

Building veterinary employability



VetSet2Go is a collaborative project to define the capabilities most important for employability and success in the veterinary profession, and create assessment tools and resources to build these capabilities.

Welcome to the third newsletter for our VetSet2Go study, which began in August 2015 and runs until May 2018. This edition follows the success of our inaugural Veterinary Employability Forum.

The past few months have been focused on consolidating our Phase 1 findings, commencing the Delphi process that will contribute to finalising the veterinary employability framework and inform a White Paper, and beginning Phase 2, which involves developing online, open-access assessment tools and resources.

We appreciate your ongoing participation in this initiative.

—A/Prof. Martin Cake, Project Leader

Veterinary Employability Forum

In the beautiful subtropical surrounds of Kingscliff, 48 delegates from a range of veterinary backgrounds came together for this inaugural forum, to discuss for the first time how the emerging issue of employability might apply in the veterinary context. As wryly noted by forum convener Dr Martin Cake, perhaps not such a difficult



Delegates at the inaugural Veterinary Employability Forum

‘world-first’ to achieve, since this word has scarcely been mentioned in the veterinary world—but nonetheless an issue of immediate relevance, given background concerns for sustainable employment, wellbeing, and future-proofing the profession.

It was agreed that employability offers a holistic approach to focusing undergraduate learning outcomes closer to the needs of all the relevant stakeholders, namely the employer or enterprise, clients, colleagues, and not least the graduate veterinarian themselves, enabling success and satisfaction in their career for the benefit of all.

Employability was defined at the forum as “a set of personal and professional capabilities that enable a veterinarian to gain employment, and develop a professional pathway that achieves satisfaction and success”, though it was noted that it is as much a career-long process as it is an accumulated skill set. The forum posed the key questions of, what are the key elements of employability in the veterinary context, and how can these be developed in students and early-career veterinarians?

A series of short presentations and lively intervening discussions tackled these questions from the perspectives of the relevant stakeholders, including fresh evidence from dedicated qualitative and quantitative research supported by the VetSet2Go project.

The ‘real-world’ perspectives of experienced practitioners, employers, and professional bodies (AVA) were also invaluable in providing a balanced view from theory and practice.



The engaging round-table workshop

To earn their pre-dinner drinks, forum delegates took part in a round-table workshop and tackled some of the thorniest questions in employability, including:

- *Who is (or rather, who should be) responsible for ensuring graduates are ‘work ready’?* (A: everybody! Ideally a collaboration between students, educators, workplace mentors, broader profession)
- *How can we usefully define employability without narrowing the scope of employment?* (A: by focusing on employability as a process; diverse career pathways; future jobs)
- *How can we measure/assess employability?* (A: not easy—but reflective self-evaluation triangulated by constructive feedback offers one approach)

The presented evidence and rich discussions of this forum will inform the veterinary employability framework and White Paper.

Quotes from stakeholder interviews

*“So I guess after a few months, when I understood that: okay, I’ve got to have some **balance** otherwise it will just be work 24 hours and there’s no life and I know I have a family to go back to and I can’t just think about work because the more I think about work the less I guess my soul is at home. So that’s when I realised that if I understood that from the beginning then it would make my job a lot easier because I found that I was very, very tired in the first few months. I was really exhausted.”—Recent graduate*

*“We always look for **communication skills**, so the ability to be clear and concise and listen well, I think because it’s a really big area of client complaint, so being able to get your point across is one thing.”—Employer of a recent graduate*

*“A successful new grad possesses so many of those skills that I consider hard to teach, like **the communication, the resilience and the calm manner**, that type of thing [...] I don’t think they’re impossible to teach.” —Employer of a recent graduate*

"He was just **compassionate** about the animal [...] he made us so welcome, I think that's the thing. He **made us welcome and put us at ease** right away [...] he was on top of his game."—Client

"I didn't feel particularly reassured [...] I got the impression [...] that we were being over-fussy and that, in particular, this wasn't an emergency. But, of course, it was an emergency for us because we felt that our loved one, our member of the family, wasn't particularly well. Yeah, it just didn't feel particularly comforting, and I felt as though some of the questions that were asked were responded to with a rolling of the eyes [...] asking other people who had used this [big franchise] veterinary surgery, they said a similar thing. And I think I was just looking for that personal connection."—Client

Delphi process

We have recruited 32 Delphi panellists worldwide, who are tasked with arriving at expert consensus on the capabilities that are most important for veterinary employability, from a multi-stakeholder perspective. They are currently embarking on the third (and final) survey round. Results will inform the veterinary employability framework, and the design of assessment tools and resources to build these capabilities in our veterinary graduates.

Subproject updates

Case studies subproject

(Lead: Dr Melinda Bell / Murdoch)

This subproject interviewed 9 matched pairs of employers and their graduate employees. Preliminary results show that success in practice is founded particularly in self-confidence, communication, teamwork, resilience, and keenness to learn.

Employer expectations subproject

(Lead: Dr Dan Schull / UQld)

This subproject explored how employers, from a range of workplace backgrounds, approach the selection of graduate veterinarians for employment. It also explored the qualities that employers seek and triangulated the data by considering what they ask for in their advertisements for graduate veterinarians, across various sources.

Eighteen employers, from a range of workplaces in Australia, were interviewed either face-to-face, via telephone or Skype. Data underwent qualitative thematic analysis. Preliminary results show that while employers of veterinary graduates look for a range of personal attributes, interpersonal skills, and veterinary capabilities, these are not 'one size fits all' and interface with the need for 'job match'.

Veterinary resilience subproject

(Leads: Dr Michelle McArthur/UAdel & A/Prof. Susan Matthew/WSU)

This subproject conducted surveys and interviews to explore the professional motivations and resilience of veterinarians. Preliminary results indicate that the factors contributing to resilience in early-career veterinarians are less well studied than those contributing to mental ill-health, but some factors identified so far include self-compassion, mindfulness, and social support.

Client expectations subproject

(Lead: Prof. Susan Rhind / Uni of Edinburgh)

Client expectations have been characterised through 8 focus groups and 6 interviews, exploring the capabilities and behaviours influencing positive or negative experiences from veterinary interactions. This informed an international survey of client expectations. Preliminary results indicate that clients particularly value veterinarians who display commitment to animal welfare and high quality care; are compassionate, open and honest; can provide clear explanations; and who inspire confidence in their skills and knowledge (i.e. a balance of professionalism and humanity).

Stakeholder perceptions subproject

(Lead: Dr Melinda Bell / Murdoch)

A large international survey of 1,519 stakeholders found consensus around the importance of communication skills (both with clients and colleagues), teamwork, working behavior (work ethic, honesty, integrity), technical competence, and psychological capital such as motivation, resilience, and personal efficacy.

Seminars and conferences

Since our last newsletter, we have presented the following papers / posters / workshops:

- McArthur, M.M. & Matthew, S.M. (2016) *Building resilience in veterinary practice: Supporting the next generation*. Workshop presented at the Australian Veterinary Business Association Mental Health Forum. Melbourne, 7 October
- Matthew, S.M., Zaki, S., Mansfield, C.M., Brand, C., Andrews, J., Hazel, S. & McArthur, M.M. (2016) *Resilience in veterinary students and the predictive role of mindfulness and self-compassion*. Paper presented at the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges Veterinary Health and Wellness Summit. Fort Collins USA, 4-6 November
- Cake, M. (2016) *VetSet2Go: Building veterinary employability*. Poster presented at the West Australian Network for Dissemination (WAND). Murdoch University, 10 November
- Cake, M. & Bell, M. (2016) *Higher order objectives in authentic assessment*. Paper presented at the Melbourne Academy for Veterinary and Agricultural Learning and Teaching (MAVALT) Veterinary Symposium. The University of Melbourne, 29-30 November

How to get involved in VetSet2Go

Please register your interest via our website—we will update you with opportunities to contribute to the project.



VetSet2Go project team attendees at the Veterinary Employability Forum (absent team members: Adele Feakes, Susan Rhind, Kirsty Hughes and Liz Mossop)

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