

Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand: Submission to Australian Universities Accord Panel

19th December 2022

Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) is a forum for the eight veterinary schools of Australia and New Zealand (NZ). 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 (NZ).

VSANZ thanks the Australian Universities Accord Panel for the opportunity to provide comment on its Terms of Reference (TOR). We wish to highlight a specific but very important issue in relation to TOR 3, namely, *Investment and affordability: Explore funding and contribution arrangements that deliver equity, access, quality and longer-term investments to meet priorities in teaching, research, workforce and infrastructure. This will include a review of the Job-ready Graduates Package.* The issue we wish to highlight is the underfunding of veterinary education in Australia.

Veterinary courses are among the most expensive of all university professional programs to deliver. The high cost reflects the demands of delivering a comprehensive clinical training program across a range of animal species and external accreditation standards, which are driven in turn by the high regulatory standards set by domestic and international veterinary education accrediting bodies acting on behalf of veterinary regulators. Accreditation standards include numerous delivery requirements not faced for most professional courses, such as strict student-to-staff ratios and the condition that universities directly provide clinical teaching for both large and small animals through veterinary teaching hospital facilities.

The former Government's Job-ready Graduates changes to higher education funding provided a welcome seven per cent net increase in funding for each new Commonwealth-supported student from 2021. However, for all Australasian veterinary schools there remains a substantial gap between total funding received for each enrolled domestic veterinary student and the cost of educating them. The Job-ready Graduates package also changed the way universities are funded to support core veterinary science research, effectively removing the 'base research' component from the Commonwealth Grants Scheme (CGS) and implied from student contribution amounts.

The funding gap in veterinary education is well documented. The most recent higher education transparent costing exercise showed that the average cost to deliver the veterinary undergraduate course, per Equivalent Full Time Student Load (EFTSL), was 149% of the funding received by the university from government and student fees¹.

¹ <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-publications/resources/2019-transparency-higher-education-expenditure-publication>

Australasian universities have for decades covered their funding shortfall for veterinary teaching and research through a range of strategies, including: increasing enrolments to dilute fixed costs; the provision of full fee-paying places for domestic and international students; reductions to central overhead charges; and, ultimately, cross-subsidising from revenues earned by other faculties, philanthropy and other sources. As a collective, the veterinary schools have also collaborated to increase efficiencies, for example through the development of common teaching resources. One example is the Australian Abattoir Learning Resource (AALR), a multimedia online package to facilitate the training of veterinary students in abattoir-related public health, food safety and animal welfare. Another is 'One Welfare', a portal of resources designed to support and enrich the learning and teaching of animal welfare and ethics for veterinary students in Australia and New Zealand.

The veterinary schools of Australia and New Zealand continue to deliver a high standard of education by international standards. The 2022 QS Rankings list five Australasian vet schools among the top 60 schools of veterinary science internationally². The Australasian schools are accredited not only by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council but also by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in the UK. In addition, five schools are accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association. This means that all Australian graduates qualify to work as veterinarians in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, and many of them are also qualified to work in the US and Canada, as well as many other countries by extension.

This high international standing is at risk if Australian veterinary schools are not sufficiently funded to deliver on their mission. More important is the risk to the Australian economy and our societal wellbeing. Beyond their most visible role of caring for companion animals, veterinary graduates 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 food safety and security; and play a vital role in human health, using their skills to minimise the spread of disease from animals to humans. Veterinarians and therefore veterinary education deliver a significant public benefit.

In mid-2022, VSANZ commissioned an independent expert panel to undertake a review of the veterinary science education capability of Australia and New Zealand ('Veterinary Education Review'). The TOR for the review are attached to this submission. The Veterinary Education Review is due to submit its report early in 2023. We look forward to apprising the Accord Panel of the findings of the review in its upcoming calls for submissions.

Yours sincerely



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² <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2022/veterinary-science>

Attachment 1.

Securing Australasia's future in biosecurity, food production, One Health and animal welfare: Independent expert review of the veterinary science education capability of Australia and New Zealand

Terms of Reference

1. What are the key skills, knowledge and attributes that veterinarians will need in the next decade? How can accrediting bodies, the profession, Australasian universities and governments work more effectively together to ensure that students leave veterinary schools equipped with transferable competencies needed for long and successful careers as veterinarians, as well as take account of the continued financial pressures faced by universities to sustain high-quality veterinary science programs?
2. Looking ten years out, what are the key challenges and opportunities that veterinary schools in Australia and New Zealand face in terms of their responsibilities to educate and train their future veterinary workforces? What needs to change to ensure the schools can address the identified challenges and take advantage of the opportunities over the next decade? Specifically:
 - a. What opportunities are there for structural reform to make Australasian veterinary schools financially sustainable? What have been the key learnings from the disruption to veterinary schools caused by COVID-19?
 - b. Is there a place to develop a new kind of professional Australian and/or New Zealand veterinary qualification, which has modularisation/specialisation (e.g. companion animals, livestock, equine, poultry, exotic) options – whether at an early or post-primary-qualification stage – focused on the requirements of the nation? If so, how should this be achieved?
 - c. Can we make changes of the kind described above and still retain the ability of Australia and New Zealand to contribute to a global, mobile veterinary workforce with mutual recognition of qualification and freedom of movement, that is, to continue to attract overseas students and practitioners?
3. How strong is the research performance of Australasian veterinary schools in the global context? What is the nexus between a veterinary school's research capability and its capacity to educate veterinarians suited to the modern workforce? What could be done to optimise the education / research mix of veterinary schools?