



AVA Submission on the Review of Australia's Higher Education System

19th December 2022

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the peak organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, livestock and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry, research and teaching. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

The AVA thanks the Department of Education for the opportunity to comment on the review of Australia's Higher Education System. Our comments are focused around maintaining the high standards Australia requires of veterinary practitioners in the context of investment and affordability in veterinary education. 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 critical thinking and problem-solving skills developed and honed in an animal health context coupled with their subject matter expertise, makes 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 economy.¹ 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).

Veterinarians are highly regulated and their initial registration to practise as a veterinary surgeon requires a Bachelor of Veterinary Science or Doctor of Veterinary Medicine that is recognised in Australia. Veterinary degrees are among the most expensive of all university professional programs to deliver, the most recent 'transparent costing exercise' showing 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 fees.² 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. Although the Australian Government's 'Job-ready Graduates' changes to higher education funding provide some increase in funding for each new Commonwealth-supported student from 2021, in many of the Australasian veterinary schools there remains a substantial gap between total funding received for each enrolled domestic veterinary student and the cost of educating them.

Structural reform to enhance the financial sustainability of Australasian veterinary schools is already being fully or partially implemented in many ways. Despite this individual veterinary schools remain under severe stress trying to deliver the high-quality education that veterinary registration demands. Veterinary schools are forced to pass on a significant proportion of the costs on to the profession and students in order to deliver the course. The veterinary profession delivers a large amount of public good through contributing to the educational requirements (as determined by accreditation) of the veterinary degree at a substantial cost to the profession (for example, hosting students during clinical placements). Regulatory requirements do not allow veterinary students to undertake full participation in work integrated learning, and consequently they may slow business efficiency rather than enhance it. The financial viability of the profession is under threat due to decades of under investment, and continued support of veterinary education by the profession where costs cannot be recouped is becoming very difficult to provide.

¹ [Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, Australian Industry and Skills Committee, Animal Medicines Australia](#)

² <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-publications/resources/2019-transparency-higher-education-expenditure-publication>



The financial investment required by veterinary students to undertake their degree is significant even when they have a commonwealth supported place (CSP). Examples of costs incurred are the financial burden of participating in compulsory clinical placements (an accreditation requirement), which require students to fund travel and accommodation costs for up to 20 weeks throughout their degree. These costs reduce the participation of students from a variety of backgrounds and reduces the exposure of the majority of students to rural and regional veterinary practice, and other areas of marked shortages.

The educational debt incurred by all students (irrespective of if they have a CSP or not) is considerable in the face of their income once they enter the profession. The profession has relatively low rates of remuneration, as evidenced by the QILT data³ compared to other professions that incur similar levels of educational debt and after 3 years is the third lowest remunerated out of the 20 areas examined by QILT.² Anecdotally, this high student debt, combined with relatively poor remuneration is one of the factors which contributes significantly to veterinary workplace attrition.

The recent senate inquiry into the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, acknowledged the rural veterinary profession is in crisis and the committee recommended that the Australian Government work with relevant industry bodies to design and implement measures to improve the capacity and capability of production animal veterinarians, particularly in rural and remote areas, including: enhancement of veterinarian attraction and retention strategies and initiatives such as graduate and rural practice incentives.⁴

One of the mechanisms to enhance veterinarian attraction and retention to areas of need is to provide sufficient exposure during higher education and provide incentives post-graduation, two areas that have been well funded in medical education. We would welcome the same funding considerations that medical education receives afforded to veterinary education. For example we strongly support initiatives that financially support students to receive appropriate exposure to rural veterinary practice. We support fee forgiveness for those students who enter areas within the veterinary profession where there are marked shortages, e.g. rural veterinary practice and government public practice.

In conclusion, the provision of veterinary services is essential in our community as animals are embedded in the fabric of our society. Australia has an excellent reputation for producing high quality veterinarians due to the programs our higher education system delivers. Unfortunately, the current university funding model to deliver this education is not sustainable and comes at significant cost to the students, universities, and profession. Risking the quality and availability of veterinary education has broad implications for animal and human health and economic security.

We look forward to being able to contribute further to the review in due course.

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³ [QILT graduate outcomes](#)

⁴ [Adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease and varroa mite](#)