Policy position: Veterinary graduate numbers and new veterinary schools in the UK

UK veterinary graduate numbers have increased steadily over a number of years as the UK’s seven existing veterinary schools have increased their annual intake and the University of Nottingham opened a new veterinary degree course in 2006.

The number of non-UK graduates joining the UK Register has fluctuated from 695 in 2007/08 down to 529 in 2009/10 and up to 740 in 2012/13.

Number of new registrations on the RCVS Register of Veterinary Surgeons by year:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK graduates</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>815*</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>795</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-EU/EEA graduates</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>135</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU/EEA/CH graduates</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>701</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCVS examination for membership</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Total non-UK graduates)</td>
<td>(695)</td>
<td>(622)</td>
<td>(529)</td>
<td>(594)</td>
<td>(603)</td>
<td>(740)</td>
<td>(844)</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,323</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,252</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,265</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,302</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,418</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,547</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,639</strong></td>
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Source: RCVS Facts 2008-2014
In 2011 86 students became the first cohort to graduate from the University of Nottingham veterinary science degree course.

In October 2012 the University of Surrey announced plans to open a new school of veterinary medicine with an intake of 45 students in autumn 2014. The University of Ulster and the University of Aberystwyth are also considering plans to offer veterinary degree courses.

In October 2013 BVA held a discussion forum titled ‘What lies ahead for recent and future veterinary graduates?’ to consider the issues raised by increasing numbers of veterinary graduates from the perspectives of veterinary students, veterinary schools, recent graduates, the RCVS, and the devolved nations of the UK.

**RCVS position**

In October 2013 the RCVS clarified its position in relation to new veterinary schools. In its summary it stated the following:

- In line with our purpose, we are committed to setting, upholding and advancing the standards that any new UK veterinary degrees would need to meet in order to be approved by the Privy Council
- We have no mandate to control student or graduate numbers
- The free market and mobility of workers in the EU makes any control at the level of sovereign state effectively meaningless with respect to workforce management

RCVS also stated, “One of the issues that may concern us is whether there are sufficient academic staff to support the growing numbers of students.”

**Issues to consider**

**Provision of extramural studies (EMS)**

EMS is highly valued by veterinary students and employers, and is an integral part of the UK veterinary degree course. A 2013/14 survey of recent veterinary graduates found that, as students, 96% were able to find EMS placements in the types of practice that they wanted,
and 96% agree or strongly agree that EMS is an essential component of undergraduate veterinary training. However, EMS may become a pinch point as student numbers increase, practices consolidate and more universities enter into arrangements with local practices.

**Oversupply of qualified veterinary surgeons**

The biggest concern raised by BVA members, especially veterinary student members, is the potential oversupply of qualified veterinary surgeons in the UK market.

A survey by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the RCVS in 2013 found that increasing numbers of UK graduates in the previous five years had had little impact on veterinary job prospects, with 94% of recent graduates in permanent employment within six months of starting to look. It also found that the average time taken for recent graduates to find their first veterinary position was 2.7 months.

In October 2011 veterinary surgeons were removed from the Government’s skills shortage list because the supply of UK-qualified veterinary surgeons had increased.

However, while current supply and demand appear reasonably balanced increased undergraduate numbers and free movement of workers within the EU may lead to an oversupply if the market cannot be expanded.

**Impact on veterinary salaries**

BVA members are concerned that an oversupply of veterinary surgeons could put a downward pressure on salaries. A knock-on effect of this could ultimately be the inability of veterinary schools to attract the brightest and best students.

**Standards in veterinary education/opportunities for innovation**

Concerns have been raised by BVA members over the possible impact on the quality of veterinary education if there is insufficient availability of academic staff to cover any future increases in numbers of veterinary schools and undergraduates. However, it is also recognised that with greater competition to attract the brightest and best school leavers and provide a course with excellent career opportunities, there is potential for innovation in the delivery of the veterinary degree course. The University of Nottingham was the newest of the seven UK veterinary schools and, in a recent survey of veterinary students, was rated the highest in terms of student experience, the course and the school. The expansion of the
UK’s veterinary infrastructure also has the potential to create teaching and research opportunities which will contribute to the veterinary and ‘One health’ R&D base, to the benefit of animal health and welfare, and public health.

**Increasing influence of veterinary graduates in wider science community**

Some BVA members suggest that an increasing number of veterinary graduates going into careers outside of traditional veterinary practice will have a positive impact in terms of widening the influence of veterinary graduates in the science community. Veterinary input should be highly valued in areas such as public health, food production and retail, scientific research, climate change and disaster management, public policymaking, and the wider one health agenda.

**BVA position**

We recognise that there are both opportunities and risks for the profession as a result of the increasing number of veterinary undergraduate places in both new and existing schools.

There are some areas of veterinary work that are currently undersubscribed and could benefit from an increase in the veterinary workforce, and we recognise that recent expansion of veterinary undergraduate places has contributed to innovation in veterinary teaching. However, we also have concerns that the current and possible further substantial increase in veterinary undergraduate places could have implications for the availability of adequate teaching staff, high quality EMS, and on the clinical career prospects for future members of the veterinary profession.

RCVS must uphold its commitment to ensure standards in UK veterinary schools are maintained. RCVS should also make information available to employers about the accreditation status of veterinary schools in the EU.

Quality EMS is highly valued by veterinary students and employers, and robustly supported by BVA, and must remain part of the UK veterinary curriculum. Veterinary schools and RCVS must be confident that provision, including a variety of placements, is available for increasing numbers of students.
As the number of veterinary graduates increases, opportunities to work in clinical practice may become more limited. Opportunities for veterinary graduates in non-clinical roles must be explored and promoted by veterinary associations. CPD and careers advice must be expanded to support alternative (non-clinical) careers for qualified veterinary surgeons, for example the BVA Careers Fair. We must be at the forefront of breaking down the barriers to professional mobility for veterinary surgeons.

Careers advice and guidance for veterinary undergraduates must be improved to support non-clinical career paths. Careers advice for school students must be better coordinated and improved to ensure students have more realistic expectations of veterinary career opportunities, including up-to-date information on average salaries, likelihood of working in clinical practice, and information about the diversity of veterinary careers and the opportunities available to veterinary graduates, including case studies.

We strongly support the development of the profession and in particular innovation in veterinary teaching and the strengthening of the UK’s veterinary research capability. Further increases in veterinary undergraduate places should contribute to the expansion of the UK’s veterinary infrastructure and should create teaching and research opportunities to support the UK’s position as one of the leaders in this field. However, we remain concerned regarding the consequences of rapid or unlimited expansion of the profession and calls for development which is proportionate to the current and future needs of the changing market.