

Inquiry into vocational education and training in NSW.

Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd



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Wednesday 5th August 2015

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8800 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. 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. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

Veterinarians are supported by veterinary nurses, animal care workers and others trained under the Animal Care and Management Training Package. These courses are taught through TAFE and private providers in New South Wales.

Our major concern in relation to vocational education and training (VET) is the wide variation in outcomes between Registered Training Organisations' (RTOs) across the country. The OECD drew attention to the inconsistencies across the VET sector in its 2008 review of VET in Australia.

Our main concerns surround the Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing. Vet nurses undertake roles within veterinary practices such as assisting with anaesthesia in surgery, providing advice on pet care and training, dental procedures, clinical pathology testing, radiology assistance etc.

Qualified and effective veterinary nurses are essential to the provision of veterinary care to Australia's animals. Most veterinary practices employ several veterinary nurses for each veterinarian. Of these, there are many veterinary nurses who will have or be training for a Certificate IV qualification. The industry is keen to see this number increase, and the professionalism of veterinary nurses to improve and keep pace with constant advances in medical technology and practice.

However, the AVA has found that the wide variation in training and competency assessment is impacting on the quality of vet nurses available to the industry. This is becoming an urgent and pressing problem.

In 2014 the veterinary industry undertook an independent review of the competency units for the Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing. Agrifood Skills Australia, TAFE NSW and the University of Sydney's Faculty of Veterinary Science provided invaluable support for this review.

In the course of the review, a number of pertinent facts were uncovered.

- Courses relating to animal studies and veterinary nursing are extraordinarily popular with prospective students. They are used as "cash cows" by RTOs across the state. They bring in student numbers and money to support other courses in a stressed TAFE environment. Private providers may take advantage of animal-loving young people to sign up for expensive courses with little prospect of employment.
- There is great choice of providers within our industry and school based options are well established. At the Cert II level this works well but at the Certificate IV level a student must have access to a workplace to learn the practical skills necessary to become competent. Currently available Certificate IV courses have a large variation in requirements for students to be involved in work-based training. This leads to extreme inequality of skills and experience among students.
- There are not enough workplaces to support the number of students currently enrolled. It is a small industry with a limited number of veterinary hospitals for training places. This can lead to large numbers of students not completing courses due to an inability to get training positions.
- There are major work health and safety issues associated with poorly trained veterinary nurses. These include bites from animals, back injuries, chemical exposure, contact with infected biological material and mental health concerns.

- The AVA has serious concerns that with Smart and Skilled and the increased fee structure that many students will enroll in cheaper, poorly assessed online courses. Our industry requires essential practical skills that cannot be achieved by predominantly online courses.
- The AVA is concerned that equitable access to training is reduced under Smart and Skilled for those who cannot afford it. Students in lower socioeconomic groups will be the most disadvantaged.
- The AVA is concerned that the increased cost of training in an industry which has traditionally low rates of pay for both veterinarians and vet nurses will reduce the uptake of the qualification by those already employed. The industry will be the loser when market forces results in fewer skilled support staff.
- The AVA believes that vet nurses have to satisfy the need to be competent in both the learning objectives of the course as well as achieve independent external validation of their skills necessary. This is essential due to the responsibilities a qualified vet nurse has to the welfare (even life) of the animals in their care.

The Australian Government has been interested in industry regulation of training packages and we have found this to be problematic even with the support of Agrifoods and the NSW DET. It is expensive to produce, license and regulate assessment tools and small industries are not capable of doing this without financial support. We question whether this is the role of industry at all.