Bridging the gap between school and university

Emily Stacey is a third-year student at the Royal Veterinary College, and is one of a group of students that has developed an online course to help new students familiarise themselves with the topics they will study and the most useful ways to study them.

The course aims to prepare students for their first months at vet school and covers fundamental veterinary topics that students are unlikely to have previously encountered. It was developed from personal experience. Between having my undergraduate place at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) confirmed and starting freshers’ week, I remember being keen to start studying anything related to veterinary science that I could lay my hands on. Despite extensive searching, I was unable to find a resource to prepare with. The RVC sent a welcome pack, but it didn’t include reading lists or preliminary exercises. Therefore, when I first arrived at vet school, I was unsure what I should be studying to ease the transition from studying science at school to veterinary medicine at university.

Chatting to student colleagues, I found they had also struggled to make the transition between classroom-based teaching and lectures. In particular, there was general agreement that it would be useful to provide a review of some of the basic topics, such as anatomy and physiology. With hindsight, we also realised the benefit of becoming familiar with the way content is presented at university. For these reasons, we created our induction course on a Moodle site, like the one we use as students, providing content in the form of animations, videos, podcasts and assessments.

We felt that this would help students become familiar with our online learning environment before they arrived on campus.

We established a small project team of four veterinary students and a vet nurse student, all of whom had recently started at the RVC. The team worked well together and each member took on different responsibilities for the project. We worked closely with college’s eMedia Unit, which provided technical support and guidance. We were also able to draw on the help of several members of academic staff who provided advice on the content of the course and reviewed the final resource to check the quality.

Developing the resource took the team approximately five weeks’ full-time work during the summer vacation. Planning the structure and content of the courses took the bulk of the time, and we gained an appreciation of how much work staff put in designing teaching material for us. Once we had a project plan and had assigned tasks, the next steps were relatively straightforward. The most difficult aspect was refining the content so that it was applicable to all three RVC undergraduate courses. We also wanted to ensure that it was engaging and informative, and that it could be approached from different educational backgrounds. Careful planning meant that we were able to complete the task, which allowed students to work through it before the start of term.

How the course helps

Our aim was to prepare students for their studies in two ways – to build on previous knowledge to best prepare them for the veterinary curriculum, and to introduce them to the RVC’s online resources. We achieved this by making a student-friendly interface with easy-to-navigate interactive content. The course was made available to students once they held an unconditional offer, and the course web address and a generic log in was included in the welcome pack.

We suggested that students spent 30 to 40 minutes on each section, with an over-
all course completion time of three hours, which we thought was reasonable for the summer vacation. However, our feedback showed that 55 per cent of respondents spent over three hours working through the resource. Students could return to the course as frequently as they wanted.

The content was divided into the following academic and pastoral sections:

- Introduction to studying at the RVC, providing information on the Student Union, study tips and information for international students, etc.
- Introduction to anatomy, covering basic anatomical topics using musculoskeletal anatomy as an example.
- Introduction to cells and tissues to encourage revision of material that would have been covered at school, providing additional depth and encouraging more insight.
- Introduction to animal husbandry, which covers general knowledge and practical skills applicable from the start of the course.
- A glossary of key terms that students might encounter during the course.

What makes these topics special is that we incorporated our personal experiences of the ways we approached them as new students. This personal perspective was something students commented on as being particularly valuable.

Feedback
To analyse the efficacy of the course and determine areas for improvement, we asked participants to complete a survey. In the most recent one, we received feedback from 36 students although we know that many more took the course. Feedback from this group suggested that over 90 per cent felt they were better prepared for starting their studies. It was reassuring to hear from one respondent that it ‘puts an international student’s mind at ease knowing what is expected of them’. The course also gives students confidence that the way they will be taught won’t be ‘entirely different to what we’re used to’.

One respondent commented that ‘Having had a similar learning environment at Exeter, I realise just how critical they are and starting to find your way around is vital’. When asked about ability to navigate through the course, 90 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the course was easy to use.

When it came to reviewing how the course built on existing knowledge taught at school, one student commented: ‘It both refreshed and taught anew with some new concepts.’

In response to feedback, we have updated some aspects of the course, including checking that interactive activities, podcasts and videos are supported on more technical platforms, such as Android and Apple mobile and tablet devices especially.

Personal benefit
As students, we have benefited from this project by developing our organisation and liaison skills and our understanding of the importance of good leadership to ensure efficient time management. We formed strong friendships within the team and were able to get to know academic and technical staff better by working alongside them. We have also developed confidence in our digital literacy skills.

As a result, we are keen to encourage other students to improve their digital literacy skills and encourage new technology projects similar to the creation of ‘RVC Online Induction’. We are also pleased that the RVC intends to make this course available to a wider audience of prospective students in the future. If you would like to know more about this project or access the site please contact me by e-mail: estacey1@rvc.ac.uk.

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