



AVA Submission on the Commonwealth Government Employment White Paper

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national professional association representing all veterinarians in Australia, with members across a diverse range of interests. We empower the veterinary profession to thrive by providing voice, education, community and support.

Executive summary

- Australia's veterinary professionals deliver an essential service in our rural and regional communities on commercial farms, in our metropolitan communities caring for our domestic pets, and in areas of community need such as wildlife, stray and feral animals.
- Vets have become part of the fabric of our communities and play a key role in detecting and managing biosecurity threats. Vets are highly valued and trusted by the communities they serve, providing a particularly vital service for the agriculture sector which contributed \$71 billion to the Australian economy in 2020-21.
- There is a shortage of veterinarians in Australia. This shortage is significantly more acute in rural and regional areas. Regional practices have in recent years been closing clinics because of a lack of veterinary staff.
- Two key issues facing the veterinary workforce are:
 - Long training time for new veterinarians (necessary to maintain animal health and welfare standards) limits the ability of the veterinarian supply to meet short to medium term fluctuations in demand for veterinary services; and
 - The sustainability of veterinary service provision is under threat from decades of underinvestment.
- Investment in veterinary services has direct flow on benefits to biosecurity, animal health and welfare, which, in turn, benefits human health in a range of ways - from the indirect benefits of protection from zoonotic disease, zoonotic disease management and food safety, to the health and wellness benefits that owning a pet.
- If Australian society is to continue to rely upon modern standards of animal health and welfare, made feasible by modern standards of veterinary practice, investment in the veterinary profession is needed to ensure that these services can be sustainably provided.
- Solutions:
 - Improved data collection, analysis and workforce planning is needed to ensure that future veterinary demand is matched by supply in a way that provides sufficient veterinarians, whilst realising the return on investment from veterinary training; and
 - Correct the unsustainability of the veterinary profession through a model that sees appropriate investment in and remuneration for the public benefits veterinary services deliver.



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The Employment White Paper

The White Paper is being developed by the Commonwealth Government following the Jobs and Skills Summit held in September 2022.

The terms of reference states that,

The Employment White Paper (the White Paper) will provide a roadmap for Australia to build a bigger, better-trained and more productive workforce – to boost incomes and living standards and create more opportunities for more Australians.

The themes of the White Paper will include:

- Full employment and increasing labour productivity growth and incomes
- The future of work and labour market implications of structural change
- Job security, fair pay and conditions, including the role of workplace relations.
- Pay equity, including the gender pay gap, equal opportunities for women and the benefits of a more inclusive workforce.
- Labour force participation, labour supply and improving employment opportunities.
- The role of collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches.
- Other relevant topics and approaches.



The veterinary workforce

The work of veterinary professionals impacts the daily lives of Australians and their animals in a multitude of ways. The contribution veterinarians make to the community is highly valued, and significantly contributes to, and protects, the social license of animal industries to operate.

The veterinary workforce is national (and in many respects international) in nature. Veterinarians work in a range of fields. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals (such as cattle and sheep), and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems, while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises.

Veterinary professionals are highly regarded, trusted members of our community. The critical thinking and problem-solving skills developed and honed in an animal health context Coupled with their subject matter expertise, this make veterinarians essential to maximising animal health and protecting animal welfare. This value also extends beyond animal health given the interconnectedness of animal, human and environmental health.

Animal-related industries are valued at around \$67 billion to the Australian economy¹. There are 13,993 veterinarians to look after Australia’s animals including our wildlife and unowned animals, split across multiple sectors (e.g. government, private, industry). The private veterinary sector includes 3744 veterinary businesses embedded in local communities².

Workforce shortage

The veterinary workforce is currently entering its seventh year of a workforce shortage. This shortage existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was exacerbated by it.

Table 1 - Skill shortages of veterinarians

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Veterinarian | N | N | Y | Y | N | N | N | N | N | N | Y | Y | Y | N/A | Y | Y |

Source: 2007 – 2019 data from DESSFB; 2021 – 2022 data from NSC

It is also clear that this shortage is significantly more acute in rural and regional areas. Regional practices have in recent years been closing clinics because of a lack of veterinary staff.

The AVA conducts regular surveys of the veterinary workforce. **The AVA 2021 Workforce Survey Report notes that 30.64% of veterinary job vacancies took more than 12 months to fill or were still not filled at**

¹ Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/data/infographics-and-maps#trade-and-market-access>), Australian Industry and Skills Committee (<https://nationalindustryinsights.aisc.net.au/industries/racing>), ABS (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/agriculture/value-agricultural-commodities-produced-australia/latest-release>), Animal Medicines Australia https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AMAU005-PATP-Report21_v1.41_WEB.pdf)

² IBISWorld, June 2021 (<https://www.ibisworld.com/au/industry/veterinary-services/623/>)



the time of the survey. Looking more broadly at vacancies taking over 6 months to fill, this accounted for 43.12% of vacancies. This is up from 34% vacancies in the 2018 survey.^{3,4}

Further interrogation of the 2021 data shows that the situation is more acute in mixed practices. Mixed practices are those which service both small animals and production animals. They are generally located in rural and regional areas.

Table 2 - Percentage of Vacancies Remaining Unfilled by practice type

| | Small animal | Equine only | Mixed practice & Production | Other |
|--|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| less than 3 months | 20.96% | 37.50% | 19.14% | 18.36% |
| 3-6 months | 18.84% | 22.50% | 21.72% | 14.84% |
| 6-9 months | 8.65% | 3.75% | 6.45% | 6.64% |
| 9-12 months | 4.65% | 1.25% | 5.59% | 5.08% |
| More than 12 months or still not filled | 29.77% | 25.00% | 34.41% | 29.69% |
| I'm not sure | 17.13% | 10.00% | 12.69% | 25.39% |
| Total | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% |
| Total sample size | 1226 | 80 | 465 | 256 |

When the data is looked at on a geographic basis the difference is even stronger with the percentage of vacancies open for 12 months or longer in the city at 23.89% and 35.19% in regional areas.

Table 3 - Percentage of Vacancies Remaining Unfilled by Location

| | City | Regional |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| less than 3 months | 23.13% | 20.29% |
| 3-6 months | 21.09% | 18.04% |
| 6-9 months | 8.64% | 7.18% |
| 9-12 months | 3.68% | 5.66% |
| More than 12 months or still not filled | 23.89% | 35.19% |
| I'm not sure | 19.57% | 13.64% |
| Total | 100.00% | 100.00% |
| Total sample size | 787 | 1114 |

NB: City category has been defined as postcodes 20xx, 21xx, 30xx, 31xx, 40xx, 41xx, 50xx, 51xx, 60xx, 61xx, 70xx, and 71xx, with the remainder being classified regional.

³ AVA (2021) Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 - Analysis Report (<https://www.ava.com.au/news/workforce-survey-2021/>)

⁴ AVA (2019) Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey 2018 (<https://www.vetvoice.com.au/SysSiteAssets/veterinary-careers/ava-workforce-survey-2018.pdf>)



Veterinary training and short-term workforce capacity

There are currently seven Australian universities that offer veterinary science degrees that are recognised by veterinary registration boards, these are:

- Charles Sturt University
- James Cook University
- Murdoch University
- The University of Adelaide
- The University of Melbourne
- The University of Queensland
- The University of Sydney

Each year there are approximately 500-700 students graduating with these qualifications, however each of these programs of study take 5-6 years to complete. This timeframe is required to ensure that the graduates attain the competencies and standards to practice as a veterinarian. However, this timeframe limits the responsiveness of the training system to cater for short-term fluctuations in the demand for veterinarians.

Lack of sufficient data and planning

The long training times for new veterinarians mean that it is crucial that thorough workforce data is collected, analysed and used for planning future workforce needs to ensure that the supply and demand for veterinarians are matched as closely as possible.

There is currently limited data on the national veterinary workforce. Individual veterinary registration boards collect data to varying degrees in their jurisdiction, however this is inconsistent. The AVA undertakes a biennial survey of veterinarians which reaches across the country, however response rates have fluctuated and, in some years, have been very low.

What is needed

- Reliable data collection on the nature of the veterinary workforce, including (at least):
 - Age;
 - Gender;
 - Location;
 - Role/occupation;
 - Type of veterinary practice;
 - Number of hours worked; and
 - Labour force status.
- Reliable forecasting of demand for veterinary services and veterinarians.
- Regular analysis and forecasting of future supply and demand of veterinarians
- Development of a long-term veterinary workforce plan

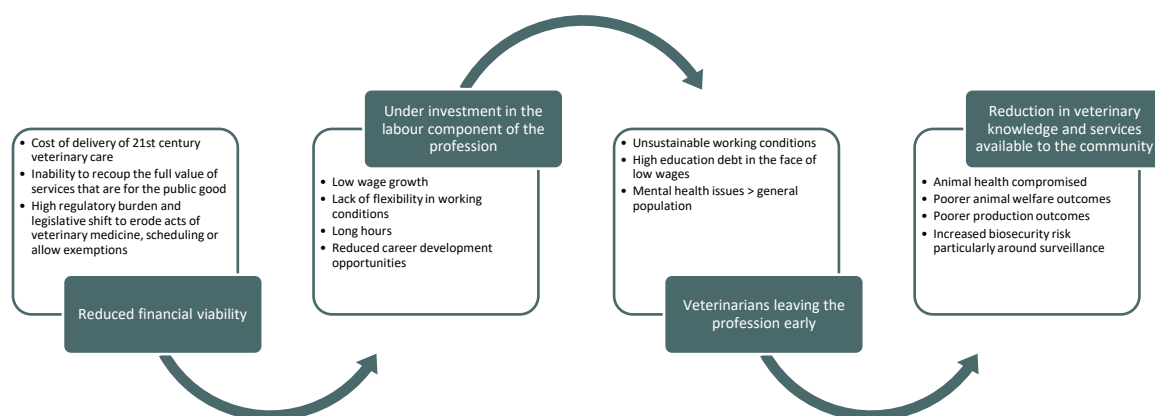


Sustainability of the veterinary workforce

Similar to human health care, delivery of modern veterinary care is costly, and the veterinary profession is suffering from marked underinvestment, predominantly around the labour component, as much of the work the profession performs is simply not paid for. This is placing considerable pressure on the wellbeing of veterinarians and on the sustainability of the profession, which is now well evidenced. If Australian society is to continue to rely upon modern standards of animal health and welfare, made feasible by modern standards of veterinary practice, investment in the veterinary profession is needed to ensure that these services can be sustainably provided.

The underinvestment in the profession has resulted in the current veterinary workforce shortage through high levels of attrition and severe mental health issues and risks the continuance and quality of Australian animal health. Low rates of remuneration compared to other professions such as medicine, engineering and dentistry, significant educational debt, continued costs to remain registered and competent, and difficult working conditions, combine to make the industry an unattractive one financially to remain in long-term. There are high rates of burnout, stress and negative mental health outcomes. Left unchecked, this has the potential to lead to the collapse of the sector, which poses significant risks to the community at large.

Figure 1 – Cycle of underinvestment in veterinary services



What is required?

Public investment in the veterinary profession, and recognition of the important role veterinarians play in society.

What does this look like?

- Improve the sustainability of the veterinary profession
 - Improve financial viability through changing the business model to ensure all veterinary services that deliver public benefits do not come at a cost to veterinary businesses
 - Include veterinarians in schemes that incentivise professionals to deliver services rurally (e.g. HECS bonding scheme for rural and regional vets similar to doctors, access to subsidies)
 - Support of veterinary profession infrastructure (e.g. adequate funding for veterinary training to ensure Australia can continue to supply local veterinary graduates and support for workforce planning)



- Provide sectoral support to improve workforce wellbeing and address the mental health crisis facing the profession
- Plan for, and fund, veterinary services in areas of public need:
 - Animal welfare
 - Biosecurity - surveillance, testing and control of disease through vaccination
 - Animal population control (e.g. desexing animals)
 - Care of animals owned by the crown (e.g. wildlife)
 - Care of unowned animals (strays)
 - Emergency care of owned and unowned animals in natural disasters
- Ensure the veterinary profession is involved in animal welfare planning and implementation
 - Develop a national animal welfare strategy and implementation plan that ensures Australia's animal welfare standards are world leading
 - Remove exemptions for animals such as wildlife and production animals from animal welfare legislation to maintain consumer confidence in modern animal welfare legislation
- Embed the veterinary profession in any Australian Centre for Disease Control and acknowledge the important role the sector plays in One Health surveillance, disease prevention and control

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