

ECCVT¹ Policy on Veterinary Education

Introduction

The veterinary profession has achieved its respect and legal status across Europe as a result of its “social contract” to deliver high quality services in animal and public health and welfare to society without abusing its privileges. Like other professions, this is achieved through formal education and assessments, to ensure threshold standards are achieved at entry and more advanced levels, collective commitment to lifelong learning, codes of conduct, and maintenance and policing of registers of those qualified to practice.

To aid the coordination of educational policy at European level, the veterinary profession has created a European Coordinating Committee for Veterinary Training (ECCVT) that includes representatives of the European Association of Establishments of Veterinary Education (EAEVE), representing standards at first degree level (European Qualifications Framework EQF Level 7), the European Board of Veterinary Specialisation (EBVS), representing standards at Specialist level (EQF Level 8), and the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE), representing the profession as a whole. Collectively, this group has recently overseen the creation of a committee for Veterinary Continuing Education in Europe (VETCEE) that is developing a middle tier standard between new graduate and specialist levels.

Crucial to successful deployment of the veterinary profession across Europe is the understanding of the importance of its role and activity around the skill sets required and the holders’ possession of these across all member states. There is now broad agreement that the three levels that have been established are meaningful and helpful to society. However, to protect the public and maximise opportunities for free movement of veterinary professionals around Europe, it is essential that both those within the profession and outside it have a common understanding of the standards that should prevail.

First Degree Level

Historically, the European Directives 2005/36/EC and 2013/55/EU have provided a good foundation for convergent curricula for the basic veterinary qualification. A minimum of five-years training is required, and the content has been described. However, societal expectations of and requirements for the professions do not remain static. The veterinary profession is science-based, and rapidly increasing knowledge in all areas of science has had consequences for both the first degree and also the many specialised roles that veterinarians play. Increasingly, the first degree(s), which may be linked Bachelor/Masters programmes or fully integrated programmes, need to be defined, in terms of

¹ A joint committee of EAEVE (European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education), EBVS (European Board for Veterinary Specialisation) and FVE (Federation of Veterinarians of Europe)

outcomes and competencies (rather than inputs and content), so that the knowledge and skills at graduation are transparent to all. The breadth of knowledge and skills needed mean that it is no longer possible for all individuals to acquire a full set, so curricula are more and more defined in terms of core knowledge, skills and competences, and elective elements. Once qualified, depending on geographical location and professional area of practice, individuals will further develop their foundation knowledge and competences into a required skill set through scientifically informed experiential learning on a lifelong basis.

Fundamental to achieving so much within five to six-year programmes is a well-integrated trajectory of learning based on sound pedagogical principles. This must be well-designed to support sequential development of knowledge and skills, and fully quality assured to ensure that all learning opportunities are both effectively and efficiently utilised. This is particularly the case for the complex workplace experiences that must form the bulk of teaching in the final year(s). This requires the development of high levels of skill in educators that are unlikely to be met by work placements in commercial environments.

ECCVT believes it is in the public interest that this transition to outcomes-based curricula is fully supported by appropriate updating and interpretation of the directives and their annexes, and common standards reinforced through the European System for Evaluation of Veterinary Training (ESEVT) through EAEVE and FVE. The ESEVT has been developed over 30 years, and its validity demonstrated by the demand for its seal of approval from all the leading veterinary schools in Europe (and a number elsewhere in the world).

The “Middle Tier”

As specialisms have emerged, it has become clear that there is a need for a middle tier training, through which members of the public can seek informed advice beyond the level of the first degree but below that of the specialist. The presence of this “middle tier” of continuing education and qualifications also provides a structure within which veterinarians can complete their obligation to engage in lifelong learning to keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date.

VetCEE provides a pan-European group through which common standards for the middle tier can be developed and accredited. Already, a number of these middle tier qualifications exist at national level, based on the separate evolutionary pathways for the profession in individual member states before European systems were developed and agreed. ECCVT believes that VetCEE now provides huge potential to accredit existing and new systems of training and qualifications, based on commonly agreed standards related to appropriate knowledge and skills sets, in the different areas of practice.

Specialist Level

Advances in human medicine have been paralleled by advances in veterinary medicine, each building on the burgeoning knowledge in the biological sciences and the subject of healthcare delivery and technological progress in diagnostic, therapeutic and preventive systems. This has led to the demand for specialists in a variety of areas as diverse as small animal medicine and public health. Overarching themes of global significance, focused on the public good, link these different specialisms, including

food quality and sustainability, public health more generally, and protection of the efficacy of therapeutic agents such as antibiotics.

Global standards for specialist training and assessment, established in the USA and Canada, Australasia, and also in Europe through EBVS and its European College system, are agreed that specialist skills are best acquired through a minimum of four years full-time postgraduate education, or the equivalent undertaken over an 8-year period on a part-time basis. Curricula are linked to regularly reviewed role-profiles linked to a generic EQF level 8 framework, modified to describe professional knowledge, skills and competences. Assessment is based on experiential inputs relevant to the discipline, and appropriate written and skills-focused examinations. The emphasis is on mastery much more than duration of experience.

ECCVT believes that it is in the public interest that important specialisms for society continue to be developed and that common standards are set and maintained across Europe. EBVS, through its Specialist College system, has been developing specialisation across Europe for over 20 years, and it will be important for public understanding and professional mobility that these standards are adopted by member states as a common framework.

Conclusion

The veterinary profession has been providing essential services to society since its emergence in France just over 250 years ago. Its “social contract” obliges it to:

- Promote standardised education to first degree level, and higher levels (currently agreed as “middle tier” and specialist)
- Ensure robust assessment for those registered as competent at each knowledge and skill level, and in each domain
- Require continuing education to ensure that all veterinarians remain up-to-date in relation to their area(s) and level of activity

To achieve this, in the interests of animal and public health and welfare, ECCVT will strive to ensure:

- The requirement that all schools in Europe will exceed the minimum expectations of the ESEVT
- All claiming to have middle tier or specialist qualifications in different member states will have achieved standards agreed with common training frameworks across Europe.