

Contingency planning for veterinary education in the time of Covid-19

General principles

As the representative body for all UK veterinary schools, the Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) realises that it is important to set out a roadmap for veterinary education at a time when the coronavirus pandemic is disrupting both the higher education and veterinary sectors. Flexibility will be needed to meet these challenges and universities, students and the profession must accept that whilst veterinary education and training will look very different over this period, veterinary schools will continue to produce the highly competent graduates that society needs.

The core principle underlying this statement is that high quality veterinary education must be facilitated as the UK needs new vets entering the profession on a yearly basis. The United Kingdom currently has a shortage of veterinary surgeons, estimated at 11-13%. It is also heavily reliant on overseas graduates; over 60% of vets registering in recent years graduated overseas. This trend is more pronounced in the public health sector where over 95% of veterinary surgeons graduated overseas. In recognition of this challenge the veterinary profession was recently restored to the Shortage Occupation List to help streamline future visa applications.

It is therefore critical that the number of graduates from UK veterinary schools is maintained in the coming years in order to ensure a sufficient workforce to support the health and welfare of animals as well as public health.

University-based education and training

The lockdown which was put in place in response to the pandemic meant that university campuses had to close. Veterinary education is still being delivered to students, but that delivery has moved online. When the lockdown is eased vet schools and universities need to consider what social distancing means for the future delivery of veterinary education and training.

The consensus amongst vet schools is that a blended approach will need to be implemented where hands-on learning opportunities are supplemented by online teaching. It is not possible to provide high quality veterinary education online for a significant amount of time as veterinary medicine is a practical course. Students must learn skills such as animal handling and surgery in order to meet the Day One Competencies required by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons for graduation and therefore registration.

As the start of the academic year approaches, which for some vet schools begins as early as May 2020, vet schools are looking at ways they can change the structure of their courses to maximise the amount of knowledge-based learning students can undertake remotely at the start of the year in order to delay the need for them to return to campus. However, due to the practical nature of their studies, vet students must be amongst the first cohort of students allowed back on university campuses.

Clinical placements

Veterinary students need clinical experience to meet the requirements of their courses. It is therefore essential that both university-owned veterinary hospitals and veterinary practices that host vet school clinical placements restart as soon as is reasonably and safely possible. Requirements to ensure social distancing are likely to be in place for the foreseeable future and this is likely to mean that placement capacity for vet students is reduced. It will therefore be necessary to prioritise which students are able to go on placement.

Students entering their final year should take priority as they need to gain significant practical experience to prepare them to become working veterinary surgeons. Vet schools will need the support and collaboration of their placement providers not only to deliver clinical placements for this stage of learning, but to cover core gaps from placement experience in their penultimate year due to the pandemic.

The second priority is students in the latter part of their courses who would ordinarily be spending the majority of their time in clinical placements. Whilst there is not an immediate urgency to prepare these students for graduation, veterinary medicine is a longitudinal programme of study that requires these valuable formative years for students to learn clinical skills and apply their knowledge. It is expected that their clinical placements will need to be more heavily supported by virtual learning and simulation than in previous years.

Extra-Mural Studies (EMS)

EMS placements are mandatory for veterinary students and recognition they have completed the required number of weeks experience must be confirmed by vet schools before they can graduate. RCVS has approved changes to the requirements around EMS in the short term to acknowledge the impact of lockdown.

Whilst fully accepting the challenges around hosting veterinary students for EMS placements, the VSC seeks the support of the profession with this important component of veterinary education. Workplace experience is of vital importance in preparing students to enter the workforce; we ask that practices consider re-commencing EMS placements at the earliest safe opportunity. All UK vet schools value their educational partnerships and welcome the opportunity to work with practices to ensure the safe and rapid resumption of EMS.