

Appreciating the difference, making a difference

Luis Sainz-Pardo didn't realise how different his experience of working as a vet in the UK was until he returned home to Spain, and subsequently travelled throughout Europe. Now, he uses his understanding of veterinary diversity to forge a varied, interesting and international career path within the profession

MORE new RCVS members now come from outside the UK than are 'home-grown' UK graduates, so practices are becoming much more accustomed to meeting the specific needs of overseas graduates as regards support. When I first arrived in the UK in 1993, it was a very different story.

My move came immediately after graduating from the Universidad de Extremadura in southern Spain and my first day was a real baptism of fire. I was dropped at the door by my new boss who told me he would pick me up that evening. There was no other vet on site, just two fantastic, highly experienced (but unqualified) nurses who managed to get me through a packed waiting room of clients and five-minute appointments.

That might seem horrifying now, but it was just the way things were done in those days. I survived and eventually began to thrive. Two years later, I moved to a bigger practice down south, and four years later I bought a practice in Stoke-on-Trent and expanded it over the next nine years.

The practice grew from just five employees to 15 and was one of the first in the UK to be awarded the BSAVA standard and, later, Tier 2 accreditation by the RCVS. It gave me

a real sense of accomplishment and I acquired the new skills I needed to manage people and a business as well as carrying out clinical work.

International perspective

After selling the practice in 2007, I returned to Spain where I took on a new challenge helping to develop veterinary e-learning courses and delivering consultancy on behalf of a large veterinary group. For the next five years I travelled across mid-Europe, researching, coaching and lecturing at veterinary hospitals and universities.

It became clear to me that the way veterinary medicine is practised is very different across nations. Having always worked in the UK, I had never fully appreciated the differences. I began to appreciate the difficulties non-UK vets and nurses had when trying to settle into UK practice after working in their home countries. Their clinical experience was invaluable, but it was a failure to understand the cultural nuances and professional obligations that often tripped these graduates



up, resulting in many of them leaving the UK, often with their self-confidence dented. I realised that, even though I had graduated in Spain, when I was a UK practice owner I hadn't understood the need for, or provided, the kind of support my non-UK colleagues badly needed.

I was determined to do something about this and, in 2010, I created VetAbroad, a predominantly e-learning course, supported with additional feedback and coaching. I started by focusing on vets from the countries I had visited, eventually building up expertise and knowledge, allowing me to coach vets from 16 different countries.

I taught non-UK vets how to follow the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct, how to work as part of a team and how to become a productive employee. There are challenges in how to communicate with clients and run effective consultations and I was able to provide hints and tips that would help overseas graduates to be more effective in carrying out their day-to-day work.

By 2014, it was becoming clear that the need for the service was increasing and that many individuals needed help in the workplace, not only before to coming to work in the UK. Practice owners told me they were willing to support their new recruits but sometimes struggled with the practicalities. I

created Practice Aid, a company dedicated to providing assistance to UK practices dealing with the recruitment, induction and mentoring of non-UK employees.

For me, it was a chance to increase the level of personal support I provided. I was already offering lots of advice and counselling, both during the course and afterwards as VetAbroad vets entered the workplace, and I found that seeing the situation from the point of view of the individual and practice management gave me a perspective that allowed me to help both parties.

Through Practice Aid, I aim to reduce the time for integration within the team and to reach peak performance. It means practice managers don't have to spend time troubleshooting due to unnecessary mistakes, worrying about reputational damage, or coping with inadequate levels of staffing due to poor employee retention rates.

I use video conferencing, which allows me to support several delegates at once and keep costs affordable. The sessions take place during the working day, or at evenings or weekends if it fits better with practice work-

flow. I also offer one-to-one coaching, help with recruitment and selection and offer on-site training on topics like team working, productivity or motivation.

Listening, guiding, developing

As a non-judgemental colleague that sits outside the management structure, I can give impartial guidance. Questions can be posed without fear or embarrassment and this openness is a big advantage, often allowing overseas vets to talk through their ideas or approaches first, rather than make mistakes. I also work with practice managers to help them with specific issues that have arisen, or develop career plans or CPD that will help them to retain their employees long term.

It has been a hugely satisfying development in my career. I've seen individuals become competent, confident professionals and make a life for themselves in the UK – around 35 per cent of recognised specialists in the UK are overseas graduates. I've also seen practices flourish as a result of the efforts of their new employees.

As importantly, I've become a trusted partner to independent and corporate practices where I've been able to reduce the burden imposed by the need to repeatedly recruit new members of staff – a process that many people told me was becoming a stressful part of running the practice.

My professional life as a vet has been varied and interesting and this second phase of my career is proving equally rewarding. I'm proud to be contributing to the profession in a useful way and also to be able to help people.

Nearly everyone benefits from having someone who can listen and give them some wise counsel based on real experience, and not on theoretical approaches that may have been imported from other industries – whether they are practice owners or employees. The service I provide isn't one I could ever have envisaged at the start of my career, but it has allowed me to develop clinically, professionally and personally. If we are open to new opportunities, accept new challenges and ensure we have the right support, we can achieve anything.

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