

# Mentoring the next generation of Strategic Thinkers

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Education is highly valued in the Air Force, with the acquisition of highly specialised skills and expertise being an integral component of one's career progression. Training comes in various forms, including mandatory, specialist, on-the-job, and professional military education. In addition to these forms of training, members of the Air Force have access to opportunities for scholarship, where they can apply for graduate programs at Masters and PhD level through civilian universities. These programs afford individuals the chance to focus on a particular "problem" for Defence, dedicating an extended period of time to research and scholarship.

After investing in individuals' graduate education and training in the Air Force, the question arises: what comes next? How can we ensure that the skills and knowledge they acquire are used to strengthen Defence? It's crucial to recognise and value their contributions and make sure that the valuable research they conduct is put into practice to improve Defence. What innovative ideas and solutions can these individuals bring to the table, and how can we support them to implement them effectively?

While graduate education is considered the normal career pathway in academia, completing a scholarship or fellowship at graduate level is still non-traditional in Defence. As such, it can be especially challenging for individuals, as there is often a lack of guidance and established benchmarks to follow. Senior leaders in Defence who have traversed these paths are also scarce, leaving individuals to navigate uncertainty on their own. The value of pursuing non-traditional paths may be acknowledged but translating that value into practical terms and achieving competitive performance evaluations can be difficult.

Those who pursue non-traditional career paths may face unique challenges that are not adequately recognised by the broader organisation, such as justifying their choices and demonstrating the value of their contributions in ways that may not be easily measurable or understood. This can be a daunting prospect, especially without the guidance or support of established role models or precedents.

Despite these challenges, however, it is important to recognise the potential benefits of pursuing non-traditional career paths in Defence. These may include the acquisition of diverse skills and perspectives, the ability to think outside the box, and the capacity to innovate and problem-solve in novel ways. Moreover, individuals who pursue such paths may serve as valuable role models and sources of inspiration for others who are considering similar paths.

To support those who are recipients of scholarships or fellowships, mentoring can be an easy win. So why mentor the next generation of thinkers?

First, and most obviously, is the benefit to the scholars. A senior leader as a mentor can provide the scholar with advice on how to navigate a non-traditional career path and provide networking opportunities. Moreover, a mentor can assist the scholar to identify potential challenges and opportunities. With their wealth of experience, mentors can guide scholars in

making informed decisions about their future career path post scholarship. Having a senior leader as a mentor can be an invaluable asset for scholars looking to advance their careers and make meaningful contributions to their fields.

Second, the benefits of mentoring on the mentors themselves. In a hierarchical organisation like the Air Force, ideas and ways of thinking typically flow from the top down. However, what if a senior leader had mentored individuals who may not have climbed the ranks but have unique and innovative ways of thinking? These "out-of-the-box" thinkers can provide a different perspective and approach to solving complex problems, especially in the current global context. By mentoring these individuals, senior leaders can gain access to a diverse network of unconventional thinkers who can offer novel solutions to wicked problems. These individuals already exist within the Air Force, but we need to find ways to ensure their ideas are valued and make it up the chain of command.

Mentoring also allows senior leaders to stay connected to the frontline of the organisation, gaining insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by those on the ground. This can help them make better decisions that are grounded in reality and can improve the effectiveness of the organisation as a whole. Taking this into consideration, it means a deliberate matching of mentors and mentees. For instance, mentors may be given access to the mentees' research and select a research area that aligns with their own interests. Alternatively, mentors may offer to become the Defence Sponsor or be matched with mentees to whom the mentor can provide guidance on career progression based on their personal experiences in the mentees' branch or role. For this approach to work effectively and benefit both the mentor and mentee, however, it needs the support and agreement of the Senior Leadership Team, rather than being imposed on mentors as a mere formality. It must be a carefully planned and intentional initiative, rather than a mere box-ticking exercise.

Lastly, the benefits to Defence. Embracing diversity and promoting innovation are vital for organisations to achieve their goals. Homogeneity in appearance, thinking, and experience leads to similar solutions based on shared experiences. Therefore, diversity of thought and expertise is necessary to create novel ideas and approaches to complicated problems.

The benefits of diversity and innovative thinking can be seen in numerous historical examples. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, for instance, believed in hiring individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives to create a culture of innovation. Such diversity of thought and expertise allowed for the development of new technologies, such as multi-touch screens and sophisticated software that were previously unavailable in mobile devices.

In conclusion, the Air Force should consider how to better support individuals who pursue non-traditional career paths, ensuring that their skills and knowledge are applied to enhance Defence. This can be achieved by recognising the unique challenges faced by these individuals and providing guidance and support that acknowledges the value of their contributions in the form of senior leaders as mentors. Mentoring has numerous benefits for both mentors and mentees. For mentors, it can provide access to a network of out-of-the-box thinkers, who can offer novel solutions to complex problems. By mentoring these individuals, senior leaders can also stay connected to the frontline of the organisation, gaining insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by those on the ground. As such, mentoring is an invaluable tool for improving the effectiveness of any organisation, including the Air Force. Diversity of thought and expertise is essential for innovation and progress. Organisations that embrace diversity and promote inclusivity are more likely to succeed in achieving their goals. By valuing and harnessing the unique perspectives and experiences of individuals from different backgrounds, the Air Force can continue to create a culture of innovation that fosters creativity and growth.