

# Editorial

## Quality and quantity in veterinary education

IT wasn't so very long ago – six years to be precise – that concern was being expressed about a potential oversupply of veterinary graduates emerging from the UK's vet schools.

That concern, widely expressed at the time, was prompted by the University of Surrey's announcement of its intention to establish a new veterinary school.

Now, following the first cohort of graduates from the Surrey vet school this summer, the picture has changed. A 'workforce crisis' has been a key concern for some time, bringing recruitment and retention of vets to the fore.

Although the Home Office recently accepted a recommendation from the Migration Advisory Committee to return vets to the Shortage Occupation List, increasing the numbers of 'home-grown' vets will also help ease the situation.

The capacity for training new vets will expand next year, when the UK's ninth vet school opens its doors. The school is a partnership between Harper Adams University and Keele University and it is now accepting applications for its Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine and Science degree.

Meanwhile, Ulster University has a long-standing ambition to open a vet school in Northern Ireland, and the Royal Veterinary College and Aberystwyth University have discussed proposals to offer a joint veterinary degree in Wales.

However, the push for quantity must not overshadow the importance of quality. This is acknowledged in a new BVA policy position on veterinary education, which was agreed unanimously by the association's council in April and will be released to the wider profession this autumn. It makes multiple recommendations covering student selection, widening participation, careers advice, the delivery and quality of undergraduate education, retaining UK graduates in the workforce, extramural studies (EMS), graduate outcomes, and equality and diversity.

Discussing the quality of veterinary education, the position acknowledges that increasing production of UK graduates could be one possible way of addressing workforce shortages. But, it emphasises that any increase in the number of vet students must also take account of potential unintended consequences on the quality and standards of veterinary education.

There are several issues to consider here, including the wider context of higher education. For instance, while there's no cap on the number of students that vet schools can admit, government funding for education is not calculated on a per capita basis. Therefore, funding will not automatically increase if schools take on more students.

Also, the veterinary course is expensive to deliver – in excess of £20,000 per student per year – and BVA's position paper points out that the cost of providing undergraduate veterinary education exceeds current direct income streams. It warns that any reduction in funding, or in student tuition fees (such as that recommended earlier this year by a government-commissioned review of higher education and

funding) 'could destabilise the provision of veterinary education, risking a dilution in terms of quality and standards or a reduction in the number of veterinary graduates being produced'.

Furthermore, vet schools accredited by the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education must adhere to specific staff:student ratios. Any increase in student numbers will require a corresponding increase in staff numbers, which, in turn, brings funding issues, as well as the question of where the extra staff will come from.

There is also the impact on EMS. Six years ago, when concerns about oversupply were prevalent, the availability of EMS placements was viewed as a potential 'pinch point' to increasing student numbers. This hasn't changed – as long as EMS remains a core part of veterinary training, more students will require more placements.

As the policy position acknowledges, the veterinary professional landscape is currently 'in considerable flux'. Against this background, it is vital to ensure that quality is not overlooked in favour of quantity in the drive to find solutions to workforce shortages.

**Kathryn Clark**

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