



The Future of EMS Report of Stakeholder Day

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The View | Royal College of Surgeons

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Introduction

Conversations about how extra-mural studies (EMS) should be implemented in the future are not new. These conversations have been going on for some time and, in recent years, tweaks and changes have been made by way of improving how it works and the overall experience of all involved.

However, as with so many other things, the particular circumstances and challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the current veterinary workforce issues, have turbo-charged these ongoing conversations, and have led the RCVS to launch a root-and-branch analysis of EMS: what are the benefits and challenges, and how can it be implemented effectively to meet the needs of all stakeholders in a rapidly changing environment.

Organising this event was a case of grasping the nettle. Rather than having disjointed conversations about how we could improve EMS or what could replace it here and there, we wanted to bring together as many of the key stakeholders – educators, students, EMS providers, employers, graduates – as we could in one room and discuss the issues and proposals for the future in an open, honest and robust way.

From the very outset, we were clear that this couldn't be a top-down endeavour with the RCVS talking to senior vet school staff and no one else. So, I am very grateful to Bryanna Andrews, Hannah Fitzimmonds, Annie McGilvray and May Yean Chua who gave the delegates their invaluable insights from a student/ new graduate perspective, as well as Malcolm Morley from the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and Pete Orpin and Andrew Parker from the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) who supplied the placement provider-eye view of EMS.

We wanted the flow of ideas at the event to be somewhat unrestrained, and invited all stakeholders to think about new ways of working for the future which could enhance the benefits of EMS for all, and ensure it is sustainable. As a result, some of the ideas that came out of the workshop will entail, if implemented,



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a degree of change. However, I would like to reassure readers that this is the first stage of a process and that, although all these ideas will be considered carefully in terms of feasibility and impact, nothing that is reported in here will be implemented without the usual consultation and engagement processes.

In terms of next steps, the RCVS Education Committee is currently looking at these ideas and using them as a basis for creating a potential new model for EMS implementation. This will be shared with the profession for consultation, and we will continue to work alongside students, schools, EMS providers, employers and other stakeholders to create an EMS model that provides a learning experience that is as effective, accessible and valuable as possible.

In the meantime, I do hope you enjoy reading this report. You are very welcome to email your feedback and any ideas you might have about how to improve EMS to education@rcvs.org.uk

Dr Linda Prescott-Clements
RCVS Director of Education

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EMS: the current requirements

Veterinary students are currently required to complete 38 weeks of extra-mural studies (EMS) over the course of their degree. This comprises 12 weeks of 'pre-clinical' or animal handling EMS (known as AHEMS), with at least one week in each of the three main disciplines (equine, production animal and small animal), and 26 weeks of clinical EMS, which can include two weeks of 'professional' EMS.

The requirements have been temporarily reduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as fewer opportunities for EMS placements have been available.

EMS is intended to be experiential, helping to consolidate teaching by the veterinary schools. It is not intended to be an extension of formal core teaching, nor are practitioners expected to teach Day One Competencies to the attending students.

The known challenges

There are acknowledged challenges around placement quality, widening participation and equality, accessibility and availability, the expense of EMS and lack of funding, and student wellbeing and safety while on EMS. The RCVS is also aware of instances of discrimination and poor treatment of students while undertaking EMS and there is evidence that students from ethnic minority backgrounds find it more challenging to source placements.

There is also evidence of a mismatch between what students want or expect from EMS and what practitioners feel it should offer.

The pressure on EMS provision has been exacerbated in the past two years by the Covid-19 pandemic. The known challenges around EMS are now playing out against a recruitment and retention crisis in general practice, alongside an increased workload generated by an overall increase in the demand for veterinary services.

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A perfect storm brewing



EMS remains an integral element in the education and experience of undergraduate veterinary students. In recent years, the need for, and importance of, EMS has not changed, but the landscape in which it is being delivered has. Changing teaching models in vet schools, evolving models of veterinary practice, and larger student cohorts are putting greater pressure on the delivery of EMS. The lines between work experience, EMS and intramural rotations are also becoming increasingly blurred, with general practitioners expected to deliver a different service to each group of students participating in these activities.

EMS placements are becoming more difficult to access, with demand increasing while supply is reducing. In 2005, the UK had six RCVS-accredited veterinary schools; there are now eight, and four further schools are at different stages of the accreditation process. Most of the new schools are or will be using some form of distributed, community-based teaching model, with partner practices being contracted to deliver intramural rotations and being paid to train veterinary students. Student numbers are rising too: in 2010, there were 4,345 students enrolled on a veterinary degree in the UK; in 2020, there were 6,711, an increase of 54%. However, in the same period, the number of practices in the UK has risen by only 17%.

All these factors have the potential to converge in a 'perfect storm', meaning it is critical to look now for innovative solutions for the longer-term future of EMS. EMS needs to work for all stakeholders involved and the best elements of the current system should be taken forward and enshrined in a workable EMS model for the future.

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Feedback from students

Students value EMS, reporting that it helps them develop their confidence both professionally and personally, and offers real workplace experience, teaching and learning experiences. It also helps them develop professional relationships, transferrable skills (both clinical and surgical), other skills such as self-management, and the ability to work in different conditions and cultures. The introduction of professional EMS is viewed positively and allows undergraduates insight into the wider veterinary profession beyond first-opinion work.

Students, however, view the current variability in placement quality as a key challenge. A great deal rests on the EMS placement provider with regard to the experience a student receives. Students value providers that are honest about the experiences and support they can offer, that carry out a proper induction, and that explain their caseload/day-to-day work and the tasks they will allow a student to undertake.

Miscommunication between the person in practice responsible for booking EMS placements and the vets responsible for delivering the EMS is felt to be one reason behind poor EMS experiences.

Accessibility and availability are further challenges. EMS opportunities are limited for students who do not own a car (even more so when there were Covid-19 restrictions which precluded car sharing while on placement); placements may also be limited in areas close to vet schools. Students may therefore have to commute long distances if they are unable to stay close to a placement. In turn, this may limit the areas that students can get involved with on their placement (for instance, out-of-hours work) and the type of EMS they choose, with placements sought on the basis of what is feasible to undertake, rather than what a student really wants to do or what would be most valuable to their professional development. International students, who do not have a home base in the UK, find it challenging to source placements that offer accommodation.

Finance is identified as the biggest challenge of all. The cost of travel and accommodation for EMS is compounded by the inability to work consistently during vacations because of the need to complete EMS. Again, this can lead to a trade-off between the experiences students really want to undertake, and whether they can afford to do so. Funding for EMS placements is limited, not accessible to all students and is viewed as somewhat of a lottery.



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Students have their own suggestions for improving their EMS experiences, including taking a standardised approach to EMS placements, the use of 'pre-EMS' forms to set out the expectations and aims of a placement, and encouraging practices to be realistic about what they can offer and the type of student best suited to their placement. They suggest that placements should be planned directly with the vets in a practice (rather than with a practice manager, for example), that practices should have a dedicated EMS liaison for students and that a short, informal (online) course could be made available to teach clinicians in practice how to share their knowledge with students.

The availability and accessibility of EMS bursaries should be widened to ease the financial burden on students. Consideration could perhaps be given to students being paid a small allowance while on placement to help them with the costs of day-to-day living.

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Evidence



Several surveys have been carried out to gather stakeholders' views on EMS.

Students' views

A 2020 survey carried out by BVA and the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS) found that 43% of students felt that too much EMS was required. Only 12% felt that there was too little EMS.

The survey also found that more than 75% of students were satisfied with EMS, although satisfaction had dropped by 7% since a similar survey in 2016. However, only 40% of respondents felt that they had been given sufficient opportunities to undertake tasks while on their placements.

The most important elements identified by students in choosing EMS were hands-on experience and the willingness of staff to teach; cost was identified the greatest barrier to EMS, with 50% of respondents saying that they did not feel they had enough money to live on.

New graduates' views

A 2016 RCVS survey of new graduates found that 93% of respondents agreed that EMS was an essential component of the veterinary degree and 81% felt that the amount required was just about right.



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The profession's view

SPVS has recently (2021) carried out a survey of practitioners' views of EMS. More than 200 responses were received, broadly split 50/50 between corporate and independent practices. Key findings, which may have been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, included:

- 76% of respondents said they loved helping students and enjoyed providing EMS.
- 35% of respondents viewed EMS provision as a moderate or low priority.
- The top three reasons why EMS was not provided were:
 - Fear of Covid-19 introduction;
 - Not enough time to support a student;
 - Too much work to do.
- 25% of respondents felt they provided top-quality EMS, receiving good feedback from students.
- From the point of view of practitioners, the top four priorities of EMS were felt to be:
 - Providing advice on client management, communications and team working;
 - Talking about practice challenges and solutions;
 - Time to discuss clinical cases;
 - Time to develop clinical skills.
- Practitioners suggested that EMS could be improved by:
 - Improving the clarity of expectations of both students and practitioners with regard to EMS;
 - Longer placements so that students could gain more confidence and therefore undertake more tasks;
 - Free training for practitioners on how to coach students;
 - Financial support for practices to take on EMS students.

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The survey also asked practitioners what they felt the universities could do to support practices offering EMS to their students. Key responses included:

- Provide complimentary CPD – a *quid pro quo* arrangement strengthening links between practices and universities.
- Better match students with practices to ensure a student is keen to undertake the placement and has realistic expectations of it.
- Improve communication between the universities and practices.
- Practitioners view the development of a central EMS database as less of a priority, believing it will generate more administration for practices.



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RCVS action on the current known challenges around EMS

Several options on EMS implementation were put to the profession as part of the RCVS Graduate Outcomes review in 2018. These were that students could be given earlier clinical experience; that EMS could be replaced with a block placement at the end of the veterinary degree; that AHEMS and clinical EMS could be undertaken in parallel; and that EMS could be replaced with a series of externships embedded in the curriculum.

However, the consultation generated no clear indication of which of these options the profession felt would work best.

Further consultation with relevant stakeholders on the current known challenges with EMS has led to the consideration and approval of several initiatives by the RCVS Education Committee including:

- Comprehensive new guidance for EMS, setting out what 'good' looks like from the perspective of students, the vet schools and EMS providers;
- A national database for booking EMS placements, to be accessible by students and EMS co-ordinators at all schools, including key information to help address some of the challenges around equality, such as information about the availability of accommodation, whether a placement is accessible by public transport or whether a student needs to have a car;
- An RCVS virtual engagement event for new students starting at vet school, demonstrating the value of EMS;
- A new RCVS policy on appropriate types of placement;
- Allowing practitioners offering EMS free access to e-learning modules from the online Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP) training for VetGDP advisers to help them coach and mentor their students, which counts towards their CPD requirement;
- A central hub for all available EMS bursaries and financial assistance for students seeking financial support for EMS.

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Action by other organisations

BVA is developing a future vision for EMS as part of its key policy priorities for 2021/22, which is expected to be finalised by autumn 2022.

SPVS has formed an EMS subgroup, which has developed a short induction guide for use by SPVS members to help focus the EMS experience, help practitioners understand what they should be offering, and help students to prepare for their placements. It has also developed a skills matrix with an emphasis on non-clinical skills that students can use privately to score how they think they are faring during an EMS placement in areas such as communication skills, client engagement, etc.



Focusing on the future

Bearing in mind the known challenges, it is important to look for solutions that will ensure EMS remains sustainable in the future. To assist the RCVS in working towards a future model for EMS, three possible options designed to address the increased demand for EMS or increase placement availability were put forward for group-based discussion at the event. Discussions were rounded off with a final session of blue-sky thinking and brainstorming to develop innovative new ideas for a way forward.

Workshop 1:

An enhanced, 'learning outcomes focused' EMS experience for students, potentially enabling a reduction in the number of weeks required.

This was generally the most preferred option.

This option was felt to offer the opportunity for flexible, tailored, individualised EMS with learning objectives/outcomes driven by the students themselves. However, the pathway to achieving the learning outcomes should be co-created between students, vet school tutors and practices.

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It is important to manage/set the expectations of all parties involved with regard to what EMS is and what it is aiming to achieve. Practices need to clearly state what they can offer to help manage students' expectations of placements. Vet schools need to prepare students for what they can/should expect from a placement.

An enhanced system of quality assurance would be required and would need to be a combined effort between all parties involved. Clarity would be needed on whose responsibility it was to ensure a placement was good quality.

A named contact within each practice would be required. In return for hosting EMS students, practices should be offered training in teaching and mentoring, for instance through the RCVS Academy or the VetGDP.

It was pointed out that EMS is not entirely about having a perfect experience and that imperfect experiences, with the right support from mentors, tutors and vet schools, are also valuable and provide good learning opportunities.



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Workshop 2:

Additional structured placements co-ordinated by the school, further to intramural rotations, focusing on consolidating skills learned in the programme

This option was the least preferred.

Comments made included that groups were 'struggling not to be too critical' of this option, that they 'weren't thrilled' or 'weren't very excited' by it. It was suggested that it could be 'prescriptive', that it could limit opportunities, that it 'blurred the lines' between intramural rotations and EMS, and that the flexibility in the approach to EMS would be lost.

One group provided more detailed feedback. They suggested that structured placements could help reduce the fear of failure and lack of confidence that some students experience. However, students would have to ensure that they also developed the skills of the 'hidden curriculum' that were relevant more widely than just in practice.

More structured placements could also permit reasonable adjustments to be made for students who required such adjustments.

Structured placements would require EMS providers to have dedicated mentors and advisers for students, similar to the VetGDP system. This would increase the burden on practices with the requirement for additional training, and could compound widening participation issues, as it would limit where students could go for EMS placements.

Workshop 3:

Initiatives to increase the availability of EMS placements and the number of workplaces offering EMS

There was good support for this option, although it seemed less preferred than option 1. Initiatives suggested included the following.

Rewarding practices/individuals for offering EMS

It was pointed out that rewards/awards look different depending on whose point of view is being considered (the practice as a whole or the individuals within a practice who support students completing EMS). Ideas proposed included:

- The vet schools offering CPD or CPD credits to practices taking students. It was suggested that this should be developed at a national level rather than at an individual university level, allowing practices to participate on the basis of the number of EMS students they took rather than which university they came from;
- Allowing mentoring on EMS to count as CPD [Note: this suggestion would appear to



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indicate that participants were not aware that individuals who mentor EMS students can, with appropriate reflection, already count this towards their CPD requirements];

- Helping practices with memberships or access to resources such as the RCVS Knowledge Library or university libraries;
- Reducing the costs of the Practice Standards Scheme (PSS) for practices that take EMS students;
- vouchers (for instance, for video streaming services or shops).

Widening EMS to include a broader range of non-clinical placements

For instance, placements in research environments or consumer-facing industries (such as retail) would teach skills (such as communication skills) that could be transferrable to veterinary practice. Students could also earn an income in some placements and gain insight into potential careers outside of practice.

Increasing the flexibility of EMS and when students can undertake it

Perhaps by counting EMS in days rather than in week-long blocks.

Making EMS provision part of the PSS

A 'light touch' approach was suggested whereby practices would be encouraged to fill in a statement describing their EMS policy, so encouraging practices to think about EMS but not requiring them to offer it. It was also suggested that excellence in EMS provision could be recognised with a new award under the PSS.

Concern was expressed that some practices that offer good-quality EMS but are not part of the PSS would be overlooked if students search only for placements in PSS practices.

Offering EMS bursaries

Students receiving a bursary would have to commit in some way to whoever was funding their bursary.

Communications campaign

Highlight the wide range of opportunities available. Also, highlight to providers that taking students on EMS is a chance to train the future of the profession and offers a potential source of new recruits for a practice.

Looking to the vet nurse education system

The idea of a 'veterinary clinical coach' responsible for supervising students in practice, similar to the clinical coach who supports student vet nurses, was raised. It was



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suggested that taking on such a role could offer career progression, as individuals could perhaps go on to general practice teaching roles in the vet schools – roles that may become more common following the recent approval of new accreditation standards for vet schools.

Understanding why practices do not offer EMS

There seems to be underutilised capacity and more practices could take students for EMS. Understanding why they do not would require some research, but the results could help inform initiatives to make it 'normal' for practices to take EMS students.

Miscellaneous


One group highlighted the importance of students/universities personally thanking practices for the EMS provided. Practices might be more inclined to take students – or take students back again – if they felt more appreciated.

Workshop 4:

Ideas for a new approach to EMS fit for the future

The final workshop was a 'blank page' exercise to encourage brainstorming and blue-sky thinking on ideas for a new approach to EMS.

Several groups proposed reducing or removing the EMS requirement during the undergraduate course and introducing some form of pre-registration period or period of professional training/foundation year between graduation and becoming an MRCVS. Potential advantages of this approach include:

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- students would be 'Day One competent' at the start of this period, having completed the formal teaching elements of their undergraduate course, including rotations and final examinations, and so would be more able to positively contribute to their host practices ('be a help, not a burden');
 - overseas students would not have to complete a pre-registration period unless they intended to practise in the UK. This would reduce the number of students seeking placements in practice.

It was acknowledged that it might be necessary to amend the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 to accommodate any period between the end of undergraduate teaching and an individual becoming a fully fledged professional.

One group suggested removing the requirement for EMS completely, but introducing competency-based assessments that students could put themselves forward for when they felt ready.



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Other suggestions included:

- Expanding the VetGDP/linking it with EMS;
- Streaming/tracking veterinary degrees to reduce the requirement for 'irrelevant' EMS;
- Making EMS voluntary, so students could decide whether to undertake it;
- Introducing a broad skills portfolio – for instance, communication skills, decision-making skills, practical skills – which students built up over time, picking areas that were of interest to them and developing skills to add to their portfolio;
- Introducing condensed veterinary degrees for students with relevant backgrounds (such as vet nurses) as they would already have many of the skills normally acquired on EMS;
- Introducing a paid sandwich year during the undergraduate course with on-the-job training in practice;
- Creating a chain of not-for-profit practices run by students throughout the UK offering quality EMS placements; it was acknowledged that this would require significant investment;
- Introducing a practice levy to fund future initiatives around EMS provision;
- Creating a charitable fund to support EMS.

A new name for EMS?

Only one group made suggestions:

- Work experience placement
- Seeing practice



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Summary

The concept of EMS remains supported, with comments from delegates including that it is 'too valuable to write off', that EMS 'teaches you to be a vet' and that the experience of working in a professional environment is 'of real value' in terms of helping students gain confidence and develop self-identity.

There was support for reducing the number of weeks of EMS required alongside ensuring a consistently high quality EMS experience focused on personal learning outcomes, through a system of quality assurance. It was also suggested that the vet schools should reduce or remove their requirements for students to complete a specified number of weeks of EMS with each of the main animal groups. This would allow students to select EMS in areas that they are interested in, meaning they would be more engaged with their placements and placements would not be 'blocked' by students who were using them simply to fulfil a requirement.

Moving forwards

The RCVS will use the proposals and feedback from the stakeholder event to inform discussions by its committees of a potential way forward for EMS. The most viable options for the future implementation of EMS to emerge from these discussions will be developed in further detail and a full proposal and action plan put to RCVS Education Committee and Council for approval in due course.



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