RCVS/VSC BAME Student Support Working Group Report

RCVS | SETTING VETERINARY STANDARDS

Introduction

1. This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)/Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Student Support Working Group. The Working Group's purpose was to explore key issues in supporting BAME veterinary students during their studies, to investigate and share good practice that currently exists, and to make further recommendations to improve the experience of BAME students. It is recognised that more needs to be done to support BAME students and the contents of this report provide the basis for future project work.

2. The report relates to workstream 2 of the **RCVS Diversity and Inclusion Group (DIG) Strategy**, 'Retention and support within the vet/VN schools at undergraduate and postgraduate levels'. It looks at issues with current discrimination reporting, support provided for BAME students and how this can be enhanced, the development of role models, and guidance on reasonable accommodations for religious clothing. It also incorporates examples of progressive work undertaken in veterinary schools and universities as well as drawing on good practice in the wider sector. Student representatives were consulted for their views on the topics discussed to ensure that the work of the group remained relevant and aligned with their experience.

3. The report also references the new **RCVS Standards and Guidance for the Accreditation of Veterinary Degree Programmes**, recently published by the RCVS. The new standards are designed to move away from a 'tick box' approach that mainly focused on inputs to the programme, to one that requires demonstrable evidence that educational outcomes have been met. The standards are categorised under six domains:

    • The Learning Environment
    • Organisation, Culture and Values
    • Educational Governance and Quality Improvement
    • Supporting Students
    • Supporting Educators
    • Curriculum Assessment

    These standards apply to all learning environments across the degree programme, including EMS placements, and incorporate robust adherence to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles and practices, which are directly relevant to the issues discussed in this document.

Roundtable discussions

4. On on both 30 September and 12 October 2020, a roundtable discussion on how to better support BAME veterinary students were organised by the VSC and RCVS DIG. Each of the eight UK veterinary schools with an accredited degree programme, together with the Harper and Keele Veterinary School and Utrecht and Dublin, were invited to send senior staff, staff responsible for D & I support at school and university level, and undergraduate and postgraduate student delegates, preferably BAME or D & I reps. Also in attendance were members of Veterinary Schools Council staff, RCVS staff, some RCVS DIG members and external speakers. Approximately 35 to 55 people attended over the two days.

5. The objectives for the roundtables were as follows:

- Identify what the common challenges are in terms of supporting BAME students;
- Understand what is already being done and what good practice can be shared;
- Understand what additional steps vet schools can take in terms of becoming anti-racist;
- Understand where RCVS structures and policies may need to change to support both recruitment and support of BAME students;
- Learn from outside the profession and outside the UK;
- Consider solutions and potential collaborations;
- Build a network that can continue after the event.

6. The Roundtable heard from three guest speakers and provided an opportunity to discuss issues they had already identified as constituting the main barriers to providing BAME student support. A summary report of the day can be found on the **RCVS website**. The event was very well-received, with high levels of engagement, particularly from students. Key recommendations that emerged from the discussions included:

   a) Developing clear discrimination reporting structures, particularly for students on extra-mural studies (EMS);
   b) Developing and supporting a group of role models within the vet schools amongst both students and faculty;
   c) Developing support structures for BAME students, with faculty being trained on how to do this.

7. It was deemed important that momentum from these discussions was maintained to bring about change. Therefore, the BAME Student Support Working Group was proposed to take these recommendations forward and to make further proposals to the RCVS, via the DIG and the VSC.

8. Membership of the Working Group was drawn from UK veterinary schools' staff, BAME student representatives, RCVS staff members and VSC members. The Group was co-chaired by a member of the VSC (Professor Rob Pettitt) and a BAME student representative (Stephanie-Rae Flicker).

Terms of Reference

9. Reporting to the RCVS DIG, the Terms of Reference for the Working Group were based on the investigation of four items. The first three items were those identified from the roundtable discussions. As a result of a student query following the roundtable meeting, religious clothing guidance for universities and intra-mural rotations (IMR)/EMS placement hosts was included as an additional item for consideration. The four items are listed in priority order:

   a) Developing clear discrimination reporting structures, particularly for students on EMS placements;
   b) Developing and supporting a group of role models within the vet schools – students and faculty;
   c) Developing support structures for BAME students, with faculty being trained on how to do this;
   d) Religious clothing – guidance for universities and placement hosts.

Developing clear discrimination reporting structures, particularly for students on extra-mural studies (EMS)

10. The most salient topic to be addressed by the Working Group was the need to develop clear discrimination reporting structures for students on clinical and pre-clinical EMS placements in veterinary or animal husbandry workplaces. Most universities have reporting systems in place at the institutional level, but there are no formal structures and feedback mechanisms at local level within many vet schools and no consistency across institutions. There is also a lack of support for students who have been affected by discrimination while on placement. Consultation with student representatives provided insight into some of the challenges. The Working Group found that discrimination reporting was a complex area, with many factors to consider. A summary of the issues is provided below.

Issues with current discrimination reporting

11. Vet schools are often required to follow the over-arching university reporting process, which usually provides two routes: attributed and anonymous. These systems are often not clear and transparent, and routes can be challenging for students to locate. With no local oversight and reporting mechanisms in place, it is difficult to follow up on incidents in a manner that is supportive of the students. Even if the interface for reporting incidents is relatively easy to locate and use, the complaint journey is often unclear. It is not known what happens to the complaint, what action has been taken, how repeated complaints are dealt with and what the impact is. This is complicated by the fact that reports are frequently anonymous, making further meaningful investigation of the incident, without the student's input, difficult. It is also impossible to inform individuals of the outcome of their complaint. Nevertheless, the anonymous route is important. It provides a means of capturing the experience of those students who would not otherwise report, as well as highlighting potential problems.

12. Universities have legal obligations under the Equality and Public Sector Act, 2010, and must demonstrate a duty of care

towards students but they have no legal jurisdiction to investigate discrimination matters involving students whilst on EMS placement. This makes the issue of reporting and responsibility much more complex, as it falls outside the university's official activities and limits what formal action they can take. It is ultimately up to the student to raise an issue with the placement provider and to follow the organisation's internal policies and reporting procedures when such incidents occur. Not all workplaces, especially smaller practices, will have these systems in place. This does not absolve them of legal responsibilities that relate to protected characteristics. For their part, universities should speak directly to the provider and reiterate their expectations concerning standards of behaviour, making it clear what is and what is not appropriate. If a pattern of discrimination emerges, universities should be prepared to remove the placement from its list of opportunities.

13. Although vet schools do have the option of removing practices/placements from their register when it is known that incidents of discrimination have been reported, they may be reluctant to do so because of the scarcity of sites available for placements, particularly if they are given on a voluntary basis. This is often the case with farm and equine placements, where anecdotal student feedback suggests instances of discrimination have occurred. It is also worth noting that practice placements may be used by more than one university. Although there is a need to maintain good relationships with providers across the sector, it is clearly unacceptable to put BAME students at risk of discriminatory behaviour.

14. The Equality and Human Rights Commission states that there is a significant under-reporting of racial harassment by university students (Tackling Racial Harassment, Universities Challenged, 2019) and based on feedback from students consulted by the Working Group, this trend seems to be reflected in vet schools. There are several reasons for this:

- Reporting systems can be difficult to locate and navigate;
- Students may not feel confident that reports will be acted upon;
- Students may be concerned that support will not be available from staff;
- Fear of not being able to graduate if the EMS is not completed;
- Offensive comments are often described as just 'banter' or 'joking around'. It can be difficult for students to judge whether an incident is serious enough to report;
- Raising complaints of this nature can be traumatic and stressful for students and they may feel the best course of action is to put up with the behaviour until the placement is over;
- When a student complains and is advised to leave an EMS placement, they are still obliged to make up the time. This causes additional stress and places an increased financial burden on them;
- Most students prefer to report anonymously. With so few students from the BAME community in universities and work placements, many are discouraged from doing so because it is obvious who has complained and difficult to protect their identity;
- Students worry about the potential negative consequences on their personal development if complaints are made;
- Students are concerned about maintaining positive relationships with the provider.

15. Importantly, feedback from students states that they feel that the emphasis should be on preventing discrimination rather than reporting it.

16. Many EMS placements take place outside normal Monday to Friday working hours, in the evenings and at weekends. Some placements are also scheduled outside of term-time. 24/7 support is not available and out-of-hours student support is predominantly for immediate health and safety issues. The absence of scheduled rota systems places an undue burden on vet school EMS co-ordinators and cover can be affected by staff shortages due to annual leave and sickness, for example. In order to support EMS co-ordinators, who are often dealing with a wide range of issues, there is clearly a need for universities to develop formal and structured systems of support, which students can access at all times while on placement.

17. As well as availability, the quality of the informal advice and support given by staff to students reporting discrimination is a potential issue. Tutors may have different interpretations of situations and the quality of advice given could vary, leading to inconsistencies in approach. Information provided by institutions is often disjointed with separate policies for the different protected characteristics, which may not take intersectionality issues into account, and make it difficult to advise students. This indicates a need for clearer guidance and training on how to deal with reports of discrimination.

18. It is also important to note that in the absence of institutional support, there is an additional burden placed on students dealing with discrimination, who are often having to support each other, by creating safe spaces to discuss issues and using private social media groups to share information on good and poor placement experiences.

19. The Working Group is clear that the wellbeing of BAME students while on placement is a priority. The exploration of the current issues has shown that more needs to be done to improve students' experience of discrimination reporting and the quality of support they receive from vet schools. Students should feel confident that robust reporting systems are in place, that complaints will be dealt with fairly and appropriate action taken. EMS placement providers also have a responsibility to ensure that students are not subjected to this behaviour while working on their premises.

Improving the reporting experience for students

20. Although the Working Group's remit is not to advise on the development and implementation of policies, it has identified good practice and several actions that could be taken by vet schools to help address the issues identified.

21. A key finding of the Working Group is the need to provide more formalised support and guidance for students going on placements. The University of Nottingham has shared its School of Veterinary Medicine and Science (SVMS) Student Guide on Harassment or Bullying on EMS placements (available on the **RCVS website**), which provides an excellent example of good practice that other vet schools could emulate if they do not already have similar policies in place.

22. The document was put together by the SVMS Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee from various sources of information available, including the University of Nottingham EDI guidance and British Medical Association guidance on harassment at placements. It defines harassment and bullying, covers the University's responsibilities, provides advice on what students can do if they experience or witness behaviour of this nature, and includes clear guidance and signposting to support, including named contacts.

23. The guidelines are disseminated to personal tutors and any staff involved in work-based and placement learning so that they know how to respond to a request for advice from students. Importantly, although students are advised to make use of local systems or policies within the placement organisation, they are also encouraged to contact vet school staff for assistance and advice. What is notable here is that although university staff cannot resolve complaints, it is expected that they will intercede with the provider on the student's behalf to locate relevant organisational polices and encourage a resolution if necessary.

24. Alongside this, it would be helpful if universities aligned EDI policies for different protected characteristics, with clear guidance and training provided for staff in handling complaints and supporting BAME students in a way that is sensitive to their needs. EDI training will ensure staff have a good understanding of racism, harassment,

diversity and inclusion. Training in conflict management, and skills in engaging EMS hosts will also ensure they feel equipped to deal with these situations. Formal guidance documentation would help to ensure robust practices are in place.

25. In order to ensure protocols for reporting incidents are clear and that students are aware of what action is available to them, it is recommended that universities provide a visual representation of formal and informal reporting options in the form of a flow chart or decision tree. Indeed, many institutions are already developing these. An example is currently being developed as a guide for individual institutions. The latest version is provided on the **RCVS website.**

26. Students should also be aware of the implications of particular sanctions from formal complaints. For instance, reporting behaviours to the RCVS is an option, but could result in the removal of a veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse's registration. Complaints to the RCVS cannot be taken forward without naming the complainant and because of this, anonymity is not possible. It should also be clear what recourse is available should a student feel the university has not dealt with the complaint properly. Making reporting structures and options visible to the practice as well as the student, will raise awareness that these mechanisms exist and can be utilised.

27. Many institutions are working to improve current reporting provision. For example, the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) has recently implemented a new reporting system which was heavily customised with input from its Students' Union. The platform provides 24/7 support for students with clear reporting routes and options. Reports are triaged and sent to the appropriate department. Feedback has been very positive, but more work needs to be done to raise awareness, and subsequent use of the platform amongst students.

28. Finally, students and staff should be made aware of the RCVS' new Accreditation Standards which require universities to demonstrate a greater commitment to EDI in terms of admissions and teaching and placement settings. Much of the content relating to the themes addressed in this report can be found in standard 2.4, which states that:

The school must actively promote and maintain a culture that does not discriminate and enhances diversity, consistent with applicable law. Diversity may include, but is not limited to, race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural and socioeconomic background, national origin, and disability. There must be reporting mechanisms in place for any individual to raise concerns about discrimination and harassment. Universities must be prepared to withdraw from teaching contracts with partner practices/organisations if they fail to respect the guidance for this standard.

In addition, standard 2.5 states that schools should cultivate a reflective, no-blame learning culture amongst student and staff to ensure issues are raised and dealt with effectively:

The school must demonstrate a positive learning culture that investigates, reflects, and learns from mistakes and adopts effective reporting mechanisms and sharing of best practice. Students and staff should feel safe in raising and reporting concerns, and these must be dealt with effectively.

The standards will help students understand what they should expect from vet schools and providers. The Working Group recommends that vet schools and universities review the standards, along with the contents of this report, to identify where current practices, policies and systems are in need of changing or updating.

Awareness raising and training for EMS providers

29. While improving reporting systems and support for students within vet schools is paramount, a greater emphasis should be placed on the prevention of incidents, and clear action taken when they do occur. The Working Group proposes that this could be achieved through closer collaboration with EMS providers to ensure they have the requisite knowledge, support and guidance on EDI related issues. This, in conjunction with clearly stated expectations of behaviour and adherence to the RCVS' Accreditation Standards, could make a significant impact in reducing the discrimination experienced by students.

30. Awareness of the nature and impact of discriminatory behaviour could

be improved through education and training on EDI issues for placement providers. This would provide clarity for individuals on what constitutes unacceptable behaviour, thereby helping to reduce the incidence of micro-aggressions and discrimination. If training is organised by universities for both new and existing placement hosts, this could help to break down barriers, strengthen relationships and foster positive and open conversations on other EDI issues. It is hoped that specialist divisions, paraprofessionals and industry bodies would be supportive of this. The British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society (BVEDS) is successfully running EDI training for young farmers, so there is already a precedent. Vet schools could also collaborate with major employers and independent practices to develop EDI education programmes for placement providers.

31. Although universities themselves are legally limited in the action they can take, it is important that discriminatory behaviour is not tolerated by vet schools and that when incidents are reported, there is appropriate follow up with the EMS provider. This is vital in maintaining students' trust in the system and the institution, and to potentially deter a recurrence of the behaviour. The new RCVS Accreditation Standards are explicit in this. Clear reporting mechanisms must be in place, and vet schools are expected to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination, which may mean withdrawing from teaching contracts with placement hosts where standards are not being met. Vet schools could also make a point of acknowledging providers who demonstrate clear commitments to EDI, to underline its importance.

32. Vet schools have a duty of care towards students and as such must be proactive in setting out expectations with regards to standards of behaviour and the treatment of students while on placement. This would help ensure that placements are set up to be inclusive from the outset and could take the form of a three-way 'contract' or charter between the student, the school and the placement provider. Some universities outline their zero-tolerance for discrimination and harassment in the letters sent to placement providers prior to students starting their placements. A standardised letter and code of conduct (highlighting legal acts of Parliament) that all universities could use to outline commitment to EDI values and standards would promote a consistent approach and help to drive positive change within the profession. Again, the RCVS' new Accreditation Standards provide significantly enhanced guidance on EDI and can be referenced to reinforce this message.

Developing and supporting a group of role models within the vet schools – students and faculty

33. With only 3% of vets coming from BAME backgrounds, the absence of visible role models is a serious issue within the profession, and this is reflected in vet schools and universities. Lack of representation is a major factor in the BAME attainment gap in universities, and also impacts career progression. While there is no quick fix to address this problem, the Working Group recognises that the promotion of BAME role models is vital in creating a sense of belonging and an inclusive environment in which BAME students can thrive. Students need to see and interact with people like them. There are issues for vet schools and universities to consider:

    • The scarcity of BAME individuals from which draw potential role models;
    • The increased volume of work and pressure this might generate for individuals;
    • The highly sensitive nature of issues they may have to deal with and the emotional strain this could cause;
    • The time commitment required;
    • The term 'role model' itself, which some students feel can be an issue.

Developing role models

34. To address the low number of BAME students/staff role models and potential issues around workload pressures this could create, schools could look to widen their pool by building a network of veterinary professionals in a variety of roles across the profession. Giving students access to qualified and experienced BAME professionals would positively enhance their learning experience and give them the confidence to achieve their aspirations. Incentives and CPD could persuade people to participate. It might also be useful to look further afield and consider involving BAME professionals working in human medicine.

35. As role models may deal with sensitive and emotionally demanding issues, any such initiatives need to ensure participants receive appropriate support and training, and are clear about what the role

entails, along with any potential issues and challenges. Consideration should also be given to how much time they can devote.

36. Vet schools may opt not to use the term 'role model,' as this term can be problematic. Individuals may not identify as role models and student feedback suggests this can be counter-productive, as it idealises people and makes them less relatable. Emphasis should be placed on recognising and encouraging people with the desired behaviours and attributes that naturally fit with this role.

37. A number of universities and vet schools are already developing and implementing role model projects and activities. For example, the University of Nottingham actively promotes visibility of role models through its various EDI activities. Glasgow University is involved in a collaborative project, 'This is how we role' with Purdue University, Indiana. The project is training student role models to go into schools to talk about veterinary careers (further details can be found on the **RCVS website**).

Mentoring support

38. The Working Group identified mentoring opportunities as a valuable source of support and development for students, especially if mentors are drawn from a network of qualified veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, as well as recent graduates, to offer support and advice to students. There are existing examples of mentoring activity in the veterinary sector, such as British Equine Veterinary Association's (BEVA) 'The Leg Up' project, which supports newly qualified equine vets. BVEDS also runs a mentoring programme and can match students with BAME veterinary professionals. This is an opportunity that can be promoted by vet schools. To grow the number of internal role models, universities could also provide mentoring to BAME staff and ensure that time invested in mentoring colleagues is recognised as a valued staff activity. In addition, a review of recruitment processes to ensure best practice, may help to increase numbers progressing into leadership roles.

39. Within vet schools and universities there are examples of mentoring practice and innovative work in this area. At Bristol University, as well as safe spaces, vet students have access to a student mentoring scheme, which has proven to be very successful. Nottingham University runs two types of schemes for students. One is a faculty-wide mentoring scheme to provide access to wider pool of mentors and is open to vet school postgraduate students. The other is a reverse mentoring scheme, in which senior members of staff are mentored by BAME students to give them insight and understanding of lived experience and help them to develop allyship behaviours. This innovative approach could be considered by organisations across the veterinary sector.

40. With both role modelling, mentoring and reverse mentoring, vet schools could work in partnership with larger institutions, organisations and the corporate veterinary practices. These organisations may have established programmes and initiatives which provide opportunities for collaboration.

Developing support structures for BAME students, with faculty being trained on how to do this

41. To embed EDI values within schools, effective support structures must be put in place. The Working Group recommends that EDI training and education programmes should be provided, tailored to the needs of vet students and staff, alongside opportunities to engage in open and productive dialogue on issues of racism and race equality.

Education and training for vet school staff

42. The baseline EDI training and resources provided by institutions can vary in terms of the quality and content across programmes. It would be helpful if the evaluation of this training could be shared across schools in order to enhance the resources across institutions. This would also be beneficial to schools in terms of evidencing how they are meeting the new accreditation standards in this area. Training of vet school staff should include those delivering Intra-Mural Rotations, whether on campus or in the community at distributed practices.

43. There tends to be an expectation that tutors/course leaders from BAME backgrounds will take on the workload when it comes to equality and diversity issues. In order to provide consistency in training and delivery, it is recommended that institutions review, embed and resource regular EDI education and training for all vet school staff, making this mandatory for anyone working with students.

44. Some good practice already exists, for example, where institutions require tutors and staff working closely with EMS students to complete EDI training, achieving a score of 80% to pass the module. However, mainstreaming EDI values across the learning environment requires universities to go beyond generic EDI training and expand their provision, to include training on micro-aggressions, bystander education and communication skills. There should also be a greater emphasis on tailored interactive group workshops and scenario-based training. Other opportunities to encourage open discussion of race equality issues and the sharing of lived experience should also be accessible. For example, as well as general EDI courses for staff,

the University of Bristol provides bystander and anti-racist training and hosts a programme of expert guest speakers. The University of Nottingham requires all staff to undertake EDI, unconscious bias and bystander training. It also provides an EDI induction for new starters and EDI guidance and scenario-based training for tutors (this is available on the **RCVS website**)

Training and support initiatives for students

45. As well as EDI training for staff, there is also a need for investment in training for students and incorporation of EDI content into the curriculum, so that they can recognise and deal with micro-aggressions and discriminatory behaviour that may be encountered in a range of situations. Nottingham University students are given an EDI induction and compulsory bystander training. The student

EDI Officer at Bristol University works with the Student BAME Taskforce, Animal Aspirations and the EDI Committee on a number of initiatives including developing an EDI Education module for all vet school students (available on the **RCVS website**). RVC has introduced cultural awareness for BVetMed 1 Students. At Glasgow University, the School of Veterinary Medicine has incorporated 10 EDI modules in the BVMS and BSc programmes. These modules cover the Equality Act, unconscious bias, the case for diversity, allyship, cultural awareness, gender and sexual identities, microaggressions, intersectionality and privilege, racial equality and disability awareness. Some of these modules have been run for staff. Glasgow has also developed a very well received communications skills scenario-based training programme for students (details are available on the **RCVS website**). Prior to going on placement, vet schools should provide training and guidance for students, possibly jointly with the EMS provider, which makes it clear that if they encounter discrimination they can withdraw from the situation and expect support from vet school staff and the placement provider.

46. When issues of racism and discrimination occur, BAME students provide support for each other through informal and formal means. At Edinburgh University, a student-led network enables individuals who feel uncomfortable making formal complaints to raise concerns in an informal and supportive setting. At Bristol University, the Student BAME Taskforce is very active and has set up in-person safe spaces where first and second-year students can request confidential conversations with third-year students.

47. The Working Group recognises that in supporting others, students are often dealing with challenging and emotionally triggering situations, so it is important that they have access to specialist training, support and counselling. While these services are often available for staff, they are not always extended to students. Vet schools should ensure this is addressed, and actively seek to resource, support, and collaborate with BAME student groups and societies. They can offer invaluable insight and feedback on the experience of BAME students and advise on what is needed to become more inclusive and achieve culture change. They also play a key role in fostering supportive environments to counter stereotypes and help celebrate cultural identity.

The Courageous Conversations conference hosted by the University of Surrey is an excellent example of engagement with students. The event aims to address the lack of diversity in the veterinary profession by promoting open and honest dialogue on key issues. Students are involved in the creation and delivery of content and the conference has involved collaboration with external groups such as BVEDS, British Veterinary LGBT+ (BVLGBT) and British Veterinary Chronic Illness Support (BVCIS). The first conference, **Courageous Conversations 1**, took place in August 2020 and following its success **Courageous Conversations 2** was held in August 2021. The conference is now an annual event with the websites serving as a repository for a range of resources. Another good example of support and collaboration with students is the RVC's work with Gateway students. The Gateway programme is a widening participation initiative aimed at students who want to study veterinary medicine but may not meet current entry requirements. The programme provides students with a preparatory 'Gateway' year designed to equip them with the knowledge and skills required to study for a veterinary degree. RVC has worked with Gateway students on decolonising the curriculum and the development of 'Gateway student success support', summer transition sessions co-created with a Gateway alumni student panel. These aim to increase a sense of belonging and build skills for success. Revision and summer sessions are provided for BVetMed1 and Biosciences students. RVC also continues to support and promote the work of students involved in **Animal Aspirations**, a group made up of veterinary and veterinary nursing students from under-represented backgrounds.

Religious clothing – guidance for universities and placement hosts

49. It is important that where possible, students' religious and social identity is respected and accommodated, so that they are able to participate fully in their studies while at university and on placement, without fear of prejudice or expression of their culture and religion. The wearing of religious articles and clothing is a key aspect of this and was included in the Working Group's terms of reference.

50. The Working Group reviewed guidelines produced for medical students by St George's, University of London, with the intention that where formal policies do not exist, the St George's guidance could be adapted for use by the veterinary schools and across the professions. It was agreed that such guidance should be promoted by the RCVS and VSC. St George's granted permission for the document to be suitably modified and utilised by the vet schools, and in wider

veterinary practice. The document was updated to meet veterinary requirements and terminology. The content on clothing was initially reviewed by subject matter experts at the University of Liverpool and subsequently shared with appropriate staff and students from the wider university community (such as members of EDI groups), for further revisions to religious terminology and to check that the information included is accurate. Particular attention has been given to the language and tone used in the document, to ensure it is inclusive, supportive and sensitive to different needs.

51. The resulting document is a practical guide, intended to provide generic guidance that can be modified for local use and can be found in the RCVS publications page. It aims to highlight to staff, students and placement providers the reasonable accommodations that may be offered for reasons of religious observance. These may be requested by students when undertaking study within the universities and while on EMS placements. It should be noted that Local Infection Control policies take precedence over this document.

52. The document covers reasonable accommodation and aspects such as uniform and workwear polices including, dress codes, scrubbing up and sleeve length, surgical attire, religious head and face coverings, religious and ceremonial symbols such as the Sikh Kara and Kirpan, and the use of alcohol-based hand gel. It also incorporates content on identification checks, and religious observance in relation to academic or exam timetable changes and food. However, it is not exhaustive.

53. The Working Group identified that a document/library of religious clothing with correct terminology would be an extremely useful resource to accompany the guidance document. This would be helpful in specifying when it is feasible to wear religious clothing and when alternatives could be used, as well as being a reference point for future projects. The RCVS is working with the affinity groups and other organisations to create an image bank that covers all types of veterinary work.

Recommendations

54. This report has highlighted several areas where changes in policy and practice would improve support for BAME veterinary students and generally have a positive impact on their educational experience. Some of these are actions that can be implemented in the short-term. Other aspects will require a greater degree of consultation and planning.

55. The key recommendations for vet schools from the Working Group are summarised as follows:

    i.   Where it does not exist, develop formal support and guidance documents for students going on EMS placements. These documents should define discriminatory behaviour, give advice on what to do if such behaviour is encountered, and include clear signposting to support, with named staff contacts. Documentation should be disseminated to personal tutors and all staff involved in work-based and placement learning.

    ii. Where it does not exist, develop formal discrimination reporting mechanisms. Ensure these are visible and easy to navigate. Devise clear visual representations of the reporting process, which detail the steps involved and the options available to students should they wish to lodge a complaint. Where student-led support is available, ensure this is highlighted.

    iii. Provide access to specialist training, support and counselling for students providing support for others, whether this is through formal or informal means.

    iv. Ensure all staff and students are aware of the RCVS' new Accreditation Standards relating to EDI in teaching and placement settings. Refer to the RCVS Accreditation Standards and identify where current practices, policies and systems require updating. The RCVS will provide support and help to disseminate information from across the directorates, including through its Education and Advancement of the Professions Departments.

    v.   Ensure EDI strategies and associated documents are regularly reviewed. Align EDI policies relating to different protected characteristics to make interpretation by staff easier.

vi. Provide guidance and training for staff in handling discrimination complaints. Consider conflict resolution skills as part of this.

vii. Provide staff with compulsory EDI training to ensure they have a good understanding of equality legislation and discrimination, harassment, diversity and inclusion issues. Supplement this with further training on anti-racism, unconscious bias, micro-aggressions and bystander education.

viii. Ensure students are provided with an EDI induction and given bystander, micro-aggressions, and communication skills training as part of their placement preparation. Where possible, training for both staff and students should be scenario-based and delivered in the form of interactive group workshops.

ix. Work with EMS placement providers to develop EDI education and training programmes to improve awareness of EDI issues and help reduce the incidence of micro-aggressions and

discrimination. The RCVS can provide support and input into training programmes as part of its wider Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

x.   Take steps to ensure that expected standards of behaviours regarding the treatment of students are formally communicated in writing prior to the commencement of placements. This should convey a zero-tolerance policy on discrimination as stated in the RCVS Accreditation Standards. Schools could acknowledge providers who demonstrate clear commitments to EDI to underline its importance.

xi.   Resource, support, and collaborate with BAME student groups and societies to understand the experience of BAME students. Seek their feedback and advice on inclusion and culture change.

xii.   Improve the visibility of BAME role models to create a more inclusive and positive educational experience for students. Devise formal role model programmes with structured training and support. Widen the pool of available role models by including veterinary professionals in a variety of roles across the profession and consider involving BAME professionals working in human medicine.

xiii.   Provide access to support and advice for BAME students through internal and external mentoring initiatives. Consider developing BAME specific schemes within institutions where they do not exist. Promote external mentoring programmes such as BEVA's Leg Up scheme and the BVEDS mentoring programme.

xiv.   Review and adapt the guidance on religious clothing and belief document for use within local settings. Ensure this is circulated to all staff and students and that copies are provided for EMS placement providers.

Conclusion

56. The findings and recommendations of the Working Group and RCVS' new Accreditation Standards, provide institutions with an opportunity to take stock and review their existing support for BAME vet students. The report has highlighted several issues with current reporting mechanisms and a need for students to be better supported when subjected to discrimination while on placement. Clear, formal reporting processes and documentation, investment in training and support on key topics for both university staff and students should be provided. This is vital in creating a culture where issues can be openly discussed and addressed and will ensure that institutions are in line with RCVS' Accreditation Standards. However, a zero-tolerance approach and prevention of these incidents is also paramount, and again, the embedding of the RCVS' Accreditation Standards provides ample scope for vet schools to work with placement providers in respect of adherence to EDI principles, expectations of behaviour and EDI education.

57. The development of support structures for students will also help to further embed EDI values and inclusive practice within schools. This can be achieved through a planned approach where EDI education programmes and initiatives are resourced, reviewed and integrated into the academic experience. This report illustrates several examples of innovative practice where this is already happening.

58. Identity and inclusion are important themes explored in the report. As well as supporting the education and career aspirations of BAME students, access to BAME role models and mentoring programmes will help to create a sense of belonging and contribute to the development of a more diverse profession. Collaboration between universities and organisations across the professions and potentially with related sectors, could address the current lack of BAME role models and give access to a wider pool of mentors. We suggest that vet schools investigate this option.

59. Finally, the religious clothing document will help to promote an inclusive environment. It provides useful general guidance on reasonable accommodations for vet schools, students, placement providers and the wider profession. It sends a positive and reassuring message to students and will help to ensure they

are able to express their religious identity while participating in their studies in teaching and placement settings, and later in the workplace.

60. We would like to thank staff and students at the following institutions for their contributions and insights:

University of Bristol
University of Cambridge
University of Dublin
University of Edinburgh
University of Glasgow
Harper and Keele Veterinary School
University of Liverpool/VSC
St.George's, University of London
University of Nottingham
Royal Veterinary College
University of Surrey
Utrecht University

61. The Working Group encourages all members of the professions to support this document, even if they have no student involvement. While progress has been made, as examples demonstrate in this document, more work needs to be done to support BAME students at all stages of the veterinary degree. It is hoped that implementation of the Working Group's recommendations and the embedding of the new RCVS Accreditation Standards will help to make a demonstrable difference to the experience of BAME students. A follow up roundtable will be held in 18 months' time to look at the progress, celebrate successes and identify any further actions.

62. This report has focussed on the experience of BAME veterinary students during their studies and on placement. It is important that BAME students entering the professions, both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, feel welcomed, valued, and respected. We strongly encourage organisations across the profession to consider how the recommendations and guidance in this report can be applied to promote inclusive practice.

June 2022