

AUSTRALASIAN VETERINARY DEANS' COMMITTEE

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Professor Denise Bradley AC
Chair, Review of Australian Higher Education
Location 023
PO Box 9880
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Dear Professor Bradley,

Loading for Clinical Training in Veterinary Science

The Australasian Veterinary Deans' Committee (AVDC) has made previous submissions to Reviews commissioned by the Commonwealth Government, in which we have presented a strong case for additional funding for core veterinary education and the need for a clinical loading to recognise the very high costs of clinical training and the anomalous lack of such a clinical loading for veterinary science.

The Federal Budget of May 2007 provided an additional allocation of approximately \$1400 per EFTSL (6%) for the Cluster including Medicine and Agriculture. Unfortunately this increase only went part of the way to addressing our core funding needs.

Attachment 1 is an extract from our earlier submission and contains a detailed justification for the clinical loading. The amount requested is equivalent to \$12,000 per student for the final two years of studies in Veterinary Science and the total cost is approximately \$11 million per annum.

I am available to discuss this with your staff if necessary.

Yours sincerely

Kym Abbott

Chair
Australasian Veterinary Deans' Committee

Attachment 1. The Case for a Loading for Clinical Training in Veterinary Science

Contribution of Veterinary Profession to Clinical Training

Development of clinical competencies is a core requirement for veterinary students and, in general, the basic training is undertaken in facilities owned and operated by Universities. Increasing student numbers make it difficult for some universities to provide sufficient case material for all students to receive high quality, small group teaching across all the relevant animal species. Increasingly, veterinary schools are seeking assistance from private clinical practitioners to allow students to spend time in commercial veterinary practices under the supervision of clinical instructors. This is in addition to the traditional extramural work requirement which is generally carried out in the final year and requires students to spend time in veterinary practices that deal with different species.

With the development of two new veterinary schools and expansion of student numbers in the other schools it is becoming more difficult to find adequate numbers of practices that meet the requirements for high quality clinical training. While the schools provide some recognition for some of this clinical instruction the majority of the placements are provided with no charge by the practices involved. When student numbers were low, the demands on individual practices were modest and practitioners were generally happy to participate. Now that student numbers are much higher the demands on some practices are very high and, in effect, the veterinary profession considers that it is bearing a disproportionate share of the cost of educating veterinary graduates. The contribution of the profession is not only being increased by expanding student numbers but, in addition, there is more emphasis on issues such as:

- adequacy of practice facilities;
- adequacy of teaching skills;
- adequacy of pastoral care;
- monitoring and evaluating student performance.

Increasing teaching demands on the veterinary profession can lead to a degree of fatigue among practitioners and put at risk the sustainability of this important element of training veterinarians. There is little doubt that new models of university and practitioner collaboration will need to be developed and it is apparent that the Universities will need to pay increasing amounts to veterinary practices to provide veterinary teaching. Such a development will put enormous stress on veterinary school budgets that are already inadequate.

Organisations with responsibility for accreditation of veterinary schools in Australasia the UK and North America are concerned about the extent of outsourcing of veterinary training and, in particular, on issues relating to the definition and evaluation of clinical competencies in facilities not directly supervised by a University. These issues were an important component of the agenda of a global meeting of these accrediting agencies that was held in Melbourne in May 2007.

Inconsistency in current funding arrangements

Veterinary science is recognised internationally as the most expensive of the professional education programs. This is because of the high cost of clinical training in the absence of support from a public health system and the need to have hands on experience with animals. Clinical teaching requires highly trained staff, small class sizes, and quality clinical and teaching facilities in an environment where there are no subsidies and limited insurance options for payment for veterinary services.

Veterinary teaching hospitals and clinical placements are essential for training of veterinary students, but required activities in teaching hospitals cannot be fully supported from their commercial operations. In comparison, medical schools do not need to provide and maintain their own teaching hospitals: the infrastructure and staffing costs of clinical training in medicine are largely underwritten by State governments, which fund teaching hospitals and medical staff specialists. Clinical veterinary training also entails support for off campus clinical teaching involving a full range of production animals, companion animals and wildlife. In a recent benchmarking exercise among veterinary teaching hospitals in Australia, New Zealand, North America and the UK it was found that, in all cases, there was substantial subsidisation of veterinary teaching hospitals. The cost of establishing and maintaining facilities and equipment such as diagnostic imaging equipment required for clinical training is substantial, and mandatory to retain accreditation.

In *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*, the additional costs associated with nursing clinical practice and teaching practicum are recognised and explicitly included within the relevant cluster funding. Recognition of the clinical costs of medicine is afforded by means of a medical student loading, currently \$1,133/EFTSL, but the additional costs are not recognised for veterinary education.

There is evidence from case studies that some of the Australian veterinary schools are managing to maintain minimal standards because they are receiving cross subsidies from other parts of their University. It is also evident that a number of the schools are required to use the fees paid by International and Australian full fee-paying students to subsidise the cost of education of HECS students. Earlier in this report we have emphasised that the Australian veterinary schools are very heavily dependent on an enormous contribution from private veterinary practitioners. The accreditation authorities are aware of the inadequate funding arrangement for Australian veterinary schools and in a number of recent reports have expressed concern about the sustainability of current funding arrangements.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The primary purpose of this submission from the Australasian Veterinary Deans Committee (AVDC) is to highlight the disturbing deficiencies in funding for veterinary schools in Australia. If the arguments in this paper are accepted, we realise that DEEWR has a number of potential ways to modify funding arrangements to better reflect the costs of veterinary education. One possible approach is to implement a clinical loading that specifically targets the areas of greatest deficiency. Previous consideration of this approach by the AVDC developed a recommendation that the Australian Government address the need for increased funding for veterinary science by providing additional funding equivalent to \$12,000 per EFTSL for DEEWR funded students in each of the two clinical years of veterinary science. This amount represents the difference between the estimated cost of veterinary training in the final two clinical years and the current maximum CGS funding in the veterinary science cluster (\$26,726 per EFTSL). The amount includes the cost of funding clinical resources for veterinary education in addition to the equivalent of clinical loading applied to medical and similar professions.

The total number of DEEWR funded students in the final two clinical years at the seven Australian Veterinary Schools is shown in Table 1. The annual cost to DEEWR for the additional funding for clinical training required for the seven Australian Veterinary Schools is estimated as \$6.0m in 2006 and rising to \$11m from 2012.

Table 1: DEST funded load in the final two clinical years at the seven Australian Schools

University	Student numbers	Remarks
Queensland	85 x 2 = 170	
Melbourne	50 x 2 = 100	
Sydney	70 x 2 = 140	
Murdoch	90 x 2 = 180	Part from 2009
Charles Sturt	54 x 2 = 108	From 2009
James Cook	60 x 2 = 120	From 2009
Adelaide	40 x 2 = 80	From 2012
TOTAL (post-2012)	459 x 2 = 918	
Total (pre-2009)	260 x 2 = 520	

The load in the veterinary science cluster typically corresponds to the final four years of veterinary training. Hence the recommended outcome could be achieved by applying a loading of \$6,000 per EFTSL to all veterinary science places in the relevant cluster, or by adding \$12,000 per EFTSL for students in the last two years of the programmes.

While provision of a clinical loading would relieve some of the pressure on funding clinical training it is important to realise that it does not solve the underlying problem of under-funding for veterinary education. In the submission to the Government Department (DEST) in February 2007, it was pointed out that the organisations responsible for accreditation of veterinary schools specify minimum ratios for student:academic staff and support staff:teaching staff and we indicated that meeting these minimum standards for staff would cost \$15,200 and \$8,622 (total \$23,822) per student. With salary increases since that date it is clear that the current level of funding will only approximately cover the salary costs of each school, and contribute nothing towards operating costs or infrastructural costs.

This analysis prompts the question of how are veterinary schools managing to survive now if their funding is so inadequate. The reality is that veterinary education for HECS students is being subsidised by funds from elsewhere in the university, by fee-paying students and by a huge contribution from private veterinary practitioners. Despite these subsidies the schools still find it difficult to maintain minimum internationally agreed standards.

RECOMMENDATION

The Deans (Heads) of the seven Australian Veterinary Schools have highlighted the serious under-funding of veterinary science education in Australia. They wish to recommend:

- an increase the overall funding for Commonwealth Supported Places in veterinary science to redress the funding shortfall;
- introduce a supplement of \$12,000 per student for the last two years of the course to cover the extensive cost of clinical training.

Professor Kym Abbott,
Chair, Australasian Veterinary Deans' Committee