IMPARTING LIFE SKILLS TO VETERINARY STUDENTS: AN EMBEDDED CURRICULUM TO ENHANCE SUCCESS IN VETERINARY PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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“Veterinary curricula … have placed too much emphasis on the accumulation of information and too little on problem-solving, critical thinking, the development of desirable behaviours, professional attitudes and the acquisition of essential psychomotor and technical skills.” (Pritchard, 1989, as quoted in Heath, 2006)

Veterinary Professional Life

Veterinary Professional Life (VPL) is a whole-of-course stream of interventions recently introduced to the Murdoch University veterinary curriculum, intended to raise the profile of, and student outcomes in, professional skills and attributes important to success in veterinary practice. These include not only veterinary-specific professional attributes (e.g. ethics, business, diagnostic skills), but also more generic skills (communication, critical inquiry) and personal qualities such as self-awareness, self-management and leadership.

Origins

Though it was once thought such attributes could not, or should not be taught (Heath 2006), there is now clear evidence, particularly from medical education, that undergraduate outcomes related to professional attributes and personal development can be successfully addressed by targeted programmes. More recently, several North American veterinary programmes in leadership and non-technical competence, such as Washington State University’s COLE (Burns et al., 2006) and the related Veterinary Leadership Experience (VLE) camp, as well as the University of California Davis’s leadership workshop (Moore and Klingborg, 2006), have established models for the successful application of similar courses within a veterinary context.

The concept of a professional attribute course has since been rapidly and widely adopted by North America veterinary schools (Lloyd and King, 2004), which were primed in the wake of industry reports such as the KPMG ‘MegaStudy’, which identified business acumen, leadership, self-management, interpersonal and communication skills as crucial for success and personal satisfaction, yet lacking in many practicing veterinarians to the long-term detriment of the profession (Brown and Silverman, 1999). Further industry working parties were convened to specifically identify key deficiencies and the best ways to address them in undergraduate curricula (Lloyd and Walsh, 2002).

In Australia, both international (AVMA, RCVS) and local (VSAAC) accrediting agencies have moved in the same direction, for example by upgrading accreditation standards to require attitudinal outcomes. This has ensured professional outcomes are at least discussed and evaluated at regular accreditation visits, and in some cases also adds requirements to track student competencies in these outcomes and feed back any apparent deficiencies into the curriculum development process.

At Murdoch, these movements came at a time when both students and academics had voiced concerns about a declining focus on generic skills due to content overload; perceptions of a decline in student motivation and initiative; increased stress and poor psychological health (Williams et al., 2005); and a less collegial, less bonded student body. With the North American experience having shown the success of VLE-type programs in
addressing similar issues, it was decided to expand Murdoch’s professional attribute curriculum - previously consisting mostly of a two-week Professional Practice Management unit in final year, that historically suffered from incomplete attendance – to scaffold across the entire course.

**Aims**

The primary aims of VPL are to raise the profile (e.g. awareness, perceived value, engagement) of non-technical professional attributes – for both students and staff - and improve outcomes preparing students for the transition to practice and personal career success. For some attributes where formal instruction is ineffectual, the initial and primary goal is simply recognition of their importance. This key message – that their university cannot teach them many of the attributes needed for success – is partly intended as a ‘wake-up call’, yet is simultaneously empowering as it breaks down the dominating primacy of knowledge-based objectives and grade-driven competitiveness. Its corollary – that we can only provide opportunities for students to learn and practice these attributes – is substantiated by presenting a framework for personal growth through a cycle of vision and goal setting, growth by challenge, reflection, and feedback. This model is of course common to most adult learning contexts, and points to the role for VPL in sustaining the supportive, motivating environment that is fundamental to all student learning. Feedback on pilot VPL events clearly shows how much students value opportunities to bond with both classmates and staff, demonstrating the perhaps growing importance of social factors in the university experience as recently highlighted by studies such as CEQuery (Scott, 2006).

**Scope and priority areas**

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Table 1: Major focus areas of the Murdoch VPL curriculum

The scope of VPL is most easily defined by what it is not – discipline-based knowledge and procedural proficiencies – than what it is. While it mostly focuses on what has been termed the ‘human aspects of the veterinary profession’ (Heath, 2006), it also encompasses fundamental principles of science such as scientific literacy and critical inquiry. Though related to clinical skills such as diagnosis and evidence-based practice, these latter attributes are in some ways of less immediate importance to a graduate, but are rather crucial to the future of the profession (Halliwell, 2006). Skills in critical appraisal and ‘filtering’ of scientific information - essential for postgraduate continuing education - are probably less well developed since the rise of internet information sources (Heath, 2006).
VPL also includes opportunities for growth in interpersonal or ‘life-skills’, particularly through tools such as Goleman’s framework for emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-management, relational management, etc.) and professionally-oriented models of leadership. This is also important to both professional success and the greater profession through expanding notions of responsibility of care beyond simple patient treatment.

Curriculum structure

The approach for VPL has been to adopt a fully embedded curriculum thus maximising potential for integration with both existing disciplines and extramural experiences. Key components include:

- A named unit in each year of the course (Veterinary Professional Life I, II, etc.), worth 1 credit point (notionally 24 contact hours) each. These will administer modest assessment tasks related to the development of VPL attributes (such as reflective learning journals), as well as auditing attendance at VPL events and completion of extramural experience.
- Full or half-day workshop events in Yrs 1, 2, 3, and 5. These focus in the early years particularly on career development and life skills. Early interventions have largely principally drawn on the experiential learning framework developed for VLE as developed by DeBowes and Ruby (Burns et al., 2006)
- New and existing extramural experience (EME) requirements. Learning outcomes of existing EME such as vacation farm experience and external clinical experience will be strengthened by new reflective assessment processes, as well as the introduction of new EME requirements into Year 1 and 2 focused on observation of interpersonal rather than clinical skills.
- Regular lunch-time seminars from guest speakers, particularly external practitioners
- The aggregate of current teaching activities that identifiably contribute to VPL-type graduate attributes. This includes activities or content previously mapped by the Murdoch Graduate Attribute Mapping Process (GAMP), but with specific veterinary rather than generic emphasis.

In this last sense, VPL is not intended to be a discrete entity, but instead an integrated theme or ‘brand’ across all veterinary teaching. Where a learning framework for VPL attributes is already well-developed in existing units (e.g. problem-solving in the context of pathology diagnosis), these will be linked through VPL to provide a clear association with future career success. Through repeated, consistent application of a distinctive logo and set of values, it is hoped that VPL will literally act as a ‘brand’ that flags and integrates activities scattered throughout course that provide growth opportunities for professional attributes.

Challenges

Potential issues include how to raise undergraduate awareness of potential challenges in future professional practice (e.g. stress, conflict, litigation) in a constructive context without negatively affecting motivation, and the apparently skewed perceptions of incoming students. Ranking surveys of a mix of graduate attributes have shown that professional attributes such as research skills, business management, and leadership are not intuitively ranked highly by either students or staff.

There are risks in choosing to develop VPL with an expansive, loosely structured, and often personally interpreted framework, rather than as a pseudo-‘…ology’, and widespread buy-in from academic and clinical staff will be important. However, initial feedback has clearly identified the relevance of speakers as a primary issue, highlighting negative perceptions where professional attributes were advocated by people lacking credible experience, or where speakers were excessively cynical or scathing of the profession. In addition staff have
widely varied - though consistently positive - views of professional attribute teaching. This may define inherent limitations on the role of faculty in delivering the VPL, and highlights the need for significant input from successful external practitioners.

References

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