

# **Independent Review of Veterinary Nursing NVQ Procedures**

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This independent review was commissioned by the RCVS and conducted by Sheila McQueen of McData Ltd.

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## Section A

### A1 Introduction

The aim of the research was: To assess whether the current arrangements, including documentation, guidance and assessment methods, can be revised to reduce the burdens of time and bureaucracy on training practices – to include a review of the paperwork, visits to practices and discussion with a range of veterinary organisations and individuals involved in the process

The main brief, in summary, was:

- To identify any changes to improve the effectiveness of the scheme
- To evaluate the effectiveness of documentation and guidance
- To evaluate the effectiveness of centre support and monitoring
- To evaluate the effectiveness of NVQ training.

In short, is the RCVS, as an awarding body, asking more of VNACs and TPs than is necessary either to comply with the NVQ regime or to provide an effective system of training VNs? If so, what should be done differently?

There was a good level of interest in this review, with contact being made by vets, assessors, IVs and students through emails, telephone interviews and visits. Seventy-eight individuals contributed, and were extremely generous with their time and information.

The executive summary (Section B) contains the key outcomes of the research and the recommendations for the RCVS as an awarding body.

The main body of the report (Section C) is divided into appropriate sections which contain a range of issues. Individual quotes and case studies have been included and are shown in boxes. Some of these may appear contradictory, but are included to show some individual opinions. The remainder of the comments in this section (not boxed) are included to illustrate representative and majority opinion.

The majority of time during the review was spent on investigating how the systems work in practice and the issues arising, rather than on auditing data. This was a decision taken because data is audited regularly by QCA, and priority was given to evaluation of implementation of the systems which, on interviewing VNACs, TPs, etc, quickly became a clear focus.

### A2 Caveats

All comments and information received were given in confidence.

The title 'Awarding Body' refers to RCVS as the awarding body. The title 'RCVS' refers to the wider organisation, particularly the regulatory body for veterinary nursing.

Whilst the recommendations contained in this document are based on the information and the comments received, it must be noted that the Awarding Body already has some things in place, or is in the process of planning some changes. The reason for including them in this document as recommendations is to give the Awarding Body the opportunity to respond. The fact that, to some people, these are

still issues indicates a communications concern. It is anticipated that the Awarding Body will respond to this document indicating where changes have happened, or are going to happen. There are also recommendations that are new, and these too will be covered by an action plan from the Awarding Body.

The consultant engaged to conduct the review was selected as qualified and experienced in awarding body and QCA systems and procedures, with an understanding of the sector, National Occupational Standards and NVQs, but was neither a qualified vet nor a VN. It was therefore beyond the limits of her expertise to judge the technical quality or content of VN training. In addition, the Awarding Body is regularly audited by QCA (the regulatory body) to ensure that there are robust monitoring and verification systems in place providing continual feedback on the quality assurance systems.

### **A3 Methodology**

1. The review was promoted via Awarding Body bulletins
2. The documentation was reviewed against the QCA document 'NVQ Code of Practice.
3. Accompanied visits with external verifiers were arranged to VNACs, however only three out of the four planned were made due to exceptional personal circumstances. On only one occasion was an interview observed throughout. This was because it seemed inappropriate to disrupt the normal business of inspection. All students, assessors, IVs and EVs were interviewed privately.
4. Visits to VNACs and Training Practices were made, telephone interviews conducted, and via email.
5. Comments were received from a range of individuals who were prompted to respond through the Awarding Body announcement or via word of mouth recommendation.
6. The main representative organisations were contacted and invited to comment. These included SPVS, BVNA, BSAVA, BVA and BEVA.
7. A representative sample was sought, to include large and small VNACs, private training providers and colleges, large and small TPs, vets, vet nurses, students, assessors, internal verifiers and external verifiers.
8. A total of 58 interviews took place. Some were of individuals, and some were of small groups. In total 78 people contributed.

### **Contributors**

All interviews and contributions were given in confidence.

The following lists the numbers of individuals in each category. The number in brackets represents those who contributed by email.

Students:	15 (1)
VNs	8 (3)
Vets/employers	12 (6)
Assessors	10 (4)
Internal verifiers	17 (7)
Heads of Centres (VNACs)	11 (4)
External verifiers	3
Other	2
Total =	78

## Part B

### Executive Summary and Recommendations

This section features the key issues raised during the review and is a summary of the more extensive issues contained in Section C. Recommendations follow each section.

#### ***B1 Systems, procedures and quality assurance***

The VN NVQ, particularly at level 3, is one of the more demanding qualifications at that level on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This is one of the reasons for having supporting systems, procedures and documentation as they are. The Awarding Body has established rigorous systems in line with the regulatory body's (QCA) requirements. It was particularly necessary in the early days, because the sector was unfamiliar with how things had to be done in order to have qualifications on the NQF. This is to enable access to the only government funding route available for qualifications at this level. The previous system (the Green Book) whilst missed by some, is regarded by the majority as not reflecting the current professional status of veterinary nurses.

The introduction of a range of systems, procedures and documentation totally unfamiliar to the profession took many people by surprise; in fact shock was one of the reactions. Mistakes were made on all fronts, as, in a way, could be expected with such a wide reaching development. The implications have taken a while to sink in. Now, however, although the Awarding Body has evolved and is making steady improvements, it may be in danger of being left behind by those VNACs who have invested time and resources over the past few years and now no longer require hand holding as was previously the case, and could contribute to developing a much more user friendly, but still rigorous, system.

Whilst the Awarding Body office systems and procedures have improved, especially over the past twelve months, there are still some complaints that portfolios take a while to arrive for students, and also to be returned. Certification is also felt to be slow. The QCA 'ten-week rule' compounds this issue.

Many people complained that the Awarding Body procedures are strict and there is little flexibility. In addition, there were several complaints that the Awarding Body records do not seem to be kept up-to-date. Others, however, were satisfied with the response rate.

Consideration should be given to other inspection regimes (e.g. RCVS Practice Standards, Adult Learning Inspectorate) that the VNACs may have to undergo, and use this information rather than duplicate it. Investigations should also be made into the QCA initiative 'Centre Recognition Project'<sup>1</sup> as it develops.

There are positive advantages for using EVs who are (or have been) vet nurses and have also acted as IVs. They showed an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the system, but also of the constraints. They are able to see what can realistically be achieved and have experienced the aspirations and frustrations of a VNAC.

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<sup>1</sup> The Centre Recognition Project's proposals will cover all qualification types and will reduce bureaucracy, freeing resources for both centres and awarding bodies to focus more on the development and delivery of high-quality qualifications for learners.

The work and support of the EVs was praised, however EVs should be aware of the demands that they sometimes make on VNACs and TPs, and not arrange inappropriate inspections, or have unrealistic expectations.

EVs and the Awarding Body have been criticised for periodically having a 'hot topic' which appears to be a priority. Currently this is perceived to be health and safety and no apparent reasons are given. If there are issues which require special attention, the Awarding Body should ensure that everyone is aware of this, and why.

Advice is not always consistent between EVs, or with the Awarding Body head office. This is being handled by regular EV standardisation meetings.

The system of selecting and qualifying external verifiers (EVs), internal verifiers (IVs) and assessors is a fundamental part of NVQ quality assurance.

All quality assurance officers (assessors, IVs and EVs) have to be technically competent (eg qualified as a VN) and also assessed as competent in their area of the Quality Assurance (QA) of NVQs:

- The assessor is directly responsible for the assessment of the candidate. If there are problems with this, the assessor has first line responsibility
- The IV is directly responsible for reviewing the work of the assessor. If the assessor has problems, or is not fulfilling his or her duties, the IV is responsible for dealing with this
- The EV is directly responsible for the work of the IV. If the IV has problems or is not fulfilling his or her duties, the EV will pick up on this and deal with it accordingly. The EV is also responsible for auditing the VNAC systems, including sampling TPs.

The Awarding Body needs to ensure clarity of these roles and responsibilities where everyone understands their responsibilities, and their level of accountability in the QA process.

Given the hard work and experience put into the development of this award over the last few years by all concerned, trust should be placed in the quality assurance officers. This would show more than anything else that the Awarding Body respects and has confidence in its staff and in the VNACs and TPs.

Using risk assessment as part of the QA process saves time and energy and does not alienate those VNACs and TPs who are doing a splendid job. It also helps in decreasing the bureaucratic burden. Risk assessment is a method of identifying those centres where there are areas of concern and focusing resources there, rather than quality-assuring all centres continually at the same level. This enables the Awarding Body to target support when and where it is required. Progress is being made in this area.

Assessors have to come from within a practice, which does not allow the use of peripatetic assessors, and some TPs have difficulties in recruiting assessors. Vets could be used as expert witnesses for a percentage of the assessment, in a controlled role contributing to the actual assessment which is the overall responsibility of the assessor. This role is becoming more widely acknowledged by QCA. This would help in recognising the role of the vet in the training and assessment process. Further guidance is available for this.

**Commendations:**

- Rigorous systems and procedures
- Professional and competent EVs
- Implementation of risk assessment procedures

**Recommendations:**

- The Awarding Body should review its systems and procedures for record keeping, issuing portfolios and certificates.
- Consider using information from other inspection regimes and keep in touch with developing systems.
- Ensure information and/or guidance is consistent.
- Ensure that VNACs are fully aware if areas arise that require special attention
- In future, select EVs with IV experience.
- The supporting role of the EV should be given more emphasis.
- Place more trust in the assessor, IV and EV system.
- Clarify and define the roles and responsibilities of QA officers
- Further develop the risk assessment procedures as part of the EV process.
- Allow more flexibility in the use of assessors, and consider adopting the role of expert witnesses as part of the assessment process.
- Relax over-control of the system. The VNACs and TPs have 'grown up', as has the Awarding Body. Major strides could be taken with co-operative development.

**B2 Documentation**

The documentation was evaluated against QCA requirements, and found to meet their demands. VNACs have also developed supporting documentation, and have some very good ideas on streamlining of bureaucracy.

The volume of paperwork is an issue; however this tended to relate more to the portfolio than to QA documentation. Everyone commented on how this area has improved over the past year.

Most VNACs use only Awarding Body documentation with the TPs, but provide additional documentation for IVs to complete. The TP is then only required to sign relevant paperwork. Several VNACs would like the opportunity to share best practices with their colleagues, regardless of being (sometimes) in competition, and would prefer a more standardised system. One large VNAC has invested considerable resources into developing an electronic system.

The form that EVs complete on their VNAC visit has a section on action planning and another on recommendations. VNACs are unsure of their relative values. There is no section in this document whereby the VNAC can give its feedback and respond to the EV comments.

**Commendations:**

- Documentation meets QCA requirements
- The Awarding Body's willingness to make improvements where necessary

**Recommendations:**

- Use the expertise of external verifiers and VNACs to review all of the documentation, including the portfolio to eliminate duplication and eradicate unnecessary bureaucracy.

- Hold VNAC workshops; let those help in setting the agenda; work together to improve the systems, documentation and portfolio.
- Hold assessor workshops – let VNAC reps help to run them. Ask the assessors what they would like on the agenda.
- Field test revised documentation prior to changeover.
- Code, date and colour code documents. Produce a summary form describing what each form is for, when it should be used, who should complete it, and who receives copies.
- Clarify the difference between action planning and recommendations. Make the action plan a compulsory 'must do', and recommendations 'thoughts for the future'. This way only the action plan has to be responded to within a set time frame.
- Include a section for a VNAC response to the inspection.

### **B3 Portfolio**

There have been complaints that the portfolio keeps changing, because the Awarding Body wanted to encourage best practice and reduce bureaucracy. It now finds itself in a dilemma – if it changes too often there are complaints, and also complaints if it remains the same. The portfolio as it stands has served its purpose, and should be reviewed and revised when the new National Occupational Standards (NOS) are accredited. It is a very weighty document, and contains anomalies in that there are demands for evidence which is not contained in the NVQs.

The terminology causes confusion – i.e. units, modules and case logs. It also currently lends itself to over-production of assessment and of duplication. The Awarding Body is gradually changing its practices by allowing alternative ways of presenting evidence, but this is not obvious in the current portfolio. Students and some assessors are loathe to use alternative methods of presenting evidence, being deterred from doing anything out of the ordinary by the RCVS logo on the portfolio.

The language used in the portfolio and in much of the documentation can be intimidating and overpowering. Whilst the information has to be given, consideration should be given to having more user-friendly language. This will also find favour with busy vets and practice principals. VNACs should be asked to help in this revision.

All assessments have to be planned, and this is perceived as a lost opportunity. Careful reading of the portfolio guidance, however, does indicate how unplanned assessments can be included, but this is not generally recognised.

There appears to be little flexibility in how assessment can take place, for example, scope has to be observed and can not be achieved via questioning, or knowledge demonstrated through written examples or case studies. The various methods of assessment should be encouraged. Many TPs have their student VNs working for them for a period prior to enrolling as a student. Consideration should be given to using this period to begin the evidence gathering process. This could be used as a form of prior knowledge and experience, and could be checked and confirmed following enrolment.

Other awarding bodies have developed a range of methods of recording evidence, especially in tracking against the NOS. This includes electronic methods. Any revision of the portfolio should consider best practice in this area, and be related to recording evidence directly against the NOS. Many VNACs have experience in delivering other NVQs, and this could be used in future developments.

**Commendations:**

- The Awarding Body recognises the need to revise the portfolio and will do so when the new NVQs are accredited
- EVs encourage different ways of presenting evidence.

**Recommendations:**

- Review the portfolio at the same time as the NVQs are accredited; work together with the VNACs on this
- Investigate portfolios designed by other awarding bodies
- Track evidence against the NVQs
- Encourage a range of assessment methods

**B4 RCVS and customer service**

As stated in B1, the Awarding Body had to be particularly robust in the early days, but can now ease up on the control, enjoy the fruits of its labour, and develop different working relationships with its customers. This should not mean slippage in quality. The Awarding Body still has to maintain the QCA requirements, but could achieve this as well as having a less turbulent relationship with its clientele. The Awarding Body must remember that the VNACs and TPs are customers, some of whom would go elsewhere if there was an alternative.

The dual role of RCVS as an awarding and a regulatory body causes confusion and concern among VNACs and TPs. A clearer division needs to be made and approval and external verification procedures should clearly reflect their purpose as part of the awarding process.

The Awarding Body gives an 'us versus them' impression, which was the single biggest complaint, and the root cause of many of the problems. The perceived lack of flexibility in the organisation, its unwillingness to listen, and the (sometimes) arrogance and bad manners in dealing with its constituents makes VNACs and TPs believe that whilst they are (in most cases) working hard to have more and better qualified VNs, the Awarding Body is not 'on the same side'. Much of the nitpicking and many of the niggles stem from this. If the Awarding Body started to work together with the VNACs and TPs, was seen to appreciate the value of their work, and recognise good practice, many issues would disappear. There is fundamentally not much wrong with the system that a bit of thought and care for the customer wouldn't put right.

Staff in the head office should share information coming from VNACs between sections. It should not be the responsibility of the VNACs to make sure that everyone in the Awarding Body office is aware of any changes. Recording and tracking systems should be reviewed.

The use of *RCVS VN News* as a method of updating VNACs should be reviewed, and consideration given to including a section solely for this purpose. Similarly the website should be regularly updated.

Most IV standardisation meetings happen in the south east. Consideration should be given to holding regional meetings.

**Commendations:**

- The RCVS / Awarding Body concerns regarding its profile led to commissioning this review.

**Recommendations:**

- Clarify the role of the RCVS as an awarding body
- Develop better working relationships with customers
- Review office systems and procedures
- Hold occasional meetings away from the south east.

**B5 Training practices and VNACs**

Whilst there are still concerns, vets are acknowledging that they are getting a good quality VN via the NVQ route. Whilst one or two vets do not like the NVQ methodology, they do appreciate the quality VN who is the product of this system.

Training practices are businesses, and largely have a sound commitment to VN training. They can not however, be expected to implement wide-scale changes overnight.

The good relationship between the VNAC and the TP is paramount, and over a period TPs come to know and trust their IV. This is making a significant impression in some areas with TPs introducing better employment practices.

**Commendations:**

- Sound working relationships between VNACs and TPs.

**Recommendations:**

- Be realistic when making demands of TPs
- Actively promote and praise good working relationships between VNACs and TPs.

**B6 National Occupational Standards; NVQs; Examinations; Degrees**

It is generally accepted that the National Occupational Standards (NOS) require revision. This is currently underway through Lantra, the Sector Skills Council and Standards Setting Body for veterinary nursing. Any comments received as part of this review and relating to the NOS have been directed to Lantra. Similarly, any comments relating to the structure of the NVQs were also directed to Lantra.

The practical examination as it stands is universally unpopular; however everyone wishes to keep an element of practical examination. There were various suggestions as to how it could be improved, including:

- Examination in the practice by the EV or IV
- More opportunities throughout the year and in more locations across the country
- Give the students the results immediately following the exam
- Review the nature of the examination
- If a student is borderline in the practical, review against NVQ achievements

Whilst review of the VN degree was not part of the remit of this review, the subject was raised on a few occasions, and the opinions expressed are included in this report. Care should be taken, however, in attaching too much value to the opinions, and they should be seen only as giving a 'flavour'.

Some practices see degree students as hard work, and frequently without the practical skills of student VNs. It should be remembered that many TPs take on students for a period prior to enrolling them. During this period, skills can be developed, attitudes assessed, and relationships developed, thus the NVQ student is often a known quantity to the practice, unlike the undergraduate. Vets are also concerned as to what added value a graduate VN will have.

Degree students, on qualification, bring with them a student debt, and time has yet to show if they advance further in the profession than their NVQ colleagues and recover these finances.

Those VNACs involved in delivering the degree believe that it produces better VNs.

***Recommendations:***

- Refer parties interested in the revision of the VN NOS and NVQs to Lantra
- Review the practical examination in close consultation with the sector

## Section C

This section contains direct quotes and case studies from individuals. These are shown in boxes. The remaining text shows examples of comments which represent majority opinion. These are included here to illustrate the background to comments and recommendations contained in Section B.

### C1 Systems and procedures

Sometimes it takes a while for documentation to arrive from Awarding Body. There were a few complaints that portfolios took a while to arrive for the students. Certificates can also take a long time to come through.

Whilst the goalposts seem to be continually moving, things have improved over the last 12 months.

**Quote:** The 60% rule is a good idea as is the necessity to complete level 2 before starting level 3 - it puts a little pressure on students to finish and means we don't get portfolios that drag.

The ten-week rule between completing level 2 and starting level 3 can cause problems for students by impacting on the time to do this level. There can be a lot of work for students to complete in their final year. Delays in receiving portfolios can also impact on this time.

**Case study:** Our first year trainee didn't receive her portfolio until October because her pre-VN portfolio was rejected for not printing out and including the homepage for two websites she mentioned in one of her case logs. This meant she had to pay to re-present her portfolio which was then given a distinction! Was it necessary? She didn't actually do any more work and it meant a two to three month delay!!

The three-hour tutorial per week has to be evidenced which is very difficult to record because it does not happen in one or two blocks.

The rules are strict and there is little flexibility.

Awarding Body records do not seem to be kept up-to-date. There is an annual request to amend the TP details, yet this information is produced at every EV visit. We are repeatedly asked to present the same information.

**Quote:** There is a requirement for experienced assessors to attend standardisation days annually but there are not always appropriate courses for them. This should be taken into consideration if their IV is happy with their assessing and sees them at the IV visits. TPs can not see the benefit of the assessors being out of the practice for most of the day to sit in a large group being given information that they already know.

## C2 Quality Assurance

VNACs are inspected by ALI (Adult Learning Inspectorate) as well as by Awarding Body. There should be cognisance of other inspection regimes.

All VNACs interviewed felt that it was more productive working with an external verifier who has internal verifier experience.

Trivial mistakes are picked up on by the EVs, for example, correcting spelling mistakes in a VNAC handbook.

The Awarding Body and EVs seem to select a 'hot topic' which they pounce on at every opportunity. At the moment it is health and safety.

**Case study:** The external verifier came to see a procedure (fluid therapy) that is not recognised as capable of simulation, however there was no appropriate patient, but the EV refused to see the student doing something else. We had arranged things for the day, and the student was very disappointed. It's not fair on the student.

**Quote:** As an awarding body for the NVQ, the Awarding Body is rigorous in enforcing the systems required for quality control at VNACs and this is encouraging as it will help to ensure that the standard required of students remains high and with better communication and more consultation between the Awarding Body and the people who are training students, hopefully the teething problems with the NVQ in veterinary nursing will be eliminated.

There is lack of consistency between external verifiers. EVs have recently changed over, and everyone has noticed that the new one puts the emphasis on different things, and sometimes gives advice that conflicts with that of his or her colleagues.

**Quote:** EVs in general have been very helpful and encouraging rather than criticising. I have met with them at IV meetings given by EVs and in practice. They will endeavour to get you an answer to the questions or problems that you ask.

EVs seem to feel that they have to find something wrong, which can be nitpicking at times. All of the comments take time to respond to, regardless of how trivial they are.

EVs frequently comment on aspects of assessments without referring to the fact that the IV had already picked it up. EVs do not always give the impression that they are there to assess the work of the IV.

**Quote:** We're really worried about changing EVs because they are all different, and have different expectations. We need standardisation.

**Quote:** We've been through some rocky times, including some harsh sanctions. We came out better in the end.

Assessors, internal verifiers and external verifiers, when trained and qualified, should be trusted to do their jobs in the quality assurance process. The awarding body would then be able to release some of the onerous bureaucratic demands.

There is a lot of time spent in completing paperwork; some internal verifiers feel that their word is worthless and that they are continually checked. There is too much checking on all aspects, and not enough reliance on IV reports. Several IVs were in tears because their confidence has been eroded, and they felt that they were not doing a good job, however their students' results proved otherwise.

Internal verifiers should be able to apply their own knowledge. Once they have experience of a TP, their information can be relied on.

**Quote:** Six-monthly IV visits to check health & safety etc in a low-risk practice seems a poor use of everyone's time. I appreciate that the IV needs to feel familiar with the practice and how the assessors work but surely this would be better run as informal tutorials with the assessors about their students, portfolios and dealing with problems large and small. The practice/TP inspection could be carried out less often as it appears very repetitive at present.

TPs are now seeing the IV as someone who helps the practice. They are helping to change ways of working, eg job descriptions and contracts.

Assessors have to come from within the TP – peripatetic assessors are not allowed. This can cause problems where there is a shortage of appropriate people.

**Case study:** We are working to develop the OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Examination) model of assessment. When competence is reached, create a scenario where certain skills are necessary; the marking scheme is against when each skill is successfully demonstrated; it allows for statistical analysis; the tasks break down; it includes global judgement.

The qualification is top heavy in recording data, with the focus on paperwork. Focusing on the minutia causes the bigger picture to be lost, and common sense does not prevail.

Many assessment opportunities are lost because of the need to plan. This is overdone. It also does not reflect reality.

Criticisms always seem to outweigh commendations. VNACs feel that they will get a sanction regardless of the good things they have done and the progress made.

**Quote:** The best placed person within a practice to assess a student is the senior veterinary surgeon but it seems that I need Assessor training. I have yet to learn anything that will enable me to train a nurse to a higher standard though. So I need assessing as an Assessor and the people who assess me (who have less experience of small animal practice than I do) - they also need assessing. I expect there is further assessment of the Assessors who assess the Assessors who assess me. Needless to say therefore that there is too much bureaucracy.

### **C3 Documentation**

Whilst many of the interviewees complained about the level of bureaucracy, everyone commented that the administrative documentation has improved considerably over the past year. On reviewing the paperwork requirements of the Awarding Body against QCA quality assurance requirements, it was found that the documentation met these needs.

Further streamlining improvements could be made by checking for duplication, coding, dating and colour-coding the forms. This would ensure that the latest copies are in use. A summary form could also be produced describing what each form is used for, who should use it, and who receives copies.

Centres use a range of self-developed administrative systems. These vary from very simple constructions, to highly sophisticated electronic systems. These tend to vary according to the size and experience of the centre. The larger centres generally have the resources to develop the more sophisticated systems.

Whilst it might be felt that there are commercial-in-confidence issues, most VNACs interviewed felt that they had developed useful systems which they would be happy to share. The Awarding Body is perceived as being poor at encouraging and facilitating VNACs to share good practices, especially in documentation.

**Quote:** One idea would be to share good practices. It would be great if the Awarding Body could hold standardisation days.

VNACs have no way of feeding back their views of how an inspection went, apart from through the appeals procedure.

The 'recommendations' section of the report is another action plan - this causes confusion and resentment when the EV wants to know why something hasn't been done, when it was on the 'recommendations' list. If another section aside from the action plan is needed, it should be reworded / retitled to clearly describe whether the action is recommended or compulsory.

There should be scope for the action planning section to be an ongoing document, whereby measures that have been dealt with can be commented on their effectiveness, and the VNAC can make notes in this section.

## C4 Portfolio

The Awarding Body is encouraging the use of electronic systems as part of the assessment process, eg in the portfolio. These are available on-line and students are encouraged to complete them on their computers.

The portfolio, as it stands is very daunting just in its volume. Whilst it was seen as necessary in the early days when the NVQ system was new, VNACs have moved on and are more confident and knowledgeable. External verifiers have informed VNACs that they can use alternative methods of gathering evidence, providing that it meets the requirements of the National Occupational Standards (NOS), and quality assurance demands. It was reported, however, that because students see the RCVS logo on the portfolio cover, they are reticent to use alternative ways of presenting their evidence. The use of alternative forms of evidence from the case logs is taking a while to get through to assessors and students.

**Case study:** At our recent VNAC meeting for assessors we were informed that scope must now be observed and not questioned, or knowledge demonstrated via written content in case studies. As many of the scope cover "problems" I believe that this may be hard to achieve. I agree that during training nurses should be able to demonstrate knowledge of problems and what to do in those situations, but within practice we would hope that, with careful case planning and observation, many of the listed situations will not arise in reality. Examples include: "fitting under anaesthesia" and "resuscitation" procedures.

The portfolio makes some demands for evidence not required in the NOS; however the portfolio structure does not tie up with the NOS which causes confusion, too much cross-referencing and repetition. The mismatch between the NVQ standards and the case logs - the numbering system - gives rise to much confusion as they do not tally.

**Quote:** Although I have just completed my portfolio, I have found it extremely hard to try and fit my life around this pointless mountain of paperwork. I have my exam in less than five weeks and have only just started to revise as I have spent so much time concentrating on the portfolios. I would have thought it would be more beneficial to me to spend more time on studying A+P and Nursing than to constantly repeat myself on how to clean a kennel out and how to handle a cat etc.

The volume of evidence requirements perceived in the case logs leads to duplication in evidence. External verifiers regularly advise on this, but students are very wary about contravening RCVS requirements so that they frequently produce too much evidence. There is also confusion in the language between units, modules and case logs.

**Quote:** The portfolio is a good tool when done well. Some assessors are inflexible, and the portfolio is not used efficiently. The Awarding Body could help by giving better advice.

Whilst a simplified version of the portfolio should be produced, and with more user-friendly language, this should be done at the same time as the new NVQs (currently under review). To cut down on duplication and bureaucracy in the portfolio, simpler guidance notes should be produced, cross-referencing tracking systems developed, and examples of tasks necessary to fulfil the NOS requirements.

One portfolio seen (and approved by the EV) was based on an animal care model, using story boards and cross-referencing to the NOS.

**Quote:** Whilst the portfolio makes you think about what you are doing, it is very time consuming, repetitious and contains too much detail

Students can only start gathering evidence when they have received their portfolio, and there is no system for accrediting prior knowledge and experience. Also, students must complete level 2 before they can start on level 3.

**Quote:** If the awarding body is going to reproduce such a document, it should now be based on a fairly standard portfolio compilation method, encourage assessment using a variety of methods and also encourage cross-referencing. This would reduce unnecessary evidence collection and unnecessary production of written statements from candidates. It could contain the following:

Section Number	Contents
1	Annexes
2	Assessment plans and candidate tutorials
3	Unit reviews (and possibly IV reports?)
4	Unit tracking matrices, linked to evidence reference letters/numbers
5	Evidence, correctly indexed A-Z or 1-2 or other suitable method
6	NOS

**Quote:** The portfolio has improved but is it necessary to have subcutaneous anaesthesia and local anaesthesia as two separate scopes? Is it really necessary to use a haematology analyser or just pipette accurately and be able to read directions? Every year we seem to come across one or two small points which make it difficult for our students to complete their portfolios.

## C5 Awarding Body

**Quote:** On setting up a VN course I found dealing with the Awarding Body very pleasant and the EV was more than helpful with lots of hits and tips to make registration a lot easier. A simple list of documents that were required was supplied and good feedback was given.

The RCVS has more than one role – as an awarding body and a regulatory body. This puts VNACs and TPs under pressure, because they are unsure which ‘hat’ the RCVS is wearing.

**Quote:** There are too many boards and committees, but all with the same people. RCVS should plan to separate the awarding body from its political agenda. There should be private practice vets, currently practising, to advise on the reality.

All of the VNACs and TPs visited were totally committed to VN training, and in producing a high quality product. Whilst it was agreed that the Awarding Body might feel the same, they came across as adversaries, rather than wishing to work together. There were several comments of it being ‘us versus them’, and ‘it’s hard to believe that we’re all after the same goal – professional VNs’.

**Quote:** Much criticism concerning paucity of information provided to practices wishing to become Equine TPs when enquiries directed to Awarding Body or website. The system is seen by those outside to be unnecessarily complicated. Response to criticisms and queries is often not forthcoming or slow. Insufficient guidance and training is given to assessors.

The Awarding Body should engender a spirit of support, not compliance, at grass roots level. There should be flexibility but consistency.

The first line of advance from the Awarding Body seems to be attack. VNACs would like to work in better accord with the Awarding Body. They would like more support and to work together for the good of the students. They would like to believe that the Awarding Body has the same focus – good quality VNs. The Awarding Body has improved recently, with more good days than bad. They are considering their responses more.

The majority interviewed felt that the Awarding Body did not listen to VNACs or TPs. It is seen as detached from general practice and not aware of reality.

**Quote:** Statistics are manipulated by Awarding Body to present whichever view suits them best.

Sometimes there is conflicting advice from the Awarding Body and EVs.

**Quote:** If there was an alternative awarding body, we'd take it.

Meetings and conferences always seem to happen in London or the south. In the north, there are many who would like to network, but do not have the same opportunities. VNACs in the north feel neglected.

## **C6 Customer Service**

Only a few, if any, of the staff in the Awarding Body office team has VN or vet experience, or experience in training VNs.

The office staff can be curt and unpleasant. They don't always return calls. Most VNACs commit requests for information etc to paper or by email so that they have a copy of responses. There have been instances of someone in the office denying something was said.

**Case study:** On enrolling a student, the application forms were sent, but nothing was heard for six weeks. The Awarding Body office denied receiving it, and then they said that the wrong amount was sent. A photocopy of the transaction showed differently, but RCVS still refused to say that a mistake had been made.

It appears that each person in the office is responsible for only one job, and the different sections do not exchange information. For example, if a VNAC has changes in personnel eg a change of practice principal, each section has to be told individually. This is another pressure on the centre. If someone in the office is on holiday or off sick then there are problems.

**Quote:** Generally, information from the Awarding Body is slow to filter down to the VNACs and TPs. This often leads to confusion of students and assessors especially, and the IVs are often left to explain the reasons for change and deal with disgruntled students and assessors. This could be avoided if the methods of communication with students and assessors were more effective.

Whilst the Awarding Body does respond to queries, they will talk to the students rather than refer them to the VNAC, who may not find out that dialogue had taken place.

**Case study:** A student had not received notification of her exam enrolment, and when she contacted the Awarding Body was told that she must not have sent the documents. When I spoke to the Awarding Body I explained that the enrolment documents had been sent by recorded delivery and that someone from the Awarding Body had signed to accept the documents. I also had a faxed copy of the Royal Mail document sent to them proving this. The reply I received was that the Awarding Body needed the original (which was in a sorting office in London) as they could not read the signature. As you will appreciate this was very distressing for the student

concerned as she was informed that she was unable to sit her exams and that it was up to her to prove that she had sent the documents. Eventually the Awarding Body saw how ridiculous this was and begrudgingly allowed her to sit her exams.

The Awarding Body seem to use *RCVS VN News* to update information, and it is very easy to miss a point, and the website is not regularly updated. This information should be clearly categorised and not mixed with other information.

Only full passes are put onto the website, not partial passes. This information is necessary for funding purposes.

## **C7 VNACs**

TPs are reliant on good communications with their VNAC. It was reported that in some cases, the scheme of work did not always arrive in time.

Some colleges / training providers are including portfolio building sessions into the final year.

Many of the VNACs also offer other NVQs, including Animal Care. They have much better relationships with the awarding bodies who offer these qualifications, feeling that they are working together as equal partners for the benefit of the students. The Awarding Body is seen as a threat.

Not one VNAC interviewed made any profit from this qualification.

**Case study:** An IV in a college VNAC does some of her site visits in her own time to keep costs down, and does not tell the college principal.

**Quote:** Any changes are made incrementally because of the size of the VNAC (small). The centre can be flexible and react quickly to support the TPs.

**Quote:** When the VNAC does a TP approval visit, the TP has already submitted a written application listing facilities and resources. Following the VNAC's visit a report is created and the decision to approve or not is made. Both reports are submitted to the Awarding Body together with an action plan and a compliance report. The Awarding Body has said that it wants to see the original evidence. Why can't the VNAC be trusted?

**Quote:** Running a VNAC is very stressful. It feels as though we're always at war with the Awarding Body.

## C8 Training Practices

Several VNACs say that they are losing TPs. Vets increasingly are saying that they will not continue training. Whilst vets are willing to train, they are running a business which does not seem to be understood by the Awarding Body. The demands and constraints put on TPs by the Awarding Body are alienating employers.

**Quote:** All I would ask is that no outside bodies are involved in nurse training; cut out all unnecessary bureaucracy and simplify the paperwork. The only reason I am still a training practice is the commitment I have given to my students but once they have finished training I can't see me continuing as a TP unless things improve.

Many TPs insist that students work for a period prior to enrolling as a student, to ensure suitability, and for the student to decide if it is the right career. This helps with decreasing the drop-out rate.

TPs take on students because it is often the only way to recruit. Overall there is a shortage of qualified VNs.

Students who do not have the required GCSEs are a struggle. Recruitment has to be done carefully.

**Case study:** The EV was visiting a new TP for a first time visit. The EV ran his/her finger over a surface and asked what the dust was. The vet was very keen but nervous. This did not give a good impression, and really made the vet wonder what she had let herself into.

There is concern over the level of basic skills (Skills for Life/key skills).

TPs are now acknowledging that they are getting better VNs through this method of training and qualifying.

**Case study:** My biggest problem is that I find, as a small practice, it becomes very resource hungry. We are a four-man practice with three branches. This year I have one nurse doing level 3 and one doing level 2. I am the only Assessor in the practice. We do have a qualified VN in another branch (both trainees are in the same branch) who we tried to use, but this did not work. As a practice principal and assessor and working vet the time and effort required becomes a problem and has brought me close to burn out a couple of times and I am now considering leaving the system.

I know people will say to utilise others to do some work, but as a small practice we find it difficult to find the time to give to the trainees without taking other people away from work. I think part of our problem is running two nurses at the same time. In future we will only run one at a time. So, help in streamlining would encourage smaller practices to stay. Some understanding from VNACs and the Awarding Body would help as to the time and effort required in practice to achieve the training, along with an understanding of what actually goes on in the real world that has to be shoe-horned in.

**Case study:** The practice has to take on more staff in order to cover training and assessment. I (the vet) spend between 10 and 20% of my time as an assessor. These all have enormous cost implications.

**Case study:** A representative of the Awarding Body visited a TP, and didn't even acknowledge the practice manager in the same room. This was very rude.

Training practices can only be improved gradually, one step at a time. They cannot possibly action a wide range of improvements within a very short timeframe as is expected by the Awarding Body.

**Case study:** A VNAC, the TP and the student wrote to the Awarding Body in March 2005 about the student failing the radiography part of the practical exam. Although the EV is checking this, the TP is threatening to withdraw.

## **C9 National Occupational Standards/NVQs**

There is a big jump between levels 2 and 3. There needs to be more of a challenge at level 2.

**Quote:** Since the VN NVQ was introduced there have been vast changes to the way it is run and these changes have generally been for the better in order to bring veterinary nursing into line with other NVQs. The award is now centred on the completion of the National Standards, and students are allowed and encouraged to produce diverse types of evidence, rather than having to produce a certain number of case logs of various types for each module. This has made it easier for assessors to assess and cross-reference students' work and means that students can complete the award with less written work if they chose to.

The NVQ is better than the Green Book, but it is too time consuming.

## **C10 Examinations**

The practical examination as it stands is universally unpopular, however everyone interviewed acknowledged the need for some form of practical examination.

Complaints about the current practical examination included:

- Unnecessarily having to wait several weeks for the results when they could be given immediately
- Distances students sometimes have to travel (eg East Anglia to Glasgow)
- The daunting nature of the examination

**Quote:** The Awarding Body has recently put samples of practical exam tasks for NVQ level 3 students on its website but there is no marking scheme available so candidates are not aware of which parts of the task are allocated which marks and what errors they will be marked down for. When we contacted them to ask for information on the marking scheme, they were not able to give any.

Suggestions included practical examinations run in the practice or in the college or training provider establishment, conducted by the external or internal verifier.

**Case study:** A student successfully generated sufficient evidence with ten radiographs, but failed the practical exam using a stuffed dog.

The written examination is supported, however there is no access to previous papers to enable tutors to put students through mock exams, as normally happens in public exams.

### **C11 Degrees**

Some practices see the degree students as hard work. They have low practical skills - they don't even know how to hold a cat or a dog safely. They are not being kept on because of the struggle with them.

**Case study:** As a student I dropped out of the degree course at the end of one year because I failed the anatomy/physiology exam twice. Even at that stage I was running up a large student debt which I am still repaying, even though I'm living at home. I can be employed doing the job I want to do without having to go through a degree, and end up with an even bigger debt. Vets have told me that they'd rather employ someone qualifying this way (NVQ) because it is much more practical.

Some VNACs think that the degree produces better VNs.

## **Annex A:** QCA guidance (From the QCA website; August 2005)

These messages and principles about portfolios of evidence are for awarding bodies and external verifiers. Their purpose is to encourage approaches to the collection and presentation of portfolios of evidence of competence that minimise bureaucracy and reduce the burden of assessment without compromising quality.

### **External verification**

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#### **Key messages**

Awarding bodies and external verifiers are placing too much emphasis on paper portfolios at the expense of other evidence.

- A range of methods should be used to assess NVQs, driven by candidates' normal activities in the workplace.
- External verifiers must be prepared to sample various types of assessment decisions, including those made at the place where the evidence is located, instead of relying too heavily on portfolio based decisions.

#### **Principles**

Awarding bodies should review their assessment guidance to ensure that centres are advised of the full range of assessment techniques and methods of presenting evidence that are acceptable in the occupational sector(s) under consideration. The review should aim to reduce reliance on paper portfolios and associated paperwork, while ensuring that centres keep up to date, auditable records of assessment and internal verification. Guidance should take into account the nature of the occupational competences associated with specific NVQs, as well as other issues such as confidentiality, which will influence the way assessment is conducted.

External verifiers should encourage centres to adopt a range of approaches to assessment, consistent with awarding body guidance, and consider alternatives to paper-based portfolios for the presentation of evidence.

Sources of evidence can include:

- direct observation of the candidate;
- photographic, audio, video or other electronic recording of candidate activity;
- the presentation of artefacts produced by the candidate;
- previous achievements;
- questioning the candidate to assess the underpinning knowledge and understanding and/or to authenticate the validity of other evidence.

It is not necessary to keep copies of all the evidence produced in one place, ie in a portfolio. Evidence of competence, where it is in paper or other material form, can be kept where it is naturally located, eg in the filing cabinet, desk or workshop. If this approach is adopted, a record of assessment must be kept which shows the evidence produced, the assessment decision, and where the evidence is located.

## Internal verification

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### Key messages

Verification has tended to concentrate on paperwork and the process of assessment; to improve quality, verification must focus more on assessors' judgements.

- Verifiers must be able to interrogate assessors' judgements by focusing on those critical features that distinguish between competent and not yet competent candidates.

### Principles

External and internal verifiers should focus on the accuracy and consistency of assessors' judgements against the requirements of the national standards.

Internal verifiers must ensure that accurate, auditable records of assessment are maintained. For each assessment decision, the following information is required:

- Who was assessed?
- Who conducted the assessment?
- What was assessed?
- When was it assessed?
- What was the assessment decision?
- Where is the evidence located?

This information should be endorsed with the candidate's and assessor's signatures and dates. Records of assessment must be audited by the external verifier and must be held by the centre until the awarding body authorises their release.

## Assessors and candidates

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### Key messages

- The term 'collecting evidence' may have been interpreted too literally in the past and this has led to the notion of the portfolio as a means of collecting evidence.
- The primary role of assessors is to make accurate decisions about the competence of candidates against the national standards, and they must be able to justify their decisions.

### Principles

Assessors must be able to make sound and consistent judgements about the acceptability of evidence. Centres have a responsibility for ensuring the competence of the assessors they employ, so that trust can be placed in the assessment decisions of assessors without the need to insist on paper evidence to back up every assessment decision.

When planning assessment, assessors should make use of a combination of assessment methods. Candidates should be encouraged to cross-reference and avoid an element by element or pc by pc approach to collecting evidence, whether or not a paper portfolio is used for presenting evidence. 'Evidence rich' activities, 'project' or 'event' approaches to collecting evidence can contribute to a reduction in the overall amount of evidence collected. The presentation of evidence should not be confined to paper-based portfolios, but assessors must keep auditable assessment records.

Candidates need to understand what constitutes actual evidence of competence. Where paper-based material is presented for assessment, candidates should avoid the inclusion of reference documents, training materials and other evidence that does not demonstrate competence. Proper assessment planning can help candidates to relate their activities to the requirements of the NVQ.