by UniSA Exercise Science (Sports Science/Human Movement) or Clinical Exercise Physiology students for a minimum of two sessions per week using UniSA Sport facilities. The CASP offers participants access to a suite of community adapted sport opportunities in partnership with established community sporting organisations which have formed a relationship with UniSA through the IPP. Activities can range from short courses (e.g. sailing or indoor rowing) to ongoing opportunities such as access to local gymnasium facilities, or participation in wheelchair AFL etc. The purpose of CASP is to provide opportunities for participants to develop social networks through participation that will help them to reintegrate into the community. Participants are referred from either EPP

or CASP pathways to the Clinical Exercise Physiology, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy or Podiatry clinics for assessment and/or treatment as required.

There has been growing demand for the services provided by IPP since its inception in 2017. When IPP began in 2017 there were seven participants, all of whom were current or former Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel. However, from 2018 first responders (i.e. police, ambulance etc) joined the program and, in 2022 we had 60 participants at any given time (age range: 22 to 75-years-old), with half being current or former ADF personnel and half being first responders. We currently do not have capacity to meet demand as IPP currently receives more than 150 expressions of interest per annum to participate from current and former ADF personnel and first responders, predominantly all from the Adelaide metropolitan area.

As part of the process of running IPP we collect data on participant outcomes for research purposes and subsequent publication in scientific journals. This research has provided data that are relevant to a number of the issues identified within the Terms of Reference for the Senate Inquiry, and we are hereby submitting this information to the Inquiry, below.

**(a) current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence;**

Participants and family members of participants in IPP have reported that participants obtained physical, mental and social benefits from participation, be it engaging in the student-led exercise training sessions (i.e. EPP pillar) and/or Community Adaptive Sport Program activities.

Families of participants reported that participation in IPP resulted in their family members feeling that they belonged back in a group and helped them make friends, which in some cases they did not have before. They reported that participants felt good about themselves as their fitness improved and they lost weight, all of which are recognised benefits of exercise and sport participation, and these changes boosted their self esteem.

Other families reported that participation in IPP provided their family member with a renewed sense of purpose in life and a renewed reason for living. While their fitness was improving, it was more the mental benefits that were evident following issues with poor mental health.

Participants themselves reported similar benefits to those observed by their families, with improved fitness, a sense of feeling stronger and fitter, and that leading to a renewed sense of meaning in their lives and resumption of setting life goals and wanting to help themselves to achieve better life outcomes.

**(b) the role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the Australian Defence Force into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide;**

Participants in IPP have indicated that in some ways the IPP replicates the ADF environment in terms of providing a sense of comradery, being part of a team, belonging to something and offering a sense of family, all of which support the transition from life in the ADF.

A number of IPP participants indicated that participants who had successfully transitioned from the ADF could provide support and mentorship to other participants who are just beginning, or still going through, the transition from ADF to civilian life. Others mentioned that programs like IPP should be put in place prior to people transitioning from the ADF, as a support mechanism. Observations from one participant, that are very pertinent to this point, are provided below:

“With Invictus though and even going through a transition if I didn't have this program I guess and things to look forward to, things that force me to get out of the house, my transition would be a completely different story. I have to get out of my house three days a week for the gym and at least one other day to go to bicycle. I'm so grateful for that because if I didn't have it I know that I would have gone downhill very fast. My mental health, whilst I don't know if I'll ever be at a place where I'll be able to go back and seek full-time employment, it's definitely got me out of a place where I can live. It's a place where I can survive... “

Over the six years that IPP has been running, a number of participants have indicated to staff that the feelings of belonging, friendship and meaning that participation in the program has provided to them has helped them deal with a range of mental health issues that they were experiencing. Similarly, participants regularly commented that they feel a lot of personal value and interpersonal connection with their students, both to support their personal and academic development whilst undertaking practicum placement in IPP, but as one IPP participant described it, “supporting the next generation” of professionals. Indeed, in a number of cases participants have identified that they were feeling so isolated and lost prior to joining IPP that they would likely have committed suicide if it were not for having joined the program and obtained the benefits that participation provided.

**(d) whether there are any gaps in services and demand for adaptive sport by the veteran community, and, if so, how these gaps can be addressed;**

Our research to date has not identified specific gaps in services, however, given the rapidly increasing demand to participate in IPP, and the benefits that participants and their families are reporting, there is clearly a need for adaptive sport programs like IPP.

Providing access to these types of programs as soon as ADF personnel start to transition out of the ADF would seem to facilitate the transition by continuing to provide many of the benefits that personnel gained from their ADF service (i.e. sense of comradeship, being part of a team, belonging to something and offering a sense of family), which would lessen the impact of transition on their wellbeing.

To achieve this type of transitional pathway effectively, the associated processes must be structured and provide clearly defined and timely information to potential participants. To support a streamlined approach, these types of pathways would best be managed by a central authority, which links to Point (f) below.

**(e) the equitability of current funding for adaptive sport, and how the accessibility of adaptive sport can be improved for veterans who are not a part of Invictus programs;**

Invictus Australia is a charity and raises funds to support adaptive sport and other activities for veterans.

The IPP is not part of Invictus Australia; it is funded and run by UniSA as a learning opportunity for students by providing them with an opportunity to engage with a diverse client group with significant physical and mental health issues. Some financial support for IPP is provided by Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESH) which is part of The Hospital Research Foundation Charity Group.

As participation in IPP has grown, the cost to UniSA of running the program has also grown and, despite an increasing number of requests to join the program as its reputation has grown, the University will not be able to financially support any further expansion without additional external funding. UniSA has had discussions with other universities around the country (e.g. University of Canberra, James Cook University) who are located in regions with military bases and access to a large population of current and former ADF personnel who might benefit from a similar program, but these universities have found it difficult to commit to such programs due to the costs involved, despite having the staffing and facilities available to deliver IPP-style programs.

A mechanism for providing financial support to universities to deliver programs similar to IPP would provide wide-ranging benefits to ADF personnel, veterans and their families by increasing access to programs that are run by highly qualified staff. Such programs will provide training opportunities for

students who will become the practitioners of the future & who will work with ADF personnel and veterans and their families to improve their physical, mental and social wellbeing.

**(f) the potential for a centralised authority to play a role in coordination or resourcing to provide access and where appropriate, enable consistency, in the use of adaptive sport to support rehabilitation, transition or reintegration for serving members and veterans around the nation and across support services and organisations;**

Having a centralised authority tasked with formalising ADF personnel to move into established adaptive sport programs as they continue to serve, or as they transition out of ADF, would be a sensible approach to ensure consistency and continuity of support.

We thank the Senate Inquiry for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Yours sincerely

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Executive Committee: Invictus Pathways Program, UniSA  
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