Widening access to veterinary school

The RVC’s Gateway Programme aims to widen the opportunities for students who do not meet the College’s normal entry requirements to study for a veterinary degree. Jim Cannon discusses progress so far

IN September 2005, the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) welcomed its first group of students on to its Gateway access course, and from these origins the initiative has continued to grow.

The Gateway course is the first year of an extended six-year veterinary degree programme. Part of a widening participation initiative, the course is designed to open up opportunities to students who went to a non-selective state school; are eligible to receive the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA); and whose parents have not been to university. Successful completion of the programme does not give a qualification in itself, but does lead to a guaranteed place on the RVC’s five-year BVetMed programme. The course also now offers students the chance to study for their veterinary degree elsewhere, with the universities of Liverpool, Bristol, Glasgow and, most recently, Cambridge guaranteeing an interview for a place on a five-year clinical veterinary degree course.

In September 2009, 34 students joined the current Gateway year, with all passing their first course assessment. Feedback from the students is positive, with one Gateway student stating: “The lectures have been structured very well, and the pace has always been just right. It’s an amazing course and I would not be here without it!” Students who have passed in previous years are now in a variety of places. Most are in years 1, 2 and 3 of the RVC’s BVetMed course. Some are at the universities of Bristol and Liverpool, while a few are spending the year studying a BSc in another discipline.

Two students from the original intake have returned to the RVC having successfully graduated with a BSc in Biomedical Sciences and Infection from University College London, and from Liverpool University with a BSc in Veterinary Conservation Medicine. This year, even more students have shown an interest in intercalation and are now applying for courses around the country.

Students in the first intake have just finished year 5 at the RVC and have been visiting practices and farms to observe and learn from practitioners. This is part of 26 weeks of extramural studies (EMS) they complete over the last three years of the course, of which they are about to enter their final year. They have become ambassadors for the RVC Gateway programme across the country. As the students spend time with vets, vet nurses and sometimes secondary school students on their work placements, they are spreading the message that it is possible to get into vet school from a non-traditional route and succeed there.

Stephanie Edwards is one such student, who has excelled in her studies, having received merits in all years and a distinction in year 3 of the BVetMed. ‘I am currently in my fourth year of the BVetMed course at the RVC. I achieved average GCSE grades and A-levels, so when applying to universities for veterinary degrees I got straight rejections. My options were limited but I was determined to achieve my goals, so I returned to school to resit my A-levels and, upon my return, the new RVC Gateway course was brought to my attention. I fulfilled the requirements for entry so applied and, after a successful interview, was given an unconditional offer.

‘I found the RVC Gateway year an excellent opportunity to integrate into a new environment and develop my learning skills, as well as making close friends within the group. Having not come from a farming background, I had little experience handling large animals and found that the structured animal husbandry classes gave me more confidence. Due to the work placement, I didn’t feel behind doing the EMS and OSCE [objective structured clinical examinations] on the BVetMed course. This helped me develop a good work ethic and basic practical skills to build on later in the course, and has enabled me to progress well with the degree.

‘I have a favourite work placement with a farm practice locally, which I continue to return to. They have helped me build on the theory and improve my practical skills in a

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large animal practice, an area of the profession which I take a deeper interest in and intend to progress into a career after graduation.

Stephanie did two periods of EMS with a farm animal practice based in Shrewsbury. One of the vets in the practice, Rob Wood, can’t speak highly enough of her: ‘We gave Stephanie her first EMS work placement, and together did a lot of routine fertility work, some operations and some clinical work. Throughout the work placement, I’ve been very impressed with her grasp of the practical work we have undertaken, her keenness to learn and to participate in our day-to-day work. Steph’s knowledge is good and she seems to have an aptitude for this side of veterinary practice.

‘I would put her practical ability above most of the students I have dealt with in the past considering where she has got in the course so far. As a Gateway entrance student, I would have no qualms about her and, at present, would rate her beyond normal-entrance students I’ve helped to train on the EMS work placement.’

Lance Lanyon, who was principal of the RVC when the Gateway programme was developed, believes the course is a great way for young people to enter the veterinary profession. He says, ‘The veterinary profession has long been recognised as one of the most difficult to enter. The odds are stacked against young people from inner cities who do not have easy access to animal experience and attend schools where students do not routinely achieve the high A grades required. The Gateway programme will help the veterinary profession become more representative of the society it serves.’

Ten-minute chat

Emily Robson followed in her family’s footsteps and studied veterinary medicine. After three years in mixed and equine practice, she embarked on a sculpture degree at Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen.

What made you become an art student?

Art has always been a passion of mine: through late school and university I forced it to the back of my mind in order to fulfil my ambition of becoming a vet. However, it became increasingly difficult to ignore my desire to explore and express the artistic side of my personality. My full-time veterinary career did not allow me the time or energy to satisfy this, and I began to feel torn between life as a vet and a desire for something more.

Were you concerned about how your decision to study art might affect your career as a vet?

Two things concerned me: first, how future employers might view this career change, and secondly, whether it would set me back in my professional development as a vet. The years I am spending studying art are often those used to undertake internships/residencies, etc., and essentially kick-start a vet’s journey to becoming a specialist. However, this is conventional, not statutory, and I would like to think that so long as I keep up to date, informed and interested, this path will still be open to me. Thus far, I am finding plenty of part-time and locum work to finance my study habit.

How do you spend a typical day?

I work in mixed and small animal practice almost all of every weekend, and during the holidays. Monday to Friday during term time, I start my day ploughing up and down the university pool! I start in the studio around 09.00 and spend between eight and 12 hours there: my time is divided between researching, drawing, developing ideas, making things in the workshop and taking part in group discussions, and so on.

We have regular guest lecturers who are practising artists, and a course alongside sculpture, which is about the context and place of art in society. It is an incredibly interesting and stimulating course; I love it!

What do you like most about being a student again?

I love the personal expression facilitated by a creative curriculum. I also love the new type of learning; learning about myself and life from a completely different angle to that of science and evidence-based medicine. I find myself thinking about life differently, and seeing issues from a new viewpoint. It is also an incredible luxury to have time to think; to consider different philosophies and explore new areas of interest.

What do you not like?

The financial strain! It’s not easy keeping a mortgage going. However, part-time veterinary work beats any other student job pay packet!

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar shift in career?

Life is fairly fast and fairly short, while bursting with opportunities for new experiences. In my opinion, people restrict themselves through fear of the unknown and the unconventional. We have to remember that we are free to make any changes; convention regarding lifestyle and career exists only in the mind. Each of us is suited to a different path, and the path less trodden may stand to bring more in return.

My advice, though a cliché, is ‘where there’s a will there’s a way’. If you find yourself with a desire to do something new or different, don’t be put off at the first hurdle; it might not be easy, but it’s unlikely to be as hard as becoming a vet.

Years of Art in Aberdeen.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?

Someone I used to know often said, ‘You’ve got to look after number one’. I ignored this advice for years; I thought it was selfish in sentiment. However, I have learned that looking after oneself is a necessary part of life. Vets tend to be incredibly conscientious and selfless in their approach to life and work.

We should not underestimate the benefits to our health and our usefulness gained by looking after ourselves. We need rest, we need a break now and again, and we could all benefit from ensuring that we eat healthily and take enough exercise. It sounds simple – we’ve heard it hundreds of times – but we seldom prioritise these elements of our lives.

What was your proudest moment?

I’m not sure that pride is something I experience in moments. I am proud of people close to me who have managed to overcome different challenges. It is a pride that I feel almost continually while in their presence, and also when I think of them; I feel proud of their achievements and fortunate to be part of their lives.

. . . and your most embarrassing moment?

I’ve had so many! Ask anyone I’ve worked with/lived with/socialised with! However, for those who know me, the antics at the 2006 Turriff Show probably top the blushometer!
Ten-minute chat

Emily Robson

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