

Scotland's Rural College

Why aren't students choosing farm animal practice and what can be done about it?

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Why aren't students choosing farm animal practice and what can be done about it?

The profession faces a recruitment and retention problem, whilst at the same time increasing numbers of students aren't selecting careers within farm animal practice. Recent research from universities and the student Farm Animal Veterinary Society have considered causes and barriers. More recent movements by several farm vets and veterinary associations have sought to highlight farm vets without 'traditional' farm vet backgrounds. This article considers the FAVS report (Owen, 2023) alongside other literature and research into potential barriers to students entering farm animal practice, whilst the panel discussions provides the views of experienced veterinary surgeons working in the farm sector as to what practitioners, and the wider profession can do to increase the number of students considering and choosing careers in farm animal practice.

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It has been widely reported for several years that the veterinary profession is in the middle of a recruitment and retention crisis (Gardiner, 2020; Hagen et al, 2020; RCVS, 2022). This has been felt widely within farm animal practice with attracting and retaining experienced farm vets increasingly challenging (Allcock, 2016; Loeb, 2021).

In the last ten years new veterinary schools have opened at five UK universities (Surrey, Harper-Keele, Central Lancashire, Aberystwyth and SRUC), almost doubling the number of universities offering undergraduate training in veterinary science. While some pose that opening new veterinary schools will alone solve the workforce shortages, others disagree and see increased graduates per year as only one small part of the solution, as generating more newly graduated staff will only further increase the burden of support on the more experienced colleagues who do remain in clinical practice. Furthermore, a 10.9% decrease in applicants to the UK veterinary schools has been reported this year (Webb, 2023).

Alongside increasing numbers of vets leaving the UK-practising part of the RCVS register, we are also seeing decreasing numbers of overseas vets joining the register since Brexit (RCVS, 2022), and in their preliminary report the RCVS (2022) claim the net increase of the UK-practising category on the register

now sits at only 268 vets/year, down from 1180 in 2019.

As farm vets we may be facing a perfect storm, with staff retention rates falling (Loeb, 2021) and new research from the National Farm Animal Veterinary Society (FAVS) highlighting that for many undergraduate students there are significant reasons why they may not opt to enter farm animal practice after graduation (Owen, 2023).

The role of the farm animal vet is also changing, with clients being more knowledgeable and capable than ever before; for example in the author's practice it is relatively uncommon to attend a 'simple milk fever' case while senior and retired colleagues describe that 30+ years ago it would have been common to attend almost one a day (Scarsdale Vets, 2021). Farm animal vets are increasingly becoming involved in data and taking more advisory/consultancy roles (Remnant, 2020; 2021); however, they must remain competent and confident at the expected practical tasks alongside rapidly developing an understanding of the economic climate in which they work, and that their clients face.

Recent research from New Zealand (Doolan-Noble et al, 2023) summarises the moral distress and complexities that national eradication programmes have emotionally and morally, and recent studies (Loeb, 2021) show similar

impacts (anxiety on read days, negative impact of delivering bad news) could be found from UK veterinarians around *Mycobacterium bovis* (bovine TB).

For decades, James Herriot has been the archetypal personification of the rural/livestock veterinarian; however, perhaps this no longer truly represents the profession within the UK. A need to increase public awareness of the changing role of, and people within, the veterinary profession may be overdue. In the FAVS report, Owen (2023) discusses a desperate need for more diverse role models to inspire students into a farm animal career. With themes including views that: it is a male-dominated industry (13%) and, that it would be hard to break into not being from a farming background (6%). Perhaps most concerningly, 57% of respondents felt the farm vet profession was not a diverse community of people.

Extra-mural studies (EMS) remain a large influencing factor in undergraduate students' career decisions (Owen, 2023), and are a key opportunity for vets in clinical practice to showcase and highlight the benefits and realities of clinical farm animal practice. EMS placements also have benefits for practices as they may predispose students to applying for graduate jobs with their company and also allow far more insight for potential employers than just an interview (Charles, 2018; Loeb, 2018).

It is yet to be seen what impact the RCVS' forthcoming changes to EMS requirements and structure (including a reduction in the number of weeks and the creation of a central database) will have on the student experience, quality of EMS and exposure to different sectors and practices within the profession (Richards, 2023).

The low retention rates within clinical practice are also evident to students (especially in clinical years as their exposure to vets in practice and the wider profession grows) and things such as work-life balance, poor management and salaries also are likely to have an impact on students' career decisions (Ruston et al, 2016; Gardiner, 2020; Owen, 2023). Interestingly, research (Loeb, 2021) has shown that both farmers and livestock vets believe that salaries have a significant impact on retention rates.

It is interesting to see how some practices are starting to address some of these themes by allowing practitioners to 'buy' and 'sell' out-of-hours work as described by Allcock (2016). Unlike in the small animal sector, external out of hours providers are not common and, therefore, when comparing career pathways, the relative ease in finding roles without out-of-hours demands in small animal due to services like 'VetsNow' (VetsNow, 2023) may have an impact, although it is worth noting that some farm animal companies now offer external out-of-hours provision in a model similar to that seen in small animal practice.

Promisingly, 86% of respondents to Owen's (2023) survey had considered a career in farm animal practice; however, clearly throughout their study a significantly high proportion of students are deciding not to enter farm animal practice. While we must acknowledge that for many there may be other factors or a stronger clinical interest in other species, it is discouraging that common themes are still rearing their head and dissuading students from a career in farm animal practice.

Conclusions

To the author it is clear: as a profession we must do better to support and encourage students to pursue careers in farm animal practice. With this relying on vets working in clinical practice just as much as, if not more than, those educating students in the university setting.

1. What was your background prior to veterinary school?

Georgia Owen replies:

My journey to vet school was quite unconventional! I was never an A* student, so after un-



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**Vivienne
Mackinnon**
BVM&S MRCVS,
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derperforming in my GCSEs and being made to take different A Levels, I moved out of my family home to my grandparent's house at 17 to re-take my exams at a different school. This meant I could finally take my science A levels and apply to vet school. I missed my grades the first time round, so studied Bioveterinary Science at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) and then re-applied to study Veterinary Medicine after graduation. It has been a long journey, with plenty of ups and downs along the way, but it has shaped me into the person I am today, and I wouldn't change a thing!

Issa Robson replies:

I am a Thai-British dedicated clinical farm vet and now academic at the university of Surrey. I am not from a farming background. I grew up in the suburbs of Surrey and my first contact with farm animals were family holidays to Northumberland and city farms. After failing to get the right A-level grades, I took the second-degree route into vet school, these 'gap years' allowed me to work on farms throughout the UK and gain confidence with farm species prior to starting at Edinburgh.

John Remnant replies:

I went to a state comprehensive school in rural Cornwall. Although I grew up in a rural area, my parents moved to Cornwall from London and Leeds, so there was no history of farming or veterinary work in my family.

Ami Sawran replies:

Absolutely nothing to do with farming or veterinary. There was not a farmer nor a university attendee in my family before me. I went to university straight from school, undeterred from a childhood dream of being a vet (or an actress: either/or).

Kirsty Howson replies:

School told me I wouldn't get the A levels to be a vet and discouraged me from doing them! I went to Agricultural college at 16, completed an NDA in Agriculture and from there I went to Harper Adams at 18 and completed a BSc in agriculture and animal science (all whilst hoping I might still get into veterinary but knowing I may not as well). I fought my case personally with the Dean at Nottingham University after he rang me to say I hadn't got a place!

Joe Henry replies:

I grew up in rural area, son of a doctor.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

I grew up in a rural part of Central Scotland and went to the local comprehensive school. Neither of my parents attended university. I was 'animal daft', keeping horses and pets and was fortunate that the neighbouring farmer and local vet practice took me under their wing, an experience which seems far less common nowadays.

Alice Miller replies:

I grew up in rural Buckinghamshire and am from a family of animal lovers. We were always lucky enough to have a menagerie of pets, but I don't have a farming background. My dad is a graphic designer and my mum an artist and teacher. I cannot remember when I first decided that I wanted to be a vet. Even early on at primary school it was my goal, which gave me the focus throughout school to achieve the required grades. There is a common misconception that you must be clever to be a vet, but I disagree, I believe hard work and motivation is what is actually required.

2. What led you to choose a career in farm animal practice?

Georgia Owen replies:

I grew up on a small housing estate in the West Midlands, so I am not from a farming background or a farming family. Prior to applying to vet school, I travelled to Ireland for a few weeks to work on a dairy farm and fell in love. I really admire the hard-working nature of farmers in the UK, and appreciated the time and effort that goes into rearing livestock and maintaining high welfare standards. It is such a varied job day-to-day, and you can forge some amazing relationships with farmers!

Issa Robson replies:

Being a dedicated farm vet wasn't something that I knew about until farm vets from Lambert, Leonard and May came in third year to encourage us to apply to see clinical practice with them. I loved my farm experiences, working with farms and cattle and sheep, but until that point I had never considered a career as a dedicated farm vet or thought it could be a possibility for me, so thank you James Allcock and Bill May for doing this outreach.

John Remnant replies:

I went to vet school planning a career in mixed practice and this is what I did after graduation. Increasingly through vet school, and then in

mixed practice, I found I enjoyed the farm animal work most. Eventually I made the decision to concentrate on farm animal work full time. I find it hard to identify exactly what it is that appealed most, but I was getting frustrated not being able to spend more time getting to know the farmers I worked with, and to follow up on work I was doing with them. Generally I found the work I did on farms more rewarding.

Ami Sawran replies:

Most of my pre-university work experience was farm based, having volunteered at a city farm on any weekends or holidays. I already had a better idea of how to interact with farm species, and over pre-clinical and EMS placements, I found that the pace of life and structure of the farm vet's day was something that appealed to me over being in one building all day. I loved the variety that the farm presented, giving me the ability to pursue different interests within the sector. I felt like farm vets overall seemed happier, and that's still my experience, having been one for nearly 12 years.

Kirsty Howson replies:

I always loved working with farm animals and from leaving school at 16 I worked on farms in my spare time, but it wasn't like work, I just would do anything to work with farm animals. I never had a passion for small animal or equine in the same way as for farm and the further I got into my veterinary degree the more I realised farm was the only thing I wanted to do. Working with farmers regularly leads to long-term working relationships and friendships, working as a team to improve their business success really motivates me. As well as the bonus of loving working outside in the countryside.

Joe Henry replies:

The relationships that are built up with farm clients, working outdoors in a seasonal job – I am in beef, sheep and goat exclusive practice, part of the red meat sector.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

In some ways I chose farm animal practice but felt it did not choose me! My first job did not turn out to be as mixed as advertised and with a lack of support and social isolation I ended up moving into small animal practice, then back into mixed for a while. Several years later, a chance conversation led me into government veterinary services with the Animal

and Plant Health Agency (APHA) which was unexpected. I relished the farm work and gaining experience across all livestock sectors. In December 2022 I joined Scotland's Rural College's (SRUC's) new vet school in Aberdeen as Director of Veterinary Partnerships to form links with practices.

Alice Miller replies:

In seeking work experience for UCAS applications, I answered a local advert for lambing help. This was on a mixed sheep and beef farm. I loved lambing and learnt so much under the guidance of the patient farmer. He had lectured at agricultural college and was an advocate for the industry and supported me in my quest for further work experience. I returned regularly over a 2 year period to help with day-to-day tasks. It was during this time that I realised the farming lifestyle appealed to me more than the previous image I had of a vet in their clinic. I found the animals fascinating, the work rewarding and enjoyed being part of the close-knit farming community too.

3. How could we engage better with pre-university students to encourage them to consider farm animal practice careers?

Georgia Owen replies:

I think allowing students to talk to real-life farm vets, whether that be at school career's fairs or during open farm days would be extremely beneficial in inspiring the next generation of farm vets. In comparison to small animal medicine, the role gets far less publicity in the media, so I think the more we can connect with students and show them what the job entails the more people will become interested.

Issa Robson replies:

The costs associated with getting farm experience are often prohibitive to pre-uni students and I support the universities' move to reduce entry requirements for this reason. But I think we now have to radically re-think how the curriculum supports and levels up students with little farm exposure prior to uni. Better engagement with pre-uni students also requires vet school widening participation teams to be better funded.

John Remnant replies:

I am not sure there is a single answer to this. I think it is important to remember that a lot of pre-university students won't have access

to farms and farm vets, due to not having the connections, location or finances. This makes initiatives like city farms really important for our sector. When we do communicate with pre-university students, I think it is also important we share the reality of modern farm work – it can be tempting to focus on lambings, and other 'cute' animals, but discussing technology and data might appeal to students who would otherwise apply to a different career entirely. I think we should also communicate how farm animal veterinary work aligns with the values of young people, explaining the contribution we make to reducing the environmental footprint of food production and improving animal welfare. We could also help to educate our small animal colleagues about the farm animal sector – due to their numbers and location they are much more likely to be in contact with more potential applicants – giving them the resources to speak confidently about the modern farm sector would be a great help.

Ami Sawran replies:

Probably by dispelling the rumours that abound about farm practice; that it is inflexible, unwelcoming to women, and only suited to people from farming backgrounds. We surveyed our farm and mixed practices at VetPartners, and found that 58% of our farm vets are women, and 75% of our farm vets are not from farming backgrounds. 87% of us have flexible working arrangements, and while I acknowledge that many barriers to entry remain (which we are working on), we do have models and working practices that are ready to welcome a new, diverse generation of farm vets. Enthusiasm and curiosity about the sector are the most important attributes of a person pursuing a career in farm practice; everything else can be learned. I think we need to plant the seeds of possibility much earlier on; just this year we have seen such promising final year students with real talent for farm; however, they had already decided on different career paths before their rotations. It's sad to see farm having already been written off – but I'm very keen to show pre-veterinary and early years veterinary students that this sector isn't quite what they think it is!

Kirsty Howson replies:

Being involved in local events for children related to agriculture and careers days help to promote farm animal vets. For example, we have been involved with Westmorland County Show Society delivering the biggest open farm

educational event across the country – a great way to inspire youngsters.

Being more open to having them on work experience is a must, but can be really tricky with farmers especially from a health and safety point of view.

Joe Henry replies:

Choose vet students from rural communities – they will find it a less alien culture. In my first job, four out of seven vets were children of farmers and the other three had grown up in rural areas. We encourage farmers' children to do placements, and speak at young farmers' meetings. Essentially though, universities are picking the wrong people to be vets. There is no recruitment crisis, it is a retention crisis. If you have a leaky bucket just putting more water in will not work – we need to fix the leak.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

SRUC's new vet school in Aberdeen has an ambition to produce vets who want to work in rural mixed practice and veterinary public health, and our admissions process is tailored to meet that goal. We have developed a tertiary model of veterinary education with an HND gateway course in rural animal health and set the academic tariff for direct entry at a level suitable for the demands of the job rather than driven by the volume of applicants. Crucially, we will focus on the applicants' commitment to rural mixed practice. This approach has proven to be successful by certain vet schools in the US and Australia, with graduates entering and remaining in rural practice.

Alice Miller replies:

Several of our board members and society members alike already volunteer their time to attend career talks in schools. I, too, have done this for both primary and secondary schools. I have even held an online, 'careers in farm veterinary medicine' event for local schools, which was well attended. As a society we recognise how important these interactions are and are looking at ways to further encourage and support them.

As well as promoting farm vetting, I think we need to educate children about agriculture in general. I would love to see it as part of the curriculum from an early age. All children should be encouraged to consider jobs in agriculture as a career option and not just the ones from farming backgrounds. We are facing a recruitment crisis in farm animal practice,

and this is the same across the whole farming industry, but unless these career options seem obtainable, they won't be pursued.

4. Many students claim they are put off farm animal practice from their 'pre-clinical/animal husbandry' placements, how can we support students more on these?

Georgia Owen replies:

I think it is important to figure out why students are being put off large animal work and provide support for them while at university so they can make the most out of their time on placement. For example, if students are nervous about handling livestock, then we should look to provide more handling sessions to improve their confidence. Many students are not familiar with the ins and outs of farming, so providing them with some basic information on what a day on placement may look like for them can really help manage student's expectations.

John Remnant replies:

Research we have carried out has highlighted that EMS is a really important factor in enabling veterinary students to decide whether to pursue or avoid farm animal careers (Payne et al, 2021). I think it is important to recognise that for some students these placements are really positive and can be the start of a strong interest in farm practice. However, we know many students have unacceptable experiences on EMS placements, which can put them off the sector completely. We know these negative experiences will be more likely in students from marginalised groups, and those not from a farming background. Ensuring support is available when bad experiences occur, while trying to identify and train hosts for more supportive placements is a good place to start.

Ami Sawran replies:

I think the huge variability in the quality of placement can mean students can have rocky starts; having university databases of good quality placements with rating systems is a good way to ensure more quality control. I am also aware of the results of student surveys that suggest that discrimination on placement has significantly impacted their learning and informed their career choices. As an industry, we need to highlight the good examples of farm practice, and, to the whole sector, the benefits of having a diverse workforce. We have plenty

of farmers that subscribe to this, and it is my hope that they will foster the development of more students in the future. Universities must also have robust reporting systems for poor placements, and act on that feedback. As a placement provider, it can be hard to know exactly how to help a student get the most out of their time, so providing structure to placements with clear learning objectives to willing providers may help. Students generally want to be helpful while on placement, as well as learn, so having a two-way flow of feedback to help achieve this is essential.

Kirsty Howson replies:

Farmers are time pressured and need students to come prepared for these placements. My feeling is those that are put off are going on a placement very green. Maybe veterinary schools could consider more practical training within the first 2 years to help students be more prepared. The agricultural industry is also desperately short of labour and so there is a huge opportunity for any enthusiastic student to get further experience whilst getting paid for it. Maybe vets could help advertise/communicate available options to a vet student portal.

Joe Henry replies:

To some extent if they can't hack it on the farm they're not going to make as farm vets. Farms vary and we cannot just choose the 'best' ones for students.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

Preparing students for the reality of industry beforehand then placing them on the right farms which are welcoming to students from all backgrounds is crucial. Farmers often ask if you are from a farming background, usually just as a conversation opener but it can make some people feel like an outsider. Students have a keen interest in animal welfare and want to have conversations to explore that. If they are dismissed as naïve by experienced farmers/vets who accept the industry standard without question, that can leave them disenfranchised. They need to work with farmers who are passionate about animal health and welfare and will nurture them to develop confidence and enthusiasm for farming, whilst getting the day job done. A big ask!

Alice Miller replies:

Unfortunately, this is something that I too have heard occasionally from individual students,

but also wider reports come from our BCVA student reps. As a result, this has already featured on our agenda for the student working group this year and we have been producing resources to better support our student members. We have a database of practices who are happy to take students and have produced a guide to help practices prepare for placements. We want students to realise that the bad experiences are unfortunately down to a damaging minority, and we do feel it is up to the universities to vet the placement providers. We are also soon to release a series of video interviews that feature farmers from all sectors. They were designed to give an insight into agriculture for those not familiar with it and help dispel some myths to show that many farmers are progressive and supportive. We have also been working on guides for students to help them plan for a placement, in the hope they feel prepared and therefore get more from it.

5. What can we do during externships and EMS to encourage students to consider farm animal practice?

Georgia Owen replies:

I think that EMS is a fantastic opportunity to connect with students visiting the practice and chat with them about what a career in farm animal practice may look like for them. If you can find a part of farm animal medicine that a student enjoys, whether that be working with a particular species, herd-health planning, calf management or fertility scanning, and explore that with them you may just spark a flame for farm animal practice. Passion is infectious, if you are around people that love what they do then you are more likely to want to get stuck in!

Issa Robson replies:

We should be providing opportunities for extra direction for first year students that have no prior farm exposure to give them a 'good start' so they can feel confident in basic husbandry tasks, such as bedding a pen or feeding calves and moving around and handling.

We also need to talk to students directly about what to do if they are having a 'bad experience' such as experiencing discrimination. Student often deal with processing these events without any help from the university.

Many students don't 'see themselves' reflected as farm vets. When changing mindsets about who belongs to an industry, visible role

models from your own background help so much. Raising the visibility and support for folks from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds in farming vetting and agriculture is a passion for myself and my co-founder Navaratnam Partheeban of the British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society.

The quality of educational experience can vary from placement to placement and season to season. Some farmer and stock people are very good at teaching students, but it would be helpful if they knew what to teach! In response I curated a series of digital guides and resources students can access on farm from a phone. These includes video guides to basic husbandry procedures and videos for routine activities they may not get an opportunity to see. There is something in the resources to help students extend their knowledge base wherever they are starting from. Keen first year students can also learn how to do a clinical exam, while they are still in a lambing shed. These online resources form an essential learning platform we direct our Surrey final year students to whilst they are on farm rotations. I am happy to share these resources more widely.

John Remnant replies:

There are lots of things. The most important thing is to be friendly and welcoming, we can't force people to become farm vets, but if students have a good experience and feel welcome then they are far more likely to be able to relax enough to properly consider it, and know that they would be supported if they do decide to pursue a career in the farm sector. We can also focus on ensuring that the students see realistic, but good, practice. We occasionally have an image problem in the farm sector with a perception that we don't care about health and safety, animal welfare or regulations – having these misconceptions supported isn't going to inspire anyone.

Ami Sawran replies:

This is something we feel strongly about at Vet-Partners, as we move to more outcomes-based EMS. I know first-hand that it is difficult to prioritise teaching and learning experiences if you're stressed and understaffed, so ensuring that it is as easy as possible to deliver is vital. Students could provide learning objectives in their applications to help practices structure EMS weeks and target certain visits ahead of a student arriving in a blur of Monday morning madness. Students shouldn't feel pressured

to learn EVERYTHING in 2-week placements, but should instead work with the provider to determine a few realistic targets for each week, which will vary depending on their experience and the type of practice they are attending. I am happiest, as a provider, when students are realistic about their strengths, weaknesses and objectives, and then we know exactly where we are with one another. Saying to me 'I want to learn everything' doesn't help me to foster specific skills. We can certainly make it much easier for each other if we communicate ahead of time.

Kirsty Howson replies:

Provide them with a positive experience showing them as many dimensions of the job as possible to ensure they get a rounded overview of the profession. Providing accommodation to encourage them to do some OOH work as well so they get some experience of this too.

Joe Henry replies:

Show enthusiasm for our job and demonstrate the lifestyle.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

As above. Spending time discussing the long-term career satisfaction helps to keep the day-to-day frustrations in perspective. Showcasing the support practices would offer a new graduate, in and outside the workplace, is essential.

Alice Miller replies:

As a practicing farm animal vet, I think it's important to be open-minded, patient and supportive towards those who lack experience in the sector. I appreciate that it is certainly challenging when you may host a student who appears disinterested, but more often than not a lack of confidence can be mistaken for this. I find it pays to take the time to plan their diary prior to arrival. This helps avoid a scenario where a student is left at the practice all day, made to feel awkward or even bored. It also really helps if students spend time with all team members and not just the vets. Include vet techs, trimmers, office staff and time in the lab. This helps to gain a better understanding of the running of the practice. Also, invite them to clinical clubs and client meetings, it gives them a chance to experience the team comradery that still exists in the farm vet setting, but is perhaps less obvious than in a small animal practice where everyone is 'out the back' together all day.

6. What are your views on practices only taking students who have already decided on a career in farm animal practice for EMS?

Georgia Owen replies:

I understand why practices have decided to go down this route, as it can help select the students who they feel would benefit the most from being on placement with them. It has benefits for farm-keen students; however, I do think it runs the risk of putting off students who are still undecided or want to explore different career options before graduation. For students just starting out on EMS, I think having as many doors open as possible to farm animal practice is important.

Issa Robson replies:

There is a place for selecting students who are 'keen' on farm, particularly in busy parts of the year, but by offering to only 'decided' students, those that are enthusiastic, capable, and unsure of their career path may never receive the mentoring and exposure that could change their minds or give them the confidence to follow this career path.

The farm sector has been slow to come to the realisation that we do have to work harder to recruit graduates into our sector, and that these students have a different demographic to the past (eg they aren't white, male, rugby players and from the local farms).

John Remnant replies:

It is understandable, but not always helpful. We all enjoy teaching people interested in our subject, and there is a significant investment from the practice in time and energy supporting EMS. It is understandable to want to make this investment where it feels most valuable. I think the key here is how we select these students – having grown up on a farm, or having done exclusively farm EMS are not the only indicators of career interest, but can give the impression only certain types of people are welcome. Many students, and graduates, will change what type of career they want. Making sure as many people as possible get to see how rewarding farm animal practice can be, and feeling supported to do so, is the best way to encourage more people in to the sector.

Ami Sawran replies:

Honestly, it's something I understand, but not something I do. I appreciate that practices are under pressure to provide useful placements

alongside meaningful, productive work, and that is much more easily achieved with a student who is already dedicated to farm. However, my team seem to enjoy showing students how brilliant a farm career can be, and we've had a few converts through the doors. We would miss opportunities like this if we shut the door too early.

Kirsty Howson replies:

I can understand why practices do this as it can be very difficult to maintain your motivation to take the time to teach students if you get a run of disinterested students who just want to tick off their EMS before pursuing a small animal career. Rightly or wrongly we have taken the approach where we are over-subscribed to turn down students right at the beginning of their EMS second years going into third year for those who have done some more clinical training – this is because I feel they get far more out of their time with us when they have got a bit further on with their training. We do not ask their interests to screen them.

Joe Henry replies:

I have some sympathy for them as sometimes one gets a student who clearly is just there to tick the box on EMS weeks, but in general I am happy to take all and convert them to a farm job. When I started in a mixed job I thought I would end up being a small animal surgeon!

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

This is understandable given current time constraints in practice, and some practices have reported a lack of engagement by a minority of students. However, it may fuel perceptions that farm animal practice is not welcoming, and lead to students feeling that they cannot be authentic when talking about career choices. Vet schools have a role to play in setting clear expectations of students' engagement with EMS, as does the RCVS in considering whether the current EMS model is still suitable for students and practices.

Alice Miller replies:

It may be easier to host students with a preference for farm work. But personally, I still find it rewarding when a student's skills and knowledge, regardless of their preference for small animal, equine or farm, improve during their stay as a result of your teaching. Sometimes this requires more time and support and, of course, the student must be open-minded.

But, by not doing this, there is a danger that it becomes limiting. We'd run the risk of missing out on future colleagues who may have lacked previous exposure, so only consider it a career option as a result of the placement. Ultimately, at BCVA we want to promote a diverse and inclusive farm vet population and ensure the future of our industry, whilst supporting our members in the process.

7. What does your practice/ institution do to encourage/ support students' interest in farm animal practice?

Georgia Owen replies:

National FAVS is a student-lead organisation, meaning encouraging students to see and get involved in farm practice is at the heart of what we do. Every year we host FAVS Congress, with the aim of teaching students about farm animal medicine and hopefully inspiring the next generation of farm vets. We are involved in setting up FAVS societies within vet schools and aim to support them by providing contacts and resources to share with students. We also recently created the Farm Vet Student Wellness Initiative (FVSWI) student group, which aims to encourage inclusion within the farm vet profession and offers as a safe space for students to chat about their placements and connect with other students.

Issa Robson replies:

I work for Surrey Vet School as lecturer in Veterinary clinical practice (LVCP). I don't miss an opportunity to tell students that farm vetting is one of the happiest sectors, with good work-life balance. I still love being a clinical farm animal vet, which I put down to a combination of working with the stock and the farmers. 'If you want to do 6 calls a day with a meaningful interaction that lasts longer than 15 mins ... become a farm vet!'

We have a super team of farm clinicians at Surrey who are very enthusiastic about farm and do a great job of relaying our love and enthusiasm to the students we teach. Final year students do their rotations in partner practices with access to support from a LVCP and a team of clinical farm vets who enjoy mentoring the next generation of vet regardless of their final career destination.

John Remnant replies:

Working in a vet school, our farm animal teaching would be the most obvious activity.

Beyond this we offer regular talks and one-to-one meetings to discuss careers and answer questions about entering farm practice. We offer support to people wanting to gain more farm experience but who are lacking confidence. Unfortunately, we also need to spend a lot of time supporting people who have had negative experiences on EMS. This can often involve students who were originally keen to pursue a career in farm practice but have been put off following sexist, racist or other discriminatory experiences (Payne et al, 2022). It can be hard for students to come back from this, but we try to point those still considering farm practice in the direction of more inclusive EMS providers for further placements to help them appreciate that, whilst these attitudes persist in our sector, they are not ubiquitous.

Ami Sawran replies:

We try to get to know a student very early on – in fact, the best application letters are the ones that already detail what a student wants from a placement, and realistic targets for their week(s) with us. By determining around 5 things they want to achieve, we can outline their whole week of placement from the routine appointments we already have booked to help them hit their targets. We also provide regular feedback, and are very open to receiving it. We outline our expectations in standard inductions and immerse the students in every aspect of our practice, with them assisting in veterinary, technical and administrative tasks. We try to be honest and realistic about practice life. I think it helps that we have a close knit, communicative team who are happy to teach, and they respond very positively to enthusiasm.

Kirsty Howson replies:

We proactively engage with the students who show an interest in farm animal when they are with us and encourage them to book more EMS with us ASAP.

Joe Henry replies:

We offer accommodation with vets for EMS, speak at FAVS, offer externships etc. Four out of six vets working here were students here.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

In addition to our admissions process, our curriculum is systems-based and focuses on first opinion mixed practice and the role of vets in the food chain from day 1. Final year rota-

tions will be based in a network of practices to maximise exposure to mixed and farm animal work.

Alice Miller replies:

I head the student liaison working group, which includes several board members, many of whom are practicing clinical vets and others who have experience in university teaching. Together we provide support and resources to the active student membership as well as the wider student population via our BCVA student representatives, for every university.

Our student membership is amazing value, as it is only a one-off fee of £5 which covers their entire time at university. Members have access to online editions of *Cattle Quarterly* and *Cattle Practice*, access to archived podcasts, webinars and clinical clubs, as well as all our student resources.

We actively support the annual National FAVS conference, through sponsorship and provision of speakers for workshops and presentations. We also encourage student attendance at BCVA Congress as a steward, which is a great opportunity for networking and a chance to attend lectures and workshops.

We provide one in-person speaker and food, for an event at each university, every year. They are not just open to BCVA and FAVS members. We actively encourage welcoming along all year groups, with the aim of promoting farm animal practice to everyone. We cover a requested topic, that focuses on practical day-one skills, with tips and advice for starting work in practice, rather than repeating material already covered in the curriculum.

We are also in the process of working closely with all the universities to see how we can further support students whilst promoting farm animal practice.

8. 21% of students listed lifestyle factors (low pay, work hours, high paperwork etc) as a reason for not wanting to pursue careers in farm animal practice. Can anything be done about these?

Georgia Owen replies:

Every practice will work to a different rota, have different OOH services and caseloads. It is expected that there will be busy seasons, particularly around easter time, and students do understand this is the nature of the job. There are still a lot of misconceptions about what a week in the life of a farm vet looks like in the

21st century, which is why we need more farm vets to share their experiences in practice, eg through social media or visiting universities to talk to students and help change that narrative!

Issa Robson replies:

An interesting finding of the survey, which doesn't necessarily reflect the reality of the role and perhaps reflects limited exposure to the day job.

Relative to typing up an extensive set of notes after each small animal consultation, paperwork is reasonably limited for farm. Pay relative to working hours and work-life balance is reasonable. Usually sensible clients, farmers also like to work within a standard working day and week. There are exciting and busy times of year, but the summer is typically very quiet and working the few calls we do have in the sunshine is a great compensation. OOH rotas are often very favourable in larger farm practices – a 1 in 7 would to me offer a good work-life balance.

John Remnant replies:

We have an important role here identifying and correcting common misconceptions. This also probably applies to people working in other veterinary sectors who speak to students about their career options, but chose not to work in farm practice themselves. There is a risk that even as things change, students continue to hear a slightly outdated version of farm practice. Salaries are similar in new graduate farm jobs to new graduate small animal jobs, and with few evening or weekend appointments working hours are often better too. While it is important to address any misconceptions, these issues are also identified as factors related to retention of farm vets. This is a challenge for the sector to think of new ways of working that overcome these issues – part-time work, good time off in lieu, OOH-only roles, increased use of non-veterinary team members, and using technology are all possible and can all make the sector more appealing and future proof. Adapting how we work is a more sustainable strategy than trying to change the expectations of future generations of veterinary students.

Ami Sawran replies:

We, as a profession, should always be re-evaluating our business practices, and responding to the changing needs of our existing and prospective teams – we've challenged our own policies multiple times in the past few years, and

we are much happier for it at Westpoint. Team discussions have driven many changes, and a lot of my personal irritations with 'the way things were' have disappeared now because we've challenged the status quo. I discussed the issue of paperwork with a colleague, because I'm not sure that I have more paperwork to do than my small animal or equine counterparts (insurance!), and she suggested that it is because when students are on placement, they tend to be in consult rooms or theatre, rather than shadowing vets in an office doing paperwork. In a farm office, everything is 'out on the floor' so to speak, so when you're shadowing farm vets, you see everything they have to do in a day. I don't feel like paperwork is excessive in farm – there are some very data driven aspects of farm practice, which may not appeal to everyone, but the beauty of farm is that there is so much variety that there's a niche for everyone. As for lower pay, it seems we do tend towards the lower scale compared to our counterparts, which is not a reflection of our contribution to the profession – more the type of work and the daily throughput, but I think the quality of life is better for me than it has been in other types of jobs. As for hours, I have a pretty reliable 8–5 job, work a 4 day week and a 1:8 rota – your hours and flexibility are practice-specific rather than sector-specific, and I enjoy the flexibility that a farm job offers; being able to structure your day out on the road means that you can factor errands into quieter days, and pursue specific career interests, especially when there are seasonal lulls in clinical work. I would urge people with these viewpoints to take a wider look at different practices and areas before writing off a rewarding career in what remains an essential, diverse and ever-evolving sector.

Kirsty Howson replies:

Yes, we are a new farm animal practice aiming for our full-time vets to work a 4-day week as standard to ensure better work-life balance. I know we are not the only ones working towards improved work-life balance. I feel like many employers are exploring options to make their practices both appealing and sustainable for vets.

Joe Henry replies:

Don't have false expectations – farm vetting is a good lifestyle – yes the hours can be long but they are generally rewarding in a nice environment compared to being in a consulting box seeing a new sick animal and owner every

10 minutes. No surprise all vets here are farmers' or doctors' children – ie they see the job as a lifestyle and enjoy it. I am not aware of the pay differences between FA and SA vet work so can't see this being an issue. The main problem with paperwork is anything to do with TB.

Vivienne Mackinnon replies:

Where possible, a more flexible approach to working hours helps. Reviewing existing practice roles and systems to maximise efficiency/minimise admin tasks, and a pricing strategy that values advice rather than relying on drug sales. Increased use of vet techs and vet nurses, and a new Veterinary Surgeons Act to facilitate this. Improving government support for small/solo practices in very remote areas where they provide essential services for livestock keepers. Awareness of the seasonal and volume differences in OOH work between farm and small animal practice, the value of exposure to emergencies (with the right support), and time off in lieu of on-call can help. Many practices are of course already doing all this! Farmers and vets championing the role helps students see the positives of being part of a community.

Alice Miller replies:

There is no easy, quick fix. It is possible to address the discrepancy between the desired conditions and the working reality, but the compromise can only occur if it is achievable and sustainable. With regards to pay, ultimately change will only

occur if business owners have the resources and inclination to implement them.

In reference to working hours, some farm practices have already embraced flexible working options, which could be a more common occurrence if we can learn from these new models.

Finally, with the perception of a high paperwork load, this is potentially unavoidable. Perhaps, this comes down to re-education, life as a modern day farm vet is becoming further removed from the traditional image of James Herriot. With TB testing, exports and consultancy style visits, paperwork is inevitable. **LS**

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