

Collaborative Report

Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine, Year 5, 2013/14

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The Programme

Please comment, as appropriate, on the following aspects of the programme:

1.1 Course content

Adequate

Response from college requested: **NO**

1.2 Learning objectives, and the extent to which they were met

Difficult to assess with material provided

Response from college requested: **NO**

1.3 Teaching methods

No teaching was observed

Response from college requested: **NO**

1.4 Resources (in so far as they affected the assessment)

Not aware of any lack of resources

Response from college requested: **NO**

1.5 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the Programme

It was difficult when reviewing all assessments in Yr5 to get an idea of which LOs are covered and how the proportion of questions is distributed over species and/or key areas of the course. Is there a target to include a certain proportion of assessment on certain definitive areas (i.e. equine, farm animal, small animal, pathology, VPH, professionalism and ethics etc.)? Sometimes these areas seem underrepresented but may have been covered in more depth in, e.g. Yr4? The existing blueprint provided by Professor Lamb on request was useful, and indicative of previous consideration of this theme.

Overall level of teaching in all areas appeared sufficient when reviewing the assessment; in most areas the range of marks was good, and within expected educational norms, indicating that high marks could be achieved. This of course does not prove that adequate teaching has been delivered but certainly indicates students are able to achieve the desired results with the opportunities provided during the course.

A relatively common theme during assessment of the research component was that students felt that access to additional statistical support would have been of benefit to them. It was not clear from observation alone during the oral defence what R&D/ethics guidance students received. There was little reference to ethics in the vivas, but we were retrospectively told that a process and input is pre-determined.

Response from college requested: **YES**

There was a systematic review of LO undertaken and a blueprint was generated to ensure an adequate range across disciplines. The structure of the written paper in Finals Pt2 requires questions on individual animal problems, technical activities, herd health and problems based on ethical/professionalism. In the remaining Finals papers and OSCE we aim to balance SA and LA topics.

There is a need to review the structure of Finals to ensure that an appropriate number of final year learning objectives across the species are assessed, either in IMR or at Finals;

Students have access to abundant statistical advice, but do not always use it. Students are not expected to apply advanced or sophisticated methods and to use the simple ones they have been taught.

There is specific teaching before students undertake their project to prepare them. All project proposals have ethical scrutiny and there is ethical training early in the course so all students are aware of ethical issues.

Student performance

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

2.1 Students' performance in relation to those at a similar stage on comparable courses in other institutions, where this is known to you

Comparable

Response from college requested: **NO**

2.2 Quality of candidates' knowledge and skills, with particular reference to those at the top, middle or bottom of the range

Similar to other institutions and adequate for this stage of the course

Response from college requested: **NO**

2.3 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the students' performance

Overall the expected range of performance was observed across assessments. At component (station) level on the OSCE a proportionally higher than overall concentration of 'communication' fails appeared in the lowest ranking students. This is consistent with wider knowledge relating to the relationship between poor communication and poor performance in general. In relation to the oral defence assessment candidates appeared, in the majority, articulate, and well engaged with the process.

Response from college requested: **YES**

Please see our response to 3.2 below.

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)

Assessment methods are thorough and complete.

Section A of Part III is an excellent method to assess critical thinking around a scientific paper. The paper was relevant and it was therefore disappointing to see the relatively poor performance of students on this section compared to other parts of the written assessment. A possible way to address this issue would be to standard set the critical appraisal and scale to 50%, as with the majority of other written papers, which would get around the issue of it being “hard” compared to other parts.

The questions were clinically focussed on the relevance of correctly understanding the presented data (“Would this paper change your future practice?”), and did not specifically ask for detailed information on statistical techniques or other, perhaps less critical, detail for a first opinion practitioner. In a culture of evidence-based healthcare it does not seem unreasonable to ask a qualifying practitioner to be able to appraise a paper at this (practical rather than ‘expert’) level and decide its value in terms of practical application, so this skill should also be addressed in the curriculum.

It was surprising to see that students could compensate their (failing) mark in Part III A with a seemingly unrelated assessment on their post rotation taught tracking course (Section B, which was an area of their interest, and 37 questions were provided, so everyone could answer one question about their chosen track course). This mark could then be further compensated by the research project mark. Section A does have relevance to the research project and being able to compensate in this area is perhaps unnecessary, but acceptable. Compensating with an exam that has little relation to the other assessment appears an unreasonable way to pass the assessment overall - often there was evidence of poor understanding of the scientific literature, which appears undesirable for academically trained professionals.

The research projects were of good quality and some excellent oral defences were witnessed by all three external examiners. However, in its current format one could consider that the same skills are assessed as in the assessment of the written project. One could consider the oral defence to be an opportunity to discuss the more professional, ethical and forward planning aspects of the research performed, something that was not often discussed in current oral defences. The research topics were typically original, well thought through, and informative.

Response from college requested:

YES

- Standard setting the scientific paper critique should be possible but the complexity of the process would not justify the perceived benefits.
- Teaching about study methodology that is relevant to the scientific paper critique is included in the Y4 curriculum:
<https://learn.rvc.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=21673&chapterid=41231>
- Finals Pt3 assesses the elective portion of the final year curriculum, which includes both clinical elective activity (IMR) and research (RP2), hence strength in one field can compensate for weakness in the other. We believe that although critiquing a research paper is important there should be scope for weakness in this area to be compensated for by overall performance.
- Oral defence of RP2 has been discontinued because it was found to add not additional validity to the assessment.

3.2 Extent to which assessment processes are rigorous

The spot test was not considered appropriately challenging for final year students by at least two external examiners when reviewing the assessment beforehand. The results indicate students found the same when sitting the exam (mean student mark around 71%, standard set pass mark around 53%). A high pass rate does not always indicate that the assessment was ‘too easy’ but a review of this assessment may be warranted, especially given that some of the questions were pitched at a level that Year 1 and 2 students may have been able to answer. The performance of individual items will aid with a review of questions – it is worth noting that many discriminated poorly between the highest and lowest performing students (although there were no negative discriminators).

The EMQ paper had a similar pass mark to the spot test (54%); however the level of questions asked was more like what can be expected from final year students that will go out into practice shortly after these assessments. Whilst the mean student mark was around 73%, this was felt to more accurately reflect students performing well on an appropriately-pitched exam containing typical “bread and butter” type questions. However, of the 100 items (20 topics with 5 stems each), six items were negative discriminators (Q. 33, 39, 50, 56, 72, and 78), and many of the other items were weak positive discriminators with scores < 0.3. When considering the “bank” of items for use in future years, these item statistics should be taken into consideration. During review of the item performance it was found that one item had a second correct answer that had been selected by 95% of students – the answer options were adjusted in the system prior to exam board and this improved the grade of some top-end students (who moved from a Merit to a Distinction for that part of the exam), but not those at the lower end. One “theme” (anaemia, EMQ 8, Q.36-40) performed poorly compared to the others – this may be a combination of students performing the questions poorly (in which case a review of teaching in this area may be warranted; average % of students answering correctly varied between 61.1% and 9.6%) and items performing poorly (four discriminated weakly and one was a negative discriminator).

The OSPEs are, as in previous years, well organised and run smoothly. It was encouraging to see nine students passed all 20 stations, against the nine students who need to resit as they failed more than eight stations. It is difficult to understand how the pass mark (within each station but also the overall pass mark of 12/20) is achieved and the literature referred to in the exam board meeting would be useful to have for external examiners to better understand this process. There was variance for certain stations with regards to the difference circuits/sessions held throughout the week - it would be valuable to understand where this difference arises from and how it is dealt with. It was concerning to see more than half of the students failing one of the two communication skills stations. This was perhaps a more challenging station, but not unrealistic in practice, which is where they will hopefully be shortly after this assessment. There were around 20% of students failing both communication skills stations. However, some of these passed the OSPEs as assessment point, as they only need to pass 12 out of 20 stations. Knowing that communication errors are a frequent reason for cases to be dealt with at the VDS, it is worth a discussion of how sensible it is to be able to pass these practical exams without having to pass either of these communication stations. A more detailed investigation of failed points in both stations demonstrated that students did not focus on the client and patient, this may have been due to the artificial ‘simulated’ environment, however, there is limited evidence that these students would perform much better in a ‘real’ environment.

The overall OSCE process appears relatively robust, other than the observation that ability to ‘pass’ carrying fails on both communication stations seems to pose a risk of missing serious deficiency in something arguably core to all aspects of future professional practice. We appreciate that clinical communication is taught and remediated elsewhere in the curriculum, but it may be worth reflecting on making one communication pass mandatory or capturing aspects of communication and/or professionalism on other stations.

Response from college requested: YES

- The LO assessed by spot test includes some that should be mastered by the majority of students, e.g. normal anatomy, recognition of specific clinical signs. Review of item statistics is planned for this winter with the aim of identifying/revising items with low correlation.
- The review noted above will encompass spot test items, EMQs and long answer questions.
- Poor performance of anaemia themed EMQs has been flagged up for the relevant teachers to consider remedial action for future cohorts.
- It is agreed that overall OSCE performance was weaker than expected, and that the number of students failing both communication stations is disappointing. Communication skills LO feature in many final year IMRs, so there should be abundant teaching occurring to address these LO and students should be familiar with characteristics of good communication. Poor performance in Finals raises questions about the quantity/quality of such teaching. This has been flagged up for the relevant teachers to consider remedial action for future cohorts. We recognize the importance of communication skills and will review the formative and summative assessment of communication skills.

3.3 Consistency of the level of assessment with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

The assessment of final year appears to be very student-centred with choices to both answer and avoid certain questions to enable to achieve their best performance. This is excellent from their perspective in particular, but one needs to consider the effect this has on staff having to supply a multitude of questions of which by far not all get used. When only two or three students sit part of the assessment it is difficult to relate their performance to other students having answered a question in a completely different area, which makes the assessment process less rigorous, and may also give an opportunity for students to pass with a serious knowledge deficit in a particular area where they do qualify for (particularly less prominent fields such as meat inspection, veterinary public health).

Response from college requested: YES

- The bulk of assessment in Finals (Pt 1 & 2) reflects core subjects, with very little choice, and with relatively less time spent on elective choices (Pt3). Opportunities for students to pass with a serious knowledge deficit in a particular core area are very limited. Overall, we consider the balance of core and elective assessment to be reasonable.

3.4 Standard of marking

Marking in general was consistent within and between markers. There were areas in Part II (long answer questions) where markers appeared generous in awarding marks, however this was done consistently. This will have benefitted the borderline student.

There was pronounced variability in the mean performance in Section B of Part III; it is difficult to determine if students were truly better performing (or more poorly performing – for example in the questions with high fail levels) in some of the post tracking courses or if the level of questions differed between the different questions. It appeared to the external examiners that this difference in difficulty may have been the case; this may be related to the area of study, but is something that needs consideration for future assessments.

Relating to oral defence, the quality of conversation, collaboration and discussion between paired assessors was overall good. We were only aware of one instance where agreement could not be reached on the day, and overall inter-rater understanding of the process (and standard expected) was impressive.

Response from college requested: YES

It is pleasing to hear that marking in general was consistent within and between markers.

Variations in difficulty of questions used in Finals Pt3 is a difficult subject to address because the difficulty of individual questions can only be judged in the context of the teaching that occurred in that particular PRTT Module, and that is deliberately very varied in scope.

PRTT Module are deliberately very variable in scope and are assessed at an appropriate level.

3.5 Opinion on changes to the assessment process from previous years in which you have examined

Often our comments were dealt with adequately, however on a few occasions they were not and it was unclear to us why not. A written response as to why changes were not followed through (there may well be good reason of course) would be appreciated. On some occasions in this assessment (Section IIIB Q9, Q23, and Q36) comments were made by more than one examiner but not followed through, and when reviewing the psychometric performance of these questions we noticed this bore out in that they did not perform well.

Response from college requested: YES

We very much appreciate the External Examiners' comments although on occasion we choose not to action them. External Examiners' comments on draft exam papers are reviewed by the Chair of the Exam Board and judgments made to amend, leave or refer to the relevant question writer for action, respectively. All comments are considered, but not all will lead to action. As noted above, review of item statistics is planned for this winter.

3.6 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the assessment process

Feedback to staff writing questions, with some clear examples of good discriminating questions and support for those who struggle to write this level of questions may help to improve question quality and comparability, especially for Section IIIB. Performance analysis of both EMQs and spot test data demonstrates the variability in this area (see above), as does the more qualitative comments provided by us, combined with the performance of students in the open/essay type questions.

Response from college requested: YES

Feedback to staff writing questions occurs routinely when questions are first submitted for the item bank, and corrections may be requested at this stage. Again, review of item statistics is planned for this winter and will certainly lead to more questions being returned for revisions to alleviate faults such as poor correlation. The outcome of review of item statistics could also be used as basis for in-house training of staff, as suggested. We will make examples of good discriminating questions available to all examiners.

Assessment Procedures

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

4.1 In your view, are the processes for assessment and the determination of awards sound and fairly conducted?

Yes

Response from college requested: NO

4.2 Opinion on changes to the procedures from previous years in which you have examined

No significant changes to comment on

Response from college requested: NO

4.3 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures

Whilst overall assessment security levels were high, there were a couple of occasions where one of the external examiners arrived first at an unlocked and unmanned viva room, to find the mark sheets and projects on the table.

Response from college requested: NO We will ensure this does not happen in future.

5.1 Comments I have made in previous years have been addressed to my satisfaction

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.2 An acceptable response has been made

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.3 I approved the papers for the Examination

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.4 I was able to scrutinise an adequate sample of students' work and marks to enable me to carry out my duties

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.5 I attended the meeting of the Board of Examiners held to approve the results of the Examination

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.6 Candidates were considered impartially and fairly

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.7 The standards set for the awards are appropriate for qualifications at this level, in this subject

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.8 The standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other UK institutions with which I am familiar

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.9 I have received enough support to carry out my role

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.10 I have received sufficient information to carry out my role (where information was insufficient, please give details)

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.11 Appropriate procedures and processes have been followed

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

5.12 The processes for assessment and the determination of awards are sound

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Completion

If you have identified any areas of good practice, please comment more fully here. We may use information provided in our annual external examining report:

Do you have any suggestions for improvements based on experience at other institutes? We may use information provided in our annual external examining report:

Compliments to the very efficient exams team - who supported the whole assessment process well, but particularly supported students and external examiners, enabling them to perform to the best of their ability. In the case of the external examining team, this made it possible for us to review all material in a timely and constructive fashion. Care has clearly been taken to engender an environment that is comfortable for learners, which in the case for the oral vivas was combined with appropriate questioning and 'stretch'. Materials we had access to in advance (e.g. papers) were very well presented, and the overall experience felt professional, courteous and welcoming. We understand the oral defence component will not be continuing, but would still like to say of it that it reflected best practice in a number of areas, including organisation, robustness (questioning, challenge level consistency) and the chance for learners to experience a panel interview (which provides confidence for future job interviews, ethics panels etc.).

Response from college requested: YES

Oral defence of RP2 has been discontinued because it was found to add not additional validity to the assessment.