

Submission on behalf of the New Zealand Veterinary Association

Independent Review of Veterinary Education in Australasia

The NZVA is the only membership organization for veterinarians in New Zealand. Seventy percent of registered veterinarians are current members of the NZVA. To gain feedback from our members to inform the content of this submission, we circulated the following questions via SurveyMonkey through the organizations email, newsletters, and social media channels. Forty-six completed survey responses were received and have been used to formulate this submission. In addition, the NZVA head office team, as well as Grant Guildford, hosted an online discussion group to ensure our summary of the survey responses reflected the view so of the membership. Some excerpts and clarity gained from the discussion has been included where applicable.

How is the demand for veterinary services changing in Australasia and the rest of the world?

There was near unanimous agreement in the responses that the demand for veterinary services in New Zealand has grown. The reasons given have been grouped into the following four categories:

- **Increased in Demand due to Workload changes:**
 - Increased animal ownership
 - Increased human population in New Zealand along with Covid has resulted in more pets in homes and more pets per home.
 - Increased demand locally and abroad for meat/milk/eggs has increased the production animal numbers.
 - Reduced staffing levels
 - Effects of border closures stopping/reducing incoming overseas trained vets
 - Effects of border opening with recent graduates headed on OE's
 - Long term problem in New Zealand which has resulted in a critically low number of staff coinciding with an increasing demand of service.
- **Increased Client Expectations:**
 - Demand for specialized services
 - This was represented as increased demands for technical knowledge, capabilities and willingness to provide specialized care at a GP level (small animal focused), as well as clients wanting access to specialized referral services.
 - This was also represented as a species-specific specialization in care.
 - ❖ *'Although mixed animal practice is still common in certain areas, equine clients are less willing to accept vets that are not horse-specific. Similarly, mixed animal vets are less willing to see equine patients.'*
 - Demand for personalized services
 - Increased level of human-animal-bond resulting in clients wanting tailored services to be provided



- Clients can access information from many sources and want to be included in the decision process when it comes to the health of their pets.
 - ❖ *'Clients are becoming more knowledgeable as they can access information from many sources and they want to be included in working with the vet professionals to find a solution for their pet (I've just interviewed 30 clients as part of a research project that confirm this)'*
 - Demand for low cost services. This was expressed from two distinct viewpoints:
 - A concern for low socio-economic families having to surrender pets due to inability to afford treatment and care.
 - Clients who can afford care of their pets however they expect high levels of care at a low cost.
 - Unrealistic expectations based on social media and television portrayal of veterinarians as well as expecting human level care.
- **Increased Staff Expectations:**
- Better work-life balance. This was expressed as:
 - Flexible working hours
 - Predictable hours
 - Family friendly hours
 - Reduced number of afterhours willing to be worked
 - Increased availability and diversity of roles outside of clinical practice which desire BVSc skills and knowledge. Examples given were:
 - Roles that look at antibiotic use and resistance
 - Residues in food producing animals
 - Disaster planning and response
 - Exportation services
 - Expectation that salaries should be in alignment with other professions with similar levels of training and responsibilities.
 - ❖ *'We have an extremely wide range of services within our field and one person in any of the specialities is expected to be all-knowing. The cost of knowing all and accessing all has gone up, but the folk (sic) asking for the service are not wanting to pay - be it the client or the employer. Veterinarians are not paid enough for the education and practice required to be skilled experts across a broad field, and folk (sic) are not interested in paying the full price of the services.'*
- **Increased Social Expectations**
- High level of awareness and demand for improved welfare for domestic and production animals
 - Environment
 - Environmentally friendly workplaces

- Effects of agriculture on environment
- Effects of environment on agriculture
- Sustainability
- Food Safety
- Increased utilization of trained allied vet professionals
- Fear of social media harassment through online negativity and bullying
 - ❖ *‘Making mistakes is part of veterinary practice. But with social media, mistakes or even perceived mistakes are now often broadcast with vitriol and fervour by unhappy clients, putting vets at much higher risk of bad exposure and blame.’*

Are there roles in which veterinary graduates are under-represented, despite being well qualified to fill them?

The membership expressed concern that there are veterinary shortages throughout the profession. The examples given below are the specific examples listed, however the majority of members expressed the problem as a holistic shortage.

- Large animal and mixed rural practice
- ER and afterhours services
- Non-clinical roles
 - Industry
 - Academia
 - MPI Verification Services
 - Government lobbying and political decision making
 - Nutrition
 - Genetics
 - One Health
 - Biosecurity
 - Epidemiology
 - Public health
- Women as leaders and/or practice directors/owners
- NZVA head office

Does the current curriculum equip veterinary graduates with the necessary breadth and depth of skills and knowledge needed to successfully contribute to the sector?

Overall, the majority of the members responded that they do not believe the current curriculum produced students with the necessary breadth and depth of skills needed. However, many of the responses provided a mixed review, responding that certain parts of the curriculum were adequate then followed that statement immediately with a negative comment. Determining the specific skills that were considered adequate was not easy to define, as many of the responses stated only ‘yes’ or referred to the graduates as having adequate levels of general knowledge and technical skills. The

responses regarding deficiencies were more specific and have been grouped into the categories below.

➤ **Clinical Skills**

- Familiarity and confidence with common diseases
- Skills in dentistry and common surgeries
- Lack knowledge in pharmacology
- Overall confidence in their technical abilities and communications skills
 - ❖ *'I have found that confidence is a big barrier in new grads. The ones I have worked with have a good knowledge base but are fairly nervous to use it for fear of making a mistake. I have found that if they have someone they can discuss the case with as they go they become confident fairly quickly.'*
- Level of support needed is high
 - ❖ *'Often the clinics are so busy that the other vets don't have the time/availability or sometimes the know how, to show them what to do at the level that is now acceptable.'*
 - ❖ *'The school seems overly reliant on our jobs after graduation to teach us the skills.'*
- Understanding the changing demands of production animal medicine
 - ❖ *'Our practice is mostly in demand for large animal vets, and the work required of our LA vets is only about 25 % traditional medicine, and 75 % routine work or preventative health and consultancy. Graduates are far under prepared for this, and get a massive reality check when they falsely expect to be James Heriot when they graduate and therefore leave the industry or become locums overseas.'*

➤ **Non-clinical skills**

- Ethics
- Business skills
 - ❖ *'Need to have more business training and understanding of how to contribute to the financial success of a business. Higher salaries can only come through higher business productivity and profitability.'*
- Client communications
- Conflict resolution
- Use of technology and data

➤ **Social Issues**

- Environmental concerns
- Sustainability
- Public Health
- Food Safety
- Welfare
 - ❖ *'Greater attention to the fundamentals of animal welfare science is needed in the curriculum. It is no longer sufficient for vets to be experts only in animal health. A deeper understanding of this core subject provides a strong*

basis for vets to move across many roles, clinical or non-clinical, with much greater ease over the course of their career'

- Wellbeing
 - ❖ *'We all know that many vets struggle with mental health and this is likely due to the pressure they are under with their work, the conflict between speaking for the animal and appeasing the client, and the fear of making a mistake. Emotional intelligence, resilience in the face of difficulty, and decision making are the hardest things to teach but also seem to be lacking in many newer graduates.'*

Do governments believe that enough veterinarians graduate each year in Australasia to meet the expected workforce capacity in the face of a severe exotic disease outbreak such as foot and mouth disease?

There was consensus that there are not enough vets in New Zealand to manage an exotic disease outbreak. As to what the government believes, there was uncertainty on how to answer this part of the question. The summary of the comments is provided below:

- Not enough vets in current practice
- Not enough vets with specific knowledge and training
- Not enough trained and skilled paraprofessionals to support vets in an outbreak.

Is the omni-competent new veterinary graduate still the preferable educational goal for veterinary schools or would employers prefer graduates with narrower but deeper knowledge and skills?

The membership demonstrated division over this subject. Key points of the online survey have been captured below. During the discussion session, the recent graduate participants stated they believed that most students did know what type of practice they would like to work in by final year and were not as concerned as the more experienced veterinarians about career opportunities outside their chosen field. The employers who participated in the discussion believed most of the training happened in practice, after graduation.

The percentage of members that favoured omnicompetence in the curriculum was 57%. The majority stated their opinion was based on the belief that students should be ready for the diversity of profession. The employers in this group stated they would prefer new graduates to have a breadth of skills which could be fine tuned once in practice.

- ❖ *'Employers would prefer employees broader knowledge and skillset. Specific skill set can be attained after graduation to suit the positions or role of the job.'*

Another strong theme that emerged was the concern that graduates would have difficulty changing professional direction throughout their career. Many members referred to their own career pathways and the opportunities they benefited from by having a broad education. The discussion component of the survey brought to light that students and recent graduates did not support the need for diversity as much as the more senior members. Many of the recent graduates referred to

the need for a foundation in ‘first principles’ with a broad understanding of anatomy, physiology and pharmacology and pathology, but the technical skills should be more specialized to the area the students are interested in pursuing.

Which brings us to the final theme expressed in the survey, that students and graduates don’t know what they want to do. As mentioned earlier, during the discussion component of the meeting, the recent graduates stated they and their classmates were confident by 4th year in the direction that they wanted focus on.

- ❖ *‘Broad skills at graduation remain important as this gives the graduate more choices and a more global vision. Not every graduate knows where their path will be and the world changes. Post graduate rather than undergraduate specialisation gives more flexibility to meet changing needs of graduates and industries.’*

The percentage of members that supported a graduate that was more species specialized at graduation was **43%**. The members that supported this stated that new graduates under this system of training would be ‘ready to hit the ground running’. The themes that emerged from the employers that supported specialized training was that they preferred graduates with a deeper and narrower skill set.

- ❖ *‘I am the owner of a companion animal only clinic, so I would be perfectly happy to have a new graduate that has never set hands on a cow, for example!’*
- ❖ *‘There is a need for both, but definitely I would prefer more graduates with deeper more specialist skills especially towards farming, one health, preventative whole herd.’*

Another theme that emerged was the belief that the ‘profession is too large for a one size fits all approach’. This was supported by employers and employees, as well the recent graduate participants. Comments described more proficient graduates being better suited to transitioning to practice.

Within this group of members there was still evidence of concern for veterinarians that wanted to change direction later in their career. Interestingly, this group addressed the concern and then followed with solutions to overcome that barrier. The solutions focused on retraining programs while working in practice, internships, or post graduate training opportunities.

- ❖ *‘if graduates have narrower but deeper knowledge they will have to decide before graduation what field they want to go in and will not be able to change between fields easily. Hard to say! May be an internship would be the way to go?’*
- ❖ *‘I think in final year students should be able to choose to graduate with an area of further interest, such as in equine, production. small animal or general (mix of the three). Many small animal vets have no interest in ever working equine practices and vice versa. If they do change then a refresher course is currently recommended so they can learn the information then. I*

believe they can choose to a degree now to study more of one area, but I think it should be even more so - and the degree should read something like BVSC with Companion Animal endorsement.'

What options exist for structural reform in relation to induction/transition to the profession?

The membership brought many suggestions to the discussion and survey on this topic. We have categorized the comments based on the organization which can enable these suggestions.

Veterinary Council of New Zealand

- The membership supported the development of standards for new graduate supervision by the council.
 - ❖ *'Clinics being licensed to have new graduates is also a big passion of mine - some new graduates are being broken in their first couple of years by lack of support.'*
- Members suggested if specialized training would come into effect for the BVSc degree, that limited registrations for graduates would need to be instigated.
- Provisional registration for the first year after graduation. New graduates are required to meet a CPD or a Year 1 assessment standard to move to full registration.

New Zealand Veterinary Association

- Guidelines for new graduate training in clinics
- Approved employer status for businesses that meet high standards of new graduate training
 - ❖ *'... approved-employer status for businesses with confirmed high standards of new graduate training and retention.'*
- Graduate mentor training programs
- Graduate CPD/Training programs

Massey

- More practical training through increased time spent in GP clinical practice
- More soft-skill training
 - Communications
 - Business Skills
 - Conflict Management
 - Making Difficult Decisions
- Better communication between Massey and GP practices and employers
- More thorough exposure to non-clinical veterinary roles

Practice

- Develop or review current new graduate induction to practice programs
- Invest in staff to become trained and certified mentors and skills trainers
- Provide supervised internships within practice (6 months – 2 years)

- There was concern that the term internship could be synonymous with underpaid and overworked junior staff. The members clearly stated the intent they envision for a new graduate internship would consist of normal working hours with a workload that allowed for learning and skills mastery.
 - ❖ *'I wouldn't however like to see a situation whereby all new grads are forced through some version of hell doing all the crappy shifts/jobs for their first year.'*
- Longer apprenticeships for final year students in practice
 - ❖ *'If not all disciplines were trained (at Massey) there would be scope for an apprenticeship type approach in final year where vets are doing some on the job training whilst still studying pre graduation.'*

Is more formal mentoring and support required for new graduates, perhaps similar to the UK's Veterinary Graduate Development Programme model?

The majority of the members (67%) agreed that a formal mentoring and support program should be provided for new graduates. The reasoning given focused on concerns about the variation of ability between practices and their willingness to provide quality new graduate training and support. Members strongly believed that quality support and training of new graduates was directly related to their wellbeing and future satisfaction with the profession.

There were a minority of members in this group that expressed concern whether the programme should be required. There was concern that the program might not be needed by all graduates or that it might slow down the progress of some new graduates.

Of the group of members that stated they were unsure (36.5%), their main concerns focused on either not knowing enough about the UK's Veterinary Graduate Programme model to comment, or they were seeking evidence to show that the model has the intended effect for new graduates.

- ❖ *'I was one of the first grads in this programme and it didn't mean a lot to employers it may be different now. It would be helpful to have an official expectation in place.'*
- ❖ *'Yes, but if that is the PDP UK program then no. I did it, was a waste of time tbh.'*
- ❖ *'Is there evidence yet to suggest that this more formal model has improved outcomes for new graduates and employers?'*

The last group was a small minority (0.5%) that stated they did not believe this program would be beneficial. The reasons given focused on their practices were already providing this program, or that they believed practices should be in charge of providing mentorship and training independently.

There was a strong concern from many members on how this type of program would be funded. Many expressed concern that unless outside funding was provided to clinics to upskill and fund a staff members salary to train new graduates, that it would not be an achievable programme.

- ❖ *'If there is formal mentoring then it should be paid by the government as currently many practices are just too busy, and it comes down to time. It is adding more work and stress onto vets who are already overworked.'*

Should the veterinary profession play a greater role in the education of veterinarians and if so, in what way?

The membership provided a divided view on this question, even within their own responses. To summarize, the main themes have been divided into pros and cons.

The pros of having the veterinary profession more involved in the education of veterinarians:

- An increased amount and variety of ‘real life’ experiences with cases and clients
 - ❖ *‘100%. When I graduated, I realised how little I knew of the “real vet world”. Have if the things we were taught couldn’t apply to real life as they were specialist surgeries, medicine, etc. the best teaching always came from my externships and practicals - not from lectures.’*
- The profession will have the greater influence curriculum on the curriculum.
 - ❖ *‘I’d love to see the profession more involved in helping shape the curriculum regularly as its easy for Massey to get way off topic, or spend much of the curriculum on largely irrelevant fields’*
- There are career opportunities for experienced clinicians to become trained supervisors
 - ❖ *‘The first year out have people paid to be a mentor to new grads. But have them paid the same as a normal vet would be paid so it is just another path they could take in their career - having it just as a volunteer role is just wishy washy and doesn't work. It needs to be a role that is respected and contain milestones that new grads have to do and complete - get things signed off.’*
- There are business opportunities for clinics to become certified in new graduate training program.
 - ❖ *‘Train practitioners to train vets and become accredited training practices.’*
- Increased involvement of the profession would bring veterinary training into alignment with human health professional training programs.
 - ❖ *I think we need to mimic the human medicine ladder with "house officer". "registrar" and have compulsory sessions with a counsellor as part of the package.*

The cons of having the veterinary profession more involved in the education of veterinarians:

- The workforce is already under-resourced and does not have the current capacity to meet the needs of all the patients seeking care.
 - ❖ *‘Time is the limiting factor here. More time in a clinic is great but the vets in the clinic need to have time to spend with students which isn’t always feasible.’*
- The training of graduates in a clinic needs to be a specific FTE role within a practice, not an additional voluntary role.
 - ❖ *‘The structure of progression needs to be official - paid mentors not volunteers. In my opinion the vet industry relies too much on volunteers and with the current stressors of everyday living and rising costs in day to day prices etc it is just too much to expect people to give their time away for free. For the vet industry to be promoting mental health and awareness and then relying on volunteers to act as mentors for new grads (or vets who are already overworked) to just take up the*

slack all in the name of helping the profession is just not a sustainable long term solution.

- There needs to be a financial plan to pay for the professions time if required to do this.
 - ❖ *'Perhaps clinics that were accredited could employ these interns and train them in clinical practice, and would receive some sort of financial incentive to employ interns???'*
 - ❖ *'Yes More structured introduction to the 'real' thing - similar to the human medical profession but Vets will need financial support for this'*
- Is it necessary if the university is providing adequate training?

Summary

The membership of the NZVA strongly support the Independent Review Process into Veterinary Education in Australasia. While compiling the feedback on this submission, the head office noticed strong over-arching trends that came through the feedback. These are:

1. The profession is understaffed and overworked.
2. The profession feels strongly about the wellbeing of its members and especially strongly for the new and recent graduates transitioning into practice.
3. The profession believes many benefits exist by increasing the involvement of its professionals in the job of training, supervising and mentoring students and graduates. However, the profession does not believe they are capable of providing this service to students and new graduates due to:
 - understaffing,
 - lack of training in quality mentorship and supervision,
 - and the financial short fall that occurs when professionals are asked to take the time out of their schedules to teach.
4. The profession believes there needs to be outside financial support provided to ensure their staff members are trained sufficiently and funded adequately to provide a quality training and mentorship service to students and graduates.
5. The profession agrees that graduates are not prepared to transition into the workplace without a formal induction and training system in place within each practice.
6. The profession believes that there should be standards and guidelines developed to outline what employers are expected to provide and what graduates should expect to receive.

The head office at the NZVA supports investigations into proposed solutions to the points raised above. The membership has shown a significant interest in this topic and would be open to further surveys and updates. The NZVA thanks the committee for involving us in this important and timely discussion, we look forward to hearing about the next steps.