

## **Veterinary students face financial and mental health pressures**

Thursday 14 May 2009

A comprehensive survey of veterinary students concludes that one in three find themselves in difficult or severe financial situations, more than half have suffered from stress, over a fifth from depression, over a quarter from anxiety and one in every 14 from an eating disorder.

The 2008 survey, produced jointly by the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and its student branch the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS), also found that some veterinary schools have almost doubled their intake of overseas veterinary students since the survey was last conducted in 2005.

### **Financial and mental health issues**

Given that 2008's veterinary science graduates, who expected to leave university with an average debt of £22,300, started their degree paying lower tuition fees, current students will undoubtedly see their final debt increase considerably and respondents who graduate in 2011 expect their debt on graduation to reach £29,400. The AVS expects this to be even higher for future students if universities succeed in lobbying for an increase in fees.

Over two thirds (66.8%) of students feel unable to work to supplement their income. It is well known that they have fewer opportunities to earn money during holidays because of compulsory extra mural studies (EMS), amounting to the equivalent of three additional terms, which have a 'triple-whammy-effect' for veterinary medicines students since

- they are unable to get a paying job during their holidays
- EMS incurs additional expenses for travel/accommodation
- it is not taken into consideration by the Student Loan Company (SLC) for loans

Given that 35.3% of respondents indicated that their financial problems are either difficult or severe it is worrying but no surprise that so many mental health issues have been reported.

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**14 MAY 2009**

The AVS suggests that there are opportunities for veterinary schools and the veterinary profession to improve this bleak picture.

BVA already provides support meetings for young professionals and has put together a position statement which will kick-start a lobbying process for

- the EMS terms to be allowed within the tuition fee loans structure
- veterinary students to be provided with robust financial guidance during their first year at veterinary school
- an increase in student loan availability for veterinary students

**Student population**

Some of the survey's other findings show that

- the veterinary student population continues an overwhelmingly female trend, increasing by 3.4% to 78.8% since 2005
- overall overseas student numbers continue to grow, increasing by 3.5% to 11.8%
- overseas students in Scottish veterinary schools increased to 23.8% at Edinburgh (up from 12.8% in 2005) and 31.2% at Glasgow (up from 15.8%)

The assumption for the Scottish schools is that this makes up the shortfall in income because Scottish students studying at Scottish Universities do not have to pay tuition fees.

BVA President Nicky Paull commented "The BVA/AVS survey, a part of the BVA's continuing work on behalf of veterinary students, once again continues to highlight the growing problem of debt. This is a particular problem for veterinary undergraduates whose five year course by definition will attract more debt than the average three year undergraduate course.

"The impact of this increasing debt is two fold. Firstly, new graduates are more likely to choose their first jobs on the basis of salary and reducing debt rather than individual professional development. Secondly, we are concerned that as school leavers make career decisions on financial grounds, only those from relatively affluent backgrounds will choose

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the veterinary profession. This is contrary to the aims of Government to promote the DfES/Gateway to the Professions initiative. It would be sad to see such a vitally important undergraduate course become one which can only be undertaken by talented young people from families who feel they can afford to help with the long term costs.

“The veterinary undergraduate course is not only training future veterinarians on animal health and welfare but also in the essential role vets play in food safety and the health of the nation.”

**Notes for Editors**

1. Download the **BVA/AVS student survey results** at [http://www.bva.co.uk/student\\_centre/student\\_survey.aspx](http://www.bva.co.uk/student_centre/student_survey.aspx). Findings are based on questionnaires circulated to students during the 2007/8 academic year to which 1833 (45.4% of veterinary students) responded.
2. The survey comprised three sections
  - composition and background of the student population
  - financial information
  - structure of the undergraduate veterinary medicine course
3. The first survey was conducted in 1996, then in 1999, 2002 and 2005
4. BVA's **position statement on student debt and tuition fees** is available at <http://www.bva.co.uk/public/documents/StudentDebtPosition.pdf> in addition to the activities and **advice page on education** at [http://www.bva.co.uk/activity\\_and\\_advice/1494.aspx](http://www.bva.co.uk/activity_and_advice/1494.aspx).
5. For background information on mental health in the veterinary profession please see '**Why are vets at high risk of suicide?**', reporting on a lecture at the British Small Animal Veterinary Association Congress in April.
6. The BVA, through AVS and its **Young Vet Network** ([http://www.bva.co.uk/young\\_vet\\_network/Young\\_Vet\\_Network.aspx](http://www.bva.co.uk/young_vet_network/Young_Vet_Network.aspx)), represents young veterinary students and practitioners and provides **support meetings** ([http://www.bva.co.uk/young\\_vet\\_network/416.aspx](http://www.bva.co.uk/young_vet_network/416.aspx)) for all recently graduated vets.
7. For further information please contact the BVA Press Office on 020 7908 6340 or email [media@bva.co.uk](mailto:media@bva.co.uk)