

# Comment

## What's so good about Nottingham?

A FEW weeks ago I was having a working lunch with three vets. One had just been to a 30-year reunion and so we inevitably got talking about vet schools, what their peers were up to now and the contrast between student life today and several decades ago.

I then asked them if they had to recommend a school now, which one would they choose? All three of them immediately replied 'Nottingham'. (None of them had studied there, incidentally).

When I asked them why, they all agreed the school produced good, employable vets.

So what is it that Nottingham is doing that is feeding that reputation?

Being a relatively new veterinary school (it officially opened in 2007), it took the opportunity to take a fresh approach. It consulted widely and focused on building professional skills and employability. In the latest (2016) Association of Veterinary Students survey, it was ranked first for career preparation, its EMS programme studies structure and student welfare.

Producing vets that are 'day one ready' is now a priority for all vet schools, of course. It was one of the actions to come out of Vet Futures – the joint BVA/RCVS initiative to future-proof the profession by 2030.

Its action plan, published just over a year ago, set out 24 areas for action for the profession, and one of them was reviewing graduate outcomes.

Under this broad headline ambition were a series of specific aims – the next generation of vets would need enhanced moral reasoning and ethical decision-making skills, it said. They would need to be reflective and resilient practitioners, who can work with uncertainty and challenging limitations, for example financial constraints. The profession would also need to think about its future leaders and how they can be identified, developed and supported.

Stephen May, the new president of the RCVS, is the man tasked with delivering the review and deciding the shape of graduate outcomes for the future.

He has assembled a panel of experts to help him – this includes representatives from the BVA, university and government sectors, and the General Medical Council, as well as independent practitioners – and over the next 12 to 24 months, they will consider the

skills and competences that future veterinary professionals will need.

Nothing is yet ruled in or out. Up for discussion is the viability – and desirability – of limited licensure, the behaviours and skills required of veterinary graduates and how the undergraduate course might be structured in the future.

But what is the review likely to bring? Professor May explores this in an interview in this week's issue (see pp 162-163).

He is hopeful it will bring a shift in focus, from a specialist-dominated programme to a more generalist one.

The review could finally lead to a greater scholarly recognition of general practice and, perhaps, an elevation of its status. And future graduate programmes are likely to build on the foundations of reflective thinking so that future vets will be able to use these skills throughout their careers and apply them to their ongoing professional development.

But what feels inevitable is that the review will bring a greater emphasis on those essential professional skills that help students unpack complex ethical dilemmas and prepare them for difficult conversations with clients, all the while factoring in the everyday realities of affordability and time.

While veterinary schools have become very good at teaching technical skills, they need to do more to build these professional skills in graduates so they are enabled to become advanced communicators, flexible in approach, robust in mindset.

Veterinary graduates may have never had a greater knowledge and technical ability than those graduating this year, but this can actually work against them by making their job so much harder when they are confronted with the uncertainties of a sick animal, says May. The increasing number of treatment options have to be weighted alongside ethical and economic considerations.

'It is important that our young professionals are well-prepared in terms of professional, non-technical skills to cope with the sheer variety of challenges that they encounter.'

These professional skills are key tools to assist vets in dealing with, what BVA's senior vice president Sean Wensley calls, the vet's 'trilemma' – the vet's duty to animals, clients and employers.

Universities recognise the challenge in developing these skills. A one-way communication lecture with little dialogue and a swift exit before questions will no longer do. They need teaching staff to involve students in discussion, role play and reflective exercises to explore their values and re-explore them.

Universities will have to gear up. They need to build the necessary teaching skills in their lecturers. Some already are – the Royal Veterinary College, for example, requires lecturers to do some teaching courses alongside their development within their discipline.

This reform agenda is progressive and welcome. Long gone are the days that some *Veterinary Record* readers may remember – when graduate education was just about delivering content. This often led to duplication and omissions, and added up to a fragmented experience – a question of pot luck whether subjects melded together to provide a satisfactory foundation.

What educational reformers in the 1990s – and May was among them – came to realise was there was a need to integrate programmes and to sequence and layer material so that simpler concepts started at the beginning and complex concepts were progressively built on those foundations.

Professor May was part of a drive to change the approach to teaching across all schools towards an outcomes-based programme. This change was underpinned by day one competencies, which were developed by the RCVS in the early 2000s.

It is now time for further reform. For those employers who have been critical about graduate preparation and the process for reviewing the undergraduate curriculum this will be a good opportunity to make their concerns heard.

The *Veterinary Record* team has been welcoming students on EMS placements since February – from Cambridge, the RVC and Surrey (all schools are welcome).

All of them, without exception, have been bright, personable and impressive thinkers – the sort of people that should make the profession feel confident it is safe in their hands. They will all go on, I'm sure, to have successful careers but it is important to review their courses now to make sure the profession equips the students who follow them with an even better foundation.

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doi: 10.1136/vr.j3820

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*Veterinary Record* 2017 181: 154  
doi: 10.1136/vr.j3820

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