

What lies ahead for recent and future veterinary graduates

On Wednesday 23 October 2013 the BVA's Members Services Group (MSG) assembled speakers from veterinary bodies, heads of veterinary schools, vet students, recent vet graduates and a representative from the Department of Education for a discussion forum on the future of veterinary education.

In particular the programme addressed the opening of new veterinary schools and the impact this may have on veterinary education generally but especially on the availability of EMS places and teaching staff. Up for discussion was also the effect the resulting increase in veterinary graduates might have on employment opportunities and on the profession as a whole.

Aim of the discussion

The BVA President and BVA Past President welcomed all assembled and outlined the aim of the day which was to begin to develop a position on the perceived threats and to identify where opportunities might lie to maintain the high quality of UK veterinary education and competent veterinary workforce.

BVA Past President Peter Jones warned that with graduates looking for job satisfaction and a good remuneration to offset the large amount of student debt accumulated the profession must particularly monitor the effect of the changing landscape on the mental health and overall welfare of the profession.

Key points from the discussion

A lot of discussion centred around Extra Mural Studies (EMS) which all agreed added value and was essential for day one competences. The Forum heard that teaching availability, quality and professional standards were key limiting factors to the number of graduates that the UK produced and this high standard needed to be maintained in the changing educational environment.

Managing expectations and public perception of the profession was part of this and was considered important.

Like Lord Trees vets should make up a higher proportion of scientist on decision making bodies was one suggestion.

Other topics raised include the potential employment prospects, the feasibility of EMS provision and the likelihood of clinical practice job security diminishing for future graduates.

One of the suggestions was to let students specialise rather than train for omni-competence which graduates could then top up with a further specialism at a later time. This would be better value for money and allow students to focus on the area that they want to practice in.

There were also calls for the profession to undergo a renaissance whereby more post-graduate support and development opportunities were made available. RCVS suggested that the Professional Development Phase (PDP) was a step in that direction of reflective learning. Part of that renaissance should also include market diversification and expansion to accommodate the increasing number of graduates. The call to the profession also included the need to work on a more joined up EMS system that could work across the UK.

It was clear from the numbers of the overseas vets registering with the RCVS that limiting the number of vet schools doesn't limit the number of new graduates each year. It also doesn't guarantee quality. Some saw competition driving innovation, quality and value for money and the size of the market eventually limiting demand for places.

BVA's view on the way forward

Given that the veterinary education landscape is changing the profession needs to look at how it can adjust and look for opportunities to influence developments for the best outcome for the profession.

The Forum heard about concerns that there is no Europe-wide standard for veterinary schools and that a large number of veterinary schools in Europe are not approved under a voluntary scheme by the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education. BVA will explore how significant the proportion is of veterinary graduates coming out of non-approved schools who are entitled to work in the EU. We will look into what, if anything, we can do to ensure these schools meet the required standards which may include lobbying the UK to make representations at a European level of those countries where the non-approved schools operate.

While the BVA can't advise practices on who or who not to recruit we may make available guidance in an accessible format for members to understand what different veterinary accreditations mean. Another element that came to light at the discussion forum is the fact that some overseas universities don't have a compulsory EMS requirement and these are all things that employers may want to take into consideration when assessing candidates' suitability for a position.

New UK vet schools will have minimal impact considering the EU element. EU vets have a right to work in the UK which means we shouldn't focus on eight or nine vet schools in Great Britain, but 110 vet schools in the EU.

The focus must not be on stifling the changes but rather on how to make the best of the shifting landscape. This may require some radical thinking and a transformation in the way we communicate the realities of the veterinary career to those interested in a veterinary degree.

Cooperation will be crucial. The way forward will require a group including member organisations, vet schools, RCVS, students and veterinary welfare organisations to monitor whether problems are emerging as a result of the changing landscape. If they are, then BVA sees such a group allocating responsibility for managing the consequences of these changes.

Throughout this it will be important to observe how these changes affect the mental health of the profession, if it is getting worse then we are not succeeding.

Highlights of speaker presentations

Evidence: RCVS survey results from a graduate perspective – recent graduate and MSG member Priya Sharp

One of the trends identified from the results of the RCVS' Survey of Recent Graduates 2013 show that during the past 10 years the number of veterinary graduates has increased from 499 to 805 which has started to cause concern about the impact on graduates finding work.

The report shows that it took graduates longer to find their first job. While in 2008 it took one to three attempts to find work, it took three to six attempts in 2012.

The report also touches on the emotional needs of graduates with the survey highlighting that one of the main reasons why their first job didn't meet their needs is that there was not enough professional support from employers and colleagues. In 2012 more graduates also answered that their first job didn't meet their needs because the position was too lowly paid.

The results further show that graduates taking on voluntary positions have increased to six per cent in 2012, but that the overwhelming majority of respondents still managed to acquire paid veterinary work after graduation.

These figures imply that enough work is currently available for veterinary graduates and that prospects are reasonable at the moment but that there is a downward pressure on salaries. The profession must work on expanding the market.

Evidence: BEVA findings – BEVA Past President Keith Chandler

A recent BEVA survey shows that there are many more veterinary graduates wishing to work in equine practice than there are jobs available.

The results also show that internships, commonly the domain of new graduates, and unpaid externships are now sometimes taken by vets that had been qualified for several years.

Equine disciplines are fashionable but realistic expectations and opportunities must be conveyed to veterinary school applicants (and awareness of the reality of the equine job market must be raised).

Current position: What BVA has done so far – MSG Chair Rachael Kilroy

BVA will look at all options to try to improve decision making. BVA's Members Services Group has looked at what can realistically be done to deal with the effect of new veterinary schools and the resulting increase in graduates.

Not all BVA members hold the view that increasing the number of graduates will be bad for the profession and some members see opportunities for potential positive outcomes such as a better work-life balance, employment opportunities for academics in the new veterinary schools, and more UK vets in public health roles. While many more new graduates would undoubtedly present serious challenges, the profession must not appear protectionist.

BVA has stimulated discussion amongst its members and the veterinary press to gather views on the topic. To trigger information sharing BVA has also raised the issue at the International Veterinary Officers Council before convening this Education Discussion Forum.

All this will help BVA identify which areas it can realistically influence and it will help formulate next steps.

What we can learn from other countries – Principal of Royal Veterinary College London
Professor Stuart Reid

The veterinary industry is a global one and we can look at experiences in other countries to help us predict the future for the profession in our own country. Any discussion about veterinary education therefore needs to include the wider veterinary education community.

The European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) runs a voluntary scheme of accreditation for vet schools but while most schools will have passed their national approval process this cannot be measured against an EU-wide standard. Many schools have never been visited by the EAEVE and have no accreditation under this scheme. Of the 110 veterinary colleges in the European Economic Area only five are fully accredited and around 40 have never been inspected or approved, yet graduates from these institutions are entitled to be employed in UK practices.

Italy is leading the way in some respects in that the government is demanding that vet schools achieve fully accredited status with EAEVE within 3 years or their funding will be stopped. Under EU regulations, the RCVS has to automatically register EU nationals who hold a recognised EU veterinary qualification.

In light of the UK being unable to control the number of EU graduates the UK veterinary profession has to consider the direction it can take and the jobs that veterinary graduates have access to. One important factor the profession should be monitoring in the future is the debt to earnings ratio. In the US, for example, salaries had increased but so had student debt.

Another example from the US includes the need to adapt to the changing environment and the decrease in practice footfall meant that US practices had to find new ways of working to compensate this.

The profession must be careful to back up comments with evidence and care must be taken when looking at stats as there are often several ways of interpreting them and some are inaccurate or out of date. The profession should try to focus less on numbers and more on quality.

Devolved country perspective – Veterinary Research Officer at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute in Belfast Simon Doherty

Why shouldn't the devolved countries have their own vet schools.

In Northern Ireland there are currently around 100 practices and 500 veterinary professionals. Most students leave the country in what is perceived as a brain drain to study veterinary medicine at University College Dublin or in the UK.

The University of Ulster is currently awaiting approval for a new veterinary undergraduate programme in 2015. While in Northern Ireland there are concerns about new veterinary schools they are also seen as an opportunity to stop the Northern Ireland brain drain and develop a more local practice relationship.

Graduates need to think outside of the box and take the component skills of a veterinary medicine degree such as analysis of data, problem solving and time management, and transfer them to para-veterinary jobs or perhaps other fields entirely.

What has and can be done by the RCVS - Director of Education at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Freda Andrews

Under an EU directive the RCVS is required to register EU vets. Latest figures show that the number of new registrants has increased, as has the number of registrants from overseas. RCVS has no mandate to control student or graduate numbers. There is no evidence that university graduates have been significantly short on their Extra Mural Studies (EMS) requirement so far despite the growing numbers of vet students.

When a new veterinary school opens RCVS comments on the new curriculum, makes two inspections in year 3 and year 5 of the degree, appoints external examiners and retains control until a recognition order is granted. The Privy Council grants recognition orders. RCVS undertakes inspection visits, re-visits, monitoring through annual reports and statistics.

Criteria have been agreed with EAEVE, Australia and New Zealand and are in line with American Veterinary Medical Association criteria. They are based on education standards, not workforce factors.

The Home Office asked the RCVS to comment on migration for the Migration Advisory Committee. RCVS responded that based on the current registration numbers and trends, that there would be a shortfall of approximately 422 +/- 100 vets per year. Vets are no longer present on the shortage occupations list.

Improving engagement in science education – Science and Education at the Department for Education Stephen Stanton

The Department for Education is trying to improve uptake of science subjects and refine the way they are offered and taught as well as addressing gender differences in uptake.

Careers advice is fragmented, particularly in the devolved countries where advice is down to school level. There is a need for baseline information including expected salaries to feed into schools and careers advice services.

Veterinary undergraduate and AVS perspective – veterinary student Alex McGhee

Universities needed to be more honest about graduate prospects at the point of admission, especially where opportunities, earnings, job security and professional satisfaction are concerned. Information on what graduates can realistically expect should be made much clearer to applicants.

According to the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS) the brightest and the best might be discouraged from applying if job prospects continue to languish. While new schools should invigorate the system and curricula, there is concern that the quality of education is diluted with a limited number of good teachers. AVS reports the effect the opening of Nottingham Veterinary School has had on Bristol Veterinary School where some of the most valued teachers moved to the new school.

AVS are very much of the view that while the cost of EMS can be considerable by the time accommodation and travel is added, EMS is highly valued for both soft skills and basic day one competencies. There is concern that an increase in the number of new schools may limit the availability and/or quality of EMS in the future.

AVS would like to see a national EMS database and some connection between EMS and the RCVS practice standards scheme.

Head of Veterinary School perspective – Head of the University of Cambridge Veterinary School
Professor James Wood

In the discussion about the changing landscape universities focus on availability of teaching staff for new vet schools and whether this will have an impact on the quality of veterinary education.

The challenges to veterinary school recruitment and retention include

- difficulties retaining quality teaching staff
- salary differences with a growing market for specialists in referral practice
- inflexible working conditions
- demands for teaching staff to be all things to all (probably impossible and certainly rare)
- costs of education to clinical specialist status combined with progression to excellence in research (can you really get both in one person?)
- and perhaps the lack of standing in the profession as a whole (the medical profession addressed this challenge decades ago)

Extra-mural studies are central to the quality of veterinary education. EMS has been critical in training our students. Is this, or should this be the key limit on student education as currently constructed?

Leadership on the future of the veterinary profession should come from all in the profession.

EMS organisation - Director of Professional Development and EMS at the Royal Veterinary College London Dr Jill Maddison

EMS distribution is important. RCVS stipulates that students undertake 26 weeks of EMS and recommends that the first 6 weeks are in 2 week blocks at 3 different practices. Beyond that, the Royal Veterinary College London (RVC) imposes a rule that the students must complete two weeks in farm, two in equine and two in small animal as a minimum. Furthermore, no more than 13 weeks may be completed abroad.

Results from an RVC student survey shows that farm and equine placements are hard to find and especially any that are close to uni or home. From the practice perspective the farm and equine placements constantly feed back that they only want to receive students with a vested interest in working in those particular fields.

Defining factors for selecting an EMS placement at the RVC are

1. High chance of developing clinical skills
2. Distance from the college, friends or family
3. High chance of assisting in a surgery
4. Low accommodation costs
5. Knowledge of the practice/relationship development
6. Word of mouth recommendation