

KYIV SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
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**Veterans' Certificate Programs as a Public Policy Tool for
Supporting Veterans' Adaptation to Higher Education**

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I express my deepest gratitude to all warriors who continue to defend Ukraine today, and especially to my friends who chose to defend our country and me. Because of them, I had the opportunity to continue learning, complete this thesis, and think about education not as something abstract, but as something that can help me support others, contribute to Ukraine during the war, and respond with gratitude through my own work and knowledge.

I am sincerely grateful to all veteran respondents who participated in this research. I want to thank them, firstly, for their service and, secondly, for the trust, openness, and time they shared through their stories and reflections in this study.

I also want to thank everyone who works to support veterans' well-being and participation in civilian life — educational coordinators, universities, civic organizations, and all those creating spaces where veterans can continue learning, changing their professional trajectories, and feeling respected and visible with their experience

Finally, I am sincerely grateful to my academic supervisor for believing in this topic from the very beginning, for her guidance and trust.

ABSTRACT

What makes higher education feel accessible, relevant, and trustworthy for people returning to learning after military service? This study examines how veteran-oriented certificate programs function within Ukrainian higher education during the ongoing war and anticipated post-war recovery.

The research is based on a qualitative design using in-depth interviews with veterans who participated in certificate programs and university administrators responsible for developing and coordinating such initiatives. It examines how different models of veteran-oriented certificate programs are conceptualized and implemented within universities, how veterans experience these educational environments, and which organizational, interpersonal, and institutional elements participants perceive as meaningful or supportive during participation in the programs.

The findings demonstrate that veterans value educational environments characterized by respectful communication, clear organization, flexibility, professors' competence, and recognition of participants' diverse professional, educational, and military experiences. The research highlights that certificate programs may create a distinct educational space within universities that allows veterans to engage with academic environments in a more accessible and flexible format. Participants often described these programs not only as opportunities for learning, but also as spaces where higher education felt more approachable, relevant, and compatible with their current life circumstances.

The study also demonstrates that universities conceptualize veteran-oriented certificate programs in different ways: as educational pathways, spaces for professional development, forms of community-building, or broader institutional responses to the growing presence of veterans within higher education. In this sense, certificate programs reflect wider attempts by universities to rethink how educational institutions engage with adult learners who have diverse educational trajectories and military experience.

The thesis argues that veteran-oriented certificate programs may function as flexible educational formats that support veterans' continued engagement with learning while contributing to broader discussions on lifelong learning, educational accessibility, and the changing social role of higher education institutions in Ukraine.

Keywords: *veterans, veteran education, higher education, veteran certificate programs, educational environments, lifelong learning, military experience, educational policy, Ukraine.*

INTRODUCTION

“They came not as officials but as people who talk to us as equals — that's when you start to believe in the country again” (R09)

Reflection that mentioned on the top of this chapter is from one of the veteran participants captures an important dimension of veterans' experiences within educational environments: the need not only for formal support, but also for recognition, trust, and equal treatment. For many veterans, returning to civilian life involves reconsidering professional identity, future plans, and their relationship with public institutions. In this context, educational environments may become important spaces not only for learning, but also for rebuilding trust, agency, and a sense of belonging.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has profoundly disrupted educational and professional trajectories across Ukrainian society. For many people, higher education represents an important stage of professional development and social mobility. However, the war interrupted or postponed these trajectories for thousands of individuals. Some delayed entering university, others suspended their studies after joining military service, while many veterans now reconsider whether and how to return to education after service.

The transition from military service to higher education is complex and extends beyond academic adaptation alone. Veterans return to educational spaces as adult learners with prior civilian, professional, and military experience, different age groups, and changing life priorities. For many, higher education is no longer perceived as a linear continuation of youth education, but rather as a possible tool for professional reorientation, acquiring new competencies, or gradually reconnecting with civilian life.

In response to these changes, Ukrainian higher education institutions have increasingly introduced veteran-oriented certificate programs. These programs differ in their institutional goals and formats: some function as transitional educational spaces connected to further academic pathways, while others focus on professional retraining, community-building, or broader social support for veterans. Despite the growing number of such initiatives, there is still limited empirical understanding of how these programs function in practice and how they influence veterans' educational trajectories and experiences within higher education institutions.

Broader Context and Relevance

As of 2025, the officially registered number of veterans in Ukraine is 851,068, according to the Ministry of Veterans Affairs¹. However, this figure is widely considered an underestimate. Many individuals remain classified as active military personnel and will formally obtain veteran status only after completing their service, while others have not yet received official status despite being unable to continue service due to injuries or other circumstances. As a result, the actual number of veterans and military-affiliated individuals in Ukraine is likely substantially higher.

Governmental projections suggest that after the end of the war the broader veteran community, including family members, may reach 5–6 million people. In public discussions and policy planning, this increasingly shapes the understanding that veterans will become one of the largest and most visible social groups in Ukraine over the coming decade.

Veterans' participation in higher education has already increased significantly. According to the Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, 19,259

¹ Analytical Information Based on Data from the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine. (n.d.). Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine. <https://data.mva.gov.ua/>

veterans entered Ukrainian higher education institutions in 2025, compared to approximately 3,500 enrolled veterans in 2020²³. This constitutes approximately 2.26% of the officially registered veteran population and approximately 1.28% relative to broader estimates of veterans and military personnel. If similar participation rates remain in the future, the number of veterans entering higher education could potentially increase to approximately 64,000–77,000 people in the context of a larger veteran population.

Many veterans will likely seek changes in their professional trajectories after military service. According to a 2023 survey conducted by the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation, approximately 52% of surveyed veterans and military personnel reported doubts regarding their current qualifications and expected to require additional education or retraining⁴. Demand for educational opportunities and career reorientation is therefore expected to increase significantly during the first decade following large-scale demobilization.

At the same time, participation in long-term degree programs remains relatively limited. Although veterans in Ukraine are entitled to various educational support mechanisms and financing opportunities, many face barriers related to long interruptions in learning, physical or psychological challenges, uncertainty regarding long-term planning, and difficulties committing to multi-year academic programs. The *Concept of State Policy*

²³Interfax-Ukraine. (2025). *Minosvity: 44,4 tys. veteraniv, ditei uchasnykiv boiovykh dii i ditei zahyblykh zakhysnykiv zarakhovanu do vyshiv u 2025 r.* [Ministry of Education: 44.4 thousand veterans, children of combatants, and children of fallen defenders enrolled in higher education institutions in 2025]. <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/1114952.html>

³ Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine. (2021). *U 2020 rotsi 3,5 tysiachi veteraniv vstupyly do navchalnykh zakladiv* [In 2020, 3.5 thousand veterans enrolled in educational institutions]. <https://mva.gov.ua/news/u-2020-roci-35-tisyachi-veteraniv-vstupili-do-navchalnih-zakladiv>

⁴*Needs and Obstacles of Veterans in Employment*. (2023). Ukrainian Veterans Foundation. https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Veteran_employment.pdf

Regarding Veterans (2025)⁵ similarly notes that veterans may often prefer shorter-term, practice-oriented, and more flexible educational formats over traditional bachelor's or master's degree programs.

Survey data further demonstrate strong interest in alternative educational formats. According to the study *Transition from Military Service to Civilian Life* conducted by the human rights center “Pryncyp,” approximately 39% of surveyed active military personnel expressed interest in courses aimed at restoring professional skills or mastering a new profession in the event of demobilization. Respondents demonstrated equal interest in both online and offline formats⁶. At the same time, almost 67% of veterans reported being unaware of existing state educational and retraining programs, suggesting that lack of access to information remains an additional barrier to participation⁷.

Military-affiliated students or students with combat experience may constitute a substantial part of higher education systems in countries with prolonged military mobilization or large veteran populations. For instance, in Israel, recent data for the 2024–2025 academic year demonstrated that approximately 70,000 reservists studied in higher education institutions, representing around 21% of the total student population. This is particularly significant given Israel's population of approximately 10 million people and an estimated 170,000 active military personnel. Similar trends can be observed

⁵ Veterans Policy. (n.d.). *Kontseptsiia polityky shchodo veteraniv, veteranok ta yikhnykh simei* [Concept of policy regarding veterans, veteran women, and their families]. <https://veteranspolicy.org.ua>

⁶ Pryncyp. (2025). *Perekhid vid viiskovoi sluzhby do tsyvilnoho zhyttia: konteksty, dosvidy, rishennia* [Transition from military service to civilian life: contexts, experiences, and solutions]. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/11-yq3kHirK9oaKHgaET1AOLiRJJJs84ht/view>

⁷ Ukrainian Veterans Foundation. (2024). *Onlain opytuvannia sered veteraniv ta diiuchykh viiskovosluzhbovtiv. Aktualni potreby ta bachennia mozhlyvostei dlia kariernoho i profesiinoho zrostannia veteraniv* [Online survey among veterans and active military personnel: Current needs and perceptions of opportunities for veterans' career and professional development]. <https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/pracevlashtuvanna.pdf>

in the United States, where approximately 200,000 service members transition to civilian life annually, with around 40% seeking higher education opportunities as part of this transition process. With a veteran population estimated at 17.3 million people in 2025, veteran education has become an important and institutionalized dimension of higher education policy.

Compared to Ukraine, where veterans entering higher education in 2025 represented approximately 2.3% of the officially registered veteran population, military learners constitute a much more visible part of higher education systems in countries with longer-established veteran education infrastructures. In Israel, reservists made up around 21% of the total student population during the 2024–2025 academic year, while in the United States approximately 40% of service members transitioning to civilian life seek higher education opportunities each year.

Although these examples reflect different military and educational contexts, they demonstrate that countries with large military and veteran populations increasingly view education not only as a form of social support, but also as a way to create long-term opportunities for professional development, civilian participation, and continued engagement after military service. In the Ukrainian context, projected growth in the veteran population and increasing demand for flexible educational formats make questions of veterans' access to and experiences within higher education increasingly relevant.

Research Focus and Problem

This study examines how veterans and university administrators understand and experience educational programs designed for veteran participants. The research addresses a gap between policy intentions and lived experience by exploring how program design, learning environments, and institutional approaches influence veterans' educational adaptation.

Rather than evaluating program effectiveness through quantitative outcomes, the study focuses on the meaning-making processes that occur when veterans engage with educational environments after military service. It treats veterans as active participants who interpret and navigate educational opportunities based on their experience, goals, and expectations.

The study investigates how different approaches to program design create different learning environments, and how these environments support or constrain veterans' adaptation to higher education. It examines both veteran perspectives on their educational experiences and administrative perspectives on institutional responses to veteran participation.

Research Question

How do different models of veteran-oriented certificate programs shape veterans' experiences within higher education environments during participation in these programs?

This research examines the relationship between the organizational and institutional features of veteran-oriented certificate programs (independent variable) and veterans' experiences within higher education environments during participation in these programs (dependent variable), including perceptions of accessibility, relevance, trust, comfort, and willingness to continue educational trajectories in higher education.

Analytical Approach

The study employs qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, institutional approaches, and experiential factors within veteran-oriented certificate programs. The analysis focuses on how different program models are structured, how educational environments are experienced by

participants, and how veterans and administrators describe the broader relevance of these programs within higher education institutions.

The research is organized around three interconnected analytical dimensions.

Program vision and structure

This dimension examines how institutions conceptualize the role of veteran-oriented certificate programs and how they understand veterans as participants within higher education environments. Particular attention is paid to how universities identify the educational needs, expectations, and experiences of veterans with different educational, professional, and military backgrounds, and how these understandings are reflected in program accessibility, participant selection, communication, duration, organizational structure, and overall program design.

The analysis assumes that different institutional approaches to designing veteran-oriented programs may shape how veterans experience participation within higher education environments and whether these programs are perceived as relevant, respectful, and responsive to participants' educational trajectories and lived experiences.

Learning environment and interpersonal dynamics

This dimension explores how veterans describe their experiences within educational settings, including perceptions of trust, communication, pedagogical approaches, instructor competence, peer interaction, and group composition, including both veteran-only and mixed learning environments.

The analysis assumes that the educational environment itself, including interpersonal dynamics and institutional communication, plays an important

role in shaping veterans' experiences within certificate programs. Particular attention is paid to which elements of educational environments participants perceive as supportive, comfortable, trustworthy, and meaningful, and whether these experiences influence broader perceptions of higher education institutions and future engagement with academic environments.

Educational trajectories and perceived relevance of learning

This dimension examines how veterans and administrators describe the broader role of certificate programs in relation to future education, professional development, and continued engagement with academic environments.

The analysis assumes that veterans may approach certificate programs from very different educational and life trajectories. Participants may differ in age, prior educational background, professional experience, and relationships between military service and previous or future higher education. Some participants may not have prior higher education experience, while others may already hold bachelor's or master's degrees and seek further professional or academic development. The study therefore pays particular attention to how veterans with different educational and military experiences perceive the relevance, accessibility, and value of certificate programs within their broader learning trajectories.

Rather than approaching veterans as a homogeneous group, the study examines variation in how participants describe meaningful educational experiences, supportive environments, and the role of certificate programs within their broader educational and professional trajectories.

Data and Methods

The study is based on 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with veterans who participated in veteran-oriented certificate programs and representatives of university administrations responsible for the development, coordination, or implementation of such programs.

Interviews explored participants' educational experiences within certificate programs, perceptions of educational environments, and reflections on the organizational, interpersonal, and institutional elements that shaped their experiences during participation. Interviews with university administrators additionally examined how institutions conceptualize the purpose of veteran-oriented programs, how they identify the needs of veteran participants, and which elements they consider important for creating meaningful and supportive educational environments.

Data analysis employed qualitative thematic coding in MAXQDA. The analysis aimed to identify recurring themes, institutional approaches, and experiential factors that participants associated with positive educational experiences within certificate programs. Particular attention was paid to how veterans described supportive, comfortable, and trustworthy learning environments, as well as how administrators conceptualized effective program models and the broader role of certificate programs within higher education institutions.

Main Argument

The study argues that veteran-oriented certificate programs become meaningful educational spaces not simply because they are designed specifically for veterans, but because of how they are structured, communicated, and experienced by participants. Veterans' experiences within higher education environments are shaped by a combination of institutional approaches, interpersonal dynamics, and organizational conditions that

influence whether educational spaces are perceived as respectful, accessible, relevant, and trustworthy.

The research demonstrates that veterans value educational environments that recognize them as adult learners with diverse professional, educational, and military experiences rather than as a homogeneous group requiring standardized forms of support. Elements such as clear communication, transparent organization, instructor competence, flexible learning conditions, and respectful interaction play an important role in shaping positive educational experiences within certificate programs.

At the same time, the study shows that veteran-oriented certificate programs may serve broader functions within higher education institutions beyond short-term learning itself. For some participants, these programs become spaces for reconnecting with academic environments, exploring future educational opportunities, or reconsidering professional trajectories after military service. In this sense, certificate programs may function as flexible educational formats that help universities respond to the growing presence of adult learners with military experience within higher education systems.

Contribution and Significance

Empirically, the study contributes to the limited body of research on veterans' experiences within higher education in the Ukrainian context, particularly during an ongoing war and large-scale military mobilization. By centering veterans' perspectives alongside institutional perspectives, the research highlights how educational environments are experienced, interpreted, and evaluated by participants themselves.

Analytically, the study shifts attention from viewing veteran-oriented educational initiatives primarily as support mechanisms toward

understanding them as educational environments shaped by institutional models, organizational decisions, and interpersonal dynamics. The research demonstrates that veterans' experiences within certificate programs cannot be understood separately from broader questions of how universities conceptualize adult learners with different educational, professional, and military backgrounds.

From a policy and institutional perspective, the findings offer insights into how higher education institutions may develop more flexible and responsive educational environments for veterans and other adult learners. The study also contributes to broader discussions on adult education, lifelong learning, and the changing social role of higher education institutions in societies experiencing war and post-war transformation.

Structure of the Study

Chapter I reviews literature on transition theory and adult learning. Chapter II presents the analytical framework. Chapter III explains the qualitative methodology. Chapters IV and V present findings and discussion results. Chapter VI synthesizes conclusions, and Chapter VII provides policy recommendations.

CHAPTER I. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Understanding Transition as a Process

Transition can be defined as a process of change involving shifts in roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions that require individuals to adapt to new circumstances (Evans et al., 2010). The analytical focus is placed not only on the event itself but on how individuals interpret and respond to it. This perspective draws attention away from structural change and toward the adaptive and decision-making processes that determine how people experience transition.

Bridges (1991) describes transition as three overlapping stages: endings, a neutral zone, and new beginnings. Later interpretations (Miller, 2017; Musamali, 2018) emphasize that these stages rarely unfold in a linear sequence, particularly for adult learners experiencing both personal and social transformation. Transition, therefore, represents a psychological reorientation that precedes behavioral adjustment.

For military veterans, this movement means leaving a highly structured environment organized by hierarchy and collective discipline and entering a civilian world that demands self-direction and independent judgment. Jones (2013) found that veterans often struggle to reconstruct a sense of purpose once the externally defined mission of the military disappears. They must learn to replace command-driven motivation with internal direction and self-defined goals.

1.2. Theoretical Frameworks of Transition

Three theoretical frameworks dominate the research on veteran transition: Bridges' Transition Model, Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory, and Astin's Theory of Involvement.

Schlossberg (1981) focused on four interacting factors that shape adaptation: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) applied this 4S model to the experiences of student veterans and demonstrated its relevance for institutional practice. Through interviews with more than one hundred participants across seven campuses, they showed that access to specialized veteran offices and trained staff significantly reduces uncertainty during adjustment to higher education. Their findings highlight that informed personnel, transparent policies, and institutional empathy are as important as individual coping abilities.

Astin's (1970b, 2005) theory provides a complementary perspective by linking successful outcomes with the degree of student involvement. Ensminger (2022) integrated Bridges, Astin, and Schlossberg into a combined framework to capture the complexity of the military-to-college transition. His phenomenological study found that participation in peer and veteran organizations fosters a sense of community and belonging, confirming the central importance of social support in Schlossberg's system.

Together, these frameworks explain that effective veteran transition depends not only on personal resilience but also on coordinated institutional environments that encourage participation and engagement.

1.3. Psychosocial and Identity Dimensions of Transition

The psychological aspect of veteran transition centers on the reconstruction of identity. Using a phenomenological approach, Jones (2013) explained how former service members integrate their military, veteran, and civilian selves

while searching for meaning in a less structured setting. Veterans reassess prior values such as hierarchy and discipline, turning them into self-regulated forms of motivation that enhance academic persistence.

This process aligns closely with Baxter Magolda's (2007) theory of self-authorship. Professor defines adult development as the capacity to create one's own beliefs, identity, and relationships rather than relying entirely on external authorities. Her Learning Partnerships Model emphasizes validation, mutual construction of knowledge, and constructive challenge as mechanisms that help learners develop internal authority. For veterans, self-authorship symbolizes the shift from externally imposed military discipline toward internalized academic and ethical autonomy. The concept also parallels the broader models of Musamali (2018) and Miller (2017), which describe meaning-making as the mechanism that connects change to stability.

Together, Jones (2013) and Baxter Magolda (2007) reveal that reintegration is not only behavioral but deeply personal. A successful transition occurs when veterans regain confidence in their ability to define goals and make choices within a new social context.

1.4. Institutional and Policy Frameworks for Veteran Support

At the institutional level, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) demonstrated that effective programs for veterans require coordinated communication across campus units. Clear procedures for financial aid, credit transfer, and advising reduce the ambiguity that often causes frustration. Ensminger (2022) confirmed that among Schlossberg's 4S dimensions, Support plays the most decisive role during the first year of college. Peer mentoring, structured orientation, and faculty awareness training were identified as primary tools that promote a stable learning environment for veterans.

Beyond education systems, national policy contributes to the strength of these frameworks. The State Veteran Policy in Ukraine (National Agency of Civil Service of Ukraine, 2024) shows how the principles of transition and adult learning are becoming part of state-level governance. The document establishes certified training programs for public servants and veterans that focus on leadership, digital skills, inclusion, and psychological adaptation. It demonstrates the practical application of Bridges (2003) and Musamali (2018) in a national context, where reintegration is viewed as a collective social responsibility rather than a purely individual challenge.

Such policy initiatives mirror the findings of U.S. research and illustrate a growing convergence: both national and institutional systems aim to support veterans through educational, psychological, and career development programs that create resilience and long-term social inclusion.

1.5. International Models of Educational Integration

European studies offer additional insight into how educational structures can facilitate smoother transitions between learning stages. Savall Ceres (2024) examined the integration of short-cycle vocational programs with university degrees in Spain, finding strong support for shared campuses and mixed learning environments. More than seventy percent of participants viewed such integration as positive, and university administrators recognized that shared educational spaces optimize resources while promoting equality of access. Two-thirds of institutions in the study shared leadership or teaching resources between vocational and academic programs.

Savall Ceres' results align with the principles of Bridges (1991) and Schlossberg (1981): flexibility and cooperation among institutions enhance the continuity of learning and ease of transition. Applying these insights to veteran education suggests that models combining professional

upskilling with academic reintegration can help adult learners adapt more effectively. Her work adds a valuable comparative dimension by linking veteran transition theory with European approaches to inclusive lifelong education.

1.6. Analytical Gap and Research Question

Across these theoretical, psychological, and institutional perspectives runs a common theme: transition is a multi-level process connecting internal identity development with external structural change. However, current literature does not fully explain how these levels interact within distinct national and post-war contexts such as Ukraine.

Research in the United States (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jones, 2013; Ensminger, 2022) emphasizes campus-level supports, while policy analysis (National Agency of Civil Service of Ukraine, 2024) focuses on nationwide professional reintegration. What remains less explored is how institutional environments actively help veterans rebuild a sense of self, confidence, and purpose while adapting to civilian education and work.

The guiding analytical question for this research is:

How do institutional, social, and personal identity development frameworks work together to support veterans in their transition from military service to higher education and public-sector engagement in post-war contexts?

The question addresses the main gap in scholarly understanding: the relationship between individual growth and institutional design. It establishes the foundation for a new, integrative model of veteran transition grounded in comparative policy and recent empirical evidence.

CHAPTER II. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptualization

This study is structured around three core analytical concepts: program design, experienced program environment, and adaptation to higher education.

Program design refers to how universities structure and position educational programs as institutional responses to veterans' transition from military service to civilian life. It includes program format, duration, selection processes, level of integration within university environments, forms of interaction with peers and instructors, and the intended role of the program within broader educational pathways. In this study, educational programs are conceptualized as institutional environments that communicate recognition and create conditions for learning.

Experienced program environment refers to how veterans encounter, interpret, and evaluate their participation in these programs. It captures how participants assess the program's relevance, structure, and purpose in relation to their prior military experience, expectations, and future goals. This concept shifts the focus from formal program design to lived experience and reflects the interpretative dimension of participation.

Adaptation to higher education refers to veterans' relationship with learning and educational institutions after program participation. It includes whether higher education is perceived as relevant and accessible, whether participants develop confidence in academic environments, and how educational experiences influence future learning motivation and civic engagement.

The distinction between experienced program environment and adaptation is maintained analytically. The former captures how participants evaluate

specific programs, while the latter refers to how these evaluations translate into broader educational positioning. This distinction allows the study to separate immediate program experience from longer-term educational orientation.

Together, these concepts allow the study to analyze how institutional design is translated into lived experience and how this experience shapes veterans' engagement with learning and higher education.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative approach focused on understanding how veterans and administrators make sense of educational programs designed for military-to-civilian transition.

The theoretical framework draws on adult learning theory and transition research. Adult learning theory emphasizes that mature learners bring significant prior experience to educational settings and evaluate new learning in relation to personal relevance, practical application, and respect for existing knowledge. Transition research highlights that major life changes involve identity reconstruction and meaning-making processes that educational environments can support or constrain.

This combination is particularly suitable for the study because it allows analysis at both the structural and interpretative levels. While some approaches focus either on institutional access or individual adjustment, this framework captures how institutional design becomes meaningful to participants and shapes their decisions about continued learning.

The central assumption is that educational programs do not automatically produce adaptation outcomes. Instead, their effectiveness depends on how

participants interpret and experience program environments in relation to their goals and expectations.

The analytical relationship can be understood as: Program Design influences Experienced Program Environment, which shapes Adaptation to Higher Education.

Program design defines the structural and institutional conditions of participation, including format, interaction patterns, and recognition processes. However, these conditions influence outcomes only when participants interpret them as relevant and meaningful. Veterans evaluate whether programs align with their experience, help them navigate transition challenges, and represent valuable educational opportunities.

When program environments are experienced as respectful, well-organized, and aligned with veterans' expectations, they are more likely to support positive engagement with higher education. When such alignment is absent, participants may disengage or perceive educational institutions as irrelevant.

2.3 Analytical Expectations

This exploratory study was guided by theoretically informed expectations regarding how educational programs function for veterans. These expectations provided analytical focus while remaining open to empirical revision.

First, drawing on adult learning theory, the study expected that veterans' educational motivation would evolve over time, moving from initial social reintegration needs toward professional validation and civic contribution as participants gain confidence and clarify their goals.

Second, informed by research on educational environments, the study expected that program structure and educator competence would be more

decisive for veteran engagement than specific program content, since adult learners prioritize respectful treatment and clear organization.

Third, consistent with transition research, the study expected that effective educational integration would require balancing veteran-specific support with inclusion in broader academic communities, suggesting that separate veteran programs might serve as preparation for wider educational participation.

These expectations guided data collection and initial analysis while allowing themes to emerge inductively from participant accounts.

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research employs an exploratory, qualitative research design to examine how veterans experience educational programs and how these experiences shape their relationship with higher education. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand how veterans interpret program environments, relate educational experiences to their military service background, and make decisions about continued learning. A quantitative design would be less suitable for capturing the meaning-making processes central to the research question.

The study is exploratory because empirical evidence on veteran educational experiences in Ukraine remains limited, particularly regarding how participants themselves understand and evaluate program environments. While universities increasingly implement veteran-oriented programming, systematic understanding of how these programs function as learning environments and influence educational trajectories remains insufficient.

Methodologically, the study relies on semi-structured interviews with both veterans and university administrators. This approach enables examination of both participant experience and institutional design logic, allowing comparison between intended program goals and lived program experience.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The study is built around the three-component analytical framework consisting of program design, experienced program environment, and adaptation to higher education, as detailed in Chapter II.

Program design encompasses how universities organize and position educational programs as responses to veteran transition needs. This includes structural decisions about format, content, duration, interaction patterns, and institutional positioning within broader university contexts.

An experienced program environment captures how veterans encounter, interpret, and evaluate program participation. It focuses on participant perceptions of program purpose, organization, relevance, and relationship to their prior experience and future goals.

Adaptation to higher education refers to veterans' post-program positioning toward learning and educational institutions. It includes perceptions of educational relevance, academic belonging, and motivation for continued educational engagement.

The framework assumes that program design influences adaptation through the mediation of an experienced program environment. This mechanism emphasizes that institutional design becomes effective only when translated into meaningful participant experience.

3.3 Operationalisation

The three core concepts are operationalized through observable qualitative indicators that guide data collection and analysis. The study follows an exploratory qualitative design, so operationalization aims to identify recurring themes and patterns rather than numerical measurement.

Program design is operationalized through:

- Program format, structure, and duration
- Selection and admission processes
- Content focus and pedagogical approaches

- Integration within university environments
- Institutional positioning and stated program goals
- How administrators describe program purpose and intended outcomes

Experienced program environment is operationalized through:

- How veterans describe program participation
- Assessments of program organization and structure
- Evaluations of instructor competence and teaching approaches
- Descriptions of peer interaction and group dynamics
- Comparisons with military experience and civilian expectations
- Interpretations of program relevance and value

Adaptation to higher education is operationalized through:

- Post-program educational attitudes and plans
- Perceptions of academic environments and institutions
- Confidence in educational settings
- Motivation for continued learning
- Integration of educational experience with broader life goals

3.4 Population and Sample

The study's population includes veterans in Ukraine who have engaged with higher education after military service, as well as university staff involved in veteran-oriented programming.

The study uses a purposive sample of nine in-depth interviews: seven with veterans representing diverse educational experiences and two with university administrators responsible for veteran programming.

The sampling strategy prioritizes analytical variation rather than statistical representation. Among veterans, the sample includes participants in different types of programs, various educational backgrounds, and different stages of post-service transition. Administrative respondents represent different institutional approaches to veteran education.

This sampling approach is justified by the study's analytical aim of identifying patterns and mechanisms rather than population-level generalization. The inclusion of both veteran and administrative perspectives enables comparison between participant experience and institutional intention.

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via secure online platforms. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen because it allows systematic exploration of key themes while maintaining flexibility to explore individual experiences and interpretations.

The interview guide for veterans covered:

- Educational background before and after military service
- Motivations for educational participation
- Specific program experiences and evaluations
- Learning environment and peer/instructor interactions
- Comparisons between educational and military environments
- Future educational and professional plans

The interview guide for administrators focused on:

- Program development and institutional rationale
- Design decisions and target goals
- Assumptions about veteran needs and preferences

- Observed patterns in veteran participation
- Institutional challenges and adaptations

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed for analysis. Interview duration ranged from 60-90 minutes.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive approaches. All transcripts were imported into MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding and analysis.

Deductive coding was guided by the analytical framework, focusing on program design, experienced program environment, and adaptation to higher education. Initial codes were created in MAXQDA based on these three analytical dimensions, allowing systematic categorization of relevant content across all interviews.

Inductive coding identified additional themes emerging from participant narratives that were not fully captured by the initial framework. New codes were created in MAXQDA as patterns emerged from the data, enabling the analysis to remain open to unexpected themes while maintaining connection to the study's conceptual structure.

The MAXQDA coding system facilitated comparison across interviews and between veteran and administrative perspectives. The software's retrieval and comparison functions enabled systematic examination of how different participants discussed similar themes and identification of convergent and divergent patterns.

Analysis separated veteran and administrative perspectives to examine convergence and divergence between participant experience and institutional

logic. Cross-case comparison identified patterns while maintaining attention to individual variation. The coded segments were organized thematically and analyzed for relationships between program design features, participant experiences, and educational outcomes.

The analysis prioritized understanding mechanisms and relationships rather than measuring frequency, consistent with the study's exploratory orientation and interpretative approach. MAXQDA's analytical tools supported this approach by enabling flexible organization of themes and systematic comparison across cases.

3.7 Limitations and Bias Mitigation

The study has several limitations. The sample is small and cannot represent the full diversity of veteran educational experiences in Ukraine. Analysis relies on participant accounts that reflect subjective interpretations and may be shaped by memory or social desirability effects. The focus on educational program participants means the study cannot address experiences of veterans who choose not to pursue formal education.

These limitations are partially mitigated through several measures. The sample includes participants with varied educational trajectories and institutional approaches. The inclusion of both veterans and administrators enables triangulation between program experience and institutional design. Systematic interview guides ensured consistency while allowing exploration of individual experiences.

The study's analytical goals focus on understanding meaning and process rather than measuring outcomes or testing causal relationships, making qualitative depth more important than sample size for addressing the research question.

CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

Although veteran-oriented certificate programs differed significantly in their institutional models, participants across interviews rarely discussed them only in terms of educational content. Instead, veterans and university administrators consistently paid attention to how programs were structured, communicated, and organized within higher education institutions.

Across interviews, respondents described program organization as part of the educational experience itself. Elements such as program duration, modularity, participant selection, communication style, certification, and instructor composition were often interpreted not simply as technical decisions, but as indicators of how universities understood veterans as adult learners with different educational, professional, and military experiences.

At the same time, participants approached certificate programs from different educational and professional trajectories. For some, these programs became opportunities for professional development or obtaining formal qualifications. For others, they offered a more accessible way to re-engage with academic environments without immediately committing to long-term degree programs. Administrators similarly described programs through different institutional goals, including educational accessibility, professional development, community-building, and broader university engagement with veterans.

Research insights and findings are organized around three interconnected dimensions: program design and organizational structure, learning environments and interpersonal dynamics, and the broader role of certificate programs within veterans' educational trajectories.

1. Program Design and Organizational Structure

1.1 How Veterans Interpreted Program Structure

One of the recurring themes across interviews was that veterans rarely perceived program structure as a purely organizational issue. Instead, participants often interpreted structural elements such as modularity, duration, certification, participant selection, and instructor composition as signals of how seriously universities approached both the programs themselves and their participants.

Across interviews, veterans consistently associated effective program design with four interconnected elements: short and modular formats, credible institutional certification, transparent selection processes, and intellectually strong instruction.

Early respondents (R01–R02) described structure primarily as a factor that made participation feel manageable after military service. Programs with clear time boundaries and predictable modular organization were perceived as easier to combine with work, recovery, family responsibilities, or uncertainty regarding longer-term educational plans.

“When it lasts only a few weeks, you can imagine finishing; you don’t have to be ready for a long future yet.” (R11)

In these cases, shorter formats reduced the pressure associated with long-term educational commitments while still allowing participants to engage with structured learning and academic environments.

For mid-career participants (R04–R05), program structure was more closely connected to professional legitimacy and institutional recognition of prior experience. R05, who already held two master’s degrees, described certificate

programs at NaUKMA and other institutions as opportunities to formalize existing expertise within recognized educational frameworks:

“It’s probably the only certificate of the state model — proof in front of donors that not only do I have experience, I have qualification.” (R05)

Here, certification functioned not simply as confirmation of participation, but as institutional validation that could later be translated into professional credibility in civilian and international contexts.

Participants also frequently linked program quality to the level of instructors involved in teaching. The presence of experienced academics, practitioners, public officials, or invited experts was often interpreted as a sign that universities viewed the programs as serious educational initiatives rather than symbolic projects created specifically for veterans.

Across interviews, veterans also often spoke about program structure not only as a matter of convenience, but as an indicator of whether universities genuinely took both the programs and their participants seriously. Programs with clear organization, transparent expectations, and strong academic involvement were more often perceived as trustworthy, professional, and worth committing to.

1.2 Administrative Staff — Design as Institutional Strategy

Administrative respondents framed program design primarily in organizational and institutional terms rather than as individualized forms of support. For them, educational structure functioned as a way to translate broader institutional and policy goals into workable learning formats that could remain sustainable within existing university systems.

Ro6 (NaUKMA) described program design as intentionally interdisciplinary and modular:

“The Centre brings together expertise from all faculties... each week is a separate module.” (Ro6)

Modularity was described not only as a pedagogical approach, but also as an organizational solution that made participation more accessible for adults combining education with work, military service, rehabilitation, or family responsibilities. This finding corresponds with broader research demonstrating veterans’ interest in shorter and more flexible educational formats rather than long-term degree programs.

The use of nomination-based selection, inspired by Fulbright and Open World practices, was similarly framed as part of the educational environment itself rather than merely an admission mechanism:

“Nomination replaces bureaucracy with trust.” (Ro6)

In this context, selection procedures were interpreted by administrators as tools for building communities based on professional recognition, trust, and participant engagement rather than solely on formal academic competition.

At the same time, administrators emphasized that universities continue operating within institutional and regulatory systems that are not fully adapted to short-term veteran-oriented educational initiatives. Ro3 (Kharkiv University) highlighted the absence of clear normative mechanisms for implementing flexible educational formats within existing higher education regulations:

“There is demand for public administration, psychology, and short formats; but we lack the normative mechanisms.” (Ro3)

And this tension reflected a broader institutional challenge identified throughout the interviews: universities increasingly recognize veterans as an important group of adult learners with distinct educational trajectories and needs, yet institutional mechanisms for integrating short-term, modular, and professionally oriented formats into higher education systems remain underdeveloped. As a result, many programs continue to rely on institutional experimentation, external partnerships, or temporary organizational solutions rather than stable educational policy frameworks.

1.3 Program Structure Through Different Perspectives

Across interviews, veterans and administrators often mentioned very similar, sometimes even the same structural elements of certificate programs, but attached different meanings to them depending on their experiences and institutional roles. The comparison below highlights several recurring points of convergence and difference identified throughout the analysis.

Design Aspect	Veterans' Perspective	Administrators' Perspective	Shared Understanding
Program format	Short-term and modular formats felt more manageable and realistic after military service	Modular formats were easier to organize, scale, and adapt to institutional capacities	Modularity increased accessibility and participation
Participant selection	Transparent selection and nomination systems were	Selection procedures helped maintain participant engagement and program quality	Selection communicated seriousness and credibility

	associated with trust and fairness		
Certification	Certificates validated existing experience and supported professional credibility	Certification was viewed as institutionally important but sometimes limited by regulation	Formal recognition mattered to both groups
Instructor composition	Strong instructors signaled respect and educational quality	Involvement of academics and practitioners strengthened program legitimacy	Instructor quality shaped perceptions of the entire program
Role of programs	Programs created opportunities to reconnect with education and professional development	Programs were seen as part of broader university engagement with veterans	Certificate programs extended universities' educational role

This comparison indicates that design simultaneously fulfils two logics: symbolic (recognition and trust) and administrative (management, organizational sustainability and institutional capacity). At the same time, both groups associated clear and well-structured programs with seriousness, credibility, and as a benchmark of educational engagement.

1.4 Summary

Across the interviews, program design emerged as more than an organizational framework. Veterans often interpreted structural elements of

certificate programs as indicators of whether universities genuinely understood participants' educational and professional realities and approached the programs seriously.

Administrators, in turn, described structure as a way to balance educational accessibility, institutional capacity, and academic quality within higher education environments that are still adapting to veteran-oriented initiatives.

The strongest points of convergence appeared around modular organization, transparent selection procedures, credible certification, and strong instructor involvement. Although veterans and administrators often explained the importance of these elements differently, both groups associated clear and well-structured programs with professionalism, trustworthiness, and meaningful educational engagement.

These findings suggest that program structure plays an important role in shaping how veteran-oriented educational initiatives are perceived within higher education institutions. In this context, organization itself became part of how institutions communicated seriousness, accessibility, and educational value to participants.

2. Experienced Educational Environment

2.1. Veteran Participants – Experiences of Communication, Trust, and Learning

For veteran respondents, the learning environment often shaped whether participation in education felt comfortable and sustainable. Participants evaluated programs less through formal credentials and more through interpersonal dynamics, communication styles, predictability, and the overall atmosphere of interaction within educational settings.

Responders described small, modular formats as supportive spaces for re-entering group interaction after service.

“Community matters more than content; you start speaking again with people who understand.” (R01)

Clear schedules, limited group size, and attentive facilitation were often associated with environments that felt easier to navigate and participate in.

Several participants (R04–R07) also emphasized the importance of dialogue and shared discussion:

“One of the biggest problems is to see there are others like you – different experiences, but the same questions.” (R05)

In these cases, educational interaction helped participants reconsider their experiences within broader professional and civic contexts. R07 contrasted academic communication with military command structures:

“University is humanity. No one shouts, no one ranks you.” (R07)

Moreover, participants also highlighted how seemingly minor elements of educational environments influenced concentration and comfort. One respondent noted that the use of Russian during one course created discomfort and made participation more difficult, demonstrating how linguistic and cultural sensitivity could affect perceptions of the learning environment.

Another veteran, drawing on international study experience, associated trust with instructor competence:

“When lecturers know their field and are confident, you also feel confident.” (R09)

During interviews participants most often associated positive educational environments with consistency, respectful communication, professionalism, and the ability to participate without pressure or judgement.

2.2 Administrative Staff — Creating Educational Conditions for Adult Learners

Administrators described these same qualities as outcomes of intentional educational and organizational design. Both R03 (Kharkiv University) and R06 (NaUKMA) and R12 (Ukrainian Catholic University) emphasized the importance of creating learning environments appropriate for adult learners with strong prior professional and life experience.

R06 summarised the program philosophy as follows:

“Education for adults doesn’t provide answers; it creates a space where people can ask.” (R06)

Small cohorts and nomination-based admissions were described as ways to maintain active participation, trust, and meaningful discussion within groups.

Administrators also acknowledged the challenge of balancing openness and sensitivity with academic expectations:

“We aim for balance between readaptation and retraumatization, that’s our main challenge.” (R03)

Both administrators rejected approaches they perceived as overly simplified or symbolic forms of engagement. Instead, they emphasized focused communication, intellectually serious instruction, and respectful interaction as central elements of educational quality.

So, the learning environment was approached primarily as part of educational organization and pedagogy rather than as a therapeutic space.

2.3 Converging and Divergent Understandings

Although veterans and administrators spoke from different institutional and personal positions, their understandings of effective learning environments frequently overlapped. Both groups emphasized the importance of small groups, qualified instructors, respectful communication, and predictable organization.

Category of Learning Environment	Veterans' Perspective	Administrators' Perspective	Shared Understanding
Group structure	Smaller groups felt more comfortable and manageable (20-25)	Smaller cohorts supported participation and discussion	Small groups improved engagement
Communication style	Equitable, dialogic communication	Dialogue-based facilitation supported adult learning	Communication shaped trust within groups
Instructor role	Competent instructors increased confidence and motivation	Strong instructors reinforced educational quality	Instructor quality influenced the overall perception of programs

Category of Learning Environment	Veterans' Perspective	Administrators' Perspective	Shared Understanding
Atmosphere of participation	Absence of judgement and pressure, reencouragement made participation easier	Stable and focused environments supported learning	Predictability and consistency mattered
Purpose of environment	Programs created space to reconnect with learning, not format of therapy that stigmatizes	Programs supported sustainable educational participation	Learning environments shaped engagement with education

Veterans more often described trust and comfort as personal experiences within educational settings, while administrators discussed these same conditions through pedagogy, facilitation, and organizational design. At the same time, both groups associated well-organized and respectful learning environments with stronger engagement and more meaningful participation in certificate programs.

Across all interviews there were found three recurring elements that were most consistently associated with positive educational environments: predictable organization, respectful adult-to-adult communication, and competent instruction. When these elements reinforced one another, participation in education was more often described as manageable, relevant, and professionally meaningful.

3. Educational Trajectories and Continued Engagement with Learning

3.1 Veteran Participants: Learning as Continuity, Professional Development, and Contribution

During interviews veterans described education not as a separate stage after military service, but as part of broader attempts to rebuild professional continuity, regain structure in everyday life, and reconsider future trajectories. Across interviews, learning was associated with several interconnected processes: returning to intellectual work, validating professional competence, restoring routines, and reconnecting with civilian and academic environments.

For some participants, education initially functioned as a structured activity that helped replace the loss of routine after military service. As one respondent put it:

“Education becomes the thing that gives you a schedule again.” (R02)

In these cases, participation in certificate programs created a manageable form of engagement that introduced structure without requiring immediate long-term educational commitments.

Mid-career participants (R04–R07) more often linked learning to professional development and the need to translate military and civic experience into civilian educational and professional contexts. R05 explained that formal recognition of competence influenced how external partners and organizations perceived his work:

“To show you are not just experienced — you are qualified.” (R05)

Here, education was described not only as knowledge acquisition, but also as a mechanism for professional validation and credibility.

Several respondents also associated participation in educational programs with broader ideas of continued development and long-term learning. R07 described university education as a reminder that professional relevance requires continuous learning:

“University reminded me that to stay relevant, you must keep learning.” (R07)

Later interviews (R08–R09) further connected learning with broader forms of social and professional contribution. One participant described education as another way of remaining engaged in public life after military service:

“It’s another way to serve – not with weapons but with knowledge.” (R09)

Across interviews, participants most positively assessed programs that approached veterans as adult professionals with prior educational, civic, and military experience rather than as passive recipients of support. Educational environments were valued when they created opportunities for meaningful participation, professional development, and continued engagement with learning.

At the same time, respondents also described barriers that complicated continued educational participation, including financial pressure, rigid bureaucratic procedures, age differences with younger students, and limited institutional flexibility within universities. Despite all this, many responders actively sought additional courses, certifications, or international educational

opportunities once they encountered programs they considered credible and professionally relevant.

3.2 Administrative Staff: Supporting Adult Learners within Changing Higher Education Systems

Administrators approached these same processes through broader institutional questions about how universities respond to adult learners with diverse educational and professional trajectories. Both respondents described veteran-oriented certificate programs as part of wider institutional adaptation within higher education systems traditionally oriented toward younger full-time students.

One of the responder described programs at NaUKMA as an entry point to formal higher education:

“The program normalizes cooperation with the university and restores curiosity — people then understand which master’s degree they want.” (Ro6)

In this perspective, certificate programs functioned as flexible educational formats that allowed participants to explore further learning opportunities without immediately committing to long-term degree programs.

Administrators also emphasized that supporting adult learners required organizational and pedagogical adjustments extending beyond curriculum content alone. One respondent described the importance of schedules, credit systems, and recognition of prior experience:

“We have to think not only about teaching content but about organizational adjustments — schedules, credit systems, recognition of prior learning.” (Ro3)

Both administrators described veteran-oriented initiatives as part of broader institutional discussions about adult education, flexible learning formats, and the changing role of universities in wartime and post-war Ukraine. They also highlighted the importance of preparing faculty members to work with adult learners through mentorship, discussion-based teaching methods, and greater sensitivity toward participants’ diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

At the same time, administrators acknowledged that many institutional and regulatory systems within higher education remain insufficiently adapted to short-term and modular educational formats, creating tensions between educational flexibility and existing academic procedures.

3.3 Shared Priorities and Different Perspectives

Although veterans and administrators approached certificate programs from different positions, their perspectives frequently converged around the importance of flexibility, professional relevance, and meaningful educational participation.

Theme	Veterans’ Perspective	Administrators’ Perspective	Shared Understanding
Role of education	Education supported professional continuity and future opportunities	Programs created pathways back into educational environments	Certificate programs helped reconnect participants with learning

Motivation for participation	Professional development, structure, contribution, new qualifications	Long-term engagement with higher education	Participation often extended beyond short-term learning goals
Main barriers	Financial pressure, bureaucracy, age differences	Institutional and regulatory limitations	Structural barriers affected participation on multiple levels
Conditions supporting engagement	Relevant content, respectful communication, recognition of experience	Flexible organization, mentorship, adult-learning approaches	Educational environments shaped continued engagement
Future orientation	Interest in further education and professional development	Sustainable adult-learning models within universities	Programs could function as bridges to broader educational trajectories

Veterans more often described participation through personal educational and professional experiences, while administrators interpreted these same processes through institutional adaptation and adult-learning policy. At the same time, both groups associated successful programs with flexibility, clear organization, meaningful communication, and opportunities for continued educational engagement.

3.4 Summary

As mentioned earlier during interviews, participation in certificate programs was often described as a process in which both veterans and universities adjusted to new educational realities shaped by war, military service, and the growing presence of adult learners within higher education.

Veterans described learning as part of continued professional and civic life, while administrators discussed the need for more flexible institutional approaches to adult education. Programs were most positively assessed when they combined clear organization, professional relevance, respectful communication, and flexibility toward participants' life circumstances.

So, the findings suggest that veteran-oriented certificate programs may function not only as short-term educational initiatives, but also as spaces that support longer-term engagement with learning and future educational trajectories. In this context, higher education institutions increasingly become environments where veterans reconsider professional plans, explore new qualifications, and reconnect with academic life in ways that feel manageable and meaningful within their current circumstances.

Also, some insights of this study suggest that veteran-oriented certificate programs in Ukraine are shaped not only by questions of support for veterans, but also by broader transformations within higher education itself. Across interviews, participants and administrators consistently described challenges that extend beyond veteran-specific initiatives, including the flexibility of educational formats, recognition of prior professional experience, adult-learning approaches, and the ability of universities to work with learners who have diverse educational and life trajectories.

Veterans most positively assessed programs that combined clear organization, intellectually serious instruction, transparent communication, and flexibility toward participants' circumstances. Across interviews, what participants often

described as “respect” or “seriousness” was closely connected to predictable organization, competent instructors, transparent expectations, and meaningful engagement with learners as adult professionals.

Administrators similarly described veteran-oriented programs as spaces that encouraged universities to reconsider how higher education institutions respond to adult learners during wartime and anticipated post-war recovery. In this sense, certificate programs functioned not only as educational initiatives for veterans, but also as opportunities for institutional experimentation with modular learning, interdisciplinary teaching, mentorship, and more flexible educational formats.

In a way the findings also demonstrate that veterans and administrators frequently interpreted the same educational elements through different perspectives. Veterans more often discussed programs through lived educational experiences, professional relevance, and accessibility, while administrators emphasized institutional sustainability, organizational capacity, and broader educational policy challenges. At the same time, both groups consistently associated meaningful participation with small-group learning, competent instruction, respectful communication, and organizational clarity.

Overall, the study suggests that veteran-oriented certificate programs may function as flexible educational spaces that support continued engagement with learning while simultaneously encouraging universities to rethink the role of higher education in societies shaped by war, military service, and changing adult-learning needs. In this context, veteran-oriented initiatives become part of broader discussions about lifelong learning, educational accessibility, and the future development of higher education in Ukraine.

CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study set out to understand what education means for people returning from military service and how universities interpret and respond to their participation. The veterans who took part are not passive recipients of assistance but experienced learners making informed choices about where and how to study. Their accounts, together with those of academic staff, show education as a shared process of adaptation. Veterans learn how to navigate civil institutions again, and universities learn how to teach people with combat experience, whose expertise was formed far away from outside the classroom.

The analysis confirmed and refined the three initial assumptions.

The first theme concerned the changing purpose of learning. For most participants, education initially restored routine and social contact after service but gradually became a way to rebuild confidence and regain recognition in civilian life. Study was understood as a structured and safe environment for experimenting, exchanging experience, and reconnecting with others who shared similar backgrounds. Veterans described the classroom not as therapy but as a space where their service experience could strengthen discussion and be valued as knowledge. These findings suggest that adaptation is most effective when universities acknowledge veterans' prior expertise and provide settings that combine respect, community, and intellectual challenge. A key question that follows is how universities can continue to support this sense of belonging and recognition after short programs end – both by keeping veterans meaningfully connected to education and by extending this culture of recognition to other stakeholders such as employers and non-formal education providers. Although higher

education may not be the pathway for everyone, university-based programs, especially local ones, should remain an essential part of the broader route veterans take toward renewed professional and social participation.

The second assumption held that program structure and instructor competence determine successful adaptation. The findings nuance this expectation. While participants appreciated clear organization and modular schedules, these features mattered mainly when accompanied by meaningful content and knowledgeable instructors. Veterans consistently linked satisfaction not to formal design or financial support but to the depth and confidence of teaching. They valued lecturers who could engage them in discussion as equals and connect theoretical material with their professional experience. For many, learning became credible only when they encountered instructors who demonstrated both expertise and openness to dialogue.

Administrative approaches reflected different institutional logics. Universities that deliberately design certificate programs for veterans, such as those at NaUKMA, approach participants as clients of an educational service who require a distinct, high-quality product. Their focus lies in academic depth, meaningful content, and instructors who can link theory with veterans' professional and life experience. In these settings, veterans are treated as mature learners with clear expectations of quality and relevance.

By contrast, institutions that open existing certificate programs to veterans on equal terms with other students, such as Karazin University, emphasize accessibility and inclusion rather than specialization. Their model highlights psychological support and the creation of a safe, mixed environment where veterans and civilians study together. The rationale is that shared learning promotes broader social reintegration and reduces the risk of isolation, even though it may limit the disciplinary depth of veteran-oriented content.

Across both models, participants valued recognized institutional affiliation. Formal university certification was seen as proof of credibility and an asset for future employment or cooperation with public agencies and NGOs. For many veterans, the presence of a state-issued certificate determined whether a program was worth their time, as it provided legitimacy beyond personal growth or informal learning.

Moreover, some participants joined certificate programs without specific expectations, using them to explore new directions, meet peers, or test their readiness for further education. For such learners, programs that combined strong teaching with opportunities for reflection on personal strengths and skills were especially valuable. In this sense, certificate programs often functioned not only as educational formats but also as spaces for orientation, where participants could better understand their own trajectories.

At the same time, this finding points to a structural gap in the current educational offer. Several respondents implicitly described the need for a different type of course that would precede or complement certificate programs. Such a format would focus not on certification but on navigation, allowing participants to assess whether higher education is relevant for them, what skills they already possess, and what direction they may want to pursue.

In the Ukrainian context, where formal qualifications remain highly valued in the labor market, certificate programs often absorb this exploratory function despite being designed as short-cycle professional education. As a result, participants may choose them not only for skill development but also because they provide official affiliation and recognition. This creates a mismatch between the intended purpose of these programs and the broader range of needs they are expected to address.

These findings suggest that certificate programs should be understood as part of a wider ecosystem of educational pathways rather than as a standalone solution. While higher education is not necessarily the appropriate route for all veterans, university-based programs, particularly local ones, can play an important role within this pathway. Their contribution may extend beyond direct teaching to shaping standards of quality and recognition that can be transmitted to other actors, including employers and providers of non-formal education.

The third assumption addressed how education balances veteran-specific safety with participation in mixed settings. The evidence indicates that separate veteran groups are essential at the beginning of transition but only as a stage toward full inclusion. Smaller, closed cohorts create conditions for confidence and mutual understanding, while joint classes later extend those capacities into broader civic and professional environments. Administrators observed similar patterns and began to design pathways that formalize this progression. The finding reframes earlier debate about separation versus integration by showing that safe environments operate as preparation, not isolation. Further study is needed to define practical criteria for when participants are ready to join mixed groups and how institutions can recognize this readiness without reducing people to categories of vulnerability.

Beyond these confirmed assumptions, the interviews suggest that veterans should be understood not as passive beneficiaries of educational policy but as active participants who shape and evaluate it. Their accounts position them as a kind of indicator group through which the strengths and weaknesses of educational provision become particularly visible, especially in relation to adult learning. Entering education with prior professional and life experience, veterans make explicit expectations that remain less articulated among traditional students, including the need for relevance, clear structure, and

recognition of prior knowledge. While this varies depending on individual service experience, many participants emphasized the importance of agency and the ability to engage with education on their own terms. For some, this marked a contrast with hierarchical structures encountered during military service, making educational environments that allow autonomy and equal dialogue especially valuable.

In describing what motivates them, participants consistently pointed to ordinary qualities of good education: predictability, respect, and relevance. When these are present, veterans see universities as credible civic institutions. When they are absent, frustration follows quickly. Their experiences expose what is missing for many adult learners, not only for those returning from the military – short cycles, flexible schedules, and competent teaching – answer the needs of people seeking retraining in a rapidly changing labour market. In that sense, veterans represent one group of clients through whom the education system's strengths and weaknesses become visible. The current demand for continual reskilling, rising tuition costs, and pressure to link education to employment means that the issues identified here extend far beyond the veteran community.

At the same time, the findings raise a number of new questions. Reliance on nomination systems creates tension between accessibility and perceived fairness: while such systems may limit open participation, they can also provide a sense of security and trust for participants. The cost of education remains a significant barrier, as many veterans return without stable income or prioritize resources for health recovery, making subsidies and free access an important enabling condition.

The role of learning formats also requires further consideration. Digital education, while expanding access, does not fully replicate the sense of cohesion and mutual understanding formed in small, offline groups. This raises the question of whether the focus should be placed on scaling access or on preserving the quality of learning environments, and whether local universities could play a stronger role in balancing these goals. At the same time, such decentralization introduces its own challenges related to maintaining consistent standards.

Overall, issues of language and cultural sensitivity, noted by some respondents, remain insufficiently addressed. This is partly linked to the absence of systematic feedback mechanisms within university programs themselves.

Together, these areas point to the need for further research if universities aim to design open, flexible, and context-sensitive educational opportunities for a broader range of adult learners.

CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how certificate programs function as public policy instruments supporting veterans' adaptation to higher education in postwar Ukraine. Through in-depth interviews with veterans and university administrators, the research explored the relationship between program design, experienced learning environments, and educational adaptation outcomes.

Key Findings

Program Design as Recognition

The study reveals that veterans interpret program design choices as signals of institutional respect and social recognition rather than merely administrative arrangements. Clear structure, modular formats, transparent selection processes, and competent instruction communicate that veterans' time and experience are valued. This finding challenges assumptions that veterans require specialized therapeutic approaches, instead demonstrating their preference for ordinary educational quality delivered with professionalism and respect.

Learning Environment as Adaptation Mechanism

Safe, predictable learning environments emerged as the central factor enabling veterans' educational engagement. Small cohorts, respectful dialogue, and instructor competence create conditions where veterans can relate their military experience to new learning goals without pressure to discuss trauma directly. These environments function not as therapy but as spaces where military experience is recognized as valuable knowledge that strengthens academic discussion.

Educational Adaptation as Identity Reconstruction

Veterans' relationship with education evolves from initial routine restoration toward professional validation and civic contribution. This progression reflects a deeper process of identity reconstruction, where learning becomes a means of translating military experience into civilian competence and continued social service. The study confirms that successful adaptation occurs when veterans are treated as adult professionals with prior expertise rather than as beneficiaries requiring assistance.

Institutional vs. Individual Logics

The research identified complementary but distinct institutional approaches. Universities designing programs specifically for veterans focus on educational depth and recognition of military experience, while institutions offering open programs emphasize accessibility and social integration. Both models can succeed when they maintain quality instruction and respectful treatment, suggesting that effectiveness depends more on institutional competence than on target population designation.

National Policy Context

The analysis of Ukrainian policy documents (National Agency of Civil Service, 2024) demonstrates how adult learning and transition theories are being institutionalized at the state level. Certificate programs for public servants and veterans reflect practical application of theoretical frameworks from Western research, positioning Ukraine as developing its own transition-education system oriented toward post-war reconstruction and civic renewal.

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances understanding of veteran transition in several ways. First, it demonstrates the applicability of adult learning theory and transition frameworks (Bridges, Schlossberg, Baxter Magolda) in a conflict-affected context, showing how these models translate across cultural and institutional settings. Second, it expands the literature by presenting veterans not as passive beneficiaries but as active evaluators of educational quality, whose experiences reveal broader challenges in adult education systems.

The research also contributes to policy literature by showing how short-cycle certificate programs can function as bridges between individual transition needs and institutional capacity building. Rather than representing a separate

"veteran education" sector, these programs serve as testing grounds for broader adult learning innovations that benefit multiple populations.

Broader Significance

This study positions veterans as an indicator population whose educational experiences expose both strengths and weaknesses in higher education systems designed for traditional students. Their emphasis on structure, relevance, and recognition reflects broader adult learner needs in an era of rapid economic change and continuous upskilling demands. The solutions developed for veterans, such as modular formats, competent instruction, flexible scheduling, represent prototypes for educational reforms needed to serve diverse adult populations.

The research also demonstrates how educational institutions can contribute to social cohesion during post-war recovery. By treating veterans as adult professionals with valuable experience, universities can model the respectful integration that broader society needs to achieve. Certificate programs thus function not only as individual skill development but as mechanisms of social healing and civic renewal.

Limitations

This study's qualitative sample limits generalizability, though its analytical depth provides insights valuable for policy development and institutional practice. Future research should examine longer-term outcomes, including employment patterns, continued education participation, and civic engagement among certificate program graduates. Quantitative studies could test the relationships between program design features and adaptation outcomes across larger populations.

Additional research is needed on optimal program duration, the role of digital learning formats, and effective faculty preparation methods. The interaction between formal certificate programs and informal veteran networks deserves further exploration, as does the question of how recognition gained through education translates into workplace and community integration.

Ukraine's experience with veteran education occurs within a unique historical moment where military service, educational innovation, and national reconstruction intersect. The veterans in this study represent not only individual transitions but collective social learning about how democratic institutions can serve those who have served. Their educational journeys demonstrate that effective policy depends not on exceptional treatment but on institutional quality that respects human dignity and recognizes the value of lived experience.

As Ukraine continues building its post-war society, the lessons from veteran education offer a template for inclusive institutions that can adapt to serve diverse populations with diverse experience while maintaining academic rigor and social purpose. The success of these programs ultimately depends on recognizing that education is an investment in human capacity that strengthens both individuals and the democratic society they help to sustain.

CHAPTER VII. RECOMMENDATION

7.1 Purpose of the Policy Proposal

Since 2015, Ukraine has developed state policy frameworks supporting veterans' recognition and social integration. This policy foundation acknowledges that people who have served, whether they began during the initial conflict, volunteered after the full-scale invasion, or continue to serve today, represent a diverse population with varied educational backgrounds, career interruptions, and reintegration timelines. Many interrupted their studies to serve and now seek opportunities to return to learning. Others, having served for extended periods, want to gain new knowledge and pursue professional requalification as they transition to civilian roles.

The state's responsibility is to create conditions that facilitate this return to education for those who choose it. The evidence shows that when veterans want to learn, particularly to acquire new competencies and professional retraining, this motivation contributes to both individual development and broader social renewal.

Certificate programs have emerged as a crucial mechanism in this process. Currently, these programs take various forms with different orientations: some are designed specifically for veterans but delivered in mixed civilian settings, while others operate as veteran-only cohorts. This diversity represents a natural and positive response to genuine demand. Universities, NGOs, and training providers are creating different solutions to meet different needs, which demonstrates institutional creativity and responsiveness.

However, the current moment calls for greater systematization. We need to research veteran educational needs more thoroughly and organize existing resources more strategically. Many state universities face funding constraints

that limit their ability to develop new programs. At the same time, they have the opportunity to review their current offerings and design programs that will genuinely interest veterans at both regional and national levels, making quality education accessible across the country rather than concentrated in major cities.

This policy proposal translates the analytical findings of the study into practical directions for government agencies, universities, and partner organizations. Its aim is to enhance access to, and quality of, higher and continuing education for veterans while strengthening Ukraine's overall adult-learning system. Veterans are considered one of the key client groups within the education sector. The solutions designed for them are prototypes of how the system can respond to a broader demand for professional requalification and lifelong learning generated by the fast-changing labour market.

7.2 Key Policy Directions

1. Support the Development of Short-Term and Modular Educational Formats

Across interviews, veterans consistently described short-term and modular programs as more realistic and accessible than long-term degree commitments immediately after military service. Universities and state institutions should therefore expand opportunities for certified short-cycle learning formats that can later connect to broader educational trajectories if participants choose to continue their studies.

This does not necessarily require creating entirely new programs. In many cases, universities could adapt existing certificate programs through modular organization, flexible schedules, blended learning, and recognition of prior professional experience.

At the same time, clearer institutional and regulatory pathways are needed for integrating short-term certified programs into higher education systems. Respondents from universities repeatedly emphasized the lack of normative mechanisms for flexible educational formats within current higher education regulation.

2. Strengthen Universities' Capacity to Work with Adult Learners

The study demonstrates that veterans most positively assessed educational environments where instructors treated participants as adult professionals with prior experience rather than as passive recipients of support.

This suggests the need for greater institutional attention to adult-learning approaches within Ukrainian higher education. Faculty development initiatives could focus on:

- discussion-based teaching methods;
- mentorship and facilitation skills;
- recognition of prior learning and professional experience;
- communication in heterogeneous classrooms with participants of different ages and backgrounds.

Importantly, respondents did not describe “special treatment” as the main factor supporting participation. Instead, they valued professionalism, respectful communication, strong teaching, and intellectually serious engagement.

3. Expand Regional and Locally Accessible Educational Opportunities

Several participants noted that educational opportunities remain concentrated in Kyiv and a small number of large cities. Local and regional universities may therefore play an important role in creating more accessible learning opportunities for veterans who cannot relocate or commit to full-time study.

Partnerships between universities, local governments, NGOs, veteran hubs, and employers could help develop regionally relevant certificate programs connected to local labour-market needs and professional retraining opportunities.

The findings also suggest that local educational environments may support continued engagement with learning by reducing logistical barriers and strengthening participants' sense of familiarity and accessibility.

4. Improve Information Accessibility and Educational Navigation

Many participants entered certificate programs without fully understanding what educational opportunities existed or how different programs related to future professional trajectories.

The findings suggest the need for more accessible educational navigation mechanisms, including:

- centralized information platforms about certificate programs;
- clearer communication regarding funding and scholarships;
- mentoring or consultation formats helping participants identify suitable educational pathways;
- guidance on transitions between short-term programs and formal degree education.

Several respondents also implicitly described the need for exploratory educational formats focused less on certification itself and more on helping participants understand their existing competencies, educational interests, and future professional directions.

5. Recognize Veterans as Proactive Participants in Educational Policy

Across interviews, veterans consistently positioned themselves not as passive beneficiaries but as active evaluators of educational quality. Their experiences highlighted broader issues related to flexibility, relevance, communication, and recognition within higher education systems.

For this reason, universities and policymakers should involve veterans more directly in:

- program evaluation;
- curriculum feedback;
- mentorship initiatives;
- alumni networks;
- discussions about future educational formats.

Such involvement may help institutions better understand how educational environments are experienced in practice and how programs can remain relevant to participants' actual needs and trajectories.

7.3 Strategic Objectives

Objective 1. Develop clearer institutional pathways for short-term certified programs

The findings demonstrate growing demand for short-cycle educational formats that can function independently or later connect to broader educational trajectories. At the same time, university administrators repeatedly highlighted the absence of clear institutional and regulatory mechanisms for integrating modular programs into existing higher education systems.

The Ministry of Education and Science, together with universities and relevant state institutions, should therefore consider developing clearer approaches to:

- recognition of short-term certified learning;
- credit transfer between modular and degree-based education;
- recognition of prior professional and military experience;
- institutional cooperation between universities and non-formal education providers.

Such mechanisms would not only support veteran-oriented initiatives, but could also strengthen broader adult-learning systems in Ukraine.

Objective 2. Strengthen institutional capacity for adult learning

The study shows that participants most positively assessed educational environments built on professionalism, respectful communication, competent instruction, and meaningful discussion.

Universities therefore need stronger institutional support for working with adult learners whose educational trajectories differ from traditional student models. This may include:

- faculty development programs focused on adult-learning approaches;
- mentorship and facilitation training;
- discussion-based and practice-oriented teaching methods;

- greater institutional recognition of heterogeneous educational and professional backgrounds within classrooms.

Importantly, respondents did not describe therapeutic approaches as the primary educational need. Instead, they emphasized high-quality teaching, intellectual seriousness, and respectful interaction.

Objective 3. Expand flexible and financially accessible learning opportunities

Many respondents described financial instability, employment obligations, and uncertainty regarding long-term planning as barriers to participation in education after military service.

It suggests the importance of:

- part-time and blended educational formats;
- modular scheduling;
- targeted scholarships or stipends;
- employer-supported educational leave;
- opportunities to combine work and study.

Such tools may later become equally relevant for broader groups of adult learners navigating professional retraining and changing labour-market conditions.

Objective 4. Support regional educational ecosystems

The findings indicate that access to veteran-oriented educational opportunities remains uneven across regions. Several respondents noted that participation often depends on geographic proximity to major educational centers.

Regional universities may therefore play a stronger role in creating accessible educational opportunities connected to local labour markets and community needs. Partnerships between universities, local governments, veteran hubs, NGOs, and employers could help expand regionally accessible certificate programs and create stronger local learning environments.

Pilot initiatives combining short courses, mentorship, internships, and community-based projects may be particularly valuable in this context.

Objective 5. Support peer and alumni networks

Across interviews, participants frequently described informal peer support and communication with other veterans as an important part of their educational experience.

Universities and program organizers could strengthen these dynamics through:

- alumni networks;
- mentorship initiatives;
- peer-support formats;
- opportunities for graduates to remain involved in future programs.

Such initiatives may help sustain longer-term engagement with education and professional development beyond individual certificate programs themselves.

Objective 6. Improve feedback and evaluation mechanisms

The study also revealed that universities often lack systematic mechanisms for understanding how participants experience educational environments in practice.

More regular evaluation procedures combining qualitative feedback and institutional assessment may help universities better adapt programs to participants' needs and changing educational realities. In particular, respondents highlighted the importance of:

- communication quality;
- instructor competence;
- predictability of organization;
- accessibility of educational formats;
- meaningful participant engagement.

More flexible feedback systems may therefore become important not only for veteran-oriented initiatives, but for broader adult-learning policy development within Ukrainian higher education.

7.4 Implementation Mechanisms

Crosssectoral Governance: coordination between the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, the Ministry of Social Policy, and regional authorities through a joint steering committee on adult and veteran education.

Funding: blended finance combining state budget, local grants, and donor contributions under unified eligibility criteria.

Accreditation: simplified procedures for universities to register short programs based on defined learning outcomes.

Communication: national information portal listing accredited programs, funding options, and contact points for veteran learners.

Partnerships: regular forums bringing together universities, employers, and civil organizations to update curricula according to labour-market trends.

7.5 Expected Impact

Implementing these measures will benefit both veterans and the education system as a whole.

1. For veterans, it will provide credible and accessible opportunities to update professional skills, gain recognised qualifications, and maintain civic engagement.
2. For universities, it will drive innovation in curriculum design, pedagogy, and service orientation.
3. For the labour market, it will supply experienced, retrained professionals able to respond to new economic tasks.

Over time, this approach should transform veteran education from a targeted initiative into a model of lifelong learning suitable for all adults who seek new competencies during career transitions.

7.6 Sustainability and Governance

To ensure continuity, veteran education should be embedded in mainstream higher-education legislation and financed through the same mechanisms that support professional development and upskilling.

Monitoring responsibility should rest jointly with educational authorities and representative veteran organizations to maintain transparency and shared ownership.

Annual public reporting will allow social partners to evaluate progress and adjust priorities.

The policy directions outlined here follow directly from the voices and experiences of veterans who have already used education to re-enter civic life. They confirm that strengthening education for one specific group strengthens it for many others. By addressing issues of flexibility, access, and recognition through the example of veteran learners, Ukraine can build an

adaptive, high-quality system of lifelong learning. Such a system will prepare people not only for employment but for active participation in society, linking education to the country's broader project of recovery and modernization.

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