



September 2011

HIGHER EDUCATION WHITE PAPER – STUDENTS AT THE HEART OF THE SYSTEM

1. The White Paper focuses on student funding reforms, improving the student experience and increasing social mobility. These are all objectives that the BVA and AVS welcome and identify with via its student and graduate members; however, we would advise that although broadly beneficial, the impact on specialised subject areas such as veterinary science may not be entirely positive.

Widening access

2. The Government's intention to increase access to students who are qualified by ability rather than reduce capacity is meritorious in principle but there are some drawbacks to this for veterinary education. There are only 7 establishments in the UK (5 in England) where the veterinary medicine degree is offered. It is a competitive degree and oversubscribed to at the ratio of 2:1. Furthermore, it is a long course of 5 years (6 at Cambridge) and includes the compulsory practical element of extra mural studies (EMS) which is 38 weeks (the equivalent of 3 additional terms). The unavoidable increase in student debt that will be incurred by students studying long courses such as veterinary science could deter students from undertaking veterinary science which will have consequences for the profession in the future.
3. Despite the escalating tuition fees it is important to minimise the impact as far as possible by ensuring that school leavers understand that help and financial support are available to them to gain access to veterinary school. Members of BVA and AVS at university are involved as student ambassadors running sessions with school students about science and veterinary medicine and we would like to see such outreach initiatives continued and extended. Gateway courses and the recognition of a range of qualifications other than standard A-levels will help to encourage students into professions like veterinary medicine where students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been unable reach the required standard of education at their school or college.

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Impact of increased tuition fees

Access

4. The prospect of significant or additional student debt is likely to deter school leavers from pursuing a career as a veterinary surgeon, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds. This cuts out a whole section of talented students who cannot afford the financial burden, and it compromises the Department for Business Innovation and Skills 'Gateways to the Professions' initiative aimed at tackling the barriers faced by low-income students.
5. Simon Hughes MP, Advocate for Access to Education, produced a report on widening access to longer courses such as veterinary science. The BVA was pleased to be consulted at the time and welcomed the Hughes recommendations but they are just that; suggestions for engaging more students from a range of backgrounds. The BVA and AVS believe that these recommendations however well meaning, need to be supported by proposals to assist such students financially and we are happy to help take this further.

Greater student numbers

6. Notwithstanding the points we have made in relation to the importance of widening access, if quotas were removed and vet schools were able to increase the numbers of course places, universities would have to ensure that resources were extended to meet the demands of the larger intake, especially clinical resources otherwise there are potential implications in terms of veterinary skill levels and animal welfare.
7. The issue of the impact on the quality of teaching greater numbers of students is also of concern. With a declining farm industry, trying to get enough practical experience in clinical procedures becomes difficult and there is the issue of animal welfare being compromised. It may be acceptable for 2 people to carry out a procedure (one to diagnose, the other to learn) but how about 3 or 6? The more beginners you have doing surgery the more risk to the individual patient. This risk is potentially heightened if the universities try to teach more students with only a minor increase in staff numbers lessening the potential for one-on-one supervision.

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8. While we do not have any data, the feedback we are getting from members indicates that there are currently more applicants for advertised veterinary vacancies than in the past and recent graduates are telling us that they are finding it increasingly difficult to get good quality permanent employment. BVA and AVS are concerned that not only could this result in higher unemployment of graduates who have spent up to £54,000 on their degree courses, it could manifest in lower salaries and there is also the concern that our highly regarded qualification could be devalued.
9. Our members are concerned that prospective veterinary students will look to the financial assistance available through NHS bursary schemes and the more favourable long term financial prospects of a career in medicine.

Postgraduate study and research

10. With estimated debts of up to £54,000¹ in tuition fees alone the prospect of continuing study at a post-graduate level becomes far less attractive. Some of our members from the university sector have been in contact with the BVA to express serious concerns that higher undergraduate fees would be a major disincentive to take on further debt associated with 3-4 years of study for a PhD. The impact on veterinary research (much of which is linked to human health and food security) could be devastating.
11. The BVA and AVS seek clarification on how the Government proposes to retain the profile of the UK research base as second in the world and the most productive in the G8 when there is a real possibility that for veterinary science, less veterinary graduates will look at research placements as an attractive or financially viable career path. BVA and AVS look forward to the results of the innovation and research strategy that is proposed in the White Paper.

Making student choice meaningful

12. The White Paper explores the possibility of improving and expanding the information provided to prospective students including individual course information,

¹ Estimated figure based on maximum tuition fee increase for veterinary science degree of 6 years.

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graduate employment prospects and earning outcomes. This would provide school students with access to better information and together with a more structured advice network; students would be able to make informed decisions about their higher education. This would be a great benefit to prospective vet students as candidates for veterinary science would be better prepared through having a greater knowledge and understanding of what is involved in their higher education and what the realistic career opportunities and prospects are.

13. Within veterinary education, examples of specific information that our members believe would be helpful to prospective students would be the ratio or first opinion and referral equine, farm animal, small animal and post-mortem cases available per final year student. A breakdown of fees would also be useful to identify what proportion of fees go towards the course and what proportion are ancillary and go towards things such as student guilds for example.
14. While we, of course, support the principle of empowering students through the provision of information it would seem fair to assume that many schools do not have the necessary skills and resources to help students make objective and informed career choices. The BVA and AVS would encourage the Government to develop a new careers service to ensure that a system of support in schools gives students the necessary guidance to interpret published performance data. This would be particularly relevant to students from families with no previous history of university attendance. We would also recommend that the advice service is made available to younger school students to encourage aspirations at an early age, ultimately improving access to the profession.
15. The Government proposes that data from current students is collated and published, increasing the information resource for prospective students. Although this would serve to increase the knowledge and understanding about institutions and the degrees on offer, BVA and AVS would caution that students may not necessarily be in the best position to assess the quality of their education because they do not have access to complete and objective information. BVA and AVS would like to see this proposal developed to include a system to capture and publish objective feedback from students and from graduates at various points post qualification. Furthermore we would like clarification of how these proposals might impinge upon the role of the regulator (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons) and the consequential affects on the veterinary curriculum.

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16. The Government has stated that institutions will have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers. It is worth noting that features that appeal to prospective students may not always be in their long-term best interests and in the interests of employers. For example:

- Biomedical research and public health education are unlikely to be attractive to prospective students but are important to a number of employers.
- A veterinary course that requires 40 hours per week may be less popular than one requiring 20 hours per week even though the 40 hour course is of significantly higher quality.
- Universities may also indulge students' wishes; offering courses with early clinical involvement at the expense of a valuable scientific grounding.
- There could be a shift away from research-based education to practical vocational training in line with the majority of student's ambitions to work in practice but the development of veterinary research skills is essential for an all-rounded veterinary education and this could compromise the growth of the research sector.

Business engagement

17. The Government is promoting university engagement with business; looking at how teaching and research activities should involve business. The BVA and AVS would not argue against this in principle; the importance of improving university-industry collaboration is clear. However, in order to make this relevant to the veterinary profession, the Government would have to include private veterinary practice in its definition of industry because the veterinary industry in its traditional sense is highly fragmented. The government departments and drug companies that make up the veterinary industry employ a small proportion of graduates and have little resource to provide sponsorship for students/universities.

18. The BVA and AVS would like to see the Government encourage universities to strengthen relationships with private veterinary practice as part of the overall drive to engage with business. This could result in significant improvements in extra mural studies and competence in day one skills. The BVA and AVS welcome the Government's proposal to undertake a review of university-industry collaboration under Sir Tim Wilson.

The future of veterinary services

19. Significant student debt is a likely deterrent to disadvantaged young people who have the academic ability to undertake the veterinary science degree. At 5/6 years, the veterinary medicine course is longer than the average 3-year degree and inevitably attracts a higher level of student debt. Unlike medicine and dentistry degree courses there is no funding available from the NHS to pay for veterinary science tuition fees and once graduated, veterinary surgeons are likely to earn less than their human medicine counterparts. Veterinary medicine not only educates future vets in issues of animal health and welfare, but also in essential public health issues, including food safety, disease control and research. These essential areas of veterinary work could become less attractive to graduates with high levels of debt.
20. Concerns have been raised about the future availability of large/production animal vets when small animal medicine may be seen as a more financially attractive career. With large debts to pay off, recently graduated vets will inevitably most likely seek employment based upon financial concerns rather than career development. Not only does this reduce the options for the individual, it also impacts on access to veterinary services in rural areas where salaries may be lower and fewer jobs are filled.
21. The vast debts that graduates will be saddled with in the long term and for a large proportion of their career will likely impair their professional development by reducing opportunities such as practice ownership. The knock on effect could see retiring vets unable to sell their practices.

Summary

22. The overall goal of the Government's White Paper is to make higher education and its institutions more responsive to student choice. The BVA and AVS would urge the Government to take account of specialised areas of higher education such as veterinary science and not to exclude students of veterinary science when developing the benefits to be delivered by these reforms.
23. BVA and AVS have found aspects of the White Paper hard to argue with but BVA and AVS support aspects such as increased access to information, responsiveness

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to student choice and engagement with business. However, we have raised a number of issues on behalf of our student and graduate members who are concerned that the plans outlined might inadvertently create barriers to postgraduate study and research and jeopardise current and future efforts to widen access to veterinary science and the future provision of the broad set of veterinary services.