



Extra-Mural Studies fit for the future: Improving learning, flexibility and opportunity

RCVS proposals for EMS policy
from autumn 2024

EMS fit for the future

Background

Few would argue with the statement that Extra-Mural Studies (EMS) for veterinary students – the time spent within a range of veterinary working environments getting ‘real world’ experience alongside their university tuition - is one of the most frequently debated areas within veterinary education in the UK.

EMS placements have been identified by new graduates and students as one of the most valuable aspects of their undergraduate veterinary education. However, a number of significant challenges is known to exist, including accessibility and availability of placements, and the associated costs to students (and providers) which, in turn, create a barrier to widening participation.

The quality of placements is also known to be highly variable, with students reporting some placements as incredibly valuable learning experiences, but others failing to meet expectations and providing little in terms of professional development. This is also the case from the perspective of EMS providers, with many practitioners involved in providing clinical EMS describing some experiences as particularly rewarding, where the student has engaged and clearly developed during their time on placement, in contrast to others who appear not to engage and give the impression they are there to ‘tick the box’.

Stakeholder feedback

We have been listening to stakeholder feedback on an ongoing basis for several years, through our meetings with the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS), the Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) and their EMS co-ordinators, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the Society for Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS), amongst other groups. In addition to feedback and data shared in these meetings, we have also gathered our own data through surveys and focus groups, and consultations with the wider profession such as the 2019 Graduate Outcomes initiative.



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Supporting EMS implementation

In response to the known challenges, our Education Committee agreed to a number of measures to support vet schools in the implementation of EMS. These included the development of a national database for booking EMS placements to include information useful to widening participation students, such as transport links; accommodation and other support available at a placement; clearer guidance for all stakeholders on good practice in relation to EMS; and, details of available support for students.

This work is ongoing, however further challenges have arisen over the last few years which made it clear that, in addition to the above initiatives to support the implementation of EMS in the short term, further work was needed to consider the longer-term implementation of EMS to ensure it remains sustainable and valuable for students.

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A changing landscape of veterinary education

External pressures

Over the last few years, major events have added further pressure on veterinary education, including the delivery of EMS. The global Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on placements, with the vast majority of EMS placements being cancelled when lockdown restrictions were in place. Although we adjusted the EMS requirement to support students during this time, it was clear from the data gathered from new graduates starting the RCVS Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP) in 2021, and from their VetGDP Advisers, that experiencing less EMS negatively affected graduates' confidence and preparedness for practice. When lockdown restrictions eased, EMS placements were slow to return, which has had a 'knock-on' impact for some students.



Also, when the UK left the European Union, this (and the pandemic) added further pressure on the UK veterinary workforce as fewer vets applied to register to work in the UK. Workforce shortages, combined with increased pet ownership and rising caseload for vets, have left some clinical placement providers feeling as though they do not have the time to support a student on EMS .

Perfect storm

In parallel, student numbers in the UK are rapidly increasing. In addition to increasing cohort numbers at existing schools, a number of new schools have recently been established and are enrolling students, including the Harper and Keele Veterinary School and Aberystwyth School of Veterinary Science. There are also plans for further new vet schools at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), which are planning to take their first cohorts of students in the next few years. All of these new schools are adopting – to a greater or lesser extent – a distributed model of teaching, whereby students receive a proportion of their clinical teaching at partner practices within the community.

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In addition, from 2023, our new accreditation standards for veterinary programmes will require all schools to deliver the majority of their clinical teaching in a general practice context, which will inevitably result in changes for some of the established schools.

As more practices in the UK become formalised (contractual) partners with vet schools in the delivery of the curriculum, taking students on intra-mural rotation (IMR) placements, there is a risk that this may be at the expense of offering EMS placements. Consequently, there is the potential for a ‘perfect storm’, with demand for EMS placements rapidly increasing over the next five to ten years, at a time when availability may be in decline.

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Making EMS sustainable for the future

Avoiding unintended consequences

It is clear that change is needed in order to make EMS sustainable in the longer term and fulfil its potential to be a valuable addition to the professional development of the next generation of vets. However, this needs to be done in such a way as to minimise the risk of unintended consequences that could have a negative impact on our future graduates and new members of the profession. The current challenges associated with EMS certainly need to be addressed, but the value EMS brings to veterinary education also needs to be kept in mind.



The importance of added value

EMS is described within the RCVS accreditation standards as “a unique opportunity for students to gain valuable hands-on experience and practise skills acquired during the veterinary programme, in a further range of ‘real workplace learning’ contexts”. However, we know from our stakeholder feedback that the value EMS brings is much more nuanced than simply the ability to practise skills. The added value a good EMS placement brings to students often relates to the more intangible aspects of working as a vet: experiencing the culture in the workplace, the discussions between colleagues, the varied (and sometimes challenging) client interactions, the business context and working as part of a professional team. These are the ‘difficult to measure’ components of professional development, helping develop resilience and professional identity, which is enhanced through experience in different working environments.

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Stakeholder feedback

We set the policy for EMS within the accreditation standards for veterinary programmes, and the new standards being implemented in 2023 include an updated EMS policy which adds clarity around EMS and allows additional flexibility for

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students (Appendix 1). However, after recognising the additional challenges being faced and to explore options for a new EMS policy in the longer-term future, we hosted a Stakeholder Event in London in November 2021.

A wide range of stakeholders attended, including vet students, new graduates, vet school representatives and veterinary organisations including BVA, SPVS and AVS. In order to make the event solution-focussed, a range of options were discussed at length and additional 'blue sky' ideas were invited. The day was positive and highly constructive with many useful ideas being put forward¹, which we have used to develop proposals for a future EMS policy.



Reducing the financial burden of attending EMS placements on students, which exacerbates the challenges for those students from differing socio-economic backgrounds, was a priority . However, this needs to be done in a way that does not have a negative impact on students' professional development, or inadvertently create further inequalities. Reducing the demand for placements through a reduction in the amount of EMS required could also reduce the associated costs. Stakeholders discussed how this could be achieved without reducing the overall educational value of EMS to students, if the consistency of high-quality EMS placements was improved through additional quality assurance measures and guidance for students and providers on best practice.

In addition to considering the demand for placements, stakeholders explored how the 'supply', namely, the number of placements available, could be increased. The costs to providers were discussed and acknowledged, and although payment would be welcomed, there was a clear sense from providers that they offered EMS for other reasons. EMS providers described feeling a real sense of personal and professional satisfaction when a placement has gone well, and feel that they are 'giving back' to the profession through sharing their experience and expertise. In contrast, instances where a student was disengaged or uninterested during a placement left them feeling somewhat disillusioned. Placement providers

¹ The Future of EMS: Report of the Stakeholder Day.

<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/publications/the-future-of-ems-report-of-stakeholder-day/>

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were keen to be recognised for the value they bring, and more appreciated by the vet schools. In light of this, incentives for EMS providers and recognition of their commitment were discussed.

One reason why students might be less engaged on a particular EMS placement, was attributed to the requirements of EMS set by each vet school, for example, the need to do a certain number of weeks’ EMS in specific areas of practice. This could result in students attending a placement in which they were less interested, simply to ‘tick the box’, leading to low satisfaction of both the student and provider. A more flexible, outcomes-focused approach to EMS, established through our accreditation standards for vet degrees and associated EMS policy, could help address this and also enhance the consistency of quality of placements.

The options and ideas discussed at the stakeholder day provided the foundations for the development of the future EMS policy by our Education Committee.

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A new approach to support students, providers and vet schools in delivering EMS

For such a complex issue, involving so many stakeholders, it is clear there is no 'silver bullet' that is able to completely remove all of the challenges faced by individuals, which would not pose a significant risk to students' professional development and preparation for entering the profession.

However, there was support for a different approach that would be able to address these challenges, and potentially improve the situation for all involved.

This would be achieved as follows, through the introduction of:

- **An enhanced approach to EMS achieved through additional quality assurance measures, enabling the number of weeks of EMS required by students to be reduced.**
- **Greater flexibility and a more outcomes-focused approach, allowing students to identify their own learning outcomes for EMS in areas most relevant and of interest to them, and achieve the experience in different ways.**
- **Clearer information for students on what specific EMS placements can offer, in terms of experience and support.**
- **Measures to increase the provision and availability of EMS placements across the profession, through improved guidance, promotion and recognition of the benefits to all parties and incentives for providers.**

Further details about each of these measures are described on pages 10-13.

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An enhanced approach to EMS achieved through additional quality assurance measures, enabling the number of weeks of EMS required by students to be reduced.

Reduction in weeks

The future policy for EMS will be for students to complete ten weeks' Animal Handling EMS (AHEMS) and 20 weeks of clinical EMS - a reduction of eight weeks in comparison with the current (2023) policy. There will be no species requirement imposed, and students will be able to choose placements that align with their development needs and interests. Further exemptions for some AHEMS may be possible where students could demonstrate considerable prior experience.

Improved quality assurance

To enhance the consistency of quality across EMS placements, new quality assurance measures will be in place to increase the likelihood that each EMS experience is positive and valuable for both the student and the placement provider. This will involve taking a more outcomes-focused approach to planning EMS placements, and improved pro-active communication between students, schools and providers to ensure expectations are clear in advance and subsequently met on all sides.

EMS database

Students should receive support from their tutors to identify and record their learning objectives for EMS in advance; this could be done periodically and adjusted as necessary as experience develops. We are developing a national EMS database to support students in searching for and booking placements relevant to their needs. Providers will be invited to include a range of information about the EMS placement(s) they offer, including the range of non-clinical support they can provide as well as the type and range of clinical and professional experience students will have (see below).

The EMS database will also provide students and schools with a mechanism to communicate with providers in advance, to ask questions, share learning objectives and discuss any

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additional support needs. It will also facilitate communication with the school during longer placements, for example, to understand if expectations are being met or adjustments are needed.

Provider and student feedback following completion of EMS placements will continue to be carried out by the vet school. However, through using the RCVS EMS database as a mechanism to improve communication and set expectations, we envisage the new approach to EMS can be achieved without additional resource burden on schools. The national database would also be able to facilitate signposting of our new guidance on best practice, which would be beneficial for new providers, and for AHEMS providers who may be less accustomed to student support.



Greater flexibility and a more outcomes-focused approach, allowing students to identify their own learning outcomes for EMS in areas most relevant and of interest to them, and achieve the experience in different ways.

Greater flexibility

Although the amount of EMS required will continue to be measured in weeks, there will be increased flexibility for students as to how this is achieved around their studies in the future policy. This should provide further options for students who struggle currently, perhaps due to competing responsibilities such as being a carer or wanting to work part time.

EMS providers will be encouraged to offer longer placements where possible, to allow for continuity and increase the ability for students to become 'one of the team' and experience what it is to work in that environment. However, EMS could also be achieved in other ways, for example, if the student attended a placement every Wednesday afternoon or Saturday over a longer period. This time could all contribute to the overall requirement and achieve the same outcomes.

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Setting own learning objectives

Students will be responsible for identifying and setting their own learning objectives (with the support of their tutor), without the constraint of needing to do a certain amount of EMS in predetermined areas, for example, across species. This will increase the likelihood that students are actively engaged in the placement and not attending to 'tick the box', thereby improving the satisfaction of both the student and the provider. Furthermore, a more outcomes-focused approach led by the student creates flexibility in that their learning outcomes can be adjusted as further experience is gained – during the development of expertise, it is often the case that 'you don't know what you don't know' until you experience a situation, learn more and then adjust the areas you wish to explore further.



Clearer information for students on what specific EMS placements can offer, in terms of experience and support.

Managing expectations

Our national EMS database will encourage providers to include a range of information about their placements for students to consider. Importantly, this will include the types of cases seen in their workplace, what a student could reasonably expect to experience and how they will be supported. Students will be able to consider this information against their own needs and learning objectives when booking a placement, resulting in expectations on both sides being better managed in advance.

Additional information for students

To help address challenges around accessibility to EMS placements, particularly for students facing additional constraints around finances or transport, we will encourage EMS providers to provide a range of additional information to help students choose placements that meet their needs.

Such information will include the geographical location of the placement, dates available, any financial support available

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or payment offered, if a car might be made available, public transport links, and if accommodation is available. In addition, providers will be able to promote their workplace and EMS placement 'offer' through the demonstration of other qualities such as having staff trained in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), or coaching / mentoring techniques, Practice Standards Scheme (PSS) or other awards. The promotion of such qualities by practices could also be seen by students as their longer-term employee offer or brand, providing an additional benefit to practices who offer EMS as a means to attract future, like-minded team members.

Measures to increase the provision and availability of EMS placements across the profession, through improved guidance, promotion and recognition of the benefits to all parties and incentives for providers.

Promoting the value of EMS

Although the reduction in the number of weeks of EMS required will ease the increasing demand to a certain extent, there is still a need to attract more individuals and practices to offer animal handling, clinical and professional EMS placements to meet the future needs of students. We will work to promote EMS and the many benefits it brings to providers themselves, as well as to students and the next generation of our profession.

Providers have shared with us the sense of personal and professional satisfaction it gives them to pass on their experience and expertise to vet students, and the valuable contributions students make to the workplace during the time they spend there. Following a particularly good experience on EMS, students may also be keen to return to that workplace later in their studies or upon graduation.

Recognition and reward

In addition to access to 'free CPD' on coaching and mentoring via the RCVS Academy, practitioners who support students on EMS have also reported these activities to be rich learning

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experiences for themselves, and therefore can also be counted as part of their own CPD.

To enhance the profile of EMS and ensure EMS providers are recognised across the profession for the value and commitment they bring, further incentives and rewards will be explored, such as awards for the best placements or providers which go above and beyond to support students, and further recognition through our Practice Standards Scheme.

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Summary

Significant challenge

Addressing the difficulties associated with EMS encountered by stakeholders, without undermining the unique value it brings, or creating unintended consequences for veterinary education and the preparation of new graduates for their future role within the profession, is a significant challenge.

A number of measures has been identified, which, when combined, aim to reduce the financial burden on all students, improve opportunities for widening participation, increase the availability of EMS placements and enhance the experience for both students and EMS providers.

Through adopting a new approach to enhance the consistency of high-quality EMS, the amount of EMS required to be completed can be reduced, which eases the pressure on supply and reduces costs to students. The additional quality assurance measures needed to achieve this are proportionate and will be facilitated by a national EMS database that we will host, with the focus being on improving communication and managing expectations of students and EMS providers prior to the placement, to improve satisfaction on both sides.

Avoiding unintended consequences

The move towards a more outcomes-focused approach will add value to the EMS process and enable students to make their experiences meaningful to their own personal and professional growth as they progress through their veterinary programme. A reduced requirement in terms of the number of weeks, which can also be achieved much more flexibly, will reduce the costs to students and provide more options for those on lower incomes to get the EMS they need, in a manner that fits with their personal circumstances.

To remove the EMS requirement completely, putting the onus on students to decide how much EMS would benefit them, could risk significantly increasing inequity for students, which



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could have an extended impact into their future careers. Students from more affluent backgrounds would have access to more EMS than those without the same support, which could impact on confidence, breadth and depth of experience and employability.

Furthermore, although students are able to reflect on their needs in terms of practising clinical skills on EMS, the value EMS brings to students extends beyond this purpose and is more nuanced, bringing experience of the 'hard to measure' aspects of professional practice, such as teamwork, workplace culture and dealing with a wide range of client needs.

Through the consideration of feedback from all stakeholders – students, vet schools, EMS providers and the wider profession – our future EMS policy will provide a framework for an enhanced, more flexible and accessible approach that is sustainable in the longer term.

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Next Steps

Our Education Committee has agreed the above future policy, aiming for implementation late in 2024. This timeframe allows for the development of the national EMS database, which is needed to facilitate the new approach, and any piloting of this in advance of the changes.

Prior to this, our recently updated EMS policy within the 2023 RCVS accreditation standards for veterinary degree programmes comes into effect in January 2023 (appendix 1).

We look forward to continuing to work with all our stakeholders in taking this important work forward.



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Appendix 1

The EMS policy within the 2023 accreditation standards for veterinary programmes can be read in full at www.rcvs.org.uk/accreditation-standards-2023/

The EMS policy within the 2023 standards maintains the previous requirement for 12 weeks AHEMS and 26 weeks Clinical EMS.

Updates to the 2023 policy includes added clarity on the criteria for EMS, for example AHEMS needing to be taken in person, and to directly involve animals. Other than the need for one week of AHEMS in equine, production animal and companion animal settings, there is no stipulation around requirements for EMS with particular species. Exemptions of up to six weeks of AHEMS are permitted where a student can demonstrate considerable previous experience in a particular area of animal handling.

Regarding clinical EMS, there are no species requirements in the RCVS 2023 policy, and students are encouraged to gain further experience in areas that would interest and benefit them the most. Up to two weeks' 'professional' EMS is permitted, that is, on non-clinical placements relevant to the veterinary profession. More than two weeks' professional EMS can be allowed for at schools' discretion if a student has a particular interest in a non-clinical area, for example, research.

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