

**SUMMARY OF QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FROM
RCVS 'PARTNERSHIPS IN LIFELONG LEARNING' SEMINAR
BELGRAVIA HOUSE, LONDON
25 JANUARY 2007**

The RCVS panel comprised:

- Profession Sheila Crispin, RCVS President
- Professor Stephen May, Chairman of the RCVS Education Policy and Specialisation Committee
- Dr Bradley Viner, Chairman of the RCVS Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice Subcommittee

Q. The current uptake rate of certificates stands at around 10%. What research has been undertaken to show that the modular certificate will be more popular?

A. We haven't undertaken any formal market research, but it is hoped that the flexibility and other benefits of the new scheme will encourage increased uptake. The Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) Masters Group conducted a survey through the *Veterinary Times* with responses from of 1,000 vets regarding their perceptions of the need for a qualification for general practitioners, and what such a qualification should cover. It was apparent from the responses that the majority of vets in general practice supported modular certificates in principle, though they were not asked to comment on this specific model.

Q. Will the RCVS be accrediting only the assessment process, or accrediting the courses making up the module learning?

A. It is predominantly the assessment process that is being accredited; the detail of courses that may run alongside it is up to the course provider. However, the Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (CertAVP) committee would of course be interested to receive information about courses being provided, and would hope to see a match between the course content and the syllabus of the module.

Q. If the CertAVP is the definition of competence, what does that make a vet who doesn't hold one? What is the level of the key skills modules (A-PKS.1 and B-CKS.0) in relation to RCVS Day-One Competences?

A. The old-style certificates have always covered material included in undergraduate courses, but the "certificate standard" has been *the effective application* of undergraduate level knowledge and theory. In assessing certificate candidates, we are seeking confirmation of the successful application, which should be demonstrated by the competent practitioner with some years' experience.

The key skills modules examine depth of understanding and practical application of knowledge, and in Professional Skills, candidates will need to demonstrate experiential learning, not just knowledge of textbook cases. The B Clinical Skills module will demonstrate that all CertAVP qualified vets have a breadth of knowledge and skills in areas of practice that practising vets must be aware of (for example, principles of euthanasia across species, or legislation concerning notifiable diseases), but which they may not regularly encounter.

Q. According to the Rules for the Administration of the Modular System, anyone offering assessment must also cater for independent learners and provide an assessment-only route. Does this mean that candidates could take CertAVP qualifications without undertaking any formal study? In that case, what is the role of the continuing professional development (CPD) provider?

A. That's certainly possible, but clearly candidates who undertake formal learning and CPD tailored towards CertAVP assessment stand a better chance of passing. The availability of relevant CPD courses also creates opportunities for CPD participants to move towards studying for modules.

The reason we ask providers to offer an assessment-only route is that we are interested in the outcomes, rather than just the inputs, and the quality assurance (QA) framework allows for setting consistent standards independent of the course provider used.

Q. There is a feeling among the veterinary community that some people have trouble passing the old-style certificates because the assessment process has become too stringent, and that subject boards have lost sight of the definition of a certificate holder as a 'competent practitioner' in that field. How will the new modular structure tackle these perceived problems?

A. The old-style certificates have come to be seen as a 'gold standard', and can be a difficult hurdle for candidates to overcome. The RCVS is re-developing the certificate as a framework that encourages lifelong learning and CPD, a series of measurable, ongoing achievements and not a monolithic hurdle to be leapt. We want to avoid the perception of certificates as quasi-specialist level qualifications.

Being clear about the standard at the introduction of the new modular certificate system ("successful application of the knowledge of the good veterinary graduate") will provide a reference point for universities assessing candidates, and help to maintain consistency between subject areas and over time.

Q. Those setting up modules need to understand the needs of practising vets. Clients are looking for vets with demonstrable specific areas of expertise, for example, Equine Stud Medicine. Can we get some assurance that the CertAVP subcommittee will keep this in mind and provide a framework tailored to the needs of practising vets?

A. You can see from the module structure documents that particular areas of expertise will be flagged up to the general public by the designated certificates. There is a route for people to study towards a Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (Equine Stud Medicine), which should preserve the "best of the old". Modularisation will allow candidates to customise this theory to their requirements, but those who wish to assemble their knowledge and organise their careers along traditional lines can continue to do that as well.

Q. I am pleased to hear that the new certificates will be more flexible, and include the CPD providers. But how will the less popular certificates or modules be represented? If provision is market-driven, won't smaller items will be less cost-effective to assess, and vanish from the system?

A. It is unlikely that the RCVS would allow any subject areas to vanish completely. It may well be that less popular modules or certificates are not offered every year, but the longer enrolment period (ten years) allows for this. Once we have received a number of accreditation submissions, the RCVS will poll universities to cover less popular modules. At the moment it is hard to see to which modules this would apply.

Q. The RCVS is making assumptions about the willingness of universities to offer assessment. How good a business proposition will it be to offer RCVS-guided assessment, considering the smallish number of candidates per certificate?

A. Some universities are already looking at business plans for assessing CertAVP modules. Each university will develop its own assessment methods for modules, probably similar to those already used for assessing taught Masters programmes, so there should not be too many extra costs associated with that. The assumption is that your QA mechanisms are robust, so the RCVS will not need to check up or demand specific assessment methods in most cases.

Q. Do you expect CPD providers to enter into contractual arrangements with universities?

A. That's certainly a valid option. We want to encourage universities and CPD providers to share their expertise. Some may have formal contracts, others may have more informal arrangements in which details of courses and assessments are exchanged and discussed to facilitate constructive alignment of learning. Today's meeting creates an opportunity for universities and CPD providers to discuss forming relationships.

Q. What is the incentive for vets to take up certificates? How do you intend to incentivise CPD?

A. There is already an incentive for practising vets to undertake CPD since it is now mandatory. Revalidation is on the horizon and it is anticipated that CPD will be an element of this. Certificates are a good way for vets to cover their CPD requirements. However, we are thinking of this in terms of the carrot, not the stick. The RCVS is communicating the message that the profession needs to take a general view on professional and personal development. Vets should see CPD and the modular certificates not just as the acquisition of knowledge, but as a way of developing themselves as professionals and individuals. The CertAVP is also a high-status qualification that should enhance a vet's employability.

Q. The structure looks good, and embraces the concept of lifelong learning. I am concerned about the expense, though. What will be the additional cost to candidates now they have to pay an enrolment fee to RCVS, and then enrol separately with the course providers and pay for assessment too?

A. There will be a small charge by RCVS for enrolment onto the scheme, to cover the costs of maintaining candidate records and the credit transfer bank. This will be set at £50 for initial enrolment, with a £25 annual renewal fee.

Universities and CPD providers will obviously charge for courses, but most vets on the current certificates are already attending courses in any case as part of their CPD. The costs for enrolling on the current certificates and entering the examination are already quite significant. The total cost of the new system may work out slightly more or less depending on the charges made by universities for assessment, and on the individual's learning route.

At the provider's discretion, some modules could be assessed in conjunction – for example, a full series of three Diagnostic Imaging modules could be assessed in a practical context in a single sitting. This would be more economical for the university, and therefore cheaper for the candidate.

Q. Since the assessment process may differ between universities, how will uniformity be ensured?

A. The RCVS has laid out assessment guidance for the modules. Since we are accrediting the assessment procedures, we will be looking very carefully at these before offering accreditation. We would expect standards to be consistent for the CertAVP modules just as we expect standards to be consistent for undergraduate degrees. This is the point of the QA system.

Q. I'm concerned about the number and demographic distribution of candidates. Will older vets be willing to take the Key Skills modules, which they may see as 'beneath them', and will younger vets with loans to pay off be able to afford to pay for assessments?

A. Surely, it is always useful for veterinary surgeons to undertake preparatory work, and to go back and re-evaluate their core skills, particular those professional or 'soft skills' which the older generation were not taught at veterinary school. You're never too old to learn, after all.

Studying towards and attaining qualifications benefits vets of any age as it enables them to give more to their professional life.

Q. Will there be *pro formas* of casebooks, and so on, available as guidance for assessment?

A. The RCVS is trying to avoid being too prescriptive. The expertise on assessment lies with the universities themselves, so the detail will come from them – we are only providing guidelines. The synoptic assessments at the end of each designated certificate will be designed by a final examining committee – for example, Diagnostic Imaging might include an oral on radiology with a series of x-rays on which to comment. As a rule of thumb, assessment should be designed to ensure that knowledge learned for the modules is brought into a coherent whole.

Q. I am concerned about low numbers. How does RCVS foresee us dealing with a situation where a provider is unable to offer a module because there are not enough candidates enrolled?

A. We would advise providers to err on the safe side and work from current figures and not anticipate rapid growth (although of course that's what we're hoping for!). If a provider has enrolled candidates onto a course or assessment, we would expect them to run it and not cancel because of low numbers. This should be standard practice anyway for any postgraduate programme.

Q. Why has RCVS removed itself from the assessment role? The Certificate Boards do a very good job – are you not in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater?

A. The intention isn't to throw anything out. The subject Boards have been heavily involved in developing the module syllabi. The assessment methods will in many cases be similar, but will now fall under the universities' quality assurance procedures for postgraduate awards. We expect that many of the current RCVS examiners drawn from both practice and academia will continue to be involved through individual universities.

The new modular certificate system sees the RCVS moving with the marketplace. It will enable candidates to access accredited modules in different locations all over the country. It's never been our intention to lose the best of the old-style certificate programme, as the retention of designated combinations of modules, which approximate to many of the old-style certificates, demonstrates.

Q. Why should candidates enrol with the RCVS before taking modules? Surely it's better to just do all the assessments and then come to the RCVS at the end to get the certificate granted, and save on enrolment fees?

A. We can't actually force people to enrol, but credits from assessed modules will not be counted towards a full certificate unless the candidate is enrolled with the RCVS. Of course, people can still do courses and modules independently outside of the modular certificate scheme, but they will not be able to bank credits towards the RCVS certificate. It's also helpful to the candidate to enrol as they will then have access to support and advice from RCVS. This is particularly important for candidates wishing to take a designated certificate and needing guidance on appropriate routes.

Q. Do you think that the modular approach will discourage people from stretching themselves professionally and going outside of their 'comfort zone'?

A. The RCVS developed the new modular certificates to find a workable method of offering qualification routes that suited the needs of veterinary practitioners. The idea of modules is to encourage more people to undertake assessed CPD, whether ultimately leading to a certificate or not.

The content of the CertAVP is driven by the needs of practitioners to undergo professional development to provide a constantly improving service to clients. There is a gap between need and want: for example, practices *need* 'soft skills', but few vets *want* to study them, as they much prefer practical, knowledge-based learning in areas they already know about. By building these key skills into the modular certificates, we can ensure a balanced syllabus.

Q. Why is the certificate called 'Advanced Veterinary Practice' if it is going to be dumbed down to the level of 'competence'? Will holders of the old-style certificates have higher status than new modular certificate holders?

A. Standards are not being lowered or 'dumbed down', as you say. The standard of the new certificates will be the same as the old-style certificates were intended to be. We are trying to anchor the CertAVP at the level of the competent practitioner, not specialist level, and keep it where it should be.

Q. Are universities being offered a cartel by being the only bodies accredited to assess? Shouldn't the RCVS be offering accreditation to all courses offered by all CPD providers? Otherwise, it is difficult for other CPD providers to get their foot in the door as candidates will naturally choose to study where they are being assessed.

A. Providers will know the learning objectives and assessment criteria of each module from the syllabus and guidelines, and can provide tailored courses independently of the assessment structure. Universities are obliged to offer an assessment-only route, and aren't allowed to restrict assessment solely to candidates who have attended their course. As far as the RCVS is concerned, the important thing to accredit isn't the input (the courses) but the outcome (the assessment).

Q. What are the timelines for getting the modular certificate programme up and running? When can candidates start enrolling?

A. Candidates can enrol as soon as modules are finalised and one or more universities has been accredited to offer the modules.

RCVS Education Department
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