

ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS

Submission to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Skills, concerning the Government's White Paper "The Future of Higher Education"

Background on the role of the RCVS

1. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) is the statutory, regulatory body for veterinary surgeons in the UK. Its role is to safeguard the health and welfare of animals committed to veterinary care through the regulation of the educational, ethical and clinical standards of the veterinary profession.
2. The veterinary degrees awarded by the six UK veterinary schools entitle the holders to register with RCVS and thereby to practise as veterinary surgeons in the UK and Europe. In its role as regulator of the standards of education, RCVS undertakes periodic visits to each of the six UK veterinary schools to monitor the standards of the undergraduate veterinary degree, and makes recommendation to Privy Council on continued recognition. RCVS visits are undertaken in collaboration with organisations in Europe and Australasia, and we have recently agreed to a mutual exchange of visitors with the American Veterinary Medical Association, the accrediting body for the USA and Canada. This reflects the importance of maintaining international veterinary standards, in order to control disease and assure food safety across national borders.
3. The proposals contained within the Government's White Paper on higher education will potentially have a significant effect on veterinary education in the UK, and thereby on the future composition of the veterinary profession. It is in this light that we would wish to submit some comments, which we hope will be helpful to the Committee in its discussions.
4. **In summary, our principal concerns with the White Paper proposals are that the greatly increased burden of debt for veterinary graduates will**
 - a. **deter many young people from applying to study veterinary medicine in the future, and**
 - b. **deter graduates from entering careers in areas of greatest public interest where salaries are lowest, ie. in veterinary research, in farm and livestock animal practice, and from rural-based practices in general.**

The supply of veterinary graduates

5. In 2002, the six UK veterinary schools admitted a total of 636 students, of whom 582 are from the UK, and 54 are from elsewhere in the EU and overseas. Each year, RCVS registers more veterinarians from overseas than from the UK. RCVS' manpower predictions¹ indicate that, with the number of UK veterinary graduates gradually increasing, the current shortage of home-trained veterinary graduates may be alleviated in the medium term and indeed a surplus is likely. It is reasonable to predict, therefore, that salary levels will fall over the next 5 – 10 years.

¹ Institute for Employment Studies, "Workforce Modelling for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons", 2001

The role of the veterinary profession in maintaining public health

6. Over 700 veterinarians are employed in various branches of government service, in the veterinary field service of the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and its counterpart in Northern Ireland, in government research laboratories, the Meat Hygiene Service, Food Standards Agency, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. In addition, many veterinary surgeons based in private practice make a vital contribution to the public sector in their role as “local veterinary inspectors”.
7. Veterinary surgeons play an important role in public health through their involvement with the farm livestock sector, through their regulatory work in abattoirs, and through research in universities and elsewhere. They make a critical contribution to disease surveillance and control, including identification of exotic disease incursions, zoonoses, and farm and laboratory animal welfare. Veterinary research also contributes to advances in human medicine, through better understanding of disease mechanisms and genetic models.

Research and Teaching

8. The White Paper puts a welcome emphasis on the need to strengthen the research base, as well as the value attached to good quality teaching in the universities. The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Veterinary Research commissioned by the RCVS (“The Selborne Report”, 1997) highlighted the problems caused by a lack of funding and coordination for veterinary research in the UK, and these issues are still being addressed by the research community and funding councils. The proposals in the White Paper for increased research funding, and for encouraging greater collaboration and knowledge exchange are positive, and we would want to encourage the veterinary schools to play a full part in developments in this area to help establish a stable research base.
9. We have concerns, however, that the proposals on student fees will lead to even fewer new graduates going into research careers and subsequently into university teaching. The increased PhD stipend is unlikely to be sufficiently attractive to persuade the best veterinary graduates to move into research. The recruitment problems currently faced by all the UK veterinary schools are real and serious and will be further exacerbated by the additional pressure created by high levels of graduate debt.

Widening Access

10. We are also concerned that the White Paper proposals could reduce the number of applicants, especially those from lower socio-economic groups who are already under-represented. There would be an additional negative impact on the current “widening access” programmes run by the UK universities with veterinary schools, and supported by the Government. The increased level of graduate debt will deter many from embarking on a veterinary degree, especially as the financial returns from employment are lower than those of comparable medical and allied professions. This will further distort the future social composition of the profession. Indeed in the recently published survey of the current veterinary student body

conducted by the British Veterinary Association (BVA), which attracted a 57% response rate, 47% indicated that an increase in fees along the lines proposed would have affected their choice of subject.

11. The A level entry requirements for veterinary degrees are necessarily high, to ensure that those admitted have the potential to complete the course satisfactorily (the current drop-out rate is negligible). It is difficult to see how veterinary schools could further increase the proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups unless such students also had the benefit of good science teaching at secondary level. Higher standards of achievement at GCSE and A level is a necessary precursor for widening access to the professions generally.

The effect of increased graduate debt

12. The veterinary degree is 5 years in length, or 6 years if a student takes an intercalated degree during the veterinary course. The Cambridge veterinary degree is 6 years in length as 'intercalation' is a standard feature of the course. Veterinary training includes a **mandatory 38 weeks of unpaid work experience** termed "extra mural studies", when students spend time on farms, in veterinary practices, veterinary investigation laboratories and abattoirs. This is usually undertaken during vacations, leaving students with little time in which to find part-time and vacation work to defray their debts. Furthermore, in many of the veterinary schools, the final year is now organised as a 48 week teaching year to allow students to gain maximum benefit from clinical rotations. This already serves to increase the living costs for veterinary undergraduates.
13. The present level of debt amongst veterinary students is already a cause for concern, and the White Paper proposals will add significantly to this. The recent BVA survey indicates that debts have increased significantly over the past 4 years, and that the mean is now close to £10,000, even without the impact of the recently introduced tuition fees. The mean anticipated debt upon graduation is now more than £17,000. Assuming the universities take the opportunity to charge increased fees from 2006, graduates will be faced with a minimum debt of £15,000 for fees alone, *plus* 5 or 6 years worth of living costs. These figures translate to a total **graduate debt of some £30,000 as a very conservative estimate**. For many veterinary graduates, **this will present a heavy repayment burden over a much longer period than their peers in other professional careers²**.
14. In addition to our concerns about the potential for deterring applicants from less affluent backgrounds, we are also concerned that veterinary graduates in the future will be deterred from entering the lesser paid (but critically important) field of farm livestock production and disease control. The numbers choosing a career in veterinary research will also decline, as graduates will seek the better paid jobs in predominantly urban-based companion animal practice.

² The 2002 salaries survey undertaken by the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons indicates that the average total remuneration package (which may include travel and accommodation allowance) for vets who have been qualified for 5 years is around £33,000, rising to around £36,000 for those who are up to 15 years qualified. The average starting salary is around £17,000, plus travel and accommodation allowances.

15. The medical and allied professions come under the Department of Health, and therefore benefit from significant government support through whole or part payment of undergraduate fees. As the veterinary profession has more private sector than public sector employees, however, it receives no support of this type.
16. The veterinary profession is principally made up of very small, private practices which are ill placed to offer further financial support through student bursaries, or by increasing salaries to new graduates to compensate for the repayment of student debts. Such practices already make a significant contribution to the education of veterinary undergraduates by providing extra-mural study placements; it would be unreasonable to expect them to meet any further cost without passing it on to their clients, with a consequent knock on effect on animal welfare. It should be noted that many practices are based in rural areas and are already facing financial difficulty due to the continued decline of the agricultural sector.
17. It would help if DEFRA, as the main public sector employer of veterinarians, could consider offering bursaries or a loan write-off scheme for a proportion of veterinary students (similar to those offered by the armed forces, or to teachers of shortage subjects), and could support graduate training programmes for work in this area.

The Scottish Veterinary Schools

18. Although the White Paper only applies to England, the effect on the two Scottish Veterinary Schools in Glasgow and Edinburgh also needs to be considered. There is already a well documented problem in recruitment and retention of clinical teachers across the UK. There are concerns that this situation will be exacerbated in Scotland, unless the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council makes similar funds available to support research and to enable the Scottish universities to continue to compete on equal terms with their English counterparts in the international recruitment market for veterinary qualified clinical teachers.