

ENQA AGENCY REVIEW

ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS (RCVS)

LUUT KROES, DURDICA DRAGOJEVIC,
ANDREA NOLAN, IULIU GABRIEL COCUZ
20 SEPTEMBER 2023

CONTENTS

CONTENTS	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	4
BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS	4
BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW	4
SCOPE OF THE REVIEW	4
MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2018 REVIEW	5
REVIEW PROCESS.....	6
HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY	8
HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM.....	8
QUALITY ASSURANCE.....	9
THE RCVS	9
RCVS'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE	10
RCVS'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES	12
RCVS'S FUNDING.....	13
FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF RCVS WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)	15
ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES	15
ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE.....	15
ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS.....	20
ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE.....	21
ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS.....	23
ESG 3.5 RESOURCES	25
ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT	26
ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES	28
ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE	29
ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE.....	29
ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE	33
ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES	36
ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS	40

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES.....	43
ESG 2.6 REPORTING.....	45
ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS.....	46
CONCLUSION.....	48
SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS.....	48
OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	48
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT	48
ANNEXES.....	50
ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT	50
ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW	57
ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY	63
ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW	64
DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY RCVS.....	64

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the compliance of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). It is the second review of RCVS, aimed at renewal of ENQA membership. It is based on an external review conducted from September 2022- August 2023. The site visit took place from June 5th to 7th, 2023. In assessing the extent to which RCVS meets the ESG 2015 standards, the panel relied on the self-assessment report (SAR) with annexes, the additional documents provided by RCVS and the RCVS website, together with interviews held during the site visit.

The RCVS is the regulatory body for veterinary professions in the United Kingdom. It is tasked with setting, upholding and advancing the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses. RCVS membership represents the licence to practise within the UK. RCVS tasks include accreditation of veterinary surgeon and veterinary nursing degrees, which they choose to do in line with the ESG.

The review panel found the College to be working in the spirit of clarity and compassion, as is emphasised by its values and ambitions, and was able to witness a well-lived quality culture at the College along with enthusiasm and room for further development. A number of College processes include several steps which improve the quality of their outcomes, and College has introduced some exemplary internal quality assurance (IQA) practices. We found stakeholders to be highly supportive of the RCVS processes and confident that any feedback they may have would be taken into account appropriately. On occasion it proved challenging to understand some of the processes which could be complex; and in an effort to rely only on the most highly qualified people and avoid conflicts of interest, the RCVS can overly rely on its staff and Committee members.

From the evidence gathered, and considering the 2018 report, we were able to follow the RCVS development from an inspection-oriented regulatory body to one with up-to-date QA practices, which has started introducing some flexibility by adopting a partially risk-based approach and further strengthened the role of students, veterinary nurses, and lay people. While the regulatory role of the College requires a focus on monitoring programme compliance and institutional accountability, its processes have developed in the direction of putting more trust into institutional IQA and paying particular attention to institutional innovation, good practices and issues relevant to students. Even though the College works within an outdated legislative framework, it has been able to adapt and innovate without waiting for the legislation to change. It is too early to judge the success of innovations which include the removal of a standardised SAR document from the accreditation process, bespoke site visit schedules and shorter reports.

While making some recommendations, as noted, the panel has found RCVS to be compliant with all of the ESG 2 and 3 standards except the 3.4, the Thematic Analysis, where we have found it to be partially compliant. RCVS has developed a plan for thematic analysis; it regularly conducts surveys – including a graduate and employer survey with an almost 100% response rate - and publishes studies on issues relevant to all institutions, to mention EMS (extra-mural studies), an obligatory component of each veterinary surgeon programme, as an example. However, the interviews at the site visit indicated there was a lack of understanding of what thematic analysis should cover in terms of using the evidence from the accreditation reports to highlight common issues as a basis for enhancement across the sector and as a reflective exercise rather than solely an analysis of metrics.

Overall, the panel has noted 6 examples of good practice and made 3 recommendations as well as 4 suggestions for improvement.

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the ENQA review panel believes that in the performance of its functions RCVS is compliant with the ESG.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. It is based on an external review conducted between September 2022 and August 2023.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

As this is the RCVS' second review, the panel is expected to provide clear evidence of results in all areas and to acknowledge progress from the previous review. The panel has adopted a developmental approach, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of the agencies.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The role of the RCVS, set in the legislation of the United Kingdom, is to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare. They carry this out through setting, upholding and advancing the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses. The RCVS sets the standards for and monitors the quality of veterinary education; holds the Registers of those vets and veterinary nurses who are qualified to practise; sets professional standards for vets and veterinary nurses; and helps practices raise their standards.

The purpose of this review is to evaluate the extent to which relevant RCVS activities comply with the ESG, as a requirement for continuation of its ENQA membership. The RCVS activities that fall within the scope of the ESG have been identified by the Terms of Reference of the review as accreditation of veterinary degrees by RCVS and accreditation of veterinary nursing degrees by RCVS, and no other relevant activities have been identified during the review.

As described in the Terms of Reference, the RCVS currently accredits eight established vet schools in the UK, and one school overseas. A further three schools in the UK and one overseas, have enrolled students, but have not yet graduated their first cohort. Once the first cohort reaches their final year of studies, the three programmes will undergo their final full accreditation, and until this time, the schools have six-monthly meetings with the RCVS and an interim visitation in their third year. Joint accreditations are undertaken with the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council to accredit veterinary programmes across Australia and New Zealand, with the American Veterinary Medical Association to accredit veterinary programmes in U.S.A. and Canada, and with the South African Veterinary Council to accredit a veterinary programme in South Africa. The RCVS accredits twenty veterinary nursing degree programmes and four awarding organisations who award level 3 veterinary nursing qualifications. All establishments who wish to deliver a veterinary nursing programme must be accredited before they recruit students to the programme. Currently no joint veterinary nursing accreditations are carried out. Once a vet school or veterinary nursing programme is accredited by the RCVS, its graduates are eligible to register with the RCVS and therefore able to practise within the UK.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2018 REVIEW

The 2018 ENQA panel review was the RCVS' first review against the ESG, and the main findings were summarised in the report's Executive Summary as follows.

RCVS is not a typical QA agency: it has a different history and a different constitution than most other agencies (...). RCVS is a professional organisation that conducts its business professionally and with great integrity. Everyone we met was well aware of the responsibility they were carrying. Arguably, it is a small profession but everything involved is very complex: complex structures, complex processes... (...) Most structures and processes carry a lot of history, and RCVS finds itself in a bit of tension between doing justice to what has been before (and also laws and rules that stem from the past) and the willingness/need for change.

In driving forward this change, RCVS can rely on its considerable strengths:

- It is a very mature organisation that can build upon decades of experience and considerable achievements and works as an independent body in their field.

- RCVS shows a spirit geared towards learning and improvement all across the institution and a professionally driven awareness of the importance of quality assurance: it is truly a learning organisation, very self-aware and conscious of its relevant environment

- The organisation seems to have a dedicated and experienced staff as well as professional and clearly engaged members in the Council and the various committees. Integrity and professionalism seem to be core values.

- RCVS has largely developed a sound and robust methodology aimed at training the best graduates ("day one competences") that is well implemented and seems to be met with a high level of satisfaction and acceptance by the concerned parties.

- The institution is in a very favourable resource situation with a positive outlook, aided by a thorough budgeting process and regular risk assessment exercises.

- RCVS is actively communicating its activities and achievements, seems to be engaged in a constant dialogue with the stakeholders it deems relevant and is very transparent in its processes and outcomes. All stakeholders interviewed made their trust in RCVS explicit.

- We found clear documentation and a commendable approach towards transparency, making almost all important documents and decisions available to the public.

In their assessment of RCVS against the ESG, the panel commended the RCVS' follow-up processes in particular (ESG 2.2). The panel suggested improvements as follows.

Yet, while trying to understand RCVS better and also view the organisation through the lens of the ESG, we also found a couple of issues that might need some (re)consideration and could be improved/further developed:

- There is no comprehensive QA policy that would help stakeholders outside of RCVS to understand the scope of their QA activities and how they are conducted and with what aim. (ESG 3.1)

- The methodologies are sound, though with still considerable differences in the processes and activities between the area of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nursing. We appreciate the changes that have already been implemented in order to support convergence between the approaches, but would also like to encourage RCVS to work even more strongly towards acknowledging internal quality assurance as part 1 of the ESG seem only to be covered to some degree in the reviews, especially when it comes to Veterinary Nursing. (ESG 2.1)

- Consistency of outcomes/processes seems to be achieved through the comprehensive committee structure including functional redundancies, but is not, to our knowledge, based on clear and transparent criteria that would also lead to the same decisions if the people involved did not know the respective institutions so well. Some inconsistencies between visit and final decision were also felt from the perspective of higher education

institutions during the previous accreditation round, but they also see RCVS's willingness to improve its procedures. (ESG 2.5)

- We found a rather small pool of reviewers when it comes to accrediting Veterinary Nursing programmes. We know that this is already being improved, but want to encourage RCVS to move from an inspection/examination approach to a real enhancement-oriented peer visit also in this field. (ESG 2.4)

- We found some initial ideas and a good data basis, but no clear concept/time plan yet with regard to thematic reports. It is also not clear to us who would take responsibility for the thematic reports, considering they will take time and require a specific kind of expertise. (ESG 3.4)

- In a similar way we still consider internal quality assurance (IQA) as an area for improvement. The Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) plays a very important role for IQA approaching it from a risk assessment perspective but so far there seems no clear concept for developing IQA beyond an increase of feedback instruments; and responsibilities are not completely clear yet. In other words: who is wearing the QA hat? (ESG 3.6).

- Last but not least, despite the impressive level of communication at RCVS and a well-developed discursive culture, stakeholder involvement is largely built on the existing committees and sub-committees. In this regard, it is worth mentioning, that no students are involved in any of the governance structures, although they are now a member of every visiting panel. Regarding the fact that students are core stakeholders when it comes to quality assurance and that student involvement is rapidly becoming a cornerstone of many developments in the European Higher Education Area, we want to encourage RCVS to even more actively approach this opportunity. (ESG 3.1)

Standards 3.4 and 2.5 were given the assessment of partial, rather than full or substantial compliance.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2023 external review of RCVS was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of RCVS was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Luut Kroes (Chair), Director, NVAO-NL, The Netherlands (ENQA nominee);
- Durdica Dragojevic (Secretary), Senior Expert Advisor at the Ministry of Science and Education, Croatia (ENQA nominee);
- Andrea Nolan, Professor of Veterinary Pharmacology, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Edinburgh Napier University, UK (EUA nominee);
- Iuliu Gabriel Cocuz, PhD student in medicine, "George Emil Palade" University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Targu Mures, Romania, Member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool

Goran Dakovic (ENQA Head of Agency Reviews), acted as the review coordinator, assisting the panel in all matters and ensuring consistency in assessing compliance with the ESG.

The review process followed the ENQA methodology. After nomination, the panel met online to discuss the SAR and the need for additional documents. The site visit schedule was produced in coordination with the RCVS, and as the RCVS was in the process of changing premises, held at the premises of the Royal College of Nursing, with most participants in-person. By the end of the site visit, based on the interviews and the evidence collected beforehand from the documents submitted and the RCVS website, the panel was able to agree on the judgments of compliance for each of the ESG. Finally, the result of the process is the present report drafted by the review Secretary in cooperation

with the Chair and panel members. It is submitted to the ENQA Board to enable its members to assess the ESG compliance of the RCVS.

Self-assessment report

According to the RCVS' SAR, primary input for the document was produced by RCVS staff in the Education and Veterinary Nursing departments, which are the departments dealing with accreditation, starting in spring 2022. Key stakeholders contributed together with representatives from the relevant RCVS committees. The work was coordinated by the Education Quality Improvement Manager (EQIM) and regularly reviewed by a steering group of essential personnel. The first full draft of the SAR was presented to the RCVS Senior Team in early September 2022 to facilitate a wider input from all the department Directors of the RCVS, and the CEO. As amendments were made, the subsequent drafts were shared with the committees and stakeholders to ensure the accuracy of the content and the tone. In addition to the committees, the draft SAR was also shared externally with the Vet Schools Council (VSC) and International Accreditors Working Group for their feedback and comments. The final draft was completed by mid-October.

The panel found the SAR well-written and informative, especially so in describing improvements done since the 2018 review. The RCVS has recently implemented new standards, in 2020 for veterinary nurses and 2023 for veterinary surgeons and the SAR described this very well, providing sufficient information on both the old and the new standards and the changes in the procedures. A complicating fact is that RCVS is not a typical regional, national or international agency (as well described in the 2018 report), but rather a professional regulatory body working in a specific profession in a country with several different education systems and levels, with a specific terminology and numerous stakeholder organisations. With multiple bodies taking part in the same task, RCVS procedures can be complex, and leaving out some steps irrelevant for a particular chapter to simplify the description, while necessary, can also lead to confusion. This is why, while there were no issues in understanding the SAR itself, the RCVS was asked for an additional description of the veterinary nursing education system, a number of additional documents, and, during the pre-meeting, additional clarifications. The RCVS recognized possible confusion was created by the organigram presented in the SAR, and provided an improved version. Once the additional clarifications were received, well before the site visit, the panel had no further issues in understanding the system and the RCVS organisation.

Site visit

Due to the availability of panel members, the site visit took place somewhat later than originally planned, from June 5th to 7th, with the pre-meeting organised online on May 15th. As noted, because the RCVS has sold its previous premises and is waiting to move into the new ones, using a co-working space in the meantime, the site visit took place at the Royal College of Nursing. The panel was able to have separate meetings with people from all levels of the RCVS organisational structure, including the CEO and the Presidents, various members of its decision-making bodies which include the RCVS Council and its various committees, and several members of the staff including directors for several areas and staff working directly on accreditation. The panel also met several HEI representatives and reviewers working for the RCVS. Finally, a number of stakeholder organisation representatives participated, including various student and veterinary organisations and a government representative. The panel especially appreciated the fact that the majority of participants came to the meetings in person. The few participants that joined online did sometimes have problems hearing what was said, but all took the opportunity to speak and most of the time they actively participated. The interviews took place in a friendly and open atmosphere, with the responses up to the point, clear and critical

when necessary. As much of the RCVS work is done in the committees which include stakeholder representatives, and whose members sometimes act as reviewers, some of the attendants participated in two meetings. The panel felt that this ensured the plurality of voices at the meetings and in no way threatened the openness of communication.

Because much of the work was done before the site visit, the panel was also able to use the breaks to check the confidential additional documents, and the RCVS staff readily met all requests for additional documents or explanations.

The panel wishes to thank all of the participants for taking the time to discuss their work with RCVS, as well as the RCVS staff for their kindness, professionalism and hospitality.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

As described in the SAR, in the UK the education system is divided into four main parts, primary education, secondary education, further education and higher education. National assessments take place at the end of secondary and further education, and the outcomes of the assessments determine the subjects and often the location of study for the continuation of either further or higher education. The stage of education is based on chronological age in primary and secondary settings, and while formal education or training - secondary and further education - must continue until age 18 (16 in Scotland), individuals can return to further or higher education at any age. Higher education is not compulsory and offers a wide choice of locations and subjects to students based on their academic ability (measured formally at the end of secondary or further education) and their preference of location.

In the UK, there are around 175 universities and other institutions that are recognised by the UK government and have the power to award UK degrees. However, it is a specificity of the UK system that there are over 400 providers of higher education, which means that there are a number who cannot award degrees themselves but are validated by a recognised university.

The RCVS is the statutory regulator of the veterinary profession, and only graduates of institutions accredited by the RCVS can obtain a licence to practice as veterinary surgeons or nurses in the UK. While veterinary surgeons (VS) can only obtain higher education qualifications, it is possible to become a veterinary nurse through further education. As described in the Terms of Reference, the RCVS currently accredits eight established vet schools in the UK, and one school overseas, with the programme lasting five or, in one case, six years. Around 5000 students are currently studying in these programmes. A further three schools in the UK and one overseas, have enrolled students, but have not yet graduated their first cohort. Once the first cohort reaches their final year of studies, the schools will undergo their final full accreditation, and until this time, these schools have six-monthly meetings with the RCVS and an interim visitation in their third year. The RCVS accredits twenty veterinary nursing (VN) degree programmes and four awarding organisations that award further education veterinary nursing qualifications. The educational programmes vary in duration, from two to four years, with around 3000 students. All establishments that wish to deliver a VN programme must be accredited before they recruit students to the programme.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The higher education system in the UK is devolved, whereby each nation (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) determines its own higher education policy including regulation. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent charity and membership organisation. It is used by higher education providers and regulatory bodies across all four UK nations to maintain and enhance quality and standards. For English higher education providers, they used to have a separate team which carried out reviews of providers and advised the competent government department – Office for Students. Due to regulative changes, they have stepped down and at the time of writing of this report, the RCVS was monitoring the situation to see if the QAA's work will be adequately taken over.

In addition, within the UK there are Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) that set standards for, and regulate standards of, entry into their specific professions and often participate in quality assurance activities. A PSRB may often have statutory authority over a profession or group of professionals, and as such will accredit or endorse programmes and courses that meet professional standards, provide a route through the professions, or are recognised by employers. The RCVS is a PSRB and is the statutory regulator of the veterinary profession. To be accredited by the RCVS, a veterinary programme (VS or VN) must be delivered by an accredited institution of higher education (or in the case of VN, educational institution working in further education). Only graduates of RCVS-accredited veterinary programmes can become RCVS members or associates, that is, acquire a license to practise within the UK.

THE RCVS

The RCVS was established in 1844 by the Royal Charter which made veterinary practice become a profession distinguished by the title "veterinary surgeon" and created the RCVS as the governing body of the veterinary profession. The statutory duties are currently laid out in the Veterinary Surgeons Act of 1966. The key aim is to safeguard the interests of the public and animals by ensuring that only those registered with the RCVS can carry out acts of veterinary surgery.

In 1967, most of the original Royal Charter was superseded by the Supplemental Charter of 1967, and in 2015 this was replaced by a new Supplemental Charter. This was an important change as it set the objects of the College – 'to set, uphold and advance veterinary standards, and to promote, encourage and advance the study and practice of the art and science of veterinary medicine, in the interests of the health and welfare of animals and in the wider public interest'. The Charter gives the College power to 'undertake any activities which seem to it necessary or expedient to help it to achieve its objects' and mentions a number of specific activities. The Charter also recognized veterinary nursing as a profession. It requires the College to keep a list of veterinary nurses while the Veterinary Nurses' Council is required to set standards for their education, training and conduct. In the past, the RCVS also served as an awarding body for VN qualifications, but this practice ended in 2015, with degrees in VN available since 1999.

The RCVS website states that the RCVS role is 'to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare'. The RCVS does this 'by setting, upholding and advancing the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.' Its vision is 'to be recognised as a trusted, compassionate and proactive regulator, and a supportive and ambitious Royal College, underpinning confident veterinary professionals of whom the UK can be proud.' Its mission, as set out in the objects of the 2015 Royal Charter, is as follows: 'As a regulator, we set, uphold and advance veterinary standards. As a Royal College, we promote, encourage and advance the study and practice of the art and science of veterinary surgery and medicine. We do all these things in the interests of animal health and welfare, and in the wider public interest.'

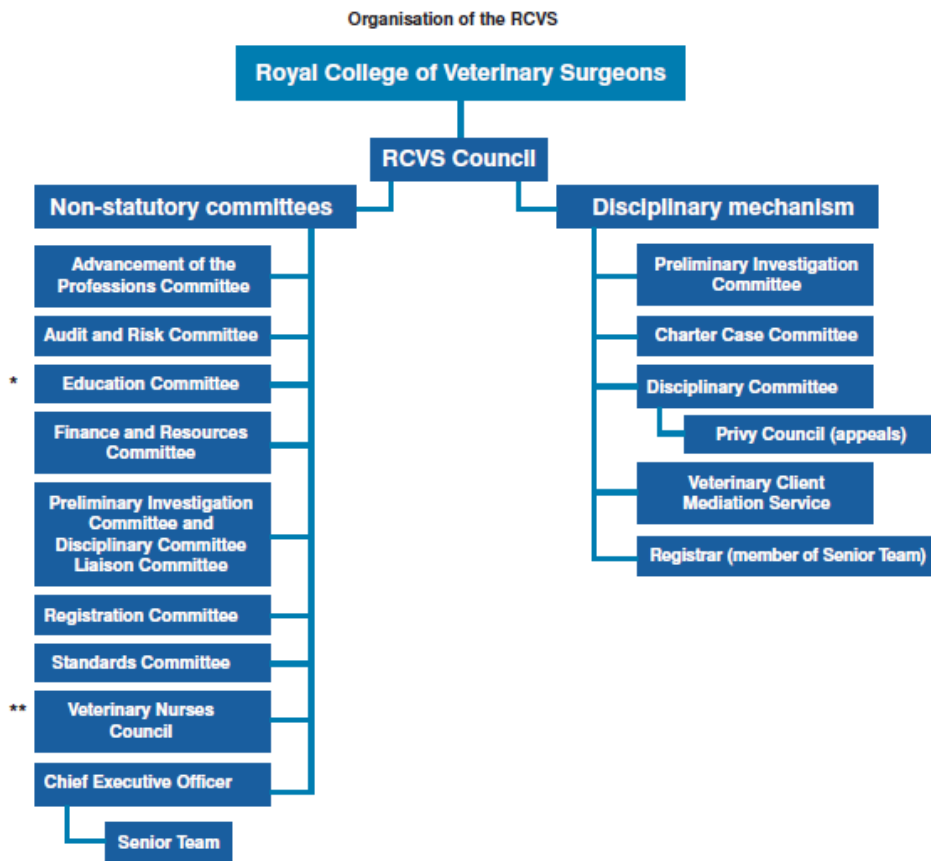
The RCVS website describes how the College has developed its strategic planning: while in 2014 it ‘focused on the basics – enabling the RCVS to be a First-rate Regulator’, the 2017 strategy ‘took a much broader scope and looked at the future direction of the veterinary and veterinary nursing professions’ based on joint initiatives with the British Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Nursing Association. The current 2020-24 strategic plan lists the key RCVS values as ‘Diverse and inclusive, Compassionate, Forward-looking and Straight-talking’. It ‘is built on a foundation of four key ambitions: Clarity, Compassion, Courage and Confidence.’ It ‘looks at the future of the RCVS as an organisation working on behalf of all its stakeholders, taking into account the future direction and needs of the professions and also the needs of the public, animal owners and, of course, animal health and welfare and public health.’ and goes on to elaborate on what the RCVS will be doing to achieve each of the ambitions.

It is noted across the RCVS documents that it wishes to establish itself as a leader and an innovator among equivalent organisations internationally. Its current strategy also mentions an objective ‘to ensure there is a global element to all that we do, and that our international members feel engaged and included’. In the field of accreditation, the RCVS works closely with other members of the International Accreditors Working Group: the European Association of Establishments of Veterinary Education – EAEVE, the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council – AVBC, the American Veterinary Medical Association – AVMA and the South African Veterinary Council – SAVC. It has also worked on establishing and currently provides the secretariat for ACOVENE, the Accreditation Committee for Veterinary Nurse Education, which performs accreditations of veterinary nursing programmes across Europe.

RCVS’S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

The leading body of RCVS is the **RCVS Council**, which currently has 24 members: 13 elected members (all veterinary surgeons), three appointed members from the Veterinary Schools Council (VSC), two appointed veterinary nurses and six appointed lay members. In addition, the Chief Veterinary Officer is an ex-officio observer. Every year, 3 or 4 (dependent on the election cycle) elected Members of Council terms of office end/begin at the Annual General Meeting; nominations are collected from all members. According to the information from the site visit, the remaining members are appointed by stakeholder organisations, apart from lay members who are selected by a special committee. Lay members include people with various types of expertise; e.g. currently there is a member with experience in professional accreditation. The Council has a president and two vice-presidents, who form the RCVS Officer Team together with the Treasurer, Registrar (chief legal expert) and the Chief Executive (who manages the employed RCVS staff and ensures the strategy is met on time and on budget).

As shown on the Chart 1, sub-bodies of the Council are those that form the RCVS Disciplinary Mechanism (outside the scope of this review), and the **Non-Statutory Committees** which the Council establishes and to which it delegates its tasks. Each Committee has its Terms of Reference and is composed partly of Council members, and partly of other appointed individuals. The relevant Committees for this review are the Education Committee (EC) with its Primary Qualifications Subcommittee (PQSC), the decision-making body for accreditations in Veterinary Surgery, and the Veterinary Nurses Council (VNC) with its Education Committee (VNEC), the equivalent bodies for Veterinary Nursing. Both Education Committees and the PQ Subcommittee include student members.



* Education Committee – Primary Qualifications Subcommittee (PQSC) is a subcommittee of the Education Committee
 ** VN Council – VN Education Committee (VNEC) is a subcommittee of the VN Council

Chart 1: RCVS organisation (source: SAR)

The **staff** working for the RCVS are led by the Senior Team and the Chief Executive Officer, and the structure is shown on the Chart 2 below.

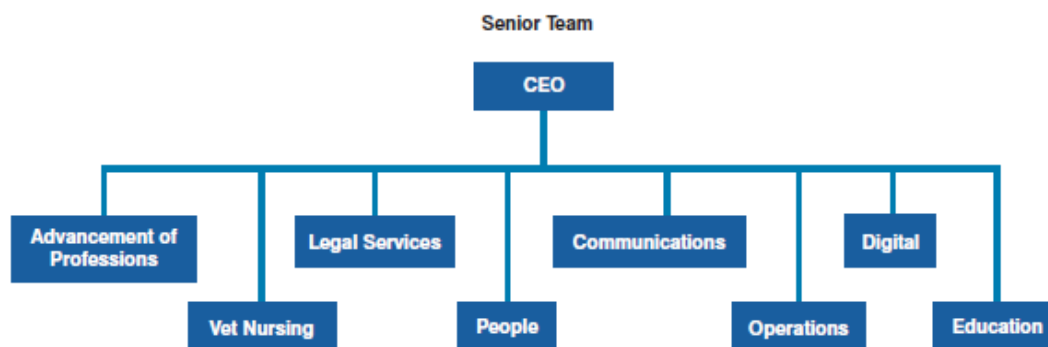


Chart 2: organisation of the RCVS senior team (source: SAR)

The relevant departments for this review are Vet Nursing and Education, both led by their respective Directors. The staff in these departments work on policy, accreditation and, in the case of Veterinary Nursing, also work on the pre-registration examination for nurses as well as monitoring assessments

done at institutions; 3 people per department work on accreditation only at the moment. Another important function, not shown on the chart, is the Education Quality Improvement Manager, who performs the IQA role and responds to the Audit and Risk Committee. In total, the RCVS employs a staff of about 170 FTEs.

RCVS'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

As the regulator of the profession, the RCVS is responsible for keeping the register of veterinary surgeons and nurses eligible to practise in the UK, and registration with the RCVS presents the licence to practise in the UK. There are currently over 36,000 registered veterinary surgeons with over 28,000 of these registered as "UK Practising" which means they can practise in the UK, with the remainder being either registered as non-practising or practising outside the UK. There are nearly 23,000 registered veterinary nurses. By registering, they become members of the College – formally, veterinary surgeons can become Members or Fellows, while nurses become Associates of the College. For those without recognized qualifications, the RCVS organizes examinations. The RCVS also implements a number of activities meant to support its members, including various types of research and surveys, continuous professional development courses and certificates, and initiatives such as Mind Matters, meant to provide support for mental health issues recognized within the profession, done in cooperation with the stakeholder organisations.

Another of the statutory duties of the RCVS is the regulation of the professional conduct of both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, with failure to comply with professional codes of conduct potentially leading to disciplinary action and possibly removal from the relevant register. The RCVS also has a client mediation service, and works on the advancement of clinical standards via accreditation within a voluntary Practice Standards Scheme.

A key duty of the RCVS is the setting and monitoring of the standards for the education of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses. The relevant legislation (the Veterinary Surgeons Act) gives the RCVS the duty to supervise courses of study and appoint visitors to visit universities and observe examinations. On this basis, the RCVS develops the standards for and performs the accreditation of veterinary and veterinary nursing degrees. In addition to developing accreditation standards, the RCVS also establishes knowledge and skill requirements for graduates – Day One Competences, and issues guidelines for extra-mural studies (profession-related work experience') and fitness to practise.

The RCVS performs accreditation procedures for the establishment of new veterinary programmes. Veterinary degrees are then subject to a regular accreditation cycle of 7 years for surgeon degrees and 5 for nursing degrees. In addition to visiting universities, RCVS is allowed to request other information from universities 'as to the course of study and examinations leading to the degree to which the recognition order relates'. Under this provision, RCVS is able to monitor standards at UK universities on a regular basis, not just through the formal process of periodic accreditation visits.

Table 1: Number of EQA activities per year (source: SAR)

Year	Number of EQA activities	
	Veterinary surgeon (VS) degree programmes	Veterinary nurse (VN) degree programmes
2018	3	4
2019	4	5
2020	1	2 (1 in person; 1 virtual)
2121	8 (2 in person; 6 virtual)	3 (all virtual)
2022	1	1

As explained in more detail under ESG 2.5, in the past 5 years there were no negative decisions in veterinary surgery, and 3 in veterinary nursing. The RCVS undertakes joint accreditations with the American, Australasian and the South African Councils that are part of the International Accreditors Working Group in their respective countries, and does the same in the UK with other international agencies when UK universities wish to have multiple accreditations.

RCVS'S FUNDING

The majority of the RCVS funding comes from annual registration fees from veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses practising in the UK, as shown in Chart 3. The funding has slightly increased annually for the past five years. The RCVS managed to build reserves above their financial goals and part of these was invested into the purchase of a new building.

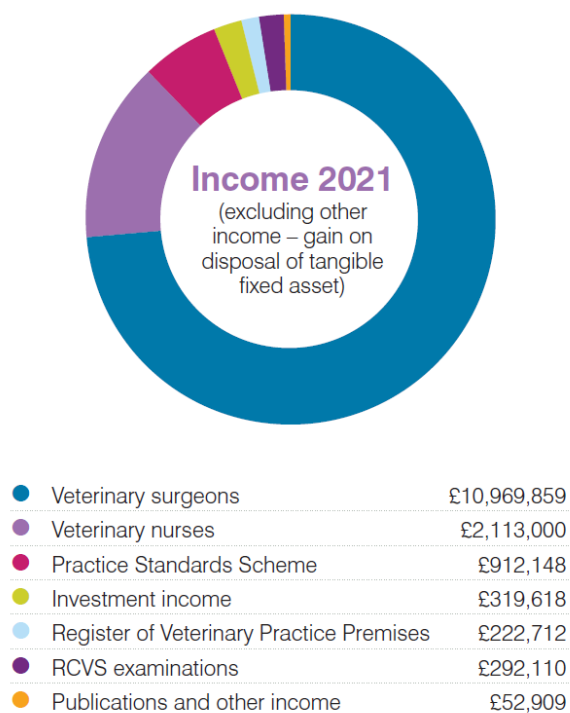


Chart 3: 2021 RCVS income (source: SAR)

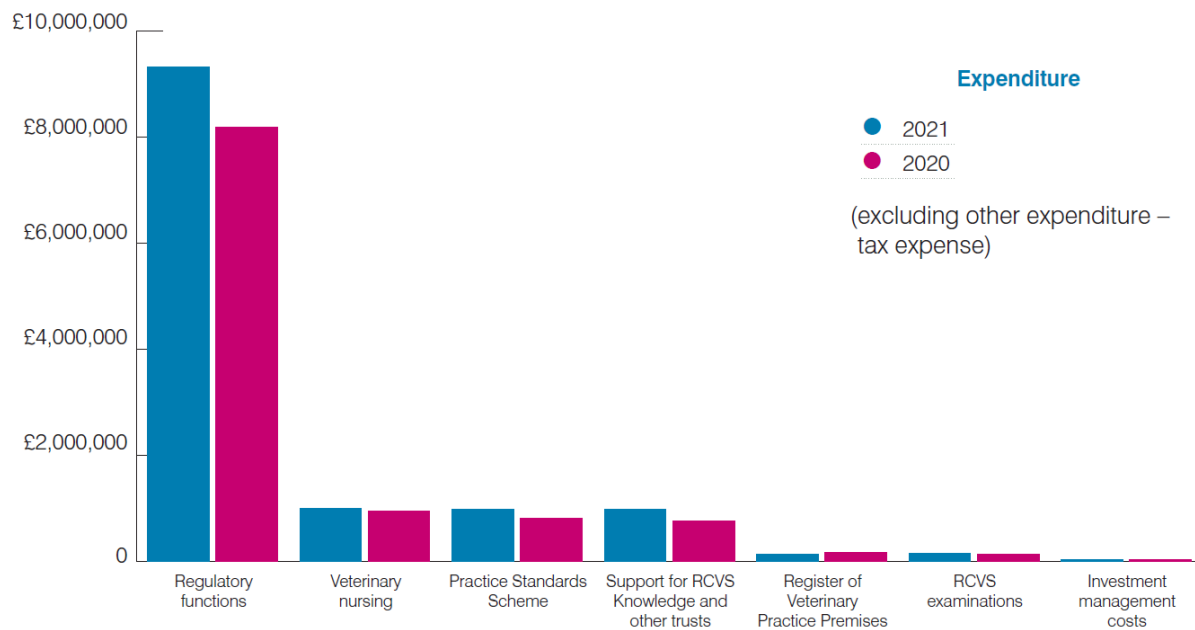


Chart 4: RCVS 2020 and 2021 expenditure (source: RCVS 2021 Annual Report)

In line with the regulations, the RCVS does not charge for accreditation of UK veterinary surgeon degrees but does charge for the accreditation of veterinary nursing degrees, as well as overseas degrees (part of Other income on the Chart 3 above).

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF RCVS WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

2018 review recommendation

- Add a more comprehensive QA policy to the next strategic plan or develop a separate QA policy document that would help stakeholders outside the RCVS to understand the aim and scope of its QA activities.
- Engage students from both veterinary surgeons and nurses' programmes to the decision making bodies of the RCVS.

Evidence

It was noted that the RCVS' mission as a regulator, as listed on its website, was 'to set, uphold and advance veterinary standards (...) in the interests of animal health and welfare, and in the wider public interest.' The regulations relating to the RCVS specify that the veterinary standards include educational standards, and that part of the RCVS' duties is to accredit new and existing veterinary programmes in the UK. The RCVS Strategic Plan 2020/24 is described in its introduction as being based on a year-long research of the opinions of a number of stakeholders which include the general public. It explains the current goals of the RCVS, with activities listed under each of its four key ambitions, Clarity, Courage, Compassion, and Confidence. The activities are formulated broadly and include improving the process of collecting input from the public, continuing its outreach programme and ensuring that the College is seen as approachable, helpful, fair and accessible to all. While many of the activities also imply accreditation, the one that explicitly mentions it is to 'plan and implement a cycle of review and improvement for our educational standards and processes, to ensure we continue to take a leadership role with our international partners.' The review was implemented in 2020 for the VN standards and in 2022 for the VS standards.

Following the 2018 recommendation, the RCVS developed its Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Policy for Accreditation Activities, which was updated in 2022. The policy is reviewed and agreed upon by the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) as part of the internal process, and is publicly available on the sections of the RCVS website that deal with accreditations in veterinary nursing and surgery. The Policy starts with a 'Quality Statement': 'RCVS is the statutory regulator responsible under the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) for the management of the veterinary profession. This includes: the registration of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK and accrediting and maintaining the requirements for professional veterinary education. By implementing a robust quality assurance system, the RCVS is committed to safeguarding the interests of the public so that they can be confident

in the care that their animals receive. The quality assurance policy for all activities aims to be transparent, fair, and free from bias and accurately details and records all quality assurance decisions. This includes the monitoring of education accreditation in line with both veterinary surgeon and veterinary nursing standards in order to maintain their quality and integrity.' The Policy further lists the aims of the accreditation as follows. 'Through the quality assurance process, the RCVS aims to ensure that the education accreditation process is understandable to stakeholders, effectively administered and accountable; the qualifications are offered by institutions that have the adequate resources, environment and expertise to ensure valid teaching, learning and assessment of students against the learning outcomes and Day One competences and skills; fairness, consistency and transparency surround the approval of veterinary education programmes.' The Policy then includes a description of the accreditation cycles in VS and VN, the decision-making process and the appeals procedure, as well as the internal quality assurance arrangements.

To establish a new veterinary surgeon programme, according to the regulations, a Privy Council (a formal body of advisers to the Sovereign of the United Kingdom) Recognition Order is necessary. These Recognition Orders are given based on the recommendation by the RCVS Council, after the full accreditation procedure is completed, and remain in place until the RCVS advises the Privy Council otherwise. Apart from establishing new veterinary schools, all other accreditation procedures done by the RCVS are formally completed within the RCVS. The establishment of new veterinary degrees is a process done with monitoring by the RCVS from the very start. For veterinary surgeon degrees, after a process of meetings every six months, an interim visitation will take place in the third year of study of the first cohort, and a full accreditation will be awarded only after the cohort has completed its clinical studies and another visit has taken place. For veterinary nursing, provisional accreditation is awarded before the first cohort can be admitted to the programme, with two schools currently in that status. Once the first cohort of students completes the qualification, a provisionally accredited AEI may apply to the RCVS for full accreditation.

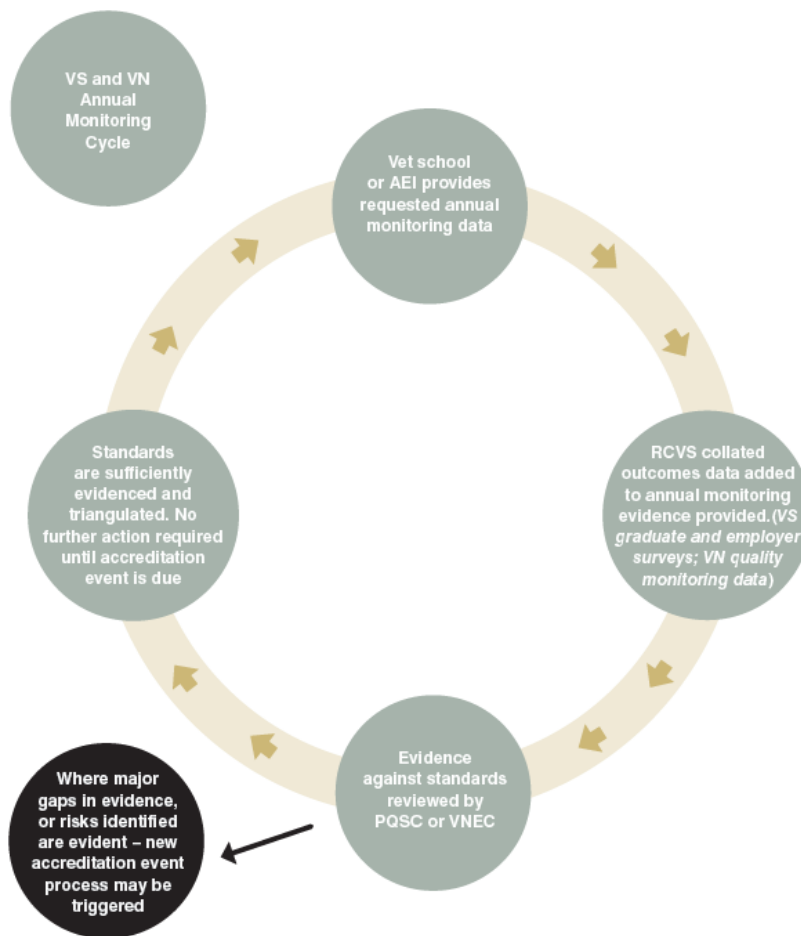
As explained in the SAR, the veterinary degree accreditation cycle runs over seven years, whereas the veterinary nursing accreditation cycle runs over five years. This difference reflects the relative lengths of the programmes – VS degrees take five (or in one case six) years to complete, whereas, a VN degree takes three or four years to complete. Part of the accreditation cycle includes a visit to the educational establishment. The regular cycle of accreditation and monitoring is depicted in the figure from the SAR.

Figure 1: VS and VN accreditation cycle (source: SAR)



As an exception, in the case of deficiencies having an impact on the student experience, the accreditation can be provided for a shorter period. In addition to regular accreditations, an accreditation visit can be triggered through annual monitoring, as depicted in the Figure 2.

Figure 2: VS and VN annual monitoring cycle (source: SAR)



The RCVS procedures are specific as it is an expert body in the field of study, and thus able to provide input on the programme content, delivery and outcomes. It typically does this through various documents and guidelines, including Day One Competences as well as guidelines for extra-mural studies and fitness to practise. Directly relevant is also the Veterinary Graduate Development Programme which was launched in 2021 to support the new graduates in their first role along with their advisors. All programme participants fill in a mandatory survey on the preparedness of graduates – as perceived by themselves before and after the programme, as well as by their advisors 3-4 weeks after the programme start and then at the programme end. This provides the RCVS with data on graduate outcomes with an almost 100% response rate. Closer cooperation between the RCVS and HEIs exists when new degrees are established, with an RCVS panel providing input on the curricula. The SAR emphasises that their aim is not to provide advice on the programme, which should be done by external advisors, but only to identify gaps that might lead to non-compliance. In the case of VN programmes, the follow-up monitoring also includes monitoring the final clinical assessments - the OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examination).

The SAR notes that stakeholders are involved in the governance and work of the RCVS through their membership of RCVS committees such as the RCVS Council and the RCVS Veterinary Nurses' Council, through working parties, through collaboration with the Veterinary Schools Council (a separate organisation whose board includes the Heads of each UK veterinary school), and through direct contact with each individual veterinary nursing AEI (accredited educational institution; they do not have an organisation as of yet). Other representative bodies within the professions are also consulted, for example, the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) and the British Veterinary

Association (BVA) and its specialist divisions. The SAR further describes how the RCVS regularly conducts profession-wide consultations on significant issues, involving multiple stakeholders. Recent examples include the consultation on the graduate outcomes project, consultation on day-one competences, skills and professional behaviours for veterinary nurses and consultation on the RCVS standards for accreditation and methodology for veterinary degree programmes.

The Strategy document describes the review of the RCVS governance, which came up as an issue in 2013 and became a part of the official strategy after the 2015 amended Royal Charter which made the RCVS the regulator of veterinary nurses. This suggested the need to include them in the Council, while the increase in the number of veterinary schools and the research pointed to the need to change the Council composition by decreasing the number of members; the same research also pointed to the need to include lay members to strengthen public confidence. This was finally implemented by the 2018 amendments to the Veterinary Law.

Following the 2018 recommendations, as described in the 2020 Follow-up Report to ENQA, student representatives were included on a number of RCVS committees, including the Education Committee, the Primary Qualification Subcommittee and the Veterinary Nurse Education Committee. Students are also invited to be part of the visitor panel for the accreditation of qualifications, as well as members of working groups, and encouraged to observe the meetings of the RCVS Council which are public. The RCVS Follow-up Report notes that 'the inclusion of students within these groups and committees has brought a different perspective to the discussions. (...) An ongoing piece of work is to now explore the impact of the student members of the committees, panels and working groups.' At the site visit the participants confirmed the value of the student perspective for their work, while the students confirmed that they felt like equal participants in the discussions. RCVS staff talked about their recently introduced outreach initiative which includes RCVS officers visiting each veterinary school to talk to first year students about the RCVS and present the opportunities for student participation. The plans were discussed to develop this further by appointing student ambassadors and encouraging two-way communication.

There are no international members in the RCVS committees, in the sense of people who have studied and work abroad.

The SAR notes that the RCVS is currently in the process of seeking new amendments to the 1966 Veterinary Surgeons Act based on a 2021 paper with recommendations, which include broadening veterinary teams and RCVS responsibilities. It was mentioned at the site visit that there is a high demand for parliamentary time, which is why the amendments have not yet been enacted but officers indicated their expectation that these will be progressed in a couple of years.

Analysis

Both of the 2018 recommendations were implemented already in 2020, with the development of the IQA policy as a separate document and the inclusion of students to the key RCVS decision-making bodies for accreditation.

The RCVS mission refers to setting, upholding and advancing veterinary standards, and the relevant regulations and RCVS public documents, including its website and the current Strategy, all specify that this includes educational standards. Like other important RCVS documents, the Strategy was based on research, including various surveys among the profession and the wider public, and then discussed and adopted by the RCVS committees which include stakeholder representatives as well as lay members. The IQA policy does not set any goals itself, but rather describes what is relevant from the other RCVS documents and regulations. In the eyes of the panel, it is a comprehensive document that provides sufficient information on how and why RCVS accredits educational programmes, as well on what it does to ensure that it does it well.

It is clear from the regulations and the Strategy that RCVS approaches higher education institutions as a regulator and an accreditor, and that any advice and support provided to them is for this purpose. Outside of the activities connected to accreditation, RCVS does not perform activities that could confuse its role.

The RCVS is tasked with protecting animal health, which can have a crucial impact on public health, which makes public trust in its work even more relevant than with more typical quality assurance agencies. The wider public is indeed included as a stakeholder in RCVS surveys and lay people sit on the RCVS Council and a number of committees. It also has a number of outreach and communications activities. As a membership organisation, the RCVS' governance is again specific, as in addition to the lay members, its governing bodies are composed of either stakeholder representatives or directly elected members. This ensures a balance of institutional, employer, and public interests. Student representatives are a relatively new addition to the RCVS committees, and the 2020 Follow-up Report mentions this as a development to be explored. At the site visit, the participants commented on the student participation as positive, adding an important perspective to the discussion. While recognising that this depends on changing the legislation, the panel believes that student participation can be further developed in line with the ESG expectation that all decision-making bodies include students, by including them in the RCVS Council membership.

Panel suggestions:

- I. The panel suggests including students in the work of the Council.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Standard:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

Evidence

The RCVS is the sole statutory regulatory body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It operates under primary national legislation (Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966), and is also designated as the “Competent Authority” for the veterinary profession under European Union legislation (Section 1a of the Act). It is constituted under a Royal Charter, the first of which was granted in 1844, followed by various updated Charters, with the most recent Royal Charter coming into effect in 2015, bringing veterinary nurses into full regulation under the RCVS. Its role as a Chartered regulator is to set, uphold and advance the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses. Under the Veterinary Surgeons Act, the list of its primary roles includes ‘to set and monitor standards for veterinary education’. Section 3 of the Act specifies that those who hold a degree from a UK veterinary school that has received a recognition order are entitled to be registered as Members of the RCVS. Only Members of the RCVS have the right to practise veterinary surgery in the UK. Section 5 of the Act gives the RCVS the duty to supervise courses of study followed by students training to be veterinary surgeons in the UK. The Act specifies that the RCVS can appoint visitors to visit universities and observe examinations. In addition to visiting universities, the Act allows the RCVS to request other information from universities “as to the courses of study and examinations leading to the degree to which the recognition order relates”. Under the Act, the RCVS advises the King’s Privy Council on

whether a UK university should have a recognition order. However, it is explained in the SAR this is a historical technicality and, to all intents and purposes, the decision on whether or not to approve a given degree programme is made by the RCVS. The official statutory Recognition Order is issued by the Privy Council and remains in place until the RCVS advises the Privy Council otherwise.

The activities of veterinary nurses are covered by Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, 1966. This sets out the professional and clinical jurisdiction of registered and student veterinary nurses, from which relevant veterinary nurse competences have been developed. It is the 2015 Charter that outlines the status of veterinary nurses as Associates of the College, and the Veterinary Nurses' Council (VNC) as the body which sets training and education standards for veterinary nurses.

In order to be accredited by the RCVS, a veterinary programme within the UK must be delivered by an accredited institution of higher education (HEI), which means that they must be recognised to have the power to award degrees and be recognised by the devolved body in the relevant nation. For overseas veterinary schools to offer a degree accredited by the RCVS, the veterinary surgeon degree awarded must be recognised as a professional qualification for veterinary surgeons by the relevant authorities (government and/or veterinary licensing body) in its own region/country. VN degrees are delivered by accredited educational institutions (AEIs), not only HEIs and required to comply with all relevant legal regulatory, professional and educational requirements and this is reviewed at the accreditation event.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has responsibility for the Veterinary Surgeons Act and as such acts as the 'overseeing' department in relation to the activities of the RCVS.

The RCVS has mutual recognition agreements with the agencies from the International Accreditors Working Group. Since the UK left the European Union the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications is still in effect, although the RCVS is not bound by it. The RCVS Council made a temporary decision to continue to recognise graduates from EAEVE approved or accredited vet schools for registration purposes. However, 'dependency on the recognition of other regulators' outcomes' is listed as a weakness in the SWOT analysis.

Analysis

As the RCVS accredits veterinary programmes exclusively, it only works with accredited HEIs within the UK, and outside the UK, with accredited HEIs that also have accredited veterinary programmes. The RCVS has a clear legal basis for its quality assurance work in the primary legislation and its Royal Charter. The fact that it is the regulator of both the profession and the institutions means that the degrees it accredits are automatically recognized within the profession and the wider public. Through various recognition arrangements, they are also recognized in the European Union and beyond.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Evidence

Regarding organisational independence of the RCVS, the Veterinary Surgeons Act specifies that the RCVS is the sole organisation responsible for the regulation of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK. It also specifies its role as the advisor of the Privy Council, rather than the government. The RCVS is not reliant on other organisations for its finances, as it derives most of its income from the annual registration/retention (licence to practise) fees of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

As for the operational independence, the Veterinary Surgeons Act specifies that RCVS is responsible for setting standards for veterinary education. The 2015 Royal Charter further specifies its responsibility for setting standards for the education of Veterinary Nurses. The RCVS Accreditation Methodology for Veterinary Programmes specifies that ‘the appointment of members of each accreditation panel is ratified by the RCVS Education Committee, following recommendation from its Primary Qualifications Sub-Committee (PQSC).’ The conflict of interest policy is specified in the Guide for Council and Committee Members, and all panel members sign a declaration on the conflict of interest which was annexed to the SAR. Their training specifies that they are acting in a personal capacity. VS panel member training includes guidance on how to avoid unconscious bias to ensure that procedures and decisions are based on panel members’ expertise as well as evidence-based decision making that aligns with the RCVS values and processes of accreditation. The VN panel member training is to be updated to an online format and will also include this guidance. Where a member of a committee or a sub-committee involved in the accreditation process has acted as part of the accreditation team or has other links to the HEI/AEI under discussion, they would play no part in the making of recommendations on accreditation status. The 2018 panel identified a small number of experts as a potential threat but was satisfied that RCVS established appropriate mechanisms to safeguard the independence of formal outcomes. During the site visit meetings, it was explained that the expert pool has recently been increased, and that this would ultimately enable the RCVS to fully forgo the historical practice of appointing Council and Committee members as panel members.

Regarding the independence of formal outcomes, the process of decision-making is described in the RCVS Accreditation Methodology for Veterinary Programmes as follows. ‘Once the school has confirmed factual accuracy, the rubric will be considered by the RCVS’s PQSC, which will review the evidence and confirm or amend any recommendations. The report is then sent to the Vice Chancellor of the university for a formal response. The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 specifies that, for UK schools, the university may, within the period of two months from the receipt of the report, “make observations on or objections to the report” to the RCVS. The university is invited to comment to the RCVS on its responses to any recommendations in the report. On receipt of a formal response from the university, this is first considered by the accreditation panel for comment before being presented again to the RCVS’s PQSC, which will then make a recommendation on accreditation status to the RCVS Education Committee, having taken the university’s response and panel comments into account.’ According to the law, the decision on accrediting new veterinary schools is made by the Council, which makes a recommendation to the Privy Council. According to the SAR, for VN programmes the decision are delegated to its Education Committee (VNEC) but ratified by the VNC.

Analysis

The RCVS’s organisational and operational independence is ensured by the regulations, which in addition to making the RCVS the competent organisation, also ensure a balance of interests in the composition of the Council, as described in the chapter on RCVS organisation. Both the SAR and the pre-visit meeting with the RCVS helped the panel understand the RCVS relationship to the Privy Council which it advises, but is independent from. The SAR also includes a detailed description of the RCVS procedure of establishing accreditation standards.

The panel training, especially useful for understanding potential biases and improving one's objectivity, the conflict of interest policy, and the fact that there are at least two levels of decision-making all serve as a guarantee of independence of formal outcomes. While already on the basis of seeing the panel training and studying the SAR and the documents specifying the VS and VN accreditation procedure, the panel was satisfied that the RCVS was compliant with this standard, this was further confirmed by the site visit interviews, as discussed in more detail under ESG 2.5.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

2018 review recommendation

- Develop a clear concept and plan for thematic analysis.
- Set clear roles and responsibilities among staff members for analysing and publishing general findings of RCVS's external quality assurance activities.

Evidence

Based on the 2018 recommendation, the RCVS developed a Thematic Analysis Policy as part of its 2020 follow-up activities. According to the SAR, the Policy was updated and reviewed by the Audit and Risk Committee. The Policy starts with stating the following aims: 'to ensure the analysis of findings of external quality assurance activities across all accredited programmes. The qualitative analysis will both identify emerging themes as well as proactively identify topical themes across all accredited programmes. To ensure the general findings of RCVS quality assurance activities are shared with stakeholders and inform quality improvement.' As the potential data sources for the Thematic Analyses, in addition to the visit reports, the Policy lists the feedback reports on the visits (which contribute to IQA), annual reports submitted by the institutions, and the annual survey of recent graduates and their employers (the results of which are regularly shared with the graduates' institutions). This is then operationalised in an Action Plan to analyse emergent themes from the institutional reports with the graduate survey data, and share the results with the relevant RCVS Committees and respective institutions and, in an appropriate form, with the public.

Finally, the Policy contains a Plan of Thematic Analysis. The Plan includes a number of data analyses (of the degree to which institutions met the standards; staff numbers; reported graduate strengths and weaknesses). These are followed by a planned review of types of evidence submitted by the accredited institutions, and then a number of studies concerning various aspects of clinical and practical learning. All of them are to be done by one person (the current EQIM) and most of them are to be completed after the time of the site visit. The panel received the two analyses that were supposed to be completed by the site visit. One is the Analysis of RCVS virtual accreditation reviews of vet schools 2021, which was annexed to the SAR, and another is a purely quantitative analysis of compliance per standard across institutions, for both VS and VN.

The SAR comments on the Policy as follows: 'The policy also includes details of the reports that are written based on the findings of the accreditation events for both VS and VN programmes. These are not thematic analyses per se but do represent how data is used to explore the trends and themes

being seen in the accreditation events and how these are then used to inform future events. It is recognised by the RCVS that this is a work in progress, but the planning should highlight that a range of thematic reviews are proposed that will have meaningful outcomes.’

It was repeated in several meetings during the site visit that the RCVS work on thematic analyses was in the early stages. RCVS staff also mentioned that data has only been collected in a form that is easy to analyse for the last couple of years, so some time was necessary to enable longitudinal analyses. One example was provided of how a general complaint by the public and students served as a basis for data analysis to identify institutions that struggled with the particular issue and provide support. An institutional representative commented that RCVS staff clearly analyse all the visit report data thoroughly, but simply do not publish thematic reports on this. It was also mentioned that in addition to the topics of clinical learning listed in the Policy, the RCVS is currently doing an analysis on disability and the possibilities of offering limited licences. At the same time, another institutional representative reported that data on this topic was being collected without a clear purpose.

The 2020 Follow-up Report also mentioned that the RCVS planned to hire a research officer. It was confirmed during the site visit that the person has indeed been hired, and is in charge of developing and conducting various surveys. The Publications section of the RCVS website contains a number of survey reports (e.g. on the impact of covid on veterinary practices, graduate outcomes), policy papers and guidelines, as well as a regular general newsletter and one dedicated specifically to the VN education. RCVS also organises topical events for the institutions, and is currently planning to launch one specifically aimed at the exchange of good practices identified in the accreditation reports.

Analysis

Already in 2018, the need for a thematic analysis policy was emphasised by the review panel as well as the ENQA board. Visible progress has been made since the 2018 report. A plan exists, positions have been created which include analytical work, and various types of data are being collected and presented. Its various publications show that thanks to its unique position, the RCVS is able to identify important topics for the profession as a whole – such as mental health, the inclusion of people with disabilities, or practical skills of graduates – and then analyse it from the perspective of the programmes it accredits and their stakeholders. Its annual monitoring of institutions can be used to collect topical information where other agencies would have to rely on surveys.

The panel recognizes that RCVS staff and committee members know the programmes they accredit well and regularly use the accreditation visits and annual monitoring to identify emergent themes as a basis for discussions with stakeholders and to suggest improvements across the sector. Due to the RCVS position as a regulator, however, their efforts result in the publication of topical reviews, guidelines and policy papers, rather than reports that would clearly fit under this standard.

In spite of the definition provided in the Thematic Analysis Policy, the panel concludes that there is still a lack of understanding of what thematic analysis should cover in terms of using the evidence from the accreditation reports to highlight common issues as a basis for enhancement across the sector. Namely, the term ‘thematic analysis’ is also used for analyses of accreditation visitations which is misleading in terms of the ESG terminology, as these are part of IQA; the Analysis of RCVS virtual accreditation reviews of vet schools 2021 would also belong to this category. Thus, while such reports are obviously within the remit of the Audit and Risk Committee, which is in charge of IQA, this might not be true of other reports listed in the Thematic Analysis Policy. Furthermore, the term ‘thematic analysis’ is also used for analyses of various metrics which, even though valuable in themselves and often a basis for thematic analyses, lack the crucial reflective component. However, the analyses listed in the Plan to be published in the following years seem promising in this regard.

Panel recommendations:

1. It is necessary to reflect on the requirements of the standard and clearly differentiate between thematic analyses – which focus on topics relevant for the reviewed programmes as identified by the visitation reports – and analyses focused on improving the review process – which are part of the RCVS internal quality assurance. The panel expects that this would lead to a revision of the existing plan and a critical analysis of the available accreditation reports as well as a discussion of potential topics with the stakeholders, both of which may require additional expertise.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

Evidence

The SAR explains that the RCVS supports separate departments for the veterinary and veterinary nursing school accreditation activities. These departments are responsible for the implementation of policy agreed by the RCVS Education Committee and the RCVS Veterinary Nurse Council. Workload is monitored by the Director of Education and the Director of Veterinary Nursing, and the operation of accreditation activities is managed by separate teams within these departments, most of whom were present at the site visit.

Resourcing and staff reviews are regularly carried out through formal (meetings and appraisals) and informal means. Any extra resource needs are identified and communicated to the Director, who will create a resource rationale. This is then presented for approval to the Chief Executive Officer and People Director. Once approved, the People Team supports the recruitment process. At the site visit, the panel met with several people who were hired relatively recently to fill a new role within the organisation, such as the EQIM or an assistant in charge of the newly developed document repository. The SAR further explains that since 2018, the Education Team has expanded in line with an expansion of vet schools within the UK (both an increase in student numbers in existing vet schools and an increase in the number of vet schools). Changes in working practices have also allowed recruitment to be nationwide as it is no longer necessary for staff to be working daily from the office in London, thus expanding the recruitment radius. In February 2020, the VN Team went through a restructuring to balance the workload, provide opportunities for career progression, and allow for the changing role of the Team. Asking about current opportunities for staff, the panel learned at the site visit that they have funding available for membership in professional organisations and professional development, which for some includes attending graduate education programmes. This is in addition to other benefits, such as volunteering days, available to both permanent and temporary staff and listed on the RCVS website. All stakeholder groups talked about the RCVS staff as always available and supportive. A large amount of work is also done by committee members, who are remunerated at the same rate as panel members, which takes into account the loss of earnings and any overtime or night work.

The RCVS is obliged by regulations to provide UK VS programme accreditations free of charge, however, it does charge for the VN accreditations and overseas VS accreditations. As already explained, the majority of the RCVS income comes from annual registration fees from veterinary

surgeons and veterinary nurses practising in the UK. The panel learned at the site visit that this income temporarily decreased due to Brexit but is now again on the increase and at record levels; this is confirmed by the 5-year financial data. The SAR explains that the RCVS is a financially stable organisation, operating with a financial surplus and healthy reserves. The free reserves target is six months of expenditure, a provision for building repairs and provision for risk cover. Based on current activity, the target level of reserves is £8.8m and the College currently exceeds this target by £30m. Total income for the year 2020 was £13.9m, with £11m total expenditure. For the year 2021, the income of £26.9m includes the sale of former RCVS premises, while the total expenditure of £15.7m includes £3m tax on the disposal of the building and investments. At the site visit it was explained that the RCVS has accumulated reserves specifically to buy a new building, which was done in 2021; they will move into the new building in 2024 and are currently renting offices.

Analysis

The RCVS is, in the context of quality assurance agencies, a large organisation. The policies for Human Resources discussed at the site visit as well as the information available on the website show that it is professionally managed, with special emphasis on diversity and inclusion, as discussed further under ESG 3.6. The staff have excellent opportunities for professional development and sufficient administrative and technical support to carry out their daily tasks and the experiences shared at the site visit show that communication with stakeholders is prioritised in their work.

Elaborate risk policies were discussed at the site visit, covering all RCVS activities, implemented separately for human resources and finances. As primarily membership-funded organisation, RCVS has a large degree of financial independence. Its financial planning and reserves ensure that there is more than sufficient funding necessary to carry out the RCVS regulatory work, including accreditations.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Standard:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

2018 review recommendation

Apply a systematic approach for collecting feedback and align the procedures at accreditations of VS and VN degrees whenever possible.

Evidence

Following the ENQA review in 2018, the RCVS developed its Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Policy for Accreditation Activities. The Policy was updated in 2022, and reviewed and agreed by the Audit and Risk Committee as part of the internal process. It includes the IQA procedure, the completion of which is the responsibility of the Quality Improvement Manager. The last step in the Procedure is the collection of feedback from all stakeholders, via a feedback questionnaire individualised for each stakeholder role. The SAR notes that the questionnaire was moved to an online format in 2021, which increased the response rate. According to the SAR, the response rate also increased when the feedback became a separate process to the accreditation event, collected by the EQIM, who is

independent of the accreditation process. In addition to the accreditation visits, feedback is also sought after the pre-accreditation support visits that were instigated in 2022 for veterinary nursing.

As specified in the IQA Policy, the reports from accreditation events are shared annually with the Audit and Risk Committee along with a high-level report to highlight the key themes and trends that have emerged from the accreditation events that have been conducted across both VS and VN programmes. The EQIM attends a sample of the accreditation events for both VS and VN programmes as part of the IQA procedure. The Panel saw a sample of the reports from the procedures that EQIM attended - Thematic Analyses of the accreditation. They include the analysis of the feedback, along with EQIM's observations on the work of the panel and the organisation of the accreditation. It is shared internally with the department conducting the event (either VS or VN). According to the SAR, themes emerging from the accreditation events are addressed and any relevant changes are made to the methodology. The SAR contains two examples of immediate changes done on the basis of these reports – introducing longer breaks to online visits, and paying attention to the room layout during in-person visits. At the site visit, the panel was able to hear from the staff that it was very useful to have the EQIM as an outside observer, both to propose on-the-spot improvements and to discuss the procedure afterwards. The importance of the EQIM's role prompted the panel to ask if there would be issues if the person doing the job left. The RCVS staff explained that all of the EQIM's work is available internally to appropriate departments and always done in cooperation with someone, so this could easily be taken up by someone else. As mentioned, the EQIM reports to the Audit and Risk Committee whose task is, according to the RCVS website, 'to support the Council by reviewing the comprehensiveness and reliability of assurances and internal controls in meeting the Council's oversight responsibilities'.

A step in the IQA procedure is 'Ensure the selection of the visitation team is free from conflict and training is sufficient to meet the demands of the role to ensure visitor decisions are consistent, reliable and free from bias.' The SAR describes that already upon applying, potential panel members are 'asked to complete a questionnaire to explore their past experience and professional roles and this information is used to ascertain their suitability as well as to maintain details of potential conflicts of interest for each individual panel member.' They are provided with training on conflict of interest and potential biases, and asked to sign a no-conflict of interest statement when being appointed into a panel. The same policy applies to committee and Council members when discussing an accreditation report. The minutes of the decision-making committees' meetings are published on the RCVS website, so that decision making is transparent. The RCVS is also subject to the Freedom of Information Act and must release any further background documents on request. In addition to the appeals procedure available within the RCVS, RCVS' decisions as a public body may be legally challenged through the process of Judicial Review.

As explained on its website and emphasised in its current Strategy, the RCVS is dedicated to being a diverse, accessible, inclusive and supportive workplace, and they have several labels and awards that attest this listed on the website. It was explained at the site visit that the RCVS has a People Director ensuring that competent and professional staff are hired and supporting every recruitment process. For the composition of the committees, the focus is on a balance of roles and types of expertise. In the RCVS strategy, 'compassion' as a key ambition is explained as 'treating everyone as individuals, communicating promptly, explaining appropriately, and being fair.' At the site visit, it was further explained that they 'want to see the institutions they regulate succeed.'

The RCVS does not subcontract its accreditation work, and uses the same policies as described above for accreditations done abroad or jointly with other agencies.

Analysis

The interviews at the site visit witnessed the integrity and professionalism of the RCVS staff, as is to be expected from an institution with a duty to safeguard the integrity of the profession. In addition to the no-conflict of interest policies that apply to the committees and the panels, and a separate set of policies governing RCVS' staff, an IQA system has been introduced since the last review specifically for accreditations. The system is well explained in the IQA policy. When first learning about the system, the panel was worried that it fully relies on one person, the EQIM. However, during the discussions at the site visit, the panel understood that the role of EQIM is actually to provide another level of assurance, above and beyond the efforts of the staff who work on accreditations and perform the regular tasks of e.g. checking the evidence, supporting the panel, assuring no-conflict of interest, etc. Both the SAR and the site visit confirm the usefulness of such a role of an "internal outsider" both as an observer of the accreditation process, and the person collecting and analysing the stakeholder feedback. We heard during the site visit that the staff and the stakeholders appreciate the work that is done as it is providing them with a welcome critical perspective on their work. We also heard from the panel members that their feedback was promptly acted upon.

The panel found that the interviews at the site visit confirmed that the RCVS was meeting its ambitions of Clarity and Compassion, both in the way the staff met the panel's requests and answered the panel's questions, and in the way that the stakeholders described their relationship with staff. In the eyes of the panel, the way the RCVS took into account the 2018 panel's recommendations and acted upon them shows that the organisation is responsive to feedback and ready to change.

Panel commendations:

1. The introduction of the role of the EQIM as an independent IQA person is to be commended.
2. The panel commends the approachability and professionalism of the College staff.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

Evidence

In 2018, the RCVS successfully underwent its first ENQA review against the ESG standards and joined as full member. This was followed up with a follow-up report in 2020. The RCVS also took advantage of a progress visit (carried out remotely), also in 2020, and since has taken an active role as an ENQA member, participating in the various events and trainings it organised.

In 2015, the RCVS underwent a voluntary review by the United States Department of Education (USDE). In order for US students to be eligible to participate in US federal student aid programs, the veterinary medical school's accrediting agency must be approved by the USDE. In applying for approval, the RCVS had to show how its standards and procedures complied with the "Guidelines for Requesting an Acceptability Determination for a Foreign Veterinary Accrediting Agency (Guidelines)". USDE department staff reviewed the processes and accreditation standards used by the RCVS and determined that the RCVS had an acceptable quality assurance system for evaluating the quality of

education offered at the veterinary schools it accredits. This was the first time that any external review of RCVS policies and procedures has been required. This process is cyclical, with re-approval occurring every six years, and in 2021 RCVS was successful in gaining re-approval with USDE.

The RCVS is an affiliated member of the Accreditation Committee for Veterinary Nurse Education (ACOVENE) which reviews the RCVS once every five years, via application as set out against the “ACOVENE Regulator Accreditation Criteria”. The RCVS also actively works on the alignment of standards within the International Accreditors Working Group, which includes equivalent bodies from Australasia and North America.

Analysis

The RCVS is compliant with this standard as this its second review against the ESG, with the last one completed five years ago. The RCVS has demonstrated progress since the last review and is active within ENQA.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part I of the ESG.

2018 review recommendation

Develop VN accreditation methodology closer to the one of VS, and through this increase the focus on IQA in VN reviews, with especial attention to student-centred learning, also in VN reviews.

Evidence

The new RCVS Standards Framework for Veterinary Nurse Education and Training were developed in 2019 and implemented in 2020. Additionally, new RCVS Standards and Guidance for the Accreditation of Veterinary Degree Programmes have been implemented from January 2023. Due to such timing, the panel had access to a sample of the reports from the new veterinary nursing methodology, but was only able to see unpublished, draft reports from the new methodology for veterinary surgeon degrees.

Out of 6 standards in the new veterinary nursing methodology, one is focused on Student Empowerment, including flexible student pathways, adaptations to students’ individual needs, and various methods of empowering students as future professionals. When asked about their experiences with the new methodology, former panel members at the site visit mentioned that there is now much more focus on student empowerment and experience than in the previous standards. The institutional representatives confirmed that the new standards were more streamlined and user-friendly.

Figure 3: comparison of new VN standards with the ESG (source: SAR)

ESG Part 1: Internal Quality		RCVS Standards Framework for Veterinary Nurse Education and Training (2019)					
No.	Title	Standard 1: Learning Culture	Standard 2: Governance and Quality	Standard 3: Student Empowerment	Standard 4: Educators and Assessors	Standard 5: Curricula and Assessment	Standard 6: Effective Clinical Learning
1.1	Policy for quality assurance	✓	✓			✓	
1.2	Design and approval of programmes		✓			✓	
1.3	Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment			✓		✓	✓
1.4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification		✓				
1.5	Teaching staff				✓		
1.6	Learning resources and student support			✓			✓
1.7	Information management	✓	✓	✓		✓	
1.8	Public information		✓				
1.9	On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes*					✓	
1.10	Cyclical external quality assurance**		✓				

The new VS standards were, according to the information from the site visit, developed primarily to be flexible enough to enable accreditation of new types of delivery of the clinical part of education. Namely, traditionally VS schools provided clinical training in their university hospitals. However, not all newly established VS schools have university hospitals, but instead work with various clinics and practices in what is known as ‘community-based or distributed’ models. This made some of the requirements of the old standards, some of which specified hospital resources, obsolete. Instead, the new standards are outcome-based and include an updated definition of extra-mural studies, profession-related work experience which is part of the VS programmes.. At the site visit, the work on better defining extra-mural studies was emphasised as particularly relevant by a number of external stakeholders including student representatives.

Another novel feature of the new VS methodology, according to the SAR and the site visit interviews, is that it enables a risk-based accreditation procedure. Based on their study of the evidence in the online repository before the site visit, the panel selects only some standards that need to be further explored in detail, creating a bespoke site visit schedule. All visits now also include a slot which the institution can use to showcase its successes and good practises. The RCVS staff believe that this enables for a more compassionate and cooperative site visit, and noted that the institutional feedback so far has been positive.

Figure 4: comparison of new VS standards with the ESG (source: SAR)

ESG Part 1: Internal Quality		RCVS Standards and Guidance for the Accreditation of Veterinary Degree Programmes (2023)					
No.	Title	Domain 1: The Learning Environment	Domain 2: Organisation, Culture and Values	Domain 3: Educational Governance and Quality Improvement	Domain 4: Supporting Students	Domain 5: Supporting Educators	Domain 6: Curriculum and Assessment
1.1	Policy for quality assurance			✓			
1.2	Design and approval of programmes			✓			✓
1.3	Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment				✓		✓
1.4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification				✓		
1.5	Teaching staff		✓	✓		✓	
1.6	Learning resources and student support	✓			✓		
1.7	Information management		✓	✓			✓
1.8	Public information				✓		
1.9	On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes*			✓			✓
1.10	Cyclical external quality assurance**			✓			

Analysis

Looking at a sample of reports done in line with the **new VN standards**, the panel has found that student-centred learning (ESG 1.3) is adequately covered, with the Student Empowerment theme often emphasised in the introductory summary of the panel's findings. Other standards of the ESG Part I are also appropriately discussed, with a specific focus on clinical learning and human and animal wellbeing, in line with the aims of the RCVS review, as follows.

The standards require an IQA strategy (ESG 1.1) that encompasses all institutional activities, with specific provisions on assessments and achieving Day One Skills and Competences. IQA is still understood as an accountability mechanism with internal and external checks, including the external examiners and a special focus on the final student assessments, the OSCE. However, there is an emphasis on institutional innovation and good practice, and the panel agrees with the 2018 panel that in the context of RCVS's aims and responsibilities the accountability-oriented assessment is acceptable.

The requirements of the ESG 1.2 are met by the institutions in cooperation with the RCVS, as it is the RCVS that prescribes much of the final learning outcomes and closely monitors programme design and development, as described under ESG 2.5. The standards look at all stages of studying from admission to final assessments (ESG 1.4), with specific attention paid to assessment and recognition of prior learning.

There is a specific standard on Educators and Assessors (ESG 1.5) looking at their qualifications and competences as well as the support provided to them; special importance is given to staff participating in clinical learning.

The standards refer to resources (ESG 1.6) both in the teaching facilities and in the clinics they cooperate with, and require evidence such as inventory lists. Student support, including support to learning and student wellbeing, is required by several sub-standards.

Effective use of information and data (ESG 1.7) is among the standards, as is publishing relevant information (ESG 1.8) as well as regular provision of the data required by RCVS.

Programme development (ESG 1.9) is expected by the standards, as is employing staff trained in this aspect and regular reviews of the learning environment, including course content.

All programmes must be accredited at least every 5 years (ESG 1.10).

While a sufficient sample of completed reports using the **new VS standards** implemented in 2023 was not available at the time of the site visit, from the reports it was able to view and the text of the new VS standards, the panel finds that they still adequately cover all standards of the ESG Part I as follows.

Two standards (3.8 and 3.9) explicitly require “robust mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement, embedded into policy and processes” as expected by the ESG 1.1, with the panel required to look at evidence which includes the composition of relevant committees, data collected and actions taken. While the standards are still accountability-focused, as is appropriate in the RCVS context, there is an element of increased trust in the institutions in the “risk-based” methodology. The institutions are trusted to upload any evidence they consider appropriate, and not all evidence is checked during the site visit. It remains to be seen if this will be valued by the institutions as expected.

The necessary features of the VS programmes, including their minimal duration and qualification framework level (ESG 1.2), are clearly specified by the standards, as are the necessary quality assurance mechanisms and steps of programme design. As described under ESG 2.3, institutions are also obliged to liaise with RCVS when developing a new programme. In line with the ESG 1.3 and 1.6, “Supporting Students” is one of the six themes with 15 out of 75 standards, and it puts special emphasis on meeting students' individual needs and increasing student diversity. All other themes also include standards that explicitly focus on student experience, such as the need for active involvement of students in cases and patient management. Practical learning is of exceptional importance in the context of veterinary surgeons, and the panel found encouraging that the stakeholders were appreciative of the way in which the RCVS involved them in discussions of how it will be treated in the new standards.

The standards require institutions to collect and analyse data on all phases of the student 'life cycle' (ESG 1.4) and provide for flexibility at all stages.

'Supporting educators' is a whole domain of standards that looks at teacher training and various policies relevant for teaching staff, in line with the ESG 1.5. The criteria also include a list of core subjects which in addition to the Day One Competences expected by the graduates enables the panels to assess if the teachers' expertise and numbers are sufficient.

In line with the ESG 1.6 and again, as expected by the RCVS accreditation focus, regular updating and adequacy of learning resources, including those available in clinics, are an important aspect of the standards.

Throughout the relevant documents, RCVS emphasises the need for the accreditation to be evidence-based, and the data and evidence to be collected, analysed and acted upon is listed under a number of standards (ESG 1.7).

Types of information that need to be available to the public, primarily prospective students, are clearly listed in the standards (ESG 1.8).

In line with the programme focus of the RCVS accreditations, regular programme reviews (ESG 1.9) are emphasised throughout the standards and expected to be done on the basis of peer reviews, recent research and evidence, student feedback, external examiner reports, etc.

All programmes are reviewed at least every 7 years (ESG 1.10), with regular annual monitoring.

Panel commendations:

1. The panel learned both from the documents and the site visit interviews that progress has been made in giving more emphasis to institutional quality assurance in accrediting VN, especially regarding student empowerment and student-centred learning.
2. The panel emphasises ongoing discussions and the attention being given to the role of the EMS within the veterinary curriculum.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Evidence

The aim of the RCVS is to set and monitor the standards for veterinary education, in the interest of animal health and welfare and in the wider public interest. The SAR states that stakeholders are involved throughout the design and regular continuous improvement of standards for VS and VN programmes. This can be as members of a working group, member of a committee, a profession wide consultation or direct feedback following an accreditation event. The most recent review of the **standards for veterinary surgeon degree programmes** was started in 2019 and the standards are in use from January 2023. One of the aims of the review was to introduce flexibility to the

accreditation process to accommodate different modes of delivery of clinical teaching, in particular by putting more focus on the outcomes rather than inputs. As described in the SAR, the review has been driven by a working group comprising an independent external chair, and a variety of stakeholders including members of the profession (both qualified and students), academics from vet schools and representatives from external quality assurance agencies. The review started with the commissioning of a literature review of accreditation in professional education with a particular focus on various risk-based models and the different approaches of input vs outcomes models. The next stage was a full review of all existing accreditation standards and methodology carried out by the working group, and subsequent review by two different committees (PQSC and EC) and the RCVS Council. The draft agreed by the RCVS Council underwent a profession wide consultation with over 100 respondents, including joint responses from professional associations within the UK and internationally.

The SAR describes that during the development of the new standards, the RCVS considered feedback from HEIs that completion of the self-evaluation report (SER) places an increased workload burden upon vet schools. Therefore, the new methodology requires vet schools to upload the evidence relating to each standard into a secure repository administered by the RCVS. The repository is open to vet schools throughout the period between accreditation visits and there is no requirement to write a full SER. A risk-based element is introduced in that the panel chooses only part of the standards to focus on in detail at the site visit, creating a bespoke schedule. Another innovation is the addition of an empty slot during the visit that the institution can use to present its best practices.

At the site visit, the institutional representatives confirmed that the RCVS asked about and took into account their needs in designing the new standards, and that they indeed supported various forms of clinical learning. One institution that has already gone through the accreditation process stated that the new methodology provided for a much more streamlined experience and a less stressful visitation. Both the institutional and the RCVS representatives conceded that some confusion and anxiety regarding the new system was to be expected, but overall there was an expectation that the new methodology would present an improvement.

Regulations allow the RCVS to implement a set of annual monitoring activities in addition to the periodic accreditation visitations, which for VS institutions means collecting annual reports. According to the comments from the site visit, in line with its policy focus on improving the diversity of the profession and introducing limited licences to enable people with various disabilities to join the profession, the RCVS has recently started to collect relevant data from the VS institutions in the scope of the annual monitoring. This has apparently caused some confusion among the institutions as much of this is data only available at the level of the university. The institutions also failed to see the connection between the data and the accreditation outcomes. One representative mentioned that it would also be good to see more regular changes done to the RCVS standards on the basis of the institutional feedback, e.g. with several standards changed annually as opposed to a periodic comprehensive review.

According to the SAR, the accreditation standards for **veterinary nurse education** and training were reviewed and updated in 2019 and this process was triggered by a recommendation made by ENQA in the 2018 report. A team of RCVS staff worked with the VNC to produce a set of standards based on the Nursing and Midwifery Council standards framework for Nursing, Midwifery and Education. The proposed framework provided a greater focus on equality and diversity along with the student experience and journey, and provides flexibility for AElS to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

During the site visit the panel met several institutional representatives who were part of the stakeholder consultations for the new standards and appreciated the way their opinions were taken into account, especially regarding the clarity of the standards. There was also one representative who

noted that they only learned about the new standards once they were published as a draft; the others commented that RCVS did invite all institutions to participate in the consultations. All confirmed that the new standards were an improvement.

The new standards for VN education were launched with a series of webinars to AELs. However, following their introduction in 2020, the first accreditation visits indicated that many AELs were still not clear on the evidence that was required to demonstrate compliance with each standard. Therefore, in 2022, the accreditation visits were suspended, and AELs were given the option to have a pre-accreditation support visit in advance of their next accreditation event. The VN application for accreditation was identified as not being particularly user friendly for the AELs, so in consultation with selected programme leads an application spreadsheet was developed that clearly separates the standards and indicates the type of evidence and where it should be uploaded. When asked about what caused the issues, RCVS staff mentioned covid, while the institutional representatives also mentioned a number of institutions that only started to deliver VN programmes, and a general wariness regarding any regulatory change.

All institutional representatives noted that the methodology has clearly improved throughout the years, from 'an inspection performed by a single person' to a much more open exercise. They note that today it is much less about accountability and, while there is of course still focus on minimal compliance, good practice and improvement are emphasised. The annual monitoring of institutions was also mentioned as an opportunity to reflect on the previous year and receive feedback. Finally, it was mentioned at the site visit that compliance assessments changed during the implementation – 'partially met' was removed to improve clarity, but is now being reinstalled based on panels' requests.

Analysis

There is still not much experience in the application of the new standards in VS or VN. However, the SAR and the site visit interviews provide evidence of involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in the development of standards. The panel trusts, following the discussions, that the cooperation will be continued as the process embeds and develops.

The panel is convinced, following the discussions with the RCVS staff and stakeholders, that the changes in the methodology have been done to decrease the burden for the institutions and to enable them to demonstrate the improvement, and it was reported to the panel that the institutions appreciate this.

The College is very active in follow-up with the annual monitoring of institutions, however the panel considers there is a need to discuss with the VS stakeholders the aims and use of the vast amount of data now being submitted annually. The VN institutions, on the other hand, expressed their appreciation of the system as an opportunity to reflect and demonstrate improvement.

The panel observed evidence of the promptness of RCVS' reaction to feedback – to mention the revision of the standards following the 2018 ENQA report, the removal of the SAR, the changes in compliance assessment in VN, and introduction of the pre-accreditation support.

Panel recommendations:

- I. The panel recommends the RCVS to discuss with the VS stakeholders the aims and use of the data submitted in the scope of annual monitoring.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

Evidence

As shown in the figures below, both of RCVS accreditations include an equivalent of the institutional self-assessment, external assessment that always includes a visitation, publication of an accreditation report, and regular annual monitoring with follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations received. RCVS accreditations also include additional steps – cooperation during the establishment of new programmes, visitations to clinics where learning takes place, and observation of student assessments, as discussed in more detail below.

In the **new VS accreditation methodology**, the institutions are no longer obliged to submit full SERs. Instead, as explained by the SAR, evidence for each standard is submitted by the HEI through a repository database. According to the interviews with the RCVS staff, the new standards are designed to be evidence-based, which enabled the removal of the SAR. The repository is accessible at any time, and uploading evidence is not limited to a specified period before an event is scheduled to take place, in order to reduce administrative burden on the institutions undergoing accreditation. Evidence may include documents, photographs, videos, and other appropriate media; a short explanation is provided for each piece of evidence. Thus, instead of reading about e.g. diversity policy in the SER, the panel is able to see the document which defines the policy, excerpts from meetings where relevant issues were discussed, and examples of how individual issues were handled.

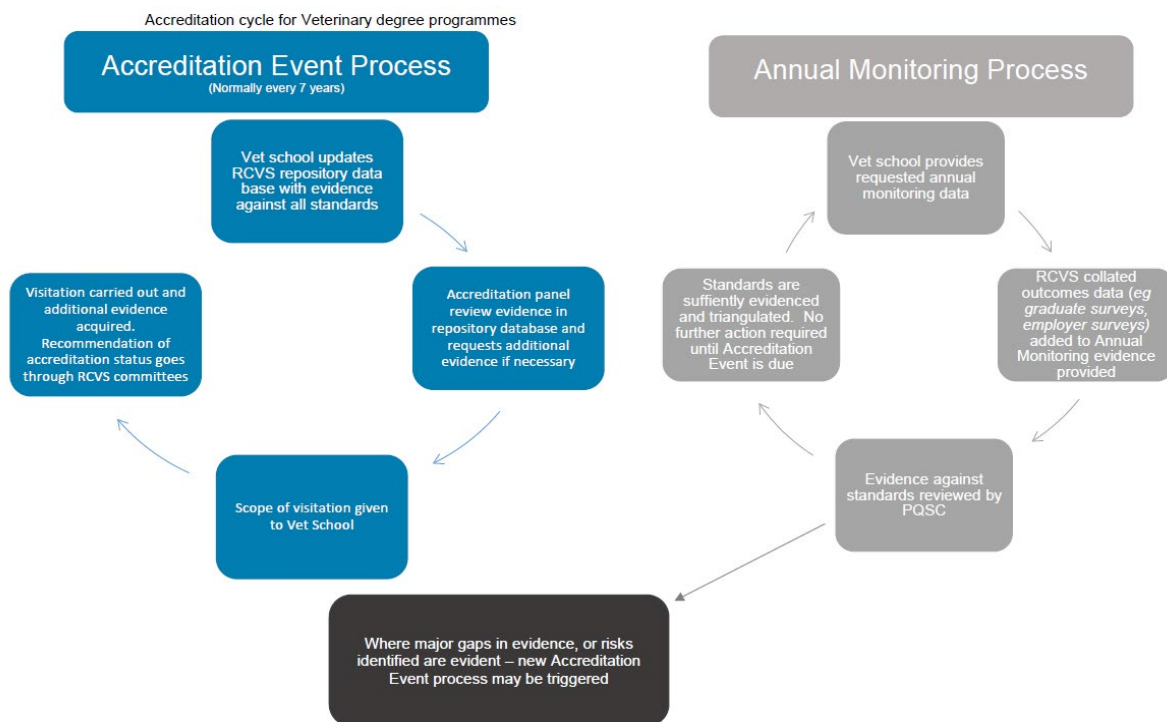
Three months before the visit to a veterinary programme is due to take place, the panel will review the evidence both independently and collectively and will decide on the scope and length of the visit based on their initial review and the need to triangulate evidence (risk-based approach). Based on this, the panel will suggest to the institution the topics to be discussed as well as the groups to discuss them with, and then continue with creating a schedule. In this way, the participants would be aware of the topics to be discussed before the visit starts.

The evidence in the repository and the evidence gathered during the visit by the panel is used to ascertain compliance against each standard and is listed on a rubric and evaluated as either “met”, “partially met” or “not met”. All panel members work together on filling the rubric. The panel does not make the final accreditation decision. The completed rubric is supported with a short report stating a series of commendations, recommendations and suggestions, aimed to assist the HEI in meeting the published standards, as well as highlighting and celebrating areas of good practice and innovation; the report is completed by the panel as a whole and submitted by the panel chair shortly after the visitation. While no reports from the new methodology were published by the time of the site visit, the panel was able to see a draft report.

The HEI is sent the report to check for factual accuracy and their comments are returned to the RCVS. Once the final report is factually correct, the HEI has two months to respond to the rubric and report and to indicate how it will address the recommendations and suggestions. This response is then shared with the accreditation panel for review and comments. The panel has the opportunity to check

the evidence provided against the responses from the HEI for validity. The HEI responses, along with the panel review of the responses are considered by the committees when making the final decision on accreditation outcome. The evidence and recommendations are reviewed by committees with the process taking approximately three to six months from visitation to a published report. The RCVS Education Committee has the delegated authority from the RCVS Council to make decisions regarding veterinary degree accreditations; they first go through the PQSC. The accreditation cycle is shown in the figure.

Figure 5: the accreditation cycle in VS (source: IQA Policy)



The removal of the SER from the procedure was a topic of discussion at the site visit. The panel heard that some kind of reflective, introductory text guiding them through standards such as an SER is missed by some of the panel members. Also, some of the HEIs have still been preparing self-reflective papers and SERs for themselves in order to structure their narrative. In addition to that, the panel has repeatedly heard that the number of documents in the repository was overwhelming. RCVS' measure to prevent this is that they pre-read and present the crucial evidence to the panels in the form of a summary sheet. When asked by the panel if an institutional self-reflection is now missing, RCVS staff responded that this should be found in the documents such as the institutional strategies, and that they plan to make a of list obligatory evidence - documents that need to be submitted by all HEIs in the future.

Regulations allow the RCVS to implement a set of annual monitoring activities in addition to periodic accreditation visitations, as shown in the figure. The annual monitoring data includes various statistics reported by the institution, plus the results of the graduate and employer survey. As noted above, it was mentioned at the site visit that the link between the data requested and the accreditation procedure was not fully clear to the institutions. In addition to the data, the institutions report on the implementation of the accreditation suggestions and recommendations, as well as any changes potentially relevant for accreditation. The reports are initially reviewed by personnel within the RCVS Education team and then reported to the PQSC for consideration, following which a recommendation of further action could be made to the HEI.

For **new programmes**, the process will differ from that stated above. HEIs considering offering a veterinary degree must liaise with the RCVS concerning its plans at an early stage. Draft curriculum and assessment plans must be submitted together with a timeline for implementation, plans for facilities and staffing and an indication of the intended student numbers. Once the formal decision has been made by the HEI to offer a veterinary programme, a series of six-monthly meetings will be arranged with the RCVS to consider the development of the degree, leading up to the initial interim visitation in year three of the first cohort of students. Following the interim visit, the HEI receives feedback on the element of the programme that has been delivered. The plans for the clinical years / clinical instruction are reviewed and the panel must be assured that the programme will meet the standards for veterinary surgeon degree programmes by year five. At this stage, an accreditation decision cannot be made because the clinical years have not yet been delivered. For these standards, the term “reasonable assurance” is used by the panel to indicate that the plans are in place for the standard to be met, but there is not yet evidence of the plans being implemented as specified. The rubric is amended to include “reasonable assurance” as a decision option. A further accreditation event including a full site visitation will be undertaken during the programme’s final year of operation. In addition to the PQSC and EC, the report will also be presented to the RCVS Council on its first accreditation, as it needs the ratification of the Council prior to going to the Privy Council for a Recognition Order.

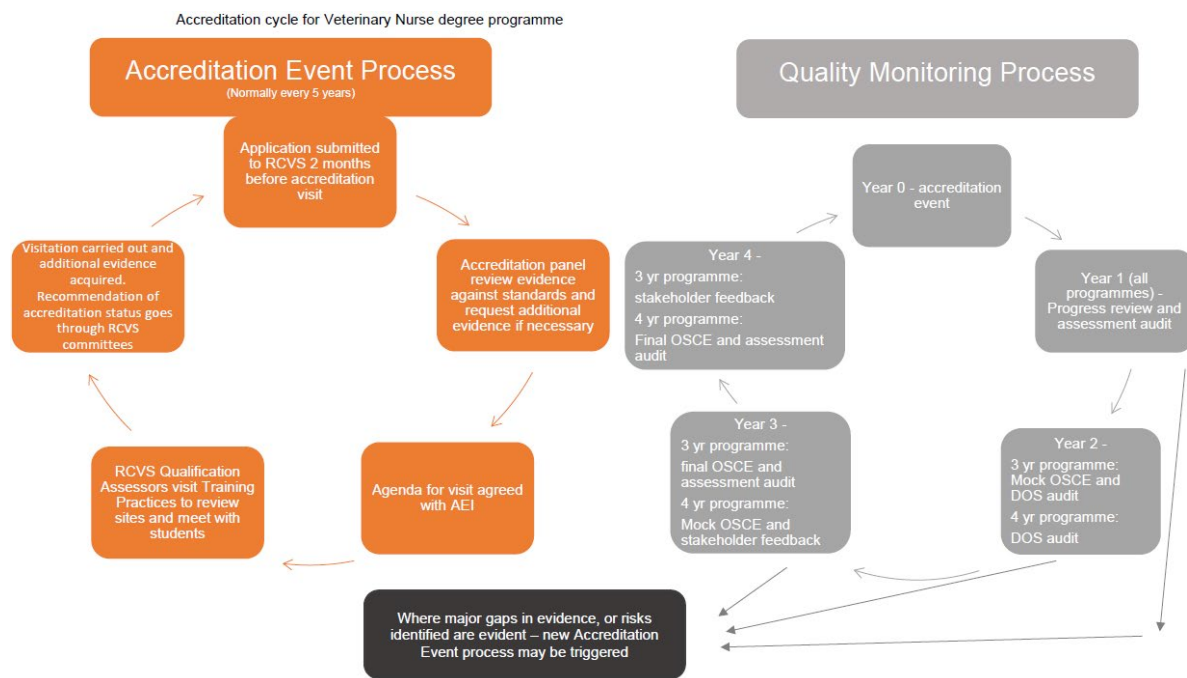
For **VN programmes**, the institutions still submit an application which is a spreadsheet with evidence listed, similar to the rubric completed by panels in the VS procedure. Evidence is listed per standard, with an obligatory short description of each piece of evidence. Additionally, unlike in the VS rubric, the AEI must include a rationale as to how the evidence demonstrates compliance, which makes the application similar to a standard SER. The evidence submitted is reviewed by the accreditation panels independently of each other and then collectively via an online meeting. The visit typically takes place over two days and includes meetings with key staff involved in the delivery of the programme as well as a review of the facilities. In advance of the visit to the AEI, selected training practices will be visited and at this point, students will be interviewed to gather their thoughts and feelings about the programme being accredited. Their feedback is made available to the panel members in advance of the visit, so that they can add this evidence to that already submitted and reviewed. The panel learned from the interviews that this would be done by the RCVS staff who normally work with the institutions in the field, and in addition to a discussion with the students that would form part of the visit.

The evidence in the spreadsheet and the evidence gathered during the visit by the panel is used to ascertain compliance against each standard. The panel uses this to fill a rubric that includes compliance assessments as well as a short description of the panel’s process with commendations and recommendations. The panel does not make the final accreditation decision. AEIs are provided with the report indicating commendations, areas for improvement and actions required, and they are asked to check the report for factual accuracy. Once any corrections have been made, the report with the actions required is returned to the AEI and the AEI must provide the completed action plan to the RCVS within two weeks. The action plan must include how the action will be addressed, who is responsible for addressing the action and within what timeframe, as well as what evidence will be provided to demonstrate compliance. The RCVS panel will review the proposed action plan to ensure the required actions will be fully addressed. The final report and action plan are presented to the VNEC for its consideration of the accreditation decision.

Following the decision made by the VNEC, the AEI is required to submit the relevant action completion evidence to the RCVS in accordance with its planned timetable. VN programmes are subject to a range of annual quality assurance activities, as well as a review of the action plan to ensure that the agreed timelines are met. As shown in the figure, the timeline for quality monitoring differs for 3 and 4 year nursing degrees, but in each case includes analyses of stakeholder feedback, audits of assessments, OSCEs (objective structured clinical examination) and DOS (Day One Skills). At the site

visit, the institutional representatives talked positively about the reviews of the action plan which enable them annual reflection on the progress done.

Figure 6: the accreditation cycle in VN (source: IQA Policy)



An AEI considering offering a **new veterinary nursing qualification** must contact the RCVS to provide an initial proposed timeline at least 18 months prior to the proposed qualification start date. All AEIs, whether new or currently accredited, are required to submit a Notification of Intent to the RCVS at least 12 months prior to the proposed qualification start date. The Notification of Intent will detail draft plans for market research, programme design, proposed approach to the assessment of the RCVS Day One Competences, Skills, and Professional Behaviours (to include the practical assessment methodologies) and funding and sustainability. All new AEIs are required to have a support meeting prior to submitting a Notification of Intent to discuss the standards and how they can be evidenced. Providing that the application is accepted in principle, the RCVS will confirm that the timetable/timeline for accreditation is appropriate and that there is sufficient time for the Veterinary Nurse Education Committee (VNEC) to consider the final report before the recruitment of the first cohort. The VNEC has delegated authority from the VNC to make this decision.

Analysis

The removal of the SER is an innovative practice currently being considered by a number of agencies. The RCVS decided to replace the SER in VS accreditations with a document repository containing brief additional explanations of each piece of evidence. In the eyes of the panel, this means that the institutions don't have an opportunity to produce a self-reflective text that would summarise the current state of affairs and plans for the future, and present the institutional self-assessment and the evidence to the panel. As mentioned, the panel's intuition was confirmed by some panel members and institutions who have participated in the new system. The RCVS is already taking steps to address this apparent gap and ensure common documents are included in the repository that will enable the HEI to demonstrate the current state of affairs. The panel believes that in addition to this, it should be explicitly stated that if institutions want to submit SERs, they could. At the same time, the panel understands how the decision to remove the SER was possible and is substantiated in the RCVS context. The RCVS criteria are specifically written to be evidence-based, and a full SER would largely consist of pointing to evidence with short descriptions, which is what exists in the repository. As

mentioned under the standard 3.5, the RCVS does have the resources necessary to go through the vast amount of documents that they receive through the repository. As discussed under 2.1, the RCVS standards require institutions to have robust IQA systems which enable institutions to regularly reflect on the achievement of their aims and if they are meeting the RCVS standards. A self-reflective document on meeting each of the standards is not provided pre-visit, but is instead submitted annually in the scope of the follow-up reporting. Finally, the RCVS accredits programmes of institutions which are already accredited, and thus have obligations to produce SERs for other accrediting bodies.

Because the visit schedules in VS are risk-based and tailored, the topics of the meetings during the site visit are pre-defined on the basis of interrogation of the evidence in the repository. This enables the panel and the institution to better decide on the meeting participants, and is an innovative practice the success of which should be monitored as a possible example of good practice.

The panel commented on the elaborate data collection in the scope of monitoring of VS institutions under ESG 2.2, however it is relevant to re-iterate here that it would be beneficial to better define which aspects of monitoring present a follow-up to the accreditation visit and preparation for the next, as is already done in VN.

Panel commendations:

I. The panel commends the RCVS on the innovative introduction of a bespoke visit schedule with pre-defined meeting topics.

Panel suggestions for further improvement:

I. The panel suggests the RCVS to explicitly offer the possibility of submitting a SER, should an institution want to.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:
External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

2018 review recommendation

At VN accreditation, pursue the widening of review pools and avoid relying too heavily on the senior staff of RCVS.

Evidence

It is explained in the SAR that the accreditation panel for **VS programmes** comprise up to six members, plus a student representative, with the necessary combination of educational and subject expertise in order to be able to consider all aspects of the curriculum, clinical and academic experience. At least one panel member must be a practitioner with a background in clinical practice outside of academia, and at least one panel member must be an educationalist (either from a veterinary or healthcare-related profession, i.e. someone with further expertise on higher education curricula, assessment standards and educational delivery models). The panel must include someone who holds, or who has recently held, a senior academic position and who understands the organisation and funding of universities and the complex requirements for veterinary education. The chair of the panel must

have experience of being an accreditation panel member and have recent experience as a committee chair in addition to having completed the RCVS training for accreditation panel chairs. The accreditation panel may also include observers in either a quality assurance role, or as a new member of RCVS staff as part of their training.

Training for VS panel members is delivered through a series of online modules covering each of the standards in detail, as well as reflecting on how the attitudes and behaviours of panel members can impact the information collected and decision making, in particular unconscious bias, collaborative working, question styles and body language. The panel was able to access the 20-hour training package before the site visit. In addition to the training, as confirmed by the interviews during the site visit, the panel is supported throughout the review by RCVS staff. They check and present the evidence to the panel members, provide guidance throughout the visitation, and assist in the completion of the report.

Recruiting new panel members has been given a high profile since the launch of the new standards. Methods have included direct requests to each HEI/AEI to promote the role amongst educationalists and promoting the opportunity amongst stakeholders through the RCVS newsletter. These efforts have succeeded in 40 new individuals declaring an interest in becoming a VS panel member, to add to the current list of 30, thus widening the pool.

The accreditation panel for **VN degrees** is composed of up to five members to include an education representative; an employer representative; a student representative, the RCVS examinations manager and a chair. There may also be RCVS representatives as required in attendance, for example, qualifications assessors and other staff for training purposes. According to the SAR, occasionally it is necessary for an RCVS representative to act as chair in order to remove any conflicts of interest or potential bias.

Once a VN expert has expressed an interest in becoming a panel member at accreditations, they are provided with the role description and person specification. They are also provided with an evidence sheet matching the person specification which they are required to complete and return to the RCVS Qualifications Manager along with their CV and CPD record. The RCVS Qualifications Manager will then review the submission and determine whether they have the relevant experience and expertise to assist with accreditations. In the event of an industry representative submitting an application, this is provided to VN Education Committee for review in order for them to determine to which types of programmes the expert may best be suited. Student representatives are appointed either through self-application or recommendation by teaching staff. Currently there are 60 individuals in the VN expert pool (to compare, there were 37 in 2020).

Upon acceptance as an expert, the individual is invited to attend a full day online live training session, to include a background to accreditations and why they are required; how a typical accreditation is run; the application process; a thorough review of the standards; and behaviours expected of a panel member including clarification and guidance on the conflict of interest and confidentiality policies. This is to be replaced by a course similar to what now exists in VS. Following the session, the participants have some independent learning to be completed and submitted as a check on learning. Panel members are required to attend annual refresher training. During the interviews, former panel members, including students, confirmed that they could also receive individual support when needed. Panel chairs are trained to ensure that the opinion of the student representative is actively sought and that they are encouraged to take part in all discussions. The panel has heard on site that the RCVS has successfully transitioned to predominantly using external chairs.

The panel inquired about the possibility of hiring international experts, which has not been done so far. An initiative was mentioned to train 'super-visitors' within the International Accreditors Working Group, people from one country also trained by an agency in another country, to save costs during joint visitations; the online training is to support this process. The panel heard different opinions on

including international members in regular visitations, from support to doubts regarding the level at which they were able to understand the UK legislation and professional context, and thus support RCVS in fulfilling its regulatory role. The participants also noted that a number of RCVS members have either studied or work abroad, and that the education system and the profession are internationalised to a significant degree, as is also reflected in the activities listed in the current RCVS Strategy.

As the age of reviewers was mentioned as another complicating factor in creating diverse panels, it was also a discussion at the site visit if younger people were prevented by other career obligations to participate. It was noted that while this can be true at some points of their careers, overall RCVS offers sufficient financial compensation, which includes a week of lost earnings, for the work.

Analysis

The panel appreciates that the stringent guidelines on panel composition in VS, which also needs to take into account disciplinary expertise, together with a time-consuming process of training and preparing for the review, can make it difficult to find experts and avoid conflicts of interest without engaging some of the RCVS committee members and/or staff. Committee/Council/panel members can thus still overlap as was standard practice in the past. The College is well aware of the potential conflict of interest issues and believes that the recent expansion of the pool of experts will enable them to fully forgo this practice in due time. Since VS is a global profession, it would seem appropriate to the panel, especially regarding the smaller disciplines, that RCVS experiments with international reviewers to expand its pool, as not all members necessarily need to be well acquainted with the regulatory framework.

As accreditations in VN are even more focused on the regulatory aspects and compliance, RCVS examinations manager still participates in panels, but generally no longer act as chair. This is the person in charge of developing examinations for veterinary nurses, qualified to check if the programmes are able to ensure that students meet the necessary learning outcomes, and with a profile and tasks pertaining to the RCVS role of the regulator of the profession, rather than a QA agency. Still, while the panel finds the inclusion of the staff member understandable in the RCVS context, with the ample support and training currently provided by the RCVS, the panel believes that this practice will stop being necessary in due time.

Overall, the panel has found the panel members it met to be truly committed and passionate about their task. The panel found the online training provided by the RCVS for VS quite time-demanding - it is very detailed in its discussion of each standard, and provides numerous generally useful and practical examples of dos and don'ts for accreditations. The panel members all noted that both the online training and face-to-face briefings and meetings with the RCVS were welcome and helpful.

Panel commendations:

- I. The panel commends the RCVS on the training and the support offered by the College to all panel members.

Panel recommendations:

- I. While recognizing the challenge, the panel recommends the RCVS to work towards fully excluding committee and Council members from the expert panels.

Panel suggestions for further improvement:

- I. The panel suggests that the College considers involving more experts trained and working in other contexts to the expert panels, to bring outside expertise and further mitigate the issues connected to working in a small profession.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

2018 review recommendation

Accreditation decisions should be confinable and justifiable. Therefore, the review panel recommends to

- consider whether the complex system of decision-making could be simplified;
- make the option “Full accreditation for a shorter period” more precise.

Evidence

Both in VS and VN, the RCVS has kept the decision-making structure that was in place in 2018. According to the information from the site visit, the possible decisions are not set by the regulations, but defined by the RCVS; currently, they are set in the Accreditation Methodology for Veterinary Programmes and the VN Standards Handbook. The possible positive decisions are either Full Accreditation (for 7 years in VS and 5 in VN) or Full Accreditation for a Shorter Period. In VN, new schools can get “Provisional Accreditation” and enrol students, aiming to achieve full accreditation by the time they graduate – if not, they would need to pass the RCVS pre-registration exam. The negative decision in both VS and VN is Terminal Accreditation, which includes a process of supporting students when the school is closing down. In addition to this, in VS there is the option of Conditional Accreditation (described during the site visit as the last warning), and Accreditation is Denied (described at the site visit as an option to be used for institutions abroad, which would not need to close down if RCVS fails to accredit them). No VS schools have received a negative decision in the past 5 years, but 3 schools in VN have received Terminal Accreditation.

In line with the 2018 recommendation, the RCVS has redefined the Accreditation for a Shorter Period so that it is clear that it ‘may be granted where there are either (a) one or more standards not being met, and/or (b) a series of standards being partially met which, taken together, could have a significant impact on students’ education. Crucially these deficiencies are deemed not [immediately] seriously detrimental to student education and to be rectifiable within a shorter period of accreditation.’ In the 5-year period, 4 VS schools received accreditations for a shorter period. It was explained at the site visit that in case of a shorter period accreditation, the next accreditation visit would focus only on the standards that were originally not met. One school received shorter term accreditation twice in a row, and it was explained at the site visit that the second such decision was made because the school changed the model of delivery in the meantime and the impact of the change needed to be monitored.

In both VS and VN, the decisions are made on the basis of 70+ standards (sub-standards in VN) which are predominantly outcome-based and very detailed. Each needs to be evidenced by documents, to which triangulation at the site visit is added, in the risk-based model in VS, and supported by extensive annual monitoring in VN. In addition to the report, the decision is also based on the institutional response to the report, which is reviewed by the panel before being submitted to the committees.

The reports are only sent back to the institutions after they have been corrected in line with the factual check, and checked by the appropriate committee.

The structure of decision-making has also remained unchanged since 2018; it is set by regulations, but the Council is able to partially devolve decision-making to the committees. The re-accreditation decisions in VS are made by the Education Committee following a recommendation by the PQSC. For a new VS programme, the decision is confirmed by the RCVS Council and submitted to the Privy Council to issue the Recognition Order. In VN, the decisions are made by the VN Education Committee and confirmed by the VN Council. In both cases, the panel members do not recommend the decision but only assess compliance with standards and provide recommendations and suggestions for improvement. Panel chairs participate in the relevant committee meetings to provide information, but do not partake in the decision-making. The committee members typically do not intervene in the panel recommendations- the only possible intervention according to the information from the site visit, is to change the status of a recommendation to a suggestion, or vice versa; in practice this is done very rarely.

The panel learned during the site visit that the decisions are always context-dependent – there is no set of rules stating e.g. the number of standards that need to be met for a certain decision, and precedents are only followed if the exact same situation takes place twice, which is unlikely. Commenting on this, as well as on the fact that panel members do not suggest the final outcome, all stakeholder groups reiterated their trust in the RCVS process of decision-making, with the former panel members noting that they get to know the institution well and prefer not to make the decision themselves; this was also the reasoning of RCVS in the Follow-up Report to the 2018 Review.

Analysis

While the five-option decision structure in VS seems complex, after considering the descriptions of the decisions in the SAR and further discussing them at the site visit, the panel understands when each of them would be used and the reason for its existence. The same is true of the layered decision-making. While complex, it does free any one body of the burden of decision-making – which can be helpful for negative decisions in a small professional community - and provide for a level of quality assurance.

Furthermore, the panel has learned that the decisions on accreditation status are made on the basis of the potential impact on students in the specific context, as assessed by the committee members. This aligns with the risk-based and outcome-based approach in a system which allows for a diversity of institutional aims and educational models. It was explicitly confirmed in the interviews that the HEIs and the panel members were confident in the decision-making process. As the system matures, the panel recommends that the College considers codifying the decision-making to a certain degree.

Panel suggestions:

- I. The panel suggests that the College starts looking at possibilities to codify the decision-making to a degree.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Evidence

Full reports of each accreditation event for both veterinary surgeon and veterinary nurse programmes are published on the RCVS website along with a summary of the RCVS accreditation status for all institutions accredited by the RCVS who deliver a veterinary degree. The summary in each report details the findings and outcome of each standard. Also published on the website are lists of RCVS accredited higher and further education qualifications in veterinary nursing. The agenda and minutes of the Education Committee and VN Council meetings are published on the RCVS website. The RCVS is subject (under UK Law) to the Freedom of Information Act, which means that any request for background documents must be complied with.

The SAR states that overseas programmes that are jointly accredited by the RCVS are not published because the parent organisations (American/ Australasian) classify their reports as confidential. However, the panel learned at the site visit that while the joint reports are not published, RCVS creates its own report from the visit which is published.

From January 2023 accreditation reports for VS degrees comprise the full completed rubric and a summary report; the panel was able to see a draft report, as none were published by the time of the site visit. Previous to this, the reports followed the same structure, listing the members of the panel, an introduction, a summary of the findings and then a detailed analysis of each standard, including the commendations, suggestions and recommendations that need to be fulfilled by the institution. The VN reports also follow a standard format, listing the panel members, a summary, the programme details and then a detailed analysis of each standard, including commendations, suggestions and actions. The commendations for each programme are always highlighted in order to reflect on what the institution is doing well. The RCVS is looking for ways of sharing any areas of innovation and good practice amongst other institutions, such as introducing a quality improvement event. They also expressed hopes that the new, shorter format of the reports in VS would attract more readers to the reports than was the case so far.

Both in VS and VN, finished reports are sent back to the institution for a factual check. After the factual check, the corrected report is discussed by the appropriate committee and again submitted to the institution which sends a formal response in the case of VS institutions, and an action plan in the case of VN institutions; in both cases, these are reviewed by the panels before being submitted to the committees for the decision to be made.

Analysis

The reports from RCVS procedures are easy to find on the RCVS website and clearly connected to the information on the accreditation status. They all begin with a summary report with key commendations and recommendations highlighted; it is informative and easy to read. The detailed information in the rest of the report is structured as a table, which again supports readability. The tables clearly list the evidence considered, so that it is easy to follow the evidence trail, as was the intention of the RCVS mentioned at the site visit. While the VN reports also contain commentary for

each standard, the new VS reports do not. However, it is the panel's opinion that, taken as a whole, the reports still provide clear and sufficient information on the findings.

The development of the reports is a process with a number of steps meant to ensure their quality and consistency, which in addition to the factual check, also includes a review by the appropriate committee, and an institutional response which is reviewed by the panel before the report is submitted for the decision-making and published.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Evidence

The RCVS complaints procedure is described on a separate page on their website; it is possible to submit a complaint on any of the RCVS activities, or a member of their staff. They can be received and dealt with at any stage of the accreditation process. They must be made in writing and will be dealt with in liaison with the Chairs of the relevant subcommittees or committees, whichever is appropriate depending on the nature of the complaint.

The appeals procedures in VS and VN are defined by separate documents, but follow the same structure. It applies where an institution questions the formal outcome of the accreditation process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence; and/or that published standards have not been correctly applied; and/or that published processes have not been consistently implemented.

The appeal is initially considered by the original decision-making body: PQSC for VS appeals, and for VN appeals, the VNEC. The outcome of this review is to decide if the appeal is to be dismissed or if it is to proceed to the next stage. The basis for dismissal is on one of the following grounds: It relates to the individual comments made by the accreditation panel; It gives insufficient information to enable any judgement to be made; It is frivolous, vexatious or relates to a minor irregularity in the conduct of the accreditation process; It is unnecessary because deficiencies in the accreditation process have already been acknowledged and appropriate action taken. If the appeal is accepted, then it is referred back to the Education Committee for VS accreditations, or the VNEC for VN accreditations. These committees will then reconsider their original decisions and may decide to amend them.

If the appeal is dismissed in the first stage, the HEI/AEI has the right to have the appeal considered by an appeals panel. The appointment of the appeals panel is coordinated by the registrar. One member should be appointed from the Council officer team (e.g. current President or Vice-President), one member from Council and one lay member. Until the end of the appeals process, the accreditation report won't be published and the appellant institution will hold its current accreditation status. In addition to this, there is the possibility to appeal to the Privy Council in the case of VS, or start a process of judicial review.

The institutions the panel met at the site visit confirmed they were informed about the possibility to appeal, and some mentioned that they have successfully submitted complaints. According to the information from the site visit, in the 5 year-period there was one appeal in VS and two appeals in VN;

two were dismissed and neither was pursued to the second instance. The panel has heard details about two appeal procedures, one in VS (for which the panel was also able to see the documentation) and one in VN; neither was pursued in the second instance. In VN there have been several negative decisions which were not appealed. The panel met with the panel chair in one of these cases, who explained that it was clear to the institution that the decision was fair and objective, and that they were ultimately able to use the experience as a basis for improvement, and become re-accredited.

Analysis

From the discussions at the site visit, the panel concluded that while the institutions were aware of the possibility to formally submit complaints, used by some, they were also able to complain informally to the RCVS staff throughout the process in the scope of regular communication which the stakeholders described as open, with RCVS quick to respond and provide feedback.

When first learning the details of the RCVS appeals procedure, the panel thought it inappropriate that an appeal would be considered by the same people who made the decision being appealed. However, after site visit discussions, the panel reached an opinion that this was simply another RCVS multi-step procedure meant to improve quality and objectivity. The 'real' appeal procedure, in which the institution is able to appeal to an independent committee, is only launched after the original committee had an opportunity to reconsider, which ultimately saves time for everyone. As the report and the decision are only published after the procedure is fully finished, this does not threaten the institutional reputation in any way. However, such a procedure has never been pursued by an institution and remains only a theoretical possibility. This is not surprising when the relatively small number of procedures, and negative decisions in particular, is taken into account, along with the high level of trust in the RCVS procedures expressed by all stakeholders at the site visit.

Panel conclusion: compliant

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, RCVS is in compliance with the ESG.

ESG 3.6

1. The introduction of the role of the EQIM is to be commended.
2. Another commendation repeated throughout the meetings with stakeholders was the approachability and professionalism of the College staff.

ESG 2.1

3. The panel learned both from the documents and the site visit interviews that progress has been made in giving more emphasis to institutional quality assurance in accrediting VN, especially regarding student empowerment and student-centred learning.
4. The panel emphasises ongoing discussions and the attention being given to the role of the EMS within the veterinary curriculum.

ESG 2.3

5. The panel commend the RCVS on the innovative introduction of a bespoke visit schedule with pre-defined meeting topics.

ESG 2.4

6. The panel commends the RCVS on the training and the support offered by the College to all panel members.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, RCVS is in compliance with the ESG.

ESG 2.2

1. The panel recommends the RCVS to discuss with the VS stakeholders the aims and use of the data submitted in the scope of annual monitoring.

ESG 3.4

2. It is necessary to reflect on the requirements of the standard. An appropriate place to start would be a critical analysis of the available accreditation reports and a discussion of potential topics with the stakeholders. We expect that this would lead to a revision of the existing plan and may require additional expertise.

ESG 2.4

3. While recognizing the challenge, the panel recommends the RCVS to work towards fully excluding committee and Council members from the expert panels.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 2.3

1. The panel suggest the RCVS to explicitly offer the possibility of submitting a SER, should an institution want to.

ESG 2.4

2. The panel suggests that the College considers involving more experts trained and working in other contexts to the expert panels, to bring outside expertise and further mitigate the issues connected to working in a small profession.

ESG 2.5

3. The panel suggests that the College starts looking at possibilities to codify the decision-making to a degree.

ESG 3.1

4. The panel suggests including students in the work of the Council.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
0	16:00 – 18:00 (Brussels time)	An online clarifications meeting with the agency’s resource person regarding the specific national/legal context in which an agency operates, specific quality assurance system to which it belongs and key characteristics of the agency’s external QA activities	Director of Education Registrar Director of Veterinary Nursing
	16:00-18:00	Review panel’s private meeting	
	19:00	Dinner	
	8:30-9:00	Review panel’s private meeting	
1	9:00-9:45	Meeting with the CEO and Presidential Team	CEO President Senior Vice President Junior Vice President
	9:45-10:00	Review panel’s private discussion	
2	10:00-10:45	Meeting with the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report	Education Quality Improvement Manager Director of Education

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			Lead for Undergraduate Education Qualifications Lead, Veterinary Nursing Director of Veterinary Nursing
	10:45-11:00	Review panel's private discussion	
3	11:00-11:45	Meeting with representatives of Senior Staff (Director of Education, Director of Veterinary Nursing and others)	Director of Education Director of Veterinary Nursing Director of Operations Registrar People Director Director of Communications
	11:45-12:00	Review panel's private discussion	
4	12:00-13:00	Meeting with staff and representatives of Audit and Risk Committee	Chair ARC Member ARC <i>Member ARC (online, 12.00 – 12.30 only)</i> Education Quality Improvement Manager

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			Senior Education Officer Education Admin Assistant VN Qualifications Assessor VN Qualifications Assessor Lead for Undergraduate Education Qualifications Manager, Veterinary Nursing
	13:00-14:00	Lunch (panel only)	
5	14:00-15:00	Meeting with representatives of Primary Qualifications Sub-Committee and Education Committee	EC - Chair PQSC Vice Chair Member PQSC <i>Member EC (online)</i> Member EC Member EC Member PQSC
	15:00-15:15	Review panel's private discussion	
6	15:15-16:15	Meeting with representatives of Veterinary Nurse Education Committee and Veterinary Nurses Council	Member VNC Member VNC / VNEC

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			Member VNC
	16:15-17:00	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2	
		Dinner (panel only)	
	8:30-9:00	Review panel's private meeting	
7	9:00-9:45	Meeting with representatives of RCVS Council (except President and Vice-Presidents)	6 members
	9:45-10:00	Review panel's private discussion	
8	10:00-10:45	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs and HEI representatives delivering programmes in Veterinary Surgery	<i>Head of Harper & Keele Vet School (online)</i> Head of Bristol Vet School President and Principal of Royal Veterinary College <i>Head of Nottingham Vet School (online)</i> Head of Surrey Vet School Scotland's Rural College
	10:45-11:00	Review panel's private discussion	
9	11:00-11:45	Meeting with heads of some reviewed AElS/ AEI representatives delivering programmes in Veterinary Nursing	<i>Askham Bryan University (online)</i> Aberystwyth University

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			SRUC <i>Bristol University (online)</i> Plumpton College College of Animal Welfare
	11:45-12:45	Lunch (panel only)	
10	12:45-13:30	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool (including students and if possible reviewers outside UK) - Veterinary Surgery	8 VS panel members, including 1 student; 4 participating online
	13:30-13:35	Review panel's private discussion	
	13:35-14:20	Meeting 2 with representatives from the reviewers' pool (including students and if possible reviewers outside UK) - Veterinary Nursing	3 VN panel members, including 1 student
	14:20-14:35	Review panel's private discussion	
11	14:35-15:15	Meeting 1 with stakeholders (governmental representatives, students' and veterinary and veterinary nursing associations)	<i>BVA, British Veterinary Association (online)</i> BVNA, British Veterinary Nursing Association AVS, Association of Veterinary Students

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			BEVA, British Equine Veterinary Association <i>VN committee member of BEVA (online)</i>
	15:15-15:20	Review panel's private discussion	
12	15:20-16:00	Meeting with stakeholders 2	BSAVA, British Small Animal Veterinary Association <i>BCVA, British Cattle Veterinary Association (online)</i> DEFRA ACOVENE <i>SPVS, Society for Practising Veterinary Surgeons (online)</i>
	16:00-17:00	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions	
	8:30-10:00	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
13	10.00 - 11.00	Meeting with CEO (and/or other members of the Presidential Team and/or Senior Staff) to clarify any pending issues	CEO RCVS Director of Education Director of Vet Nursing Registrar

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
	11:00-12:00	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	
	12:00-13:00	Lunch (panel only)	
14	13:00-13:30	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Council members to inform about preliminary findings	CEO President Senior Vice President Junior Vice President Director of Education Director of Vet Nursing Education Quality Improvement Manager Lead for Undergraduate Education

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

External review of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

September 2022

I. Background and context

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) was established in 1844 by Royal Charter, to be the governing body of the veterinary profession. The statutory duties of the RCVS are currently laid out in the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. The Supplemental Charter of 2015 sets the objectives of the RCVS and recognises veterinary nursing as a profession.

The role of the RCVS is to aim to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare. This is through setting, upholding and advancing the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

The RCVS sets the standards for and monitors the quality of veterinary education; holds the Registers of those vets and veterinary nurses who are qualified to practise; sets professional standards for vets and veterinary nurses; and helps practices raise their standards.

The RCVS currently accredits eight established vet schools in the UK, and one school overseas. A further three schools in the UK and one overseas, have enrolled students, but have not yet graduated their first cohort. Once the first cohort reaches their final year of studies, the schools will undergo their final full accreditation, and until this time, these schools have six-monthly meetings with the RCVS and an interim visitation in their third year. Joint accreditations are undertaken with the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) to accredit veterinary programmes across Australia and New Zealand, and with the South African Veterinary Council (SAVC) to accredit a veterinary programme in South Africa. The RCVS has a recognition agreement with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) whereby graduates of AVMA-recognised programmes are able to register with the RCVS in the UK. Since the UK left the European Union (EU) a temporary decision was made to recognise graduates from the European Association of Establishments of Veterinary Education (EAEVE) approved or accredited vet schools. This decision is reviewed by the RCVS annually.

The RCVS accredits twenty veterinary nursing (VN) degree programmes and four awarding organisations who award level 3 veterinary nursing qualifications. All establishments who wish to deliver a VN programme must be accredited before they recruit students to the programme. Currently no joint VN accreditations are carried out, although the RCVS does recognise those who graduate from an Accreditation Committee for Veterinary Nurse Education (ACOVENE) accredited programme and, as such, register them without further

assessment. Also, as an affiliated member of ACOVENE, graduates of an RCVS accredited establishment are granted mobility to work across Europe.

Once a vet school or VN programme is accredited by the RCVS, its graduates are eligible to register with the RCVS and therefore able to practise within the UK either as an MRCVS (member of the RCVS for veterinary surgeons) or as an RVN (registered vet nurse).

RCVS has been a member of ENQA since 2018 and is applying for ENQA renewal of membership.

2. Purpose and scope of the review

This review will evaluate the extent to which RCVS (the agency) complies with each of the standards of Parts 2 and 3 of *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* and support the agency in its efforts to continually review and enhance its work. Such an external review is a requirement for agencies wishing to apply for ENQA membership.

2.1 Activities of the agency within the scope of the ESG

To apply for ENQA membership, this review will analyse all of the agency's activities that fall within the scope of the ESG, e.g., reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditations of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). All activities are reviewed irrespective of geographic scope (within or outside the EHEA) or whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities of the agency must be addressed in the external review:

- Accreditation of veterinary degrees by RCVS
- Accreditation of veterinary nursing degrees by RCVS

3. The review process

The review will be conducted following the methodology of ENQA Agency Reviews. The process is designed in line with *the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*.

The review procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of, and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between RCVS and ENQA (including publishing of the Terms of Reference on ENQA's website¹);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Self-assessment by the agency including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit of the agency by the review panel;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;

¹ The agency is encouraged to publish the ToR on its website as well.

- Publication of the final review report;
- A decision from the ENQA Board on ENQA membership;
- Follow-up on the panel's recommendations to the agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review panel

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts (at least one of whom is currently employed by an ENQA member agency), an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member, and potentially a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

3.2 Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

The agency is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and must adhere to the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is expected to contain:
 - a brief description of the HE and QA system;
 - the history, profile, and activities of the agency;
 - a presentation of how the agency addresses each individual standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG for each of the agency's external QA activities, with a brief, critical reflection on the presented facts;
 - opinions of stakeholders;
 - reference to the recommendations provided in the previous review and actions taken to meet those recommendations;
 - a SWOT analysis;

- reflections on the agency's key challenges and areas for future development.
- All the agency's external QA activities (as defined under section 2.1) are described and their compliance with the ESG is analysed in the SAR.
- The report is well-structured, concise, and comprehensive. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which the agency performs its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.3 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule which must be submitted to the agency at least six weeks before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule is to include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is usually 2,5 days. The approved schedule must be given to the agency at least one month before the site visit to properly organise the requested interviews.

In advance of the site visit (ideally at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

The review panel will be assisted by the ENQA Review Coordinator during the site visit. The review coordinator will act as the panel's chief liaison with the agency, monitor the integrity of the review process and its consistency, and ensure that ENQA's overall expectations of the review are considered and met.

The site visit will close with a final debriefing meeting in which the panel outlines its general impressions and provides an overview of the judgement on the agency's ESG compliance. The panel will not comment on whether or not the agency would be granted/reconfirmed membership with ENQA.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final review report

Based on the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will follow the purpose and scope of the review as defined

under sections 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for the panel's findings concerning each standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language, and it will then be submitted to the agency – usually within 10 weeks of the site visit – for comment on factual accuracy and grave misunderstandings only. The agency will be given two weeks to do this and should not submit any additional material or documentation at this stage. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the agency's feedback on possible factual errors and finalise and submit the review report to ENQA.

The report should be finalised within three months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 40-50 pages in length.

3.5 Publication of the report and a follow-up process

The agency will receive the review panel's report and publish it on its website once the Agency Review Committee has validated the report. The report will also be published on the ENQA website together with the statement of the Agency Review Committee validating external review reports by assessing the integrity of the review process and checking the quality and consistency of the reports. Importantly, during this process, and prior to final validation of the report, the Agency Review Committee has the option to request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome.

As part of the review's follow-up activities, the agency commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to ENQA within two years of the validation of the final external review report. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website.

The follow-up report may be complemented by an optional progress visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). The visit, which normally takes place 2-3 years after the verification of the final external review report (and after submission of the follow-up report), aims to offer an enhancement-oriented and strategically driven dialogue that ordinarily might be difficult to truly integrate in the compliance-focused site visit. The progress visit thus does not have the objective of checking the agency's ESG compliance or how the agency has followed up on the recommendations, but rather provides an arena for strategic conversations that allow the agency to reflect on its key challenges, opportunities, and priorities. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

4. Use of the report

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA.

The report is used as a basis for the agency's membership in ENQA, i.e., for the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of

ENQA. The review report should only be considered final after validation by the Agency Review Committee. After submission to ENQA but before validation by the ARC, the report may not be used or relied upon by the agency, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without ENQA's prior written consent. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on ENQA membership.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the final review report and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

5. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	September 2022
Appointment of review panel members	November 2022
Self-assessment completed	15 November 2022
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	End-November 2022
Preparation of the site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January 2023
Briefing of review panel members	February 2023
Review panel site visit	Early April 2023
Draft of review report and its submission to ENQA Review Coordinator for verification of its compliance with the Guidelines	End May 2023
Draft of review report to be sent for a factual check to the agency	June 2023
Agency statement on the draft report to the review panel (if necessary)	End-June 2023
Submission of the final report to ENQA	July 2023
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	September 2023
Publication of report	September 2023
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	October 2023

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

AEI	Accredited Educational Institution
ARC	Audit and Risk Committee
EAEVE	European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education
EC	Education Committee
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
EMS	extra-mural studies
EQIM	Education Quality Improvement Manager
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
IAWG	International Accreditors Working Group
IQA	internal quality assurance
QA	quality assurance
PQSC	Primary Qualifications Subcommittee
PRSB	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies
RCVS	Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
SAR	self-assessment report
SER	self-evaluation report
VN	veterinary nurses
VNC	Veterinary Nurses Council
VNEC	Veterinary Nurses Education Committee
VSC	Vet Schools Council
VS	veterinary surgeons

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY RCVS

- Empty application sheet for accreditation in VN
- Access to a mock repository of documents submitted by a HEI for accreditation in VS (real repository viewed on site)
- A table of accreditation decisions for VS programmes for the last 5 years
- Sample of accreditation decisions for VS and VN along with the institutional responses
- An example of an action plan along with the relevant correspondence
- An example of minutes of a pre-accreditation visit in VN
- An example of an appeal (viewed on site)
- Sample of thematic analyses of site visits
- The last RCVS annual report, plus 5 year financial data.
- Thematic analyses of standard compliance in VS and VN
- An example of the rubric filled by panel members in VS
- The list of expert pool members (with functions)
- An overview of veterinary nursing training in the UK
- RCVS Accreditation Methodology for Veterinary Programmes
- RCVS Veterinary Nurse Visitation and Accreditation Appeals Procedure
- RCVS 2020 ENQA Follow-up Report
- RCVS QA Policy for Accreditation Activities
- RCVS 2020-24 Strategic Plan
- RCVS Standards for VN
- RCVS Standards for VS
- RCVS VN Standards Handbook

ENQA AGENCY REVIEW 2023

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), undertaken in 2023.

enqa.

European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education