

# Feature

## EDUCATION

# Widening access to the veterinary profession

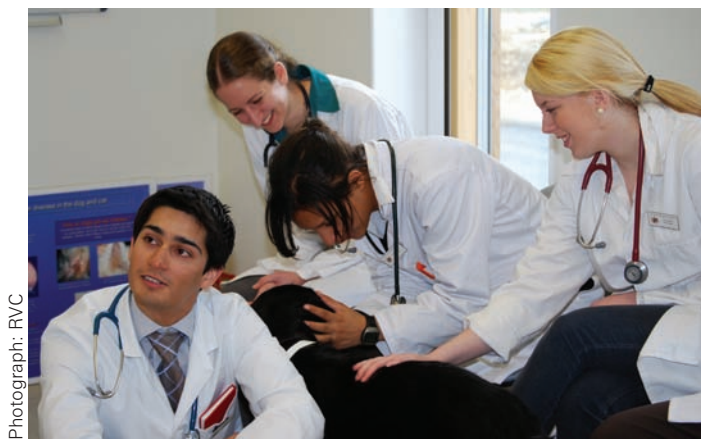
University tuition fees in England are set to increase to up to £9000 per year in 2012. A key requirement that had to be fulfilled by universities wishing to charge more than £6000 in tuition fees was that they committed to widening access to their courses to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The seven veterinary schools in the UK are already active in this area, and a number of other initiatives are also in place, as Freda Andrews, head of education at the RCVS, explains.

THE UK's veterinary schools have a number of different widening access schemes in place, some specific to the particular school or involving several schools, while others are part of broader programmes with other organisations.

### Royal Veterinary College

The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) introduced its 'Gateway' programme six years ago, providing a foundation pre-veterinary year for students fitting widening participation profiles. The progression and integration of these students into the main veterinary programme, not only at the RVC but also now at other participating veterinary schools, demonstrates the success of the initiative. The RVC has provided significant bursaries for students enrolled on the programme and has invested in the development of learning support systems to ease the transition of these students into the mainstream programme. The first 'Gateway' graduates entered the veterinary workforce last summer.

Widening participation to increase the diversity of the student population is one of the RVC's strategic objectives and progress has been made towards targets for recruiting students from previously under-represented groups. There has been an increase in admissions of students with vocational qualifications, as well as increasing numbers of students from lower socioeconomic groups (from 11.3 per cent to 29.1 per cent in seven years), and a small increase in students from ethnic minorities. The college has relationships with a number of inner-city schools and local colleges,



Photograph: RVC

Students at the Royal Veterinary College, which introduced its 'Gateway' programme aimed at widening access to the veterinary course six years ago

and its widening participation staff invest significant amounts of time in targeting interventions to encourage talented school students from inner-city schools to consider veterinary careers. The RVC has developed a careers website, 'So you want to be a vet' ([www.tobeavet.com](http://www.tobeavet.com)), aimed at school students who may lack the support and guidance to apply to university. Among other things, this provides tips and guidance on interviews, and on completing personal statements on UCAS forms.

The RVC was the lead and founding member of the National Lifelong Learning Network for Veterinary and Allied Professions (VETNET LLN, see box on p 10) and continues to be the lead institution supporting its activities during its transition to a self-funded association.

### Liverpool veterinary school

Alongside the RVC, Liverpool vet school has been a key player in the VETNET LLN. It has run three Easter schools for vocational students and the first BTEC diploma student started on the veterinary degree course in autumn 2010, having successfully completed one of the Easter schools.

Despite the pressure produced by the

generation of league tables to require high tariffs for entry to the course, Liverpool has maintained its entry requirements for the veterinary degree course at grades AAB at A level, and has taken the decision not to require A\* grades in order not to disadvantage those from poorly performing schools. It has developed a 'Year 0' foundation programme with local further education colleges, providing access for students from failing schools, or for those who have not taken A level sciences, and also for mature 'access' students. (This is not a back door route for those who have failed science A levels, who should resit.)

Liverpool veterinary school staff are widely involved in secondary school visits and take part in the university's 'mentor' scheme, which encourages Liverpool children from less affluent families to go to university.

### Bristol veterinary school

Bristol veterinary school is now in its third year of running a pre-veterinary foundation year, and between two and three students per year, primarily with BTEC diplomas and Access to Higher Education qualifications, are progressing

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## VETNET lifelong learning network

Since its launch in 2007, VETNET LLN – the National Lifelong Learning Network for Veterinary and Allied Professions – has made a major contribution to improving progression routes between vocational further education courses and higher education in the animal- and veterinary-related sector. VETNET LLN is a national network of veterinary schools, other universities and further education colleges and was initially funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for three years to the tune of £3.74 million. Previously, it had been almost impossible for students to be considered for admission to a veterinary degree course unless they had obtained high grades in traditional academic science A levels or the Scottish equivalent. Any talented students who had taken a vocational route into working with animals – often as a result of poor careers guidance – would find their career aspirations blocked unless they were in a position to take A levels.

As its HEFCE funding has now run out, VETNET LLN has recently become

a self-funded association of universities and colleges so that the work can continue. It has also extended its reach to Scotland.

VETNET LLN has initiated a large number of local projects aimed at encouraging students on vocational courses to consider progressing to study at university. Work to improve the scientific content and teaching on animal-related vocational courses has been particularly important to improving progression routes. VETNET LLN has helped to run Easter schools at the veterinary schools for vocational students (the one at Liverpool is now in its third year). It has also run CPD courses for further education teachers, and initiated curriculum development projects. A new BTEC chemistry module has been developed to improve the basic science content of BTEC diplomas in animal management.

VETNET LLN has been instrumental in encouraging the development of 'foundation year' – or 'pre-veterinary' courses at some of the veterinary schools.

Such programmes are now enabling talented vocational students to progress into veterinary degree courses.

Although in absolute terms the number of students benefiting from such programmes who have been admitted into veterinary degree courses is small, the effect in terms of changing the attitudes of teachers (in both schools and universities) and students is significant. The fact that there is now a route for some vocational students to progress and to achieve a veterinary degree is a powerful message, and demonstrates that a significant barrier to higher education study has finally been removed.

It is early days for VETNET LLN's new incarnation as a membership association, but its continuation will be important if this initial momentum is not to be lost. VETNET LLN's continued existence as an association will depend upon its college and university members paying annual subscriptions and it is to be hoped that these do not become the victim of public sector education cuts.

into the full veterinary degree course. Bristol has also admitted four students from the RVC's Gateway programme. It continues its admissions policy for widening participation schools, being more flexible in the A level grades required. Bristol took the decision not to require A\* grades for entry in 2011, being mindful that this might disadvantage applicants from poorly performing schools.

Bristol also runs a 'Vet Quest' day each year for schoolchildren, to give them a taste of veterinary work, and staff and students in the veterinary school are encouraged to visit schools to discuss careers in veterinary science and to help raise aspirations. The veterinary school is also active in the VETNET LLN, including the Progression Agreement, chairing the new Regional Group and running an Easter school. Two participants in the 2010 Easter school were offered places on the pre-veterinary year in 2011. In order to further encourage widening participation in the south west, the school has developed close associations with Bridgwater College (the head of the veterinary school is a governor of the college), a further education college that admits many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and with Brymore School, a state boarding school that admits many pupils with educational challenges. The veterinary school continues to participate in the Sutton Trust Summer School, Higher Education Summer School and Access to Bristol schemes.

### Glasgow veterinary school

Glasgow veterinary school is involved in a number of widening participation initiatives, such as 'Reach' – a national project in Scotland that aims to raise awareness of professional degree-level study and to encourage, support and prepare secondary school pupils aged 14 to 18 (years s4 to s6 in the Scottish education system) who wish to pursue a professional degree.

The Reach programme for the west of Scotland is coordinated by the University of Glasgow and will work with 92 schools across the region. It is aimed at school pupils with the interest, potential and ability to study one of the following professional degrees: dentistry, law, medicine and veterinary medicine. The s4 students will be introduced to generic university study skills and subject-specific tasks. This will lead on to practical workshops and demonstrations in each of the professional schools. They will be introduced to the virtual learning environment and be given specific tasks to complete. The s5 students were involved in a one-week summer school programme at the veterinary school in June, which included a tour of the vet school facilities and meeting a variety of veterinary professionals discussing all aspects of the profession. The pupils were also introduced to clinical and communication skills. The admissions officers spoke to them about applying to vet school and about interview techniques. The week also involved coaching sessions for pupils with undergraduate students and

staff regarding UCAS applications, and workshops on aspects of application, such as personal statements, the UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) and the National Admissions Test for Law (LNAT). The Reach programme provides support in finding work experience. The s6 pupils will be provided with support during the final stages of the application process and will be invited to take part in an interview skills workshop with staff and current students.

The veterinary school has also been involved with the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), a suite of programmes run by Stow College in Glasgow on behalf of a consortium of higher education establishments in the west of Scotland. Stow College runs tailored one-year programmes providing an alternative access route to the higher education institutions. Success in the SWAP scheme guarantees an interview at the higher education institution(s). The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine has agreed to consider the medical studies programme in relation to entry to veterinary medicine. In 2009, three candidates were interviewed and an offer made to one of them.

The School of Veterinary Medicine at Glasgow has joined the RVC's 'Gateway' scheme and in 2009 offered a place to one of the candidates. The Glasgow veterinary school is also an active member of the VETNET LLN.

The widening participation officer at the veterinary school participates in open days in secondary schools each year and is also

invited to speak to local primary schools. A key component of these visits is the use of interactive learning skills and veterinary literature to promote careers in veterinary medicine.

### Edinburgh veterinary school

The University of Edinburgh is a funding partner of the Lothians Equal Access Programme for Students (LEAPS). The programme includes an eight-week summer school and students can be asked to attend this as part of their conditional offer or of their own volition. The veterinary school currently admits between three and five students annually through this route.

The school is also an active partner in the 'Pathways to the Professions' project involving a number of schools in Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Scottish borders, to encourage progression by under-represented school students into professional courses (veterinary medicine, medicine, law and architecture). The programme, for school pupils aged 15 to 18, includes an open day organised by the vet school, which comprises short talks on aspects of being a veterinarian and career opportunities, tours of the clinical facilities, and participatory workshops in communication skills, basic surgical skills, echocardiography, equine hospital and small animal medicine. In addition, academic members of staff and students participate in parents' and pupils' evenings and sessions for careers advisers/school counsellors/teachers as part of the Pathways scheme. Through the Pathways/LEAPS schemes, the veterinary school's farms manager is also able to assist applicants from non-traditional backgrounds

to gain some of the necessary work experience with farm animals needed for their application where this may be difficult because of their personal circumstances.

Pathways to the Professions is embedded in and funded by the University of Edinburgh and was cited as a best practice example in 'Unleashing Aspiration', the report of the Panel for Fair Access to the Professions chaired by Alan Milburn.

A recent development is the rolling out of the Pathways to the Professions model via a new national (Scotland) project funded by the Scottish Funding Council. Edinburgh is delivering the Reach Scotland project in the south east of Scotland and the vet school will be an active partner, allowing more students in the Forth Valley area to gain insight into the degree programme and the profession.

### Cambridge veterinary school

Although admission to veterinary school is the main hurdle that must be overcome for anyone with ambitions to be a vet, the opportunity to explore a wide range of career options within the profession is also a factor in social mobility. Cambridge offers a nine-week residential research summer school, which is open to students from all veterinary schools, funded by the Wellcome Trust and supported by Glaxo SmithKline. Students are provided with a stipend to cover daily living expenses, fully paid bed and breakfast accommodation at one of the colleges, travel costs, and even a bicycle to get round Cambridge for the duration of the course. This provides an excellent opportunity for students who would not otherwise be able to afford to attend,

to gain experience in a leading research environment as preparation for a possible research career.

Cambridge offers a short residential course for prospective vets. The course provides a two-day experience of life as a veterinary student at Cambridge and invitations are sent to more than 4000 schools and colleges from the UCAS database. Approximately 65 per cent of those attending come from maintained schools and a small number of bursaries are available on a case-by-case basis.

Cambridge veterinary school hosts visits during the Sutton Trust Cambridge University summer open days, and also promotes the possibility of entry to the veterinary profession from a broad range of backgrounds by means of a stand at the Vet-Medlink conference held annually at Nottingham and attended by a large number of potential applicants.

It has also been involved in VETNET LLN activity, and has been working with further education colleges in the eastern region to develop CPD programmes for further education staff on animal management programmes. Girton College has recently agreed to join the RVC's 'Gateway' scheme and will now consider applications from the foundation year course for admission to Cambridge.

Admission policies are the responsibility of the individual Cambridge colleges, and many are involved in various outreach activities. The University of Cambridge and its colleges are committed to widening participation in the university and in higher education in general, as demonstrated by the hundreds of outreach initiatives and

## New fees regime – what it means for students

A commitment to widening access was part of the new arrangements for university tuition fees in England from 2012. Other aspects of the new regime are outlined briefly below.

- Monthly repayments from salary on loans for tuition fees will be £540 per annum less than under the present regime as the repayment threshold will rise from £15,000 to £21,000 income. Repayment is at 9 per cent of salary over £21,000, with interest rates increasing progressively for higher salaries. For those on incomes over £41,000, interest will accrue at RPI + 3 per cent.

- Students taking longer six-year courses at universities charging fees of £9000 per year will pay back the same amount each month as students taking short degrees and paying lower fees. English veterinary students (whether studying in England or

Scotland) will have larger loans to repay overall, but the monthly repayment rate will be less than now; those who do not earn high salaries will not pay off the full amount.

- Student loans are written off after 30 years, so that many will not repay all that they borrowed.

- Outstanding student loans will not affect credit ratings or mortgage applications, except in so far as monthly net income will be slightly reduced – as the loan repayment is, in effect, another form of taxation. Basic rates of income tax are substantially lower now than they were in previous decades when students paid no tuition fees and received grants. Basic rates of income tax in the 1970s and 1980s were between 30 and 35 per cent, with rates rising to 50 per cent and beyond on higher salaries.

- Loans to cover maintenance/living costs are also available, and there are

non-repayable grants for those from households earning less than £40,000 per year.

Some school students may be put off applying by a psychological barrier to borrowing, but those who do choose to go to university may be more attracted to a professional degree such as veterinary medicine, where employment prospects are still healthier than in many other sectors. Veterinary students also have the benefit of their whole professional training and qualification being classed as an undergraduate degree, giving them access to government-subsidised loans for their full professional qualification. This is in contrast to other sectors, such as finance and law, where the fees for professional qualifications have to be self-funded, or covered by bank loans, or may be paid by an employer only when the trainee has secured a job.



events run each year. These take place in Cambridge as well as in schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges around the UK.

The College Area Links Scheme enables schools and colleges from anywhere in the country to build a relationship with the university, and provides a platform for prospective applicants and their advisers to learn more about college choice, the admissions process, interviews, student life, finance and higher education in general. The widening participation team, based within the Cambridge admissions office, is involved in a range of initiatives to encourage students to consider the university, including GEEMA (the Group to Encourage Ethnic Minority Applications) and in working with further education colleges and mature students. Cambridge is also an active participant in Aimhigher initiatives for students in the eastern region.

### Nottingham veterinary school

The new School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham was approved by the Higher Education Funding Council for England with the stretching target of recruiting 25 per cent of its intake from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds. Since the first intake in 2006, the school has consistently exceeded this target with, on average, 34 per cent of its students meeting at least two indicators of disadvantage and/or entering via access or vocational qualifications.

This success has been achieved through a holistic approach. Targeted widening participation outreach activities include annual contributions to summer schools and master classes (such as the Sutton Trust and the university's Get on 4 Uni programme) run by the university's widening participation team, as well as a range of other school-run activities. The vet school interacts with local primary and secondary schools, including staff- and student-led delivery of teaching, careers advice and hands-on practical sessions, together with demonstrations at local and national rural fairs and events to raise aspirations and encourage admissions. Vet school staff provide careers talks on request from schools across the UK, and veterinary-related teaching materials and careers information is available for secondary school teachers through the veterinary school's website.

The school's recruitment and admissions process is designed to provide equal opportunity for all applicants to demonstrate their potential, with staff taking contextual information into consideration. The course itself may be more attractive to students with vocational qualifications or farming backgrounds, due to the integration of hands-on clinical practice from day 1. The standard offer is AAB at A level, and provides flexibility in



The RCVS's 'Walks of Life' careers material aims to help encourage more people from a diverse range of backgrounds to become vets

subject-specific grades for students with disadvantaging circumstances or a lack of opportunity.

From the school's inception, 'year 0' arrangements have played an important role in widening the intake. This preliminary year, which commenced four years ago and admits 24 students, provides an entry route for students who do not have the required science qualifications, but who do have high academic achievement in non-science or vocational subjects, or extensive experience. A new 'Gateway' year is designed for students who are studying science subjects, but whose grades are not at the level required for direct entry due to a lack of opportunity or disadvantaging circumstances. From the 2011 entry this will replace the Certificate in Health Science, provided in partnership with the University of Lincoln, which won the *Times Higher Education* Widening Participation Initiative of the Year award in 2006. The University of Nottingham is ensuring that these 'year 0' routes remain a viable option for students from low-income backgrounds entering in 2012 by providing fee waivers through the National Scholarships Programme for the first year of study.

### The wider profession

It is not just the veterinary schools that help to promote a veterinary career to all sections of society. Since the report 'Unleashing Aspiration' was published in July 2009, the RCVS has continued to promote its 'Walks of Life' careers materials, aimed at increasing diversity within the profession. These materials were originally produced following research that the RCVS commissioned from the Institute of Employment Studies. This aimed to identify why a broader range of students do not apply for veterinary school in the light of concerns that the student population was being drawn from a narrow range of applicants. The careers brochure and a series of short 'role model' videos were produced and first distributed to all secondary schools and colleges in 2008. This project was funded by the RCVS and six of the seven UK veterinary schools, with matched

funding provided by the then Department for Innovation and Skills.

After their initial launch, the RCVS redistributed the materials to all UK secondary schools in May 2010, and again in May 2011, and continues to make them freely available to careers advisers, schools and veterinary surgeons who visit schools to give careers talks. They are available on an interactive website at [www.walksoflife.org.uk](http://www.walksoflife.org.uk), and also on a You Tube channel at [www.youtube.com/vetcareers](http://www.youtube.com/vetcareers). They continue to be very positively received.

The Walks of Life careers materials are in demand not only by schools but also by veterinary practices. Individual veterinary surgeons and veterinary practices up and down the country continue to make a significant contribution to widening access through volunteering their time and expertise to participate in local school careers events and by offering work experience placements to school students considering applying to university.

It is still too early to say with any authority whether these materials and other initiatives have had a significant effect on the types of students applying to veterinary school, but early indications are that there has been a small improvement in the last three or four years. The number of men applying to study veterinary medicine has increased slightly – 523 applications from men in 2010 (24 per cent of all applications), compared with 360 (21 per cent of all applications) in 2007. Applications from ethnic minority students to degree courses in veterinary and related subjects have also seen a small increase, from 145 (3 per cent of applications) in 2008, to 241 (3.6 per cent) in 2010. The student population does, however, continue to be predominantly composed of white, female students.

■ This article is based on an RCVS submission to Alan Milburn, independent reviewer on social mobility and child poverty, as well as a paper on the new university funding regime produced for the RCVS Council.

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