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Military sociology, intellectual capital and Defence capability

Executive summary

The ADF needs to improve the quality and focus of its intellectual capital if it is to be effective in the increasingly complex strategic and operational environment of the future. This submission is the third of three submissions that address interrelated issues in ADF personnel (and unit) capability development; "Submission 1 "Building Adaptive Capacity" Submission 2 "Military Academic Faculty" Submission 3 "Military sociology, intellectual capital and Defence capability"

Military sociology is a broad term to describe the academic field that studies the individual within the military institution, and the military profession within its wider society. A bare three decades after it emerged as a distinct focus of study in Australia, and just at a time when defence "people issues" are becoming markedly complex, Australian military sociology studies are almost moribund. This submission recommends a number of support mechanisms by which the ADF could maintain the health of military sociology in Australia.

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Military sociology focuses on why people behave as they do within military organisations and on the underlying social issues associated with important practical matters, such as military professionalism, the military ethos, recruitment, retention, career development, combat motivation, leadership, family adjustment, military-civilian career transitions, and military-civil/political relationships.

The proverbial man from Mars, on landing in Australia and learning of its military's oft-asserted dictum that "our most important asset is our people" and that its Chief recently asserted that "recruitment and retention is the ADF's number one strategic issue", would be astonished to learn about the sorry state of military sociology in Australia. The topic receives very little attention in Australian academic and military circles. There are no courses in military sociology in Australian tertiary institutions (such as sub majors within a broader humanities degree) and no full-time "military sociology" academics in Australian university or at the Defence Academy or the various staff colleges. Indeed, it would be safe to say that very few Australian officers are aware that there is such a field as military sociology and that it can inform on practical "people issues" in the military institution.

To make matters worse, of the three Australians who are active members of the Inter-University Seminar for Armed Forces and Society (the quasi-professional association that is the major international forum for the interests and activities of military sociologists), two will retire soon and the third recently resigned to become a management consultant. (In the case of the latter, it's fair to say that his decision owed much to a considerable level of frustration with the contribution or lack of it that he was being allowed to exert.) There is thus a strong possibility that what is currently a small but steady stream of relevant publications on Australian military sociology will soon become a trickle.

Even though military sociology is not a mainstream academic discipline anywhere in the world, many military institutions include military sociology as an important complimentary discipline within their military academies and staff colleges. And, as summarised in the most recent edition of *Armed Forces & Society*, a number of other countries follow a similar practice.

Academic interest in military sociology within Australia was given a formal basis three decades ago with the launch of an annual series of conferences. Each such activity produced at least one publication and was well attended by academics and serving and retired officers.

From 1986, organisation and sponsorship was assumed by the Australian Defence Studies Centre at the Defence Academy. However, the ADSC's later conferences gave little attention to military sociology, and even this potential forum was removed when the University College disestablished the Centre in 2004 and replaced it with a "Defence Studies Forum", the activities of which are modest indeed.

In short, the integrity and health of military sociology in Australia is under serious threat. In this, as in other fields, Australia is missing out on the direct and indirect benefits of wider academic and public discussion of Defence activities. Judgment in professional practice requires the professional officer to take into account not just content knowledge, but also context, competing bits of evidence, methods, conceptualizations and a variety of criteria and standards of adequacy. If wilfully ignored or treated as a "generalist" field of study unworthy of the attention of academic experts, people issues and human factors are likely to cost the ADF dearly.

As a minimum, the ADF should:

- establish a full-time academic position in military sociology (as part of the proposed Military Academic Faculty) at the Defence Academy, with a formal teaching link into the programs at the Australian Defence College;
- sponsor a full-time military sociologist at one of the country's academic centres for the study of strategy, such as the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, where its incumbent could benefit from tapping into the broader network of sociological and other studies within and beyond the university; and
- sponsor and fund regular conferences on military sociology and related topics.

I agree to my submission being published on the Defence website

I agree to my submission being quoted in the Community Consultation Report