



# Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper

Submission of the  
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

April 2023

## The Australian Veterinary Association

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national 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 Higher Education Accord Panel for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel in response to its discussion paper. We also made a submission to the first round of consultation on in December 2022.

### Executive summary

The AVA supports the development of an Accord to drive lasting reform in Australia's higher education system. We are committed to working with Government, and other stakeholders to deliver a higher education system that meets the current and future needs. Determination of the knowledge and skills our society needs requires a collaborative process across all stakeholders. While education benefits the individual, it also provides significant benefits to our society and the future prosperity of our nation. The cost of attainment of education must be fairly shared across society, particularly for those services which society deems essential, for example veterinary services.

The AVA's focus is the veterinary profession and the sustainability of veterinary education to deliver veterinarians to the profession. We have focused on the questions of greatest relevance to the veterinary profession, however the suggestions provided may have applicability to other areas of higher education. We have addressed specific questions asked in the discussion paper under the terms of reference headings.

### Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

#### **Q1 How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia's higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?**

To address the challenges faced by Australia's higher education system, there needs to be a multi-faceted approach that involves collaboration between Government/regulators, industry, and academia to ensure that the workforce is equipped with the skills needed to meet the current standards and predicted demands of the future. An accord should be structured to bring the key stakeholder groups together, each with equal input to determine what standards and skills are required now and in the future. The facets that contribute to the knowledge and skills Australia requires needs to be viewed through how it improves the social fabric of the community, not just economic gain.

In the context of the veterinary education and its role in ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the skills needed to meet the current standards and predicted demands of the future this could involve formal collaboration between the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC), Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) and AVA. The AVBC acts on behalf of the regulators, that is the veterinary boards of the states and territories to accredit veterinary schools to deliver graduates suitable for registration as veterinary surgeons by the boards. Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) represents the veterinary schools of Australia and New Zealand and would be represent the universities. While the AVA is the peak professional body, representing the profession.



#### **Q4 Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?**

Ensuring higher education delivers the education to provide essential services society requires, is accessible to all in Australian society, and that cost of delivery is shared by the entire community, not just the students and the professions that it serves is a challenge for higher education.

In the context of the veterinary profession, this is a profession that provides an essential service to the Australian community, a community that places high value on animal health and welfare. This is evidenced by the ongoing growth of the animal agricultural sector, 69% of households owning pets<sup>1</sup>, the efforts to protect Australia's wildlife and the protection of animals in times of natural disaster. As well as providing animal health services to owned animals the veterinary profession contributes to the public good through reliable animal health and welfare quality assurance systems with veterinary certification underpinning key aspects of valuable trade in agricultural products, enhancing our international reputation. It is intimately involved in minimising biosecurity and food security risks associated with animals, as well as being essential in response to the impacts of natural disasters on animals. The interconnectedness of human, animal and environmental health and wellbeing (One Health) is now well recognised, and veterinary involvement in the One Health paradigm is critically important.

There is a critical shortage of veterinarians to meet the needs of the community. In order to meet Australia's veterinary workforce with the required knowledge and skill there needs to be a mechanism for accurate data collection and modelling to make sure that education is being undertaken and funded in all areas of need and in the appropriate quantities. For example, the education of veterinarians relies heavily on work integrated learning (WIL) within private veterinary hospitals. Inadequate support for universities to deliver veterinary education means that there is a reliance on private veterinary hospitals to provide and fund clinical education (WIL) with significant impact to veterinary sustainability and needs immediate correction.

There also must be a mechanism to protect education in specialised areas of knowledge despite low demand when it serves the public good. An example of this in the veterinary services sector is the recent discontinuation of the last postgraduate course that delivered veterinary public health. This will result in increased risk to Australia's biosecurity now and in the future, especially in the context of the high risk of emerging zoonotic diseases. Ideally there should be an arrangement where at least one provider in the higher education sector is tasked with providing essential education in areas of low demand, and a mechanism for the cost of delivery of specialised knowledge and skills is shared across society.

#### **Access and opportunity**

#### **Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/report/pets-in-australia-a-national-survey-of-pets-and-people-2/>



Collaborative workforce planning, data collection and modelling of future skill requirements needs to occur between industry and government and future skills and knowledge requirements communicated to education providers for the development of course and program design that meets those needs. Once needs are understood providing incentives for students to study in priority areas should be considered. Using veterinary degrees as an example it is clear that large animal veterinarians are required to service the needs of the \$35 billion animal agriculture sector, however, the number of people wishing to develop skills in this area is declining. Factors that contribute to this include high tertiary education debt coupled with suboptimal lifestyle such as 24/7 on-call for animal welfare, and inadequate remuneration. Providing incentives to study in these areas through scholarships, grants, fee forgiveness is likely to increase uptake and satisfy some financial pressure. Areas of need must be considered such as in rural areas and areas without feeder universities, to assist in attracting veterinary graduates to satisfy requirements in all areas of Australia.

We live in an increasingly diverse community. To ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society encouraging diversity and inclusion with the higher education is essential. Ensuring education and training programs are accessible to all, regardless of background or circumstances, will encourage diversity and inclusivity in the workforce.

There also needs to be a focus on ensuring that students are studying courses that align with the specific needs of regional Australia. Many sectors are contending with acute and chronic workforce shortages in regional communities. This includes the veterinary profession, where undersupply in rural and regional areas is leading to veterinary clinic closures. The Australian Government funds extensive programs in health and education to address workforce supply issues, however, has taken no action to ensure the viability of veterinary practices outside of the major cities. Adequate supply of veterinarians has direct flow on benefits to biosecurity, animal health and welfare, and human health and as animal ownership increases, this threat only becomes more serious.

We also need a stronger evidence base to understand drivers and barriers to study decisions. In order to ensure that enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of society an understanding of what drives student choices in the current environment is required. Using the example of the veterinary profession, understanding why the demographics of the veterinary profession do not reflect community demographics is essential to determine the mechanisms required to change this. For example, the low return on investment of a veterinary degree relative to educational debt may be one of the reasons that the veterinary profession has become highly feminised.

**Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?**

Underrepresented groups may not be undertaking higher education due to perceived inaccessibility, concerns around their capacity to participate and the cost of higher education. Addressing these factors may increase the number of prepared applicants. Regarding perceived inaccessibility and concern around capacity to participate this will require targeted programs and communications tailored to specific unrepresented groups that clearly articulate all pathways to apply and what is required to participate. In the context of the veterinary profession, participation rate of Indigenous people is 0.6%, compared to 3% in the general population and yet the demand in rural communities is greater than ever. In order to increase the number of prepared applicants' universities that offer



veterinary programs must have programs in place that support and prepare Indigenous students for the veterinary degree. Examples of where this is in place is at Murdoch University.

For many underrepresented groups perceived cost and return of investment of the specific course will influence application. Funding mechanisms to offset costs of higher education for underrepresented groups will likely assist increased participation.

## **Investment and affordability**

### **Q12 How should an adequate supply of CSPs be sustained and funded, as population and demand increase?**

Skills and knowledge that are deemed essential and deliver varying degrees of public good need to be supported through the adequate provision of Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding. Ongoing funding for CSP and the ongoing post graduate requirements of skills needed for public good, needs to be borne by the entire Australian community.

We also recommend a greater focus on regular and transparent reviews of funding programs to ensure limited Commonwealth funds are used most efficiently.

### **Q14 How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?**

Work integrated learning (WIL) is an example of public good that the industries contribute to society. The degree of public good provided is dependent on the regulatory framework in which the industry sits. In the context of the veterinary profession, veterinary legislation and regulations are very specific as to what veterinary students can undertake when participating in WIL. Given the degree of supervision required, participation in WIL often comes at a significant cost to the veterinary profession. When the financial viability of the profession is threatened, as it currently is, WIL participation by the profession could decline. Overall, higher education providers need to understand that industries will only provide WIL if they see a return on investment as delivery comes at a significant cost. This calls for greater Government funding and support.

For the number of WIL placements to increase, participation by industry needs to be supported. In the case of the veterinary profession WIL not only comes at significant cost to the profession but also to the students. Due to limited CGS funding students undertaking veterinary degrees need to bear to costs of WIL (travel, accommodation etc). Over time this has resulted in reduced exposure to students to rural veterinary practice which could be a contributor to the veterinary workforce challenges seen in the rural sector. Providing funding for businesses to undertake WIL and students to participate in WIL is likely to have both direct immediate benefits and longer-term indirect benefits.

### **Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?**

There are numerous professions where continued professional development is required to maintain currency, respond to community needs and be eligible for re-registration in order to work. It is suggested that those professions that have regulatory requirements around professional development are reviewed to determine what features embed a culture of lifelong learning.



### **Q16 What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?**

Lifelong learning can be costly to the individual, which is a barrier, particularly in sectors that have low remuneration. This is certainly the case in the veterinary profession. Flexibility of incentives to encourage people to participate in continued learning is required if an appropriate culture is to be made possible. These could include businesses incentives, so the cost is not borne by the employee, greater individual tax incentives and support of ongoing training in areas of public good.

Lack of flexibility within the higher education sector is also a barrier. Given that career journeys are extremely varied innovative flexible solutions are required to allow participants to tailor educational opportunities to their circumstances. For example, the veterinary profession would likely welcome the ability for a range of educational opportunities undertaken through varying providers over a period of time by to be packaged into a post graduate degree. Furthermore, allowing flexibility in higher degrees in research would be beneficial. For many people who wish to continue to participate in the workforce whilst undertaking post graduate degrees in research, the time restrictions imposed by the higher education sector may not be achievable. Flexibility around time frames for government funding of higher degree research completions may assist with this.

### **Q17 How should better alignment and connection across Australia's tertiary education system be achieved?**

The world is increasing in complexity as are the skills and knowledge required to deliver services. The cost of delivery of education around skills and knowledge is also ever increasing. Coupled with this is increased connectivity and ability deliver knowledge and develop skills in novel ways.

In nationally accredited courses, there could be an opportunity to develop national curricula to achieve better alignment and connection. Using the veterinary degree as an example, in order to remain accredited each veterinary school must deliver the degree against a national set of standards. They all develop and deliver their own curricula to achieve this end. The development of a national curricula where the components could be shared amongst vet schools could allow schools to focus on areas of expertise and reduce the workload of staff and cost to the education provider.

### **Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?**

Allowing greater flexibility in the HELP scheme and halting indexation associated with the HELP scheme could assist with addressing the hidden costs of higher education participation. In the context of the veterinary degree, extension of inclusion of the cost of undertaking overseas WIL to domestic WIL where travel and accommodation is required would be welcomed. Additionally stepped assistance for educational areas which require highly intensive investment over a long period of time and significant travel to achieve WIL, therefore preventing self-support of living expenses whilst at university would be welcomed (Band 1- Veterinary degree).



## Governance, accountability, and community

### **Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?**

The mechanisms to ensure that workers are physical and culturally safe at their place of employment should be extended to students while studying. In the context of the veterinary degree as students are not considered employees, they do not have access to the benefits of the workers compensation system. The veterinary profession and by extension the veterinary degree carries significant risk particularly in the area of personal safety. Students who are injured during their degrees are not afforded the same benefits as employees who are looked after by workers compensation. As well as the direct consequences (both short and long term) this has to the students it can have indirect consequences by reducing the appetite of WIL providers to participate due to the higher risks they incur.

Lack of financial safety is particularly relevant for veterinary students, new veterinary graduates, and veterinarians in post graduate veterinary study due to the absence of support for the veterinary profession, available in other health professions.

### **Q48 What principles should underpin the setting of student contributions and Higher Education Loan Program arrangements?**

The principles of importance are:

- The values of the skill set and knowledge (public value) to the community. For those courses that provide essential services to the community the level of student contribution should be linked to the public value of the work and the earning capacity of that sector as a whole. This could be further stratified to modifying student contribution to areas of greatest need and length of time of participation within sector. In the context of the veterinary degree this would be welcomed as the earning capacity relative to educational debt is low. The average starting salary for a graduate veterinarian in 2022 was \$62000<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the short term and medium-term salaries of veterinarians are below the average across 45 study areas including teaching and nursing.<sup>3</sup> The educational debt of CSP students is at least \$70 000, whilst full fee-paying students incur an educational debt of at least \$200 000. The return on investment of the veterinary degree from an individual perspective is low and this may be one of the drivers of a highly feminised veterinary workforce.
- Further stratifying setting of student contributions relative to need should also be considered. In the context of the veterinary profession, it is well accepted that there is a marked skills shortage in the rural and regional areas, an area where vets are essential to support the animal agricultural sector and mitigate biosecurity risk to the entire community. Providing a mechanism through setting of student contributions that would contribute to increased rural and regional workforce participation would be welcomed.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-\(gos\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-(gos))

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey--longitudinal-\(gos-l\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey--longitudinal-(gos-l))



- Provision of funding to higher education providers should reflect the cost of delivery of the course. The CGS funding should have flexibility to accommodate the variation in cost of delivery between courses. Courses that provide essential services to the community (e.g. the veterinary degree) and are costly to deliver should receive greater CGS funding, so the cost is not borne by the students, or the businesses required for mandatory WIL. In the context of the veterinary degree, it is estimated the cost of delivery is 148% of funding provided.<sup>4</sup> The difference is paid for by students through full fee payment places or hidden costs such as lack of financial assistance for work integrated learning. Hidden costs of the veterinary degree result in lower socioeconomic students not being able to afford to do the course irrespective if they have a CGS funded place and severe lack of financial safety during education and continuing throughout a veterinary career.

## Quality and sustainability

### **Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?**

Teaching quality should be a focus of the higher education sector to promote a quality learning environment. This could be achieved through extending mechanisms that reward research into the area of teaching, for example increasing government funding for research into teaching innovations is likely to promote quality learning environments.

Leveraging the experience of alumni to contribute to continuous improvement of providing a quality learning environment is likely to be advantageous. In the context of the veterinary profession this is an asset that appears to be underutilised.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-publications/resources/2019-transparency-higher-education-expenditure-publication>