1 August 2016

Higher Education Reform Feedback
By email: HEReform@education.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand submission

Introduction

Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) is pleased to provide a submission to the Higher Education Reform process.

VSANZ comprises the eight veterinary schools of Australia and New Zealand. These schools are located within James Cook University, the University of Queensland, the University of Sydney, Charles Sturt University, the University of Melbourne, the University of Adelaide, Murdoch University and Massey University.

VSANZ recently launched its strategic plan, which describes how the Australasian veterinary schools will work together to achieve the organisation’s vision of ‘Excellence in veterinary education and research’. We pursue five strategies:

1. ADVOCATE: for strong, valued veterinary professional and veterinary education sectors;
2. INNOVATE: in veterinary education so graduates exceed societal demands for veterinary services;
3. COLLABORATE: to improve schools’ capacity to deliver excellence in veterinary education;
4. CHAMPION: veterinary research, to expand and maximise its impact; and
5. ENABLE: by building a recognised and influential organisation.

VSANZ thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to provide comment on the Discussion Paper of May 2016.
Response to the Discussion Paper

This submission focuses on the likely impact of the Discussion Paper’s proposals on veterinary education in Australia’s universities. We wish to confine our comments to the ‘Affordability’ section of the Discussion Paper.

The financial challenges for veterinary schools were covered in greater detail in our submission\(^1\) to the Higher Education Base Funding Review of 2011. A more succinct summary is provided here.

1. Veterinary graduates play an important role in Australian society. Beyond their most visible role caring for companion animals, vets safeguard the health, welfare and production of livestock, supporting important domestic and export economic activity; play an important wildlife conservation role; contribute to Australia’s biosecurity; and play a vital role in human health, using their skills to minimise the spread of disease from animals to humans. We advise that veterinarians and therefore veterinary education delivers a significant public benefit. Furthermore, the training of fee-paying foreign students by veterinary schools represents a significant opportunity for international engagement.

We foresee a growing need in coming decades for veterinary graduates to enable Australia to take advantage of opportunities in exports to Asia (food, veterinary and related services) and tackle threats such as (to name a few): food insecurity, exotic disease incursions, antimicrobial resistance, the emergence of new human and animal diseases and biodiversity loss.

2. Australasian veterinary education is of a quality equal to any in the world. The 2016 QS Rankings list five Australasian vet schools among the top 50 schools of veterinary science internationally, including one school in the top 10.\(^2\) Each of the Australasian schools must be accredited by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) in order for its graduates to be legally qualified to practice in Australia. The Australian schools are also accredited with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) in the UK and, in addition, five of them are accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), meaning that their graduates qualify to work as veterinarians in the UK and the US and Canada, respectively, as well as many other countries by extension. AVMA accreditation is seen as a ‘gold standard’ in veterinary education and because of this enables international student recruitment to Australian courses. Accreditation is a highly rigorous process that reflects public expectations of the skill and training of veterinarians.

---

\(^1\) Submission by Council of Veterinary Deans of Australia and New Zealand (CVDANZ) – since renamed VSANZ

\(^2\) QS World University Rankings by Subject 2016
3. Qualification as a veterinarian requires 5-7 years of full time study. The veterinary course is one of the most expensive of all university programmes. The high cost reflects the demands of accreditation, which in turn are driven by the high quality standards of international veterinary education and the necessity for veterinary schools to provide clinical training across a range of animal species. Accreditation standards include numerous requirements not faced by most other educational providers, including (to provide just a few examples):

- An academic staff to student ratio of 1:7 (compared with 1:12 for similar disciplines)
- Hospitalisation facilities for large and small animals;
- Diagnostic laboratories; and
- Cleaning practices at a human health standard.

4. A significant cost of veterinary training lies in clinical training. All Australian schools own or manage veterinary teaching hospitals to provide students with experience in high-quality clinical practice. These hospitals are not commercially self-sufficient, because of the intensive instruction and supervision required and consequent lower case throughput. Case completion times are typically 3-4 times greater than those of commercial veterinary clinics. In contrast to the medical education sector, veterinary education does not benefit from access to a publicly-funded hospital system.

The profession is fortunate that many private veterinary clinics generously accept students for work-integrated learning through extramural studies (EMS). This is a largely unpaid service to veterinary education and relies on considerable goodwill. Notwithstanding this contribution, EMS placements themselves create substantial costs for veterinary schools arising from, among other things, administrative support to organise, place and track completion of EMS placement requirements, and academic staff time to liaise with and develop and maintain educational resources for EMS providers. Students also incur significant costs in travel, accommodation, dress, equipment and compliance, as well as the opportunity costs of forgone holiday work.

5. Government funding is insufficient to cover the costs of training a veterinary student. We submitted evidence to the Higher Education Base Funding Review (2011) that veterinary science education is underfunded by approximately $7,000 per equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) per year. The Base Funding Review Panel recommended (rec 4, p. 69) that Government should address areas of underfunding including veterinary science. Elsewhere in its final report the Panel observes that ‘Based on international comparisons and the available costing information, the Panel considers that the base funding rate for medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and agriculture should be increased significantly and by as much as 25 per cent’ (p. 59). This conclusion was partly based on evidence that Australian funding for veterinary science is low by international standards (p. 58).
At the time of the Base Funding Review (2011) the Government contribution to veterinary science education through the CGS was $19,542 and the maximum student contribution $9,080. In 2017 the corresponding figures will be $22,809 and $10,596. This represents a compound annual growth rate in the total funding available per student of 2.6%. This level of growth has not kept up with increases in schools’ costs, much less allowed the original structural deficit to be overcome.

6. Veterinary schools cover their funding deficit through: increasing the number of students, to dilute fixed costs; through the provision of places to fee-paying international students; and, ultimately, by cross-subsidisation from other faculties by the respective universities. Increasing the throughput of students has raised concerns within the Australian veterinary profession of an oversupply of graduates.

Schools are also continuously seeking ways to streamline their delivery model, through initiatives such as the joint development of online and other resources and the sharing of specialist personnel and facilities. However, the increase in sophistication of veterinary medicine and the requirement to maintain rigorous quality standards limits the extent to which costs can be reduced; and in fact the requirements of veterinary school accreditation become ever more demanding year-on-year. A decline in quality standards would negatively impact both the standards of veterinary science as practised in Australia and the ability of the schools to attract foreign students.

Providing universities with the flexibility to seek a higher contribution from students is one potential option to resolve the structural funding deficit of veterinary schools. However, veterinary science is in this regard at a disadvantage to medicine and dentistry (two of the other fields identified by the Base Funding Review as being underfunded) because of the relatively low salaries of veterinary graduates. In the 2014 Graduate Destinations Survey, veterinary science was ranked 20th of 23 fields of education for graduate starting salary. New graduates in veterinary science earned, on average, $46,300 compared to a median starting salary across all graduates of $52,500. Medicine graduates earned $54,000 and dentistry graduates $75,000. The gap between veterinary graduates and those of disciplines with a comparable training requirement continues throughout the graduates’ professional lives and is a matter of great concern to the profession and to our organisation.

In our view, therefore, whilst veterinary science currently enjoys a high level of demand from school leavers, rises in the student contribution towards a veterinary degree will quickly start to reduce our capacity to attract students and potentially for Australia to meet its needs for veterinary services, as outlined in point 1 above.

---

3 VSANZ itself is forum for such initiatives, which are described in the VSANZ strategic plan
We thank you for this opportunity to submit our report and would be pleased to provide further information, in a face-to-face discussion forum if the opportunity were to arise.

Yours faithfully,

Prof Rosanne Taylor  
Chair, VSANZ