

## **Veterinary medicine students' experience of student support services and an investigation into the health and wellbeing aspects of the university structure" (USA & Canada)**

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### **Introduction**

There are only four American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) accredited Vet Schools in the UK and Ireland: Royal Veterinary College (RVC), London; Edinburgh's The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies; University of Glasgow and University College Dublin Veterinary faculties.

As such, these schools are effectively treated as 'out-of-state' schools by AVMA and North American students, and the fees are the same as they are in the USA and Canada – roughly £20,000 per annum. About 10% of the RVC's total Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine (BVetMed) students are North American.

These students face some challenges in the UK Vet Schools that they do not face in North America. While a first degree in the appropriate area is an entry course requirement for both North American and UK universities, the UK awards the BVetMed degree at undergraduate level and North Americans award it at postgraduate level. The BVetMed is recognised in North America as equivalent to their Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM), but this issue, coupled with our very different teaching styles makes it difficult for students to manage their expectations.

The courses also vary in duration, generally four years in North America, five or six years in the UK. Therefore it costs substantially more to study in the UK, especially in London. In common with many American students in the UK, our students experience difficulties with Federal Loans companies, although this is not such a problem for Canadian students. Students are older than most UK entrants and find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that they are considered at the same level academically as eighteen year olds straight from school. Many come with partners and families. We do not know yet exactly how much these additional challenges impact on the already high stress levels RVC students experience on such academically demanding courses.

The RVC wanted to determine how much parity there is between the UK Vet Schools and the North American ones in terms of student support experience – is there any more that we could learn/do that would give our North American students a smoother transition into our College, help them feel more at home and improve their overall student experience?

Three Veterinary Colleges/Faculties in North America were visited: The College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York – hosted by the Director of Student Services and Multicultural Affairs; The College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University (KSU) – hosted by the Chair of International Activities Committee and the Chair of Academic Standards and Admissions; Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) at the University of Guelph, Canada – hosted by the International Student Adviser and the Diversity and Career Co-ordinator and McGill University in Montreal, Canada – hosted by the International Office and the Office for Students with Disabilities. Although not in the original PMI bid, McGill was also visited because it hosts a large number of international students (mainly Americans).

Studying and living in Montreal is a similar experience to living in London for Americans in that it is totally different in culture (and language!).

All of the universities arranged comprehensive two day itineraries with back-to-back meetings with staff and students, tours of faculties and facilities including opportunities to meet socially with staff and students in the evenings. At McGill I stayed with a household of international students (including two Americans) similar in age to the RVC's North American students. Throughout the trip I met a variety of people working in every conceivable area of student support including: Directors of Student Services; Disability Officers; Associate Deans of Studies, Directors of Financial Planning, Directors of Admissions, Deans of Learning and Instruction; Graduate Student Life Deans; Director of International Programmes; Director of Greek Letters; Heads of Clinical Services; Counsellors; Directors of Library Services; Careers Advisers and Housing Officers. Different institutions had different posts responsible for organising Orientation, and this was an area researched at length in each university.

### **Summary of Outcomes**

Much discussion around the issues students face financially, socially and academically convinced me that essentially, North American students of Veterinary Medicine seem to behave in the same way, and have almost identical problems, irrespective of where they study in North America or in the UK. North American students at the RVC themselves perceive, and give the impression, that many of their difficulties are a direct result of coming abroad to study. In fact, apart from the different learning styles, they would be experiencing very similar issues were they studying in North America, albeit to a lesser degree.

### **Key Findings**

The RVC is probably one of the largest Vet Schools in the world; on average there are about 200 students in each of the five years of the BVetMed degree. Cornell has about 80-90 in each of the four years, Kansas State and the OVC have greater numbers, approximately 105 - 140 per year. Inevitably there are differences in the way that students gel together and are managed by academic and support services because of this. The main finding was that all Vet Schools have increasing numbers of students experiencing some kind of stress-related or mental health issue at some time during their degrees. This is of interest as the Veterinary profession is known to have the highest suicide rate of all professions, even higher than the medical profession. All the schools reported that their students felt their workloads to be so heavy that they were unable to access most, if any, student services that were not actually sited within the faculty. They all employed University counsellors to come on site from their usual offices to the veterinary faculties. KSU has done some research looking at the predictors of depression and anxiety in first year vet students, with results indicating about a third of them were experiencing clinical levels of depressive symptoms. Based on evidence from Counselling services at the RVC, and discussion with colleagues, if similar research were undertaken in other Vet schools in both North America and the UK the findings are likely to be the same.

### **Reflections on implementing learning points at the RVC**

It was interesting to see the comprehensive handbooks that each college gave to students on arrival, and the wealth of details contained within them – including photographs of every student and their contact details in the faculties, detailed timetables and information about each course for all the four years of the courses.

This helped explain why our North American students are continually asking for more detail and information. Given that they already have a first degree, this is a system they have become very used to. There is a large divide between the RVC's attitude that students are adults and should be more self sufficient, self directed and professional in their approach to learning and life, that we do not wish to 'spoon feed' any of our students, and the North American students' attitude that we are somehow failing them in not providing enough/appropriate detailed information.

We need to be significantly clearer in our communication of what is to be expected in our university from the very earliest stages in our dealings with North American students. While we cannot fundamentally change the information to fit the North American model, it is clear that for these students it feels like they have gone from 'all' to 'nothing' in terms of information provided by the college. We can address this issue with clear communication about how and why we do things, explaining what they might expect from a North American university, and what they should expect from ours. We can also provide some detail in information that in fact would benefit all our students.

All the Financial Aid officers I met reported similar issues with the Federal Loans companies, another area that our North American students find problematic. For American students in particular, the OVC student experience closely resembles that of the RVC, and the issues they faced in Guelph as international students were almost identical. The RVC has already implemented measures to improve lines of communication between the various members of staff involved in financial advice and the students.

The librarians in the specialist veterinary library at KSU recognised that high-achieving and highly motivated students working very long hours need to be encouraged to have a better 'balance' when studying, and have made the library environment comfortable and user-friendly by providing a variety of different work 'spaces' and 'comfort' zones, hot drinks on tap and even reclining chairs to relax in. KSU also offers paid 'peer mentoring', an informal system which seems to work well and is valued by the student body, and this is something we could introduce at the RVC – North American students may be used to this system and all students could benefit.

At Cornell, bringing counselling services on site for vet students has been helpful; additionally there is a 'walk in' service offered at various other departments in the university ('Let's Talk') and any student can attend these sessions. Stress reduction groups are also offered to first year vet students, and the RVC's counselling service is now looking at additional/different ways of supporting students (one example: via telephone, as students spend so much time away from the campus on placements). Cornell also has a student volunteer 'Pet Loss Support Line' (operating in a similar way to 'Nightline' in the UK). This is an interesting way of assisting students with the communication skills elements of their course while offering a service to the public, and one we will consider with the Student Union at the RVC.

### **Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions**

Commonly, veterinary students tend to socialise very little with other students studying other courses, even if their faculty is located right in the heart of a large university. They feel highly pressured and have little time for engaging in activities outside of their environment. They work hard and play hard, but mostly within their own highly specialised faculty. This is one contributing factor for the increasing levels of poor mental health and stress-related illnesses that vet students report.

An example of this can be seen clearly at the OVC, located on one side of a road, with Guelph's extensive Student Union and Student Services buildings located on the other side, just a few minutes walk away. In reality few vet students venture over to the Student Services and the faculty actually refer to it as 'going over the road', as though it is a great adventure.

It is worth considering the benefits of encouraging vet students to explore and take up more activities outside of their own specialism, and how we may become involved specifically with any 'Well Being' initiatives our universities are engaged in.

Support for students with learning differences and disabilities is funded and wholly managed via the institution in America; in Canada this is coupled with a version of the UK's Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). The Professional Standards and Fitness to Practice requirements of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and AVMA can make it difficult for people with certain disabilities to qualify to practice. On the whole I felt that the UK system and the support available to UK and international students with learning differences/disabilities is better than in North America. However perhaps some quantifiable research needs to be done in this area in the relevant UK Vet schools.

### **Reflections on national policy issues**

Although North American veterinary students face additional challenges when they come to the UK, the core difficulties they experience are the same across the board whatever they study. The international students I spent time with at McGill were either North American or from Western countries. It is worth noting that they all knew about International Student Services and the programmes and events on offer to them there, but never accessed them, because they felt that these were events really aimed at students from 'third world countries'. In fact they missed out on a lot of good information and I believe their introduction to university life in Montreal was definitely compromised by this attitude. The needs of this group of students should be considered in more depth when arranging International Student Orientations.

### **Issues for the future**

We have yet to see the full impact of the global economic problems on our North American student body. It may affect recruitment although to date this does not seem to be an issue. It will certainly affect students once they are here, and this has been a factor in a couple of students transferring back to North America after a year or two. As the loans for fees are the same it would be interesting to compare the financial experiences of North American Vet students in the UK and at home over the next few years.