

Maintaining excellence and sustainability in UK veterinary education and research post-Brexit

The April 2017 [House of Commons Education Select Committee report](#) highlights the need for government to reduce the uncertainty surrounding Brexit for both EU students and staff at UK universities. It also states that maintaining research collaboration is essential and any future immigration policies must facilitate movement to universities. This Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) report takes a closer look at these matters specifically in relation to veterinary education and research.

VSC supports the ongoing work of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and the British Veterinary Association (BVA) in their efforts to gather evidence to develop important considerations surrounding Brexit in relation to the veterinary profession, and to advise government in the impending negotiations.

VSC agrees with the sentiments outlined in the RCVS' recently published [Brexit Principles](#), and welcomes the [BVA's dedication](#) to ensuring the 'best possible outcome for veterinary science, animal health and welfare and public health' in light of the vote to leave the EU. It is essential that the optimum policies and structures are in place to ensure that veterinary training and research outputs continue to thrive.

It is still not yet clear exactly what the vote to leave the EU will mean for the UK on key issues such as free movement of people, mutual recognition of qualifications and collaborative research across the EU. Despite these uncertainties, as an organisation and as individual veterinary schools, members of the VSC remain committed to working with, and remaining members of, the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE).

VSC believes in the principles of harmonisation of standards, mutual recognition of professional and specialist qualifications, where appropriate, and values the work that EAEVE does in ensuring that standards for veterinary education are consistent. VSC will continue to engage with EAEVE on the important work of assuring the quality of veterinary education across Europe.

Below we outline some of the key considerations in relation to maintaining and advancing the UK's strength in veterinary education and research.

Education and training capacity

In an [open letter to the Prime Minister in October 2016](#), the RCVS and BVA raised a concern that if immigration controls restrict the number of EU professionals working in the UK, there may not be sufficient veterinary surgeons available to meet workforce demands. The most cost-efficient way to increase the number of graduates from UK undergraduate veterinary medicine courses would be to increase the size and capacity of current veterinary schools.

However, veterinary schools do not currently have the resources needed to do this. The costs per student for veterinary education are high compared to other teaching subjects, as illustrated by Figure 1 below. This is because of the wide range of clinical and professional skills they need to be equipped with at graduation, as set out in the RCVS Day One Competencies. While further research is needed, schools anticipate that the current cost of veterinary courses could be beyond the £20,000 estimate that was calculated to create Figure 1 using [TRAC\(T\) data](#).

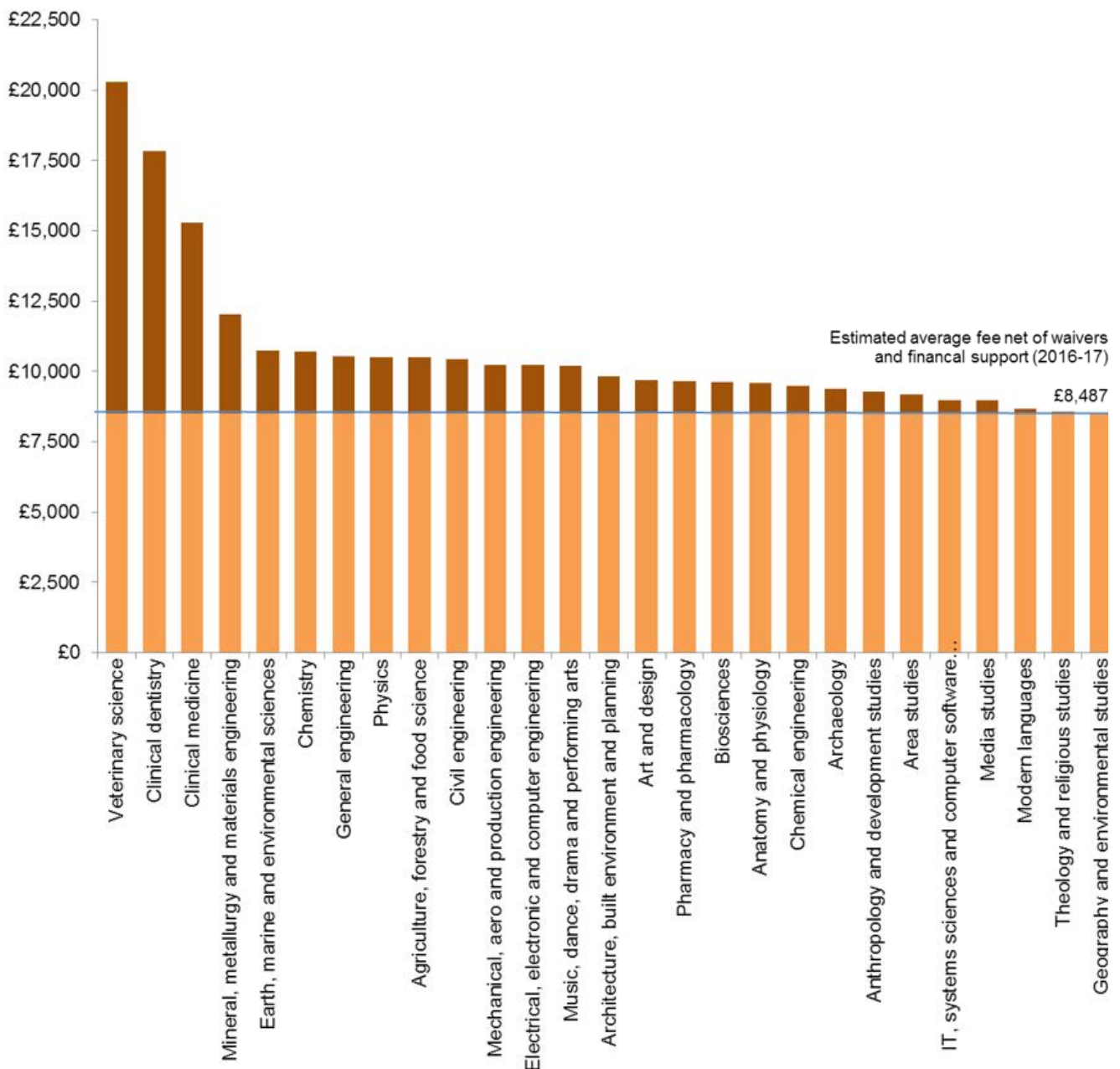


Figure 1: Identifying high-cost subjects: Difference between fee income and costs (Source: Adapted from Universities UK analysis of Higher Education Funding Council for England TRAC(T) and Office for Fair Access data)

To sustainably run a veterinary medical course has its challenges, and this may require further government investment in the near future. In order to increase capacity, investment would certainly be needed in infrastructure and staff, and for other costs such as student support. These costs cannot be covered by a £9000 student fee plus the current support provided from the Higher Funding Council for England (HEFCE) or similar funding levels provided by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Initial evidence gathered by veterinary schools suggests that the cost of veterinary education already exceeds the funding that they receive for UK students.

A further concern is whether there would be a sufficient number of applicants from the UK, and there is already some concern that the overall number of applications to veterinary medicine in the UK may be declining. VSC would encourage the government to consider refraining from implementing barriers to EU applicants or students from other areas in coming to study in the UK. The contribution of students studying in the UK [from abroad is evident](#) and this is [recognised by the wider public](#).

Maintaining excellence in veterinary research

UK veterinary research is world-leading, as outlined in the VSC report '[Bridging the Gap](#)'. This highlights the world-class research undertaken in veterinary schools of the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, and how this research has had real impact across Europe and beyond. The national and global impact of UK veterinary school research was also highlighted in a recent article in the Veterinary Record.¹ The UK veterinary schools are all highly ranked in QS global rankings and it is essential that we maintain our global research position.

The impact of veterinary science on animals and society, including global health, is significant and ever-increasing. Most challenges to society are not border controlled and require an interdisciplinary collaborative approach between relevant institutions and societal bodies.

The Research Committee of the Veterinary Schools Council has begun to consider the potential impact of Brexit on the UK veterinary research sector, including issues in staff recruitment and retention, concerns on access to research funding and a potential strain on global networks. Below is a summary of the key concerns from the perspective of our member institutions.

Fostering and preserving global research networks

The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Utrecht University in The Netherlands strongly supports increasing collaboration between leading European veterinary faculties, to secure a network-based approach to veterinary medicine and global health. This covers a wide spectrum of activities, including collaborative EU research programs, but also fostering student and staff exchange to share clinical expertise. Throughout the discussions surrounding Brexit it will be important to ensure the benefits of the current approach to animal, man and society is not jeopardized.

The School of Veterinary Medicine, University College Dublin (UCD) highly values its well-established collaborative research links with veterinary schools and research

institutes in Great Britain and with institutes and universities in Northern Ireland. Colleagues in the UK participate in interdisciplinary projects funded by agencies in the Republic of Ireland (Science Foundation Ireland, Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, the Agricultural and Food Development Authority (Teagasc) as well as in EU Framework programmes. The UCD School of Veterinary Medicine hopes that Brexit will not pose a threat to these invaluable research relationships, which significantly contribute to the national and global impact of research.

Ensuring sufficient funding to carry out the veterinary and global health agenda

Researchers at UK veterinary schools are continuing to make applications for European funding schemes, which remain accessible for the time being. There has been no evidence that UK researchers will be excluded from collaborative bids, but the uncertainty over access to EU funding schemes continues to be a major concern.

The future of the EU funding review process is much less certain and there is a strong feeling among staff that UK researchers will not be able to lead consortia in the future because of the perception that UK led consortia may be unfairly reviewed. Though it is too soon to evaluate the impact on applications, there is certainly a lack of confidence in the process amongst UK staff.

Recruiting and retaining the best minds to advance veterinary and global health research in the UK

A significant concern is the residency status of the high proportion of skilled staff at veterinary schools who are non-UK EU nationals. EU nationals constitute approximately 17% of the UK veterinary school workforce, and for some schools this is up to as much as 40%.²

There have been reports of a major effect on morale for existing European staff at UK universities, which has impacted retention. This has been coupled with challenges in recruitment, particularly to senior research positions. Although there may be other factors involved in the loss of EU and international staff or applicants (e.g. a desire to return to their home country), anecdotal evidence suggests that Brexit has been an influencing factor.

The assurances from government thus far in relation to ensuring the future of health and scientific research funding and workforce stability post-Brexit have not yet been sufficient to alleviate concerns. This seems likely to have a significant impact on long-term planning if it is not resolved in the near future.

Reviewing how we conduct research and maintaining the UK's competitive edge

As the UK moves towards Brexit however, we should look to review how we conduct patient-based research in the UK and whether we can work with RCVS, BVA, VSC, the Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs and the Home Office to take a critical look at patient based research, what should come under the Animals Scientific Procedures Act (ASPA) and how we can streamline clinical studies while still protecting our patients. This was recently highlighted in an editorial in Nature.³ A priority must be to maintain the UK's position in world research rankings.

As the Brexit negotiations unfold, the Veterinary Schools Council will assist the work of the RCVS, BVA and other relevant bodies to consider the ongoing and potential impacts of Brexit and surrounding developments on UK veterinary medicine and global health.

References

1. 'Research with a wide impact', Veterinary Record, 179:392 (22 October 2016) doi:10.1136/vr.i5658
2. This average was calculated with data collected between July-September 2016 from seven UK veterinary schools
3. 'Reform regulations to make pet clinical trials easier', Nature, 540:169 (08 December 2016) doi:10.1038/540169a

Our role

The Veterinary Schools Council provides a source of informed opinion on matters concerning veterinary education and research. It engages in representative and policy work to ensure that the voice of veterinary schools is recognised for its experience and will to innovate. The Veterinary Schools Council represents seven of the UK's veterinary schools and two non-UK associate members: the School of Veterinary Medicine, University College Dublin; and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University. For more information please see www.vetschoolscouncil.ac.uk.

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