Three years ago, students at the Royal Veterinary College established the first UK chapter of the Veterinary Business Management Association. Its president, Chloe Hannigan, discusses the association’s aims and reveals some future plans.

Created in 2001 by a group of North American students, the Veterinary Business Management Association (VBMA) was set up to provide veterinary students with a business-related support network, and the means to achieve their personal and professional goals. With a focus on enhancing business skills in order to become better clinicians, the VBMA ethos was infectious, and now there is a chapter in every vet school in the USA.

In 2007, a group of keen RVC students, along with a faculty adviser, decided to join their American peers and founded the first British chapter, which is now well and truly established.

**Business skills**

We aim to provide our members with additional knowledge and skills in business-related topics, concerning veterinary medicine and good practice, at a higher level than can be offered at the veterinary schools.

By conflating the vocational and business aspects of the veterinary profession, VBMA aims to promote graduates as well-rounded, clinically competent professionals. The association wants to give members the resources to get more out of their future careers.

An awareness of our ‘value’ as vets is a key element to being successful, and it can only be a good thing for students to know how much they could bring to practices, while being conscious of the potential expense to the practice of taking on a new graduate.

Increasing students’ ‘employability factor’ is one of our targets, and we are looking to hold a professional skills clinic in May, featuring talks and interactive stations where members will have the opportunity to learn how to improve their CV, practise interview techniques, hear what employers look for, and so on.

VBMA is ideal for those of us who have ever thought about becoming a partner, or running our own practice, though for the moment I am sure we would all be content just to get through the five years of exams!

**Events**

We hold a variety of events throughout the year, organised by some of the key players in the veterinary business world. In November 2009, we held a ‘Question Time’, where we invited members of the audience to pose questions to a distinguished panel of veterinary professionals.

VBMA organises a variety of events; a recent one was a ‘Question Time’, where a panel responded to a series of questions including advice on being a new person in the practice, the ease with which women can find employment in large animal practice, and ways of balancing personal and professional lives.

We always put an emphasis on engaging with our guests after events, which provides excellent networking opportunities and allows questions to be asked in a less formal setting – over drinks and, usually, pizza!

On this occasion, we trialled event feedback forms, so that our members had the chance to review their society and the event. This will have a bearing on our future plans.

With an ever-increasing membership base,
Setting up a chapter
We are pleased to be working with Hill’s Pet Nutrition, and together we are looking to help other UK vet schools to establish their own chapters. It would be ideal if eventually we could establish a VBMA chapter in each UK vet school, with the further development of, perhaps, a national executive board.

Last year, Andrew Monchar, our president at the time, went to Florida for the annual VBMA congress, and was able to count it as a week of clinical EMS. He presented the findings of his visit to us at our annual general meeting, and it was extremely beneficial to hear what is happening ‘over the pond’ with regard to the development of business material in the curriculum.

We would love to hear from you if you’re a proactive student who could find a few like-minded friends and a willing faculty adviser! Or perhaps you are a member of a vet school faculty and would like students from your university to get involved. Either way, we would all have one goal in common: the progression of the veterinary profession.

If you would like to find out more, please feel free to contact me (vbma@rvc.ac.uk), or visit www.vbma.biz.

About the VBMA
On its website – www.vbma.biz – VBMA describes itself as ‘the largest independent veterinary student organisation in the world, and the fastest growing veterinary student group in the USA’. It has 28 chapters at veterinary schools across the USA, three international chapters, and over 2600 student members.

The VBMA, the website says, is ‘a truly grass-roots movement, that is organised and advanced by veterinary students working within their own schools. Each school is different, and each chapter focuses on issues and topics of greatest interest to its own student body. At ground level, students learn to organise and fund major events, cultivate necessary leadership skills and network on a local level.’

The website goes on to say that the VBMA ‘is founded on the determination, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit of future veterinary leaders who desire a higher level of business education than what is being offered through veterinary colleges’.

Ten-minute chat
Jennifer Hall is studying veterinary science at Nottingham; she took over as president of the Association of Veterinary Students during last week’s AVS congress in Liverpool

Why did you choose veterinary science?
If you had asked my family, a veterinary career would have been the least likely path they would have suggested for me. I was so frightened of dogs that I had to be peeled off the ceiling if one was in the room, and I could take or leave small furries. But, when I was 14, we moved to Devon and took on a house with land. The first animal to arrive was a goat (my mother had read that it would eat the brambles that had taken over most of the land). The goat turned out to be a ‘BOGOF’ and produced babies shortly after. She couldn’t rear them, and I took it upon myself to handrear them. I found a love for the outdoors and the farming lifestyle, and was soon helping out on local farms at lambing time.

Why Nottingham?
Having got B grades at A level, I wasn’t accepted at vet school. I didn’t want to retake, so I took up a place at Sutton Bonington to study animal science – mainly agricultural and animal nutrition, with a view to going into consultancy. Then, very conveniently, they built a vet school there, which was completed in 2006, the year I graduated. The course at Nottingham offered something that nowhere else could – the promise of practical-based teaching and an exciting new curriculum. On top of that, I knew the area well and I was happy here.

What will you do when you finish vet school?
My plan is to be a large animal practitioner in the south-west, but eventually I want to specialise in dairy cow nutrition, and maybe work alongside agricultural consultants. I would love to bring nutritionists, vets, agronomists and farming suppliers together within a farm consultancy company. I would also like to spend a season in Canada, working in a big dairy unit (and skiing at weekends!).

Why/how did you get involved with the AVS?
Nottingham hosted AVS congress in its first year, and I volunteered to be part of the committee. We had such fun organising it, and really put the event back on the map. I also attended a couple of AVS committee meetings, which sparked an interest in some of the issues being discussed. I became treasurer at the AGM; the rest is history.

What student issues are closest to your heart?
Mental health and welfare issues within our profession (especially eating disorders in female vet students); financial problems experienced by vet students, which introduces extra stress; and developing an accessible database of EMS placement practices.

What do you hope to achieve in your year as president?
Encourage more male vet students to join the AVS committee; get the AVS EMS database up and running; continue campaigning for more funding; better financial support for vet students (especially fighting to stop the removal of the cap on tuition fees). Carry on promoting AVS as an association that represents vet students’ views on important issues, not just social events! Make my mark by voicing the views of the up-and-coming vet generation.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
A head nurse once told me that my fear of dogs was obvious because I tried to be over-friendly with them. She told me to ignore them while I talked to the owner, then get on with what you have to do without all the “who’s a good boy” rubbish (she was a New Zealander). It worked and I no longer worry about handling dogs, and I haven’t had any problems with them since.

What will be the biggest challenge of the next year?
Passing my fourth-year exams and starting my rotations, while keeping up with my AVS commitments; maintaining a social and sporting life, and doing them all well. It’s not my style to only put half the effort into a job, so I can see a bit of a crazy year coming up, but I will take each day at a time.