

## **Guidance on the recruitment of work-based veterinary nursing students and the admission of veterinary nursing students to full-time vocational and degree courses**

### **Introduction**

1. The following guidance draws upon the RCVS Guidance on the Admission of students with disabilities to the professional veterinary degree course, prepared for the university veterinary schools, in the context of the requirements of Part 6 of the Equality Act 2010, covering education including schools, further education, higher education and general qualification bodies.
2. Students with a wide range of disabilities or health conditions can achieve the required standards of knowledge and skills to enable them to practise as veterinary nurses, but it needs to be recognised that each case is different and has to be viewed on its merits. The safety of patients, the public and other colleagues must always take priority.
3. Guidance is provided below on the implications of particular disabling conditions for veterinary nursing applicants. This guidance represents current best practice, but will be updated in the light of experience, or if the Veterinary Nursing Occupational Standards or RCVS Day One Skills for veterinary nurses are substantially altered.

### **Background**

4. The Equality Act 2010 consolidates and replaces the previous discrimination legislation for England, Scotland and Wales. It places duties on awarding organisations and providers of education and other related services in Great Britain. The Equality Act makes it unlawful for bodies responsible for such provision to discriminate against disabled students and other disabled people.
5. As a 'qualifications body', RCVS sets the competence standards required to practise as a veterinary nurse. The Act defines a 'competence standard' as an academic, medical, or other standard applied for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability. The Act recognises that it is considered desirable, and in the public interest, that qualifications bodies should be able to apply one professional standard equally to all applicants, rather than being obliged to adjust that standard on a case-by-case basis. The competence standard, however, must be seen to be genuinely necessary and fundamental to the requirements of the profession to ensure competence in that profession. The RCVS considers that the Veterinary Nursing Occupational Standards and RCVS Day One Skills for Veterinary Nurses meet this requirement.

6. The Equality and Human Rights Commission published technical guidance on Part 6 of the Equality Act. We would recommend this document to the potential employers of student veterinary nurses, and to universities and other institutions admitting students to veterinary nursing degree and diploma courses leading to entry onto the register for veterinary nurses. It provides useful guidance on a range of issues relating to the interpretation of the Act. The technical guidance is a lengthy document, and can be downloaded at:  
[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/EqualityAct/technical\\_guidance\\_on\\_further\\_and\\_higher\\_education.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/technical_guidance_on_further_and_higher_education.pdf)
7. Universities must also comply with the QAA Code of Practice, which includes a section on students with disabilities. The full code is available on the QAA's website at  
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/COP9PlacementLearning.pdf>
8. Colleges offering vocational education and training must ensure that they have in place suitable equal opportunities policy and disability guidance, and that this extends to the practical placements attended by their students.

## The Role of RCVS and the role of the universities and veterinary employers

9. All student veterinary nurses, whether training via an apprenticeship-style route in employment in a veterinary practice, or whether undertaking a full-time course, must meet the Veterinary Nursing Occupational Standards, RCVS Day One Skills for Veterinary Nurses and the provisions of the RCVS Veterinary Nursing Bye-laws relating to training in order to apply to enter the register.
10. The National Occupational Standards (NOS) and Day One Skills (DOS) are either met through the achievement of a vocational qualification in veterinary nursing or by a degree or other “licence to practise” qualification approved by the RCVS Veterinary Nurses Council. Students undertaking these courses must, through their studies and practical placements, also meet the NOS and DOS. The NOS and DOS are, accordingly, seen to be the equivalent in veterinary nursing terms of the Day One Competencies set by the RCVS for veterinary surgeons.
11. In determining who to admit, universities, approved centres and veterinary employers must consider the NOS and DOS as well as, in the case of universities, their own academic standards and regulations. Centres and universities do not have the discretion to offer individuals dispensation from parts of the prescribed training. Whilst it is the right of employers to select student nurses to meet the needs of their business, they must bear in mind the competence requirements of veterinary nurse training and consider carefully how each individual student will be able to reach these. Centres must be assured of the ability of potential students, employed in veterinary practice, to meet the required competencies before they endorse an application to register (enrol) for vocational training.
12. Similarly, universities must demonstrably embed the above considerations within their student admission policies.
13. The RCVS would encourage veterinary employers, centres and universities to review the information they provide in their prospectuses and other marketing materials to ensure that applicants are encouraged, in their own interests, to disclose any disabilities or long-term illnesses when they apply. It should be made clear that disability *per se* does not mean that an applicant will not be accepted for veterinary nurse training. However, without disclosure, employers and/or admissions tutors will be unable properly to consider each applicant’s merits.
14. When considering disabled applicants for admission to veterinary nurse training, employers and/or admissions staff should consider carefully the requirements of the NOS and DOS. They will need to consider whether the disabled applicant has sufficient ‘coping strategies’ not only to cope with the demanding academic and work-based training components of veterinary nurse training, but also whether he or she would be able to meet the requirements of the NOS and DOS. Students should only be admitted if they are physically able to carry out all the tasks that normally constitute veterinary nursing work i.e. are contained in the NOS and DOS. If this is in doubt, such applicants will need to be assessed on an individual basis. In some cases it may be appropriate to seek medical advice on the possibility of improvement in an applicant’s condition, so that deferred admission can be considered.
15. Universities, centres and employers may put in place “reasonable adjustments” in order to assist a disabled student to complete their education and training. There is no duty to make reasonable adjustments to the application of a competence standard as defined in the NOS or DOS, adjustments

must be considered for the process by which the competence is assessed. Such adjustments take into account each student's individual needs and circumstances and the scope to assist students in this way are broad. However such adjustments must first be "reasonable" i.e. be achievable without major disruption or cost and assist the student to carry out the full range of skills required i.e. to meet the NOS and DOS requirements. A reasonable adjustment should not place the student at an undue advantage over other students, especially in relation to qualification assessments.

### **Definition of disability**

16. The Equality Act defines disability as a person's physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. For a fuller definition of disability, please refer to the Disability Rights Commission Code of Practice.
17. It is recognised that further education colleges and universities also deal with students who have a number of other medical and health conditions that do not fall within the terms of the Equality Act, but which could have an effect on a student's ability to practise. Support systems already exist within the universities and further education colleges for students experiencing such difficulties, and maximum use should continue to be made of these systems in order to help individual students through difficult periods.
18. In a small number of cases, where problems affecting a student's ability to practise emerge or worsen during the course (for example due to an accident or a worsening clinical condition), and these cannot be resolved, it may be appropriate for a student to be transferred to another course that would not lead to a registrable qualification.

### **Dyslexia**

19. The further education colleges and universities already have experience of admitting students with disabilities, of which dyslexia is the most common. Whilst many students are able to cope with some degree of dyslexia, it can present particular difficulties for student veterinary nurses who must be able to cope with highly technical language during an intensive supporting academic course, or the additional heavy reading load of a university-based programme. It may be advisable, before an offer is made to a student with dyslexia, to refer the student to the centre or university's Equality Officer or other independent dyslexia specialist to determine the level and degree of disability. Assessment reports that are more than two years old should not be used as the basis on which to make a decision as an individual's condition may change over time. Students with dyslexia may need ongoing support from the further education college or university's special needs specialists.
20. As far as written course work and internal examinations are concerned, whilst some allowance can be made for dyslexia by allowing extra time, or the use of a computer, in written examinations, this should not be such as to give the student an unfair advantage over others, or to prevent the assessment of the student's ability to cope with technical written material, which is an essential part of the job. The veterinary nurse – sometimes working alone - must be able to read and prepare written reports, interpret and dispense prescriptions accurately and interpret written instructions on patient care. Some of which, however, could be computer generated under certain circumstances. Scribes should only be permitted for temporary disability such as a broken arm, not for someone who would never be able to produce the required level of work, either by computer or by hand. If a student's dyslexia is so severe that it prevents

them demonstrating these skills without assistance from a third party, this could ultimately endanger the safety of patients.

21. Students who have substantiated dyslexia are offered extra time and special invigilation facilities in the RCVS external veterinary nursing theory examinations. These examinations are multiple choice papers which are delivered online and therefore a scribe is not a relevant consideration. Whilst invigilators will assist with the reading of individual “difficult” words or phrases, question paper readers *per se* are not provided. Veterinary nursing students must be able to read sufficiently well to recognise when they require assistance in interpretation. If dyslexia is so severe as to render an individual unable to read reasonably reliably (if slowly), they are unlikely to be able to work safely as a veterinary nurse. This approach should be adopted by other awarding institutions.
22. Students with a very severe level of dyslexia may have great difficulty in coping with the demands of the veterinary nursing qualification. It should be noted that there are a number of competencies which require students to produce clear written clinical records, write nursing reports and provide written instructions to clients. Students with dyslexia may not be exempt from this competence and any adjustment made must not give the student an unfair advantage or make them unsafe. Advice should therefore be taken from the appropriate dyslexia specialists or educational psychologists

## **Sensory impairments**

### **Impaired vision**

23. A veterinary nurse may be able to practise with some limited visual impairments (eg. colour blindness or monocular vision), although the extent of impairment would need to be assessed against the requirements of the NOS and DOS. It should be noted that students will have to undertake tasks which normally rely heavily on visual acuity, such as microscope work and assisting during surgery during their course in order to meet the NOS and DOS and a judgement will need to be made in this context. A severe visual impairment would render the individual unable to practise as a veterinary nurse.

### **Hearing impairments**

24. Individuals with a hearing impairment are not necessarily ruled out for admission to veterinary nurse training, as long as they have the appropriate coping strategies and make use of appropriate aids (eg. cochlear implants and the use of amplified stethoscope). In such cases, employers and/or admissions staff will need to have access to medical and other background information to inform their decision. Issues to be taken into account will include the individual’s ability to communicate with others, as well as their ability to cope in a range of practice and clinical-based contexts so as not to be a danger to themselves, colleagues, clients and animals.
25. Whilst it is recognised that British Sign Language is used widely within the deaf community, centres must consider the potential student’s ability to communicate with clients and colleagues without the use of a language interpreter.

## **Mental health**

### **General**

26. When considering applicants with mental health problems such as serious depressive illness, or the position of student veterinary nurses who develop such problems during their training, it must be borne in mind that studying on the veterinary nursing course and working in veterinary practice is a stressful undertaking. Although a history of mental illness would not necessarily preclude admission, it is advisable for such students to be the subject of a risk assessment. In the context of the ready availability of drugs to a veterinary nurse, a history of mental illness could be grounds for not admitting an applicant onto the course where they could be a danger to themselves.

### **Drug abuse**

27. A history of drug abuse could render an individual unable to practise and the employer or university could therefore be justified in refusing to admit, or not allowing a student with a drug problem to complete training. Mental impairment as a result of drug abuse could cause significant difficulties for the individual in coping with veterinary nurse training as well as posing a danger to others.

### **Anorexia**

28. One of the problems often associated with anorexia is the sufferer's inability to admit to the condition or accept treatment. Student veterinary nurses must develop a capacity for self-appraisal and a person who is unable to admit to a condition such as severe anorexia and accept the necessary treatment would not meet this competence. Physical problems and lack of strength and stamina associated with the condition would also be likely to make an applicant unsuitable for training. However, lack of strength **alone** would probably be insufficient grounds for rejection. Documented severe anorexia that has not proved amenable to treatment could provide grounds for non-admission.

### **Physical disabilities**

#### **Absence or partial loss of a limb**

29. On its own, loss or partial loss of a limb would not necessarily preclude an individual from consideration for admission. The effects of the individual's disability with reference to the NOS and DOS should be considered. In particular, the individual's ability to handle and restrain animals safely and to handle equipment will need to be considered.

#### **Wheelchair users**

30. An individual who is permanently based in a wheelchair may be unable to demonstrate the full range of Occupational Standards, and may not therefore be able to qualify as a veterinary nurse.

### **Asthma and allergies to animal dander and other allergens**

31. In the interests of the individual's safety, self-disclosure of such conditions is important at the point of entry to veterinary nurse training. Generally, such conditions are controllable and students can cope well. In some severe cases, however, an allergy may prove to be uncontrollable and life threatening and thus could be grounds for non-admission. Exposure to a wide range of species in veterinary practice is an inevitable and integral part of veterinary nurse training, and applicants need to be advised that the requirements of the NOS and DOS mean that they may not be able to avoid contact with certain species on the grounds of an allergy, or to request dispensation from parts of the course.

### **Immuno-suppressive conditions**

32. Applicants who are taking immuno-suppressants need to be made aware that they would be exposed to organisms that, while not normally pathogenic, might pose a risk to anyone who is immuno-suppressed. It may therefore not be in their best interests to enter training. Employers and/or admissions staff will need to take further medical advice on a case-by-case basis.

### **Annex A**

Extracts from Equality and Human Rights Commission Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education

The full Code of Practice is available on the web at

[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/EqualityAct/technical\\_guidance\\_on\\_further\\_and\\_higher\\_education.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/technical_guidance_on_further_and_higher_education.pdf)

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