The University of Liverpool offers a postgraduate certificate in veterinary business management. Ben Sykes describes how the course is run.

RECENT articles in *Veterinary Record* have demonstrated the importance of veterinary business management to practitioners, but the role of various tiers of education in veterinary business management remains a point of contention. In a recent Viewpoint article, I argued that the development of extensive business skills at a new graduate level is beyond the capabilities of undergraduate students, and the capacities of the universities that educate them (Sykes 2013). I further suggested that veterinary business management should be viewed as a specialised skill in the same manner that clinical skills are, and that attainment of business management skills requires a systemic, structured approach to learning. Recognising this, the University of Liverpool’s School of Veterinary Science has developed a postgraduate certificate in veterinary business management (PGCertVBM), which can be studied online through part-time study.

The PGCertVBM is a 60-credit programme at Master’s degree level, consisting of six modules starting with a four-week introductory module. This is followed by four 16-week modules that cover key aspects of business management (human resources, marketing, finance and accounting and business strategy and entrepreneurship) and a 16-week work-based learning module. Assessment for the four core modules is also approved by the RCVS and successful attainment of these modules can contribute towards achievement of the RCVS certificate in advanced veterinary practice (CertAVP).

Each module is designed to encourage the candidate to critically evaluate the daily activities of a veterinary practice against the fundamentals of business management, with emphasis on how the business management literature relates to veterinary practice. It is commonly accepted that an evidence-based approach is central to the development of good clinical skills and the programme’s philosophy is that business management is no different.

An evidence-based approach is taken throughout the programme, using peer-reviewed business management research to answer specific questions. This approach is considered a cornerstone.

The structure of the modules is such that learning materials and assessments are provided on a weekly basis, allowing candidates to work through each module at a steady pace. Extensive peer to peer interaction is encouraged through the use of discussion boards where students can interact and collaborate, bouncing ideas between colleagues and academic staff within the virtual ‘classroom’. These facilitated discussions are an important aspect of the learning process and often result in the development of interesting, educated discussion points. Additional assessments revolve around written work, reflecting the study material learnt against the candidates’ own business experience.

The programme is open to veterinary surgeons and non-veterinary staff who are actively involved in business management. As such, it provides an avenue for veterinarians or practice managers seeking to develop.
a further understanding of their own business; alternatively, it creates an opportunity for veterinary or non-veterinary staff who are looking to gain a new skill with the goal of improving their future job prospects.

Enrollment for the introduction to veterinary business management modules take place three times per year, with the four core modules operating on a rotating basis, and the work-based learning module is offered three times per year, allowing candidates to start and stop according to their own schedule – over usually two years and within a maximum of three years.

Ten-minute chat

Jonathan Cracknell is a zoological and wildlife vet with a strong interest in welfare and anaesthesia. He is Director of Animal Operations at Longleat Safari and Adventure Park; he also provides capacity and capability support for welfare charities internationally – from Europe to Indonesia. He has worked with a variety of species, but is best known for his work with bears in China and India, as well as his contributions to elephant infectious disease management, including elephant endotheliotropic herpesvirus and tuberculosis.

Were you always interested in zoo animals and wildlife?
I’ve always been interested in working with the wilder species that challenge the veterinary profession, and I have been extremely fortunate to have been able to work on the projects that I have. It is a difficult and competitive field to get into and I freely admit that I have been very lucky. Starting at school I was a voluntary keeper at Chester Zoo and throughout veterinary school I volunteered to work alongside some amazing people, building the network that allowed me to get to where I am now.

Do you specialise in one area?
Zoological and wildlife vets are considered to be the ultimate generalist as we have a wide range of knowledge over a diverse range of taxonomic groups. Within the discipline we often become specialised simply through exposure to a larger number of cases than our colleagues; in my case that would be zoo and wildlife anaesthesia (building on my skills from my anaesthesia residency at the Animal Health Trust), elephant medicine and bear rehabilitation. However, I can equally turn my hand to avian orthopaedics or fish surgery if required.

What does your job involve?
The joy of zoo and wildlife medicine is the variety of cases and species that you see on a daily basis. There is not really a standard day: one day I could be in India helping manage tuberculosis preventative medicine strategies, the next I could be training, via telemedicine, local veterinarians in Beirut in captive primate management. I see a wide variety of captive and wild wildlife. There is a lot of paperwork too, though it’s not all glamorous.

What’s the best thing about your job? Probably the privilege of getting to find things, even simply anatomical features, that no-one has even noted before.

. . . and the worst bit?
Thinking you’ve discovered something new, not in the current literature, only to find that Sir Richard Owen had already discovered it in 1880.

Why is your job important?
To me? Simply because I love doing what I do. For the charities? I provide a service that allows the standards of welfare to be raised for the animals in their care while improving preventative and reactive medicine programmes in line with prudent ethical and financial resource use. For the captive animals I currently look after? I ensure that they are catered for in line with best current practice.

What advice would you give someone considering a similar career?
That’s a difficult one. I’ve seen many clinicians, many much better then me, have no luck in this field. It’s about being in the right place at the right time and making a niche for yourself. I considered anaesthesia was a sensible route to go down and this proved to be right for me. There are a lot of opportunities out there and you have to be able to be in a position to be able to run with them and throw caution to the wind sometimes. Emerging infectious diseases and epidemiology is probably the direction I would look to if I was starting all of this again.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
There has never been one piece of advice that I could single out as being the best; however, I would say that two individuals stand out in my training in the discipline of zoological and wildlife medicine. They taught me the skills and art needed when considering the wildlife patient: Alistair Lawrie and Andrew Routh, in my opinion, are two of the best and most influential clinicians that I have had the privilege to work with. Saying that I couldn’t achieve what I do without the advice, network and support of the many clinicians, nurses and animal teams that I work with: the zoo and wildlife field is a large family in some respects, simply because it is so small and there is always some one out their with advice to help you solve a problem or mull over a disaster .

What was your proudest moment?
Being invited to be the veterinary adviser to the Polar Bear European Endangered Species Management Programme.

. . . and your most embarrassing?
It takes a lot to embarrass me, but one moment stands out. Early on in my working life in China I was taken as guest of honour to a meal with my colleagues and introduced to the joys of baiju. I was unable to work for almost three days afterwards. It was not pretty for anyone, including the small army that had to carry my prone body back home that evening.
Ten-minute chat

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