

EXTRA-MURAL STUDIES

THE VALUE OF EMS

1. There is wide consensus on the enduring value of EMS – not just in terms of its contribution to the veterinary undergraduate course, but also to the many practices who feel they benefit from the injection of new ideas from students and the opportunity to contribute to the professional development of the next generation of veterinarians.
2. Although there is no direct equivalent of EMS elsewhere on mainland Europe or in the USA, and there is no requirement for EMS within the EU Directive setting out the minimum training requirement for veterinary surgeons, the UK's system is often looked on with envy by veterinary colleagues in other countries, and there are some moves elsewhere in Europe to develop a similar system. The UK's EMS system is an excellent example of how universities and practices can collaborate in the training of the next generation of veterinary surgeons, and should not only remain as a key feature of veterinary education but should continue to be strengthened and improved.
3. Furthermore, there is an increasing emphasis within UK higher education on work-based learning, which is seen as a way to improve the employability of graduates and to increase the involvement of employers in HE.¹ "Employer engagement" and "employability" are key government themes for HE, and these have been features of veterinary education in the UK for over 70 years. The veterinary profession should be seen as an example for other sectors of how employers and the universities can work together for mutual benefit, and for the good of the profession at large.
4. There are strong educational reasons why EMS should continue to be an integral part of the veterinary degree. It provides students with an unrivalled opportunity to gain real-life work experience that enhances their university-based studies. Whilst the universities are responsible for teaching the skills that students need to practise when they first graduate, (the 'Day One Competences'), it is on EMS placements that students can further practise the animal handling and clinical skills that they first learn at university, as well as build up their experience of dealing with clients and with members of the veterinary team. New graduates are therefore able to 'hit the ground running' having developed their Day One competences whilst on EMS placements during their degree course. EMS helps students to prepare for work, and introduces them to the important concept of lifelong learning and reflective practice which then continues after graduation through the Professional Development Phase and ongoing CPD. As the veterinary degree is a professional qualification, EMS constitutes an important component that helps to distinguish the qualification from other academic science degrees.

¹ Dept for Innovation, Universities & Skills, "Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value", April 2008.

5. EMS provides educational benefits for students with periods of veterinary work placements interspersed with their university-based studies. The timing of EMS placements is important as the experience that students gain during placements informs and reinforces their learning during the core curriculum.
6. EMS placements not only help to develop Day One Competences, but they also provide students with valuable complementary experience in contexts that cannot be replicated within the university. Students benefit from being exposed to veterinary work in real-life commercial and other working environments. Working within the time constraints and financial pressures of every-day veterinary practice is seen as an invaluable part of the undergraduate course and this must continue to be the main focus of EMS for the majority of students.

AIMS OF EMS

7. The aims set out below reinforce the flexibility to tailor EMS to fit the individual student and get away from the idea that placements should always cover a breadth of species for each student.

EMS AIMS

Work placements should be undertaken in a range of veterinary-related contexts to allow students to gain an appreciation of the breadth of the veterinary role and how veterinary medicine and science operates in “real-life” and commercial environments. Specifically, placements should enable students to:

- develop their animal handling skills across a range of common domestic species
- develop their understanding of the practice and economics of animal management systems and animal industries
- appreciate the importance of herd health and the epidemiological approach to production animal work
- develop their understanding of practice economics and practice management
- develop their understanding and gain further experience of medical and surgical treatments in a variety of species
- develop communication skills for all aspects of veterinary work
- expand their experience to those disciplines and species not fully covered within the university
- appreciate the importance of animal welfare in animal production and in the practice of veterinary medicine
- gain experience to help them appreciate the ethical and legal responsibilities of the veterinary surgeon in relation to individual clients, animals, the community and society
- gain experience of a variety of veterinary working environments.

TIME SPENT ON EMS

Pre-clinical EMS

8. The term “pre-clinical EMS” is used to refer to that period of EMS undertaken in the early part of the veterinary course, when students gain experience of animal husbandry and animal handling across the common domestic species as well as the animal and food industries. Some universities refer to this as animal husbandry EMS; others call it pre-clinical EMS or other variants. The term “pre-clinical” EMS is used here purely for the sake of simplicity, accepting that some universities may wish to adopt different terminology.
9. Twelve (12) weeks should be devoted to pre-clinical EMS. Students need to develop their handling skills and husbandry knowledge for a variety of species, as well as develop their communication skills with animal owners and others and this must remain an essential component of the early years of the veterinary degree course. It is also an important grounding for veterinary public health education.
10. For the majority of students it is important that this pre-clinical EMS experience is undertaken after they have started the veterinary course so that it builds on and complements other teaching in the early years. In particular, students will need to have received a thorough briefing on health and safety matters before going on placements.
11. Universities may wish to consider granting exemptions on a very exceptional basis (for example for students who have considerable animal handling experience gained on a previous course at tertiary level). However, any time saved by allowing exemption in one particular area would be well spent on developing skills in other areas, such as gaining experience on different types of farms, at other animal handling facilities, or at food production facilities.
12. The priority should be for pre-clinical EMS placements to provide the student with all the necessary handling skills and husbandry experience of common domestic species that they need to master before they progress to the clinical components of the course. This continues the concept expressed in previous RCVS guidance which said that “animal husbandry EMS should be designed to meet the individual needs of the student.” Universities should provide sufficient resource to assess individual student learning needs, allowing as much flexibility as possible to meet these needs, rather than students merely ticking boxes as evidence of time-serving.

Clinical EMS

13. Twenty-six (26) weeks should be devoted to clinical EMS placements and clinical EMS should be phased and structured so that there is more flexibility to allow students to select placements that match their areas of interest as well as the university’s curriculum.

14. Universities should take advantage of the significant flexibility in the balance that can be achieved between different types of placement. This will help avoid a climate of “box ticking” with students attending placements merely to meet the requirements, rather than seeing all their placements as a positive contribution to their learning.
15. Whilst it is essential that all students gain appropriate experience across all the common domestic species to meet their Day One Competences, universities must not rely solely on EMS placements to provide this experience. Universities must take primary responsibility for delivering the Day One Competences, and where these need to be covered in placements outside the university, such external placements should be seen as part of the core curriculum and should be quality assured, controlled and monitored accordingly, just like any other part of the intra-mural course. Where placements are being used to deliver essential ‘Day One’ teaching that is not being covered within the university, such placements should not be seen as falling within the category of EMS with which this paper is concerned.
16. Clinical EMS should comprise two phases:

- **“Preparatory EMS” of around 6 weeks, to be undertaken when pre-clinical EMS has been completed. During this period students should undertake at least three different types of placements to experience a range of veterinary work.**

This phase will help them prepare to make decisions about the type of placements to undertake during the next, practical phase of EMS. As a student’s clinical skills are still undeveloped in year 3, the amount of hands-on clinical work that is reasonable for them to undertake during early EMS placements is limited, and this can sometimes prove frustrating for both the student and the placement provider. The focus during this phase of EMS should instead be on observing how practices work, and gaining experience to help select an appropriate ‘base’ practice or area of practice for the next phase of EMS. This is not to rule out practical hands-on work during this phase – on the contrary, students will learn best by doing, rather than just by seeing, but the limits of their ability at this stage need to be appreciated by all parties.

- **“Practical EMS” should follow on from preparatory EMS, and should comprise the remaining 20 weeks to be undertaken during the later clinical years.**

For their practical EMS, students should be able to select the areas of practice they wish to focus on, and should be encouraged to find a “base” practice where they can spend a significant part of this final phase of their EMS, returning at different intervals until they graduate. This will help students to build a relationship with the practice, and help the practice to get to know and trust the student. In this way, the opportunities offered by the placement can be maximised for both parties.

17. The number of weeks that should be spent in a base practice, and the number of weeks that should be spent on different types of placement (eg. on research or lab based

placements) or with different species have not been specified. This should be left to the individual student after a discussion with their clinical tutor at the university to identify their changing learning needs and career aspirations. However, the university has the over-riding responsibility to ensure that Day One Competences have been covered adequately for each student, either through external placements (the 'distributed model') or through other intra-mural rotations at the university. Universities must provide sufficient resources to enable individual "tailoring" of student learning to be agreed and reviewed at regular intervals.

18. Wherever possible, students should be discouraged from selecting a base practice or booking up EMS placements for particular species too far in advance. This is difficult to regulate as many students want to book well ahead to secure their preferred placement. However, not only might they change their minds about the areas on which they want to focus, but booking too far in advance blocks placements for others unnecessarily. It would help if practices were discouraged from accepting bookings too far ahead, as this may limit choices when students and their tutors are planning future placements to match the student's educational needs. The exception to this would be that of a student seen during their preparatory EMS who would then like to book several return practical EMS visits throughout their remaining time as a student.

EMS AND VETERINARY PUBLIC HEALTH

19. Separate guidance on the teaching of VPH is available from RCVS. The practical component of understanding food hygiene and gaining experience of full-throughput abattoirs should not be delivered solely through *ad hoc* EMS placements. To improve the quality of learning in this area, visits to fully commercial abattoirs and other meat processing plants, which form an essential part of teaching in veterinary public health for all students, must be part of the core curriculum and should not be left to EMS.
20. The use of small in-house abattoirs such as those at Nottingham and Bristol could be effective if used to introduce students to the processes involved in a controlled manner. RCVS strongly supports collaboration and sharing of facilities for abattoir training between universities. But this must be supplemented by external visits, coordinated by the university as part of the core course and possibly organised in small groups, to commercially run full-throughput red and white meat abattoirs, cutting and processing plants. This will help ensure that all students see a variety of meat production processes and, with more direction and control provided by the university, may help facilitate the development of closer links between the industry and the university for the mutual benefit of each. Continued collaboration between the veterinary schools, the Government Veterinary Surgeons team and the Veterinary Public Health Association is important.
21. Those students who wish to spend further elective time focussed on public health (which of course is far broader than just meat hygiene) should be encouraged to undertake relevant EMS placements within the industry, including time with an OV and in abattoirs,

as well as other placements such as with the VLA, Defra, Animal Health, and food production facilities.

COMMUNICATION

22. For EMS to be effective, all parties – veterinary schools, practices and students – have a part to play and communication and exchange of information between veterinary schools and practices, between students and practices, and between students and their university tutors is important. Adding RCVS into the equation with its statutory duty to set and monitor standards for veterinary undergraduate education means that there are four principal parties involved if EMS is to be delivered effectively: students, universities, practices and other placement providers, and the RCVS.
23. In general EMS is considered by all involved to be of immense value and should not be diminished, but there is room for improvement by all parties to ensure that EMS continues to be an effective part of veterinary education and contributes to the development of the profession more generally. All have a part to play if EMS is to be strengthened, and the roles and responsibilities of all four parties are set out below.

STUDENTS

24. Students must take responsibility for their own learning during EMS. This includes preparing properly before each placement, setting themselves learning objectives for each placement in consultation with their tutors, taking into account the RCVS Day One Competences. They must be familiar with the guidance provided by their university and RCVS for EMS. They should also communicate effectively and in a professional manner with the placement provider before, during and after the placement. The EMS 'Driving Licence' developed by Edinburgh and RVC will be very useful preparation for placements. Students should check that their placement provider has received all the relevant paperwork and guidance relating to EMS and, if they haven't, then either provide the practice with a copy, or email them with an on-line link so they can find it easily.
25. Students must keep their EMS records up to date, and must keep a proper record of their experience during EMS, using the logbooks, learning diaries or databases provided by their university. They must discuss their EMS records and progress with their clinical tutor(s), reflect on what they are learning and see their EMS experience as an integral part of their education.
26. There is already plenty of guidance for students on how they should behave whilst on EMS placements, including the EMS 'Driving Licence' and the BVA EMS Guides, 'Making the most of EMS – a student guide' and 'Making the most of EMS: a guide for providers of EMS'. The key issue is that students must recognise that they have important responsibilities as "nearly professionals" when undertaking EMS and that their attitudes

and behaviour have an effect on their own career, and also reflect on their university and the veterinary student body more widely.

UNIVERSITIES

27. Universities must allocate sufficient staff resources to EMS to ensure that it is administered, coordinated and monitored effectively, as befits a 38 week component of the veterinary degree. They must ensure that there is ongoing liaison with all the various placement providers, ensure that staff are available to discuss learning objectives prior to each placement, gather feedback on students with those providers, and ensure that students are maintaining their EMS experience records and learning diaries. They must also ensure that such records are discussed with clinical tutors. It is recommended that timetabled tutorial sessions are built into the course to facilitate this.
28. Responsibility for coordinating EMS within the university is not a task that can be undertaken by a single individual, especially when that individual has other teaching, clinical or administrative demands on their time. Universities must have a single named EMS coordinator to oversee EMS within the university and to liaise with practices and other organisations, including the RCVS. But, to ensure EMS continues to be delivered effectively and to do justice to the enormous contribution provided by the rest of the profession through placements, the universities must ensure that there are adequate staff resources to support EMS.
29. There must be a comprehensive recording system for students to log and reflect on their EMS experience and this must form an integral part of formative assessment during the degree course. Such a log could be combined with other records that demonstrate students' progress in achieving Day One Competences; it need not necessarily be used exclusively for EMS. Students must be made aware of the importance of keeping accurate and up to date notes on their progress
30. Universities must take primary responsibility for delivering the Day One Competences, and where these need to be covered in placements outside the university, such placements should be seen as part of the core curriculum – not as EMS - and should be quality assured, controlled and monitored accordingly, just like any other part of the intra-mural course (see RCVS requirements for Universities implementing a 'distributed' veterinary clinical education model, February 2008.)
31. The 2009 student finance regulations in England allow students to apply for long course loans where attendance over 30 weeks and 3 days is required. The extra loan is paid for 52 weeks where attendance is required on a course for 45 weeks or more. Although such extended loans are means-tested, they would provide access to significant extra funds to help some students defray the expense of undertaking EMS. Although this is not a complete solution to the problem of alleviating students' financial problems as it will add to graduate debt, it is still worth exploring as a means of providing additional funds to those students most in need. As EMS is a mandatory and integral part of the veterinary

degree course, it is recommended that universities should together explore the possibility of defining some parts of their degree course as a “long course”, and publicise this information to students to enable them to take advantage of the increased student loan available.

32. Bearing in mind that practices receive no financial remuneration for their contribution to the training of veterinary students, universities should consider offering EMS providers discounted and/or preferential access to some services, facilities and/or CPD provided by the university. This will help to strengthen links between practices and universities, bringing benefits to both sides. Whilst these recommendations have financial implications for the universities, it should be recognised that it could cost them considerably more to try and replace EMS completely by in-house or university-owned provision, if indeed it ever could be replicated.

PRACTICES

33. It is recognised by all that veterinary practices and other placement providers make a very important and highly valued contribution to veterinary education through their involvement with EMS. This altruistic attitude to education is a great credit to the profession and is something that should continue to be nurtured. When undertaking its review of EMS in 2009, the RCVS working party heard from many contributors about the benefits to practices of taking students, not only in terms of recruitment opportunities, but also of having insight into the latest thinking within the veterinary schools. It was reported that students who were near the end of their degree and who had built a relationship with a practice were often able to act as an additional pair of hands within the practice and thus were not always perceived as a drain on practice staff time.
34. To improve the experience of EMS for both the practice and the student, it is recommended that practices identify named individual(s) to act as EMS contact for students and the university, and that some time is set aside for entry and exit interviews with students at the beginning and end of each placement. Each student should arrive at the placement with a set of objectives they're hoping to meet, and it will save time and make the placement more productive for both parties if these can be briefly discussed with the student at the outset. Practices should then not be inhibited from providing honest feedback to and about the student, and should contact the university's EMS coordinator if they want to discuss a particular student in more detail.
35. Practices should check they have access to the latest guidance on EMS provided by the BVA and the universities and on the RCVS website. The student should be able to give them a copy or point them to the online guidance if necessary. Guidance published on the RCVS website summarises the curriculum for each university and gives further general guidance for practices.

RCVS

36. It is RCVS's responsibility to monitor that EMS is being delivered effectively as part of the university degree. Although EMS has always been considered during RCVS visitations, an audit-based approach will be adopted so that RCVS's Education Policy & Specialisation Committee can monitor how the universities are developing and improving their EMS programmes, as well as other measures they are taking to deliver Day One Competences generally. In the first few years of implementing these recommendations RCVS will arrange a series of short one day or half day visits to follow up a random sample of students, tutors and EMS providers and associated records. The committee will ensure that this is a regular feature on its agenda.
37. RCVS will take the lead in exploring with the universities the feasibility of developing a single 'PDP style' recording system for EMS to be used by students as a pre-cursor to PDP after they graduate. This could be by extending the existing PDP system or a variant thereof, or by agreeing common data items to be recorded in the universities' own systems. There is a natural link between systems used to record EMS, PDP and ongoing CPD, and this would help to emphasise the importance of reflective lifelong learning in the workplace.
38. RCVS will communicate its recommendations on EMS to veterinary schools and to the wider profession in a concerted effort over the next year.

SUMMARY

RCVS Council adopted the report and recommendations of the EMS Working Party at its meeting on 5 November 2009 and agreed that implementation by all parties – veterinary schools, students, practices and other placement providers, and the RCVS - should begin immediately. The main actions to be taken and responsibilities of all four parties are summarised below.

1. Twelve weeks should be devoted to pre-clinical EMS and it should be designed to meet the individual needs of the student. (paragraphs 8 – 12)
2. The way clinical EMS is phased and structured should change: there should be more flexibility to allow students to select placements that match their areas of interest as well as the university's curriculum. (paragraphs 13 – 18)

Clinical EMS should comprise two phases:

- Preparatory EMS of **about 6 weeks**, to be undertaken when pre-clinical EMS has been completed. During this period it is suggested that students should undertake at least three different types of placements to experience a range of veterinary work.
- Practical EMS should follow on from this preparatory EMS phase, and should comprise the remaining 20 weeks to be undertaken during the later clinical years.

3. Visits to fully commercial abattoirs and other meat processing plants, which form an essential part of teaching in veterinary public health for all students must be seen as part of the core curriculum and should not be left to EMS. (Paragraphs 19 – 21)
4. Collaboration and sharing of university facilities for abattoir training between universities must be complemented by external visits, coordinated by the university as part of the core course and possibly organised in small groups, to commercially run full-throughput red and white meat abattoirs, cutting and processing plants. (Paragraphs 19 – 21)
5. Students must take responsibility for their own learning during EMS. This includes preparing properly before each placement. Students must keep their EMS records up to date, and must keep a proper record of their experience during EMS, using the logbooks, learning diaries or databases provided by their university. They must discuss their EMS records and progress with their clinical tutor(s), reflect on what they are learning and see their EMS experience as an integral part of their education. (paragraphs 24 - 26)
6. Students should ensure that their placement provider has a copy of the relevant documents and guidance on EMS. (paragraphs 24 – 26)
7. Universities must allocate sufficient staff resources to EMS to ensure that it is administered, coordinated and monitored effectively, as befits a 38 week component of the veterinary degree. (paragraphs 27– 28)
8. There must be a comprehensive recording system for students to log and reflect on their EMS experience and this must form an integral part of formative assessment during the degree course. (paragraph 29)
9. Universities must take primary responsibility for delivering the Day One Competences, and where these need to be covered in placements outside the university, such placements should be seen as part of the core curriculum – not as EMS - and should be quality assured, controlled and monitored accordingly, just like any other part of the intramural course. (paragraph 30)
10. Universities should together explore the possibility of defining some parts of their degree course as a “long course”, and publicise this information to students to enable them to take advantage of the increased student loan available. (paragraph 31)
11. Universities should consider offering EMS providers discounted and/or preferential access to some services, facilities and/or CPD provided by the university. (paragraph 32)
12. Practices should identify named individual(s) to act as EMS contact for students and the university, and ensure that some time is set aside at the beginning and end of each placement for entry and exit interviews with students. (paragraph 34)

13. Practices should check they have access to the latest guidance on EMS provided by the universities, RCVS and the BVA. The student should be able to give them a copy or point them to the online guidance if necessary. (paragraph 35)
14. An audit-based approach will be adopted so that RCVS's Education Policy & Specialisation Committee can monitor how the universities are developing and improving their EMS programmes, as well as other measures they are taking to deliver Day One Competences generally. This could be achieved in the first few years of implementing these recommendations by a series of short one day or half day visits. The Committee should ensure that this is a regular feature on its agenda. (paragraph 36)
15. RCVS will take the lead in exploring with the universities the feasibility of developing a single 'PDP style' recording system for EMS to be used by students as a pre-cursor to PDP after they graduate. This could be by extending the existing PDP system or a variant thereof, or by agreeing common data items to be recorded in the universities' own systems. (paragraph 37)
16. RCVS will communicate its recommendations on EMS to veterinary schools and to the wider profession in a concerted effort over the next year. (paragraph 38)