Author's response to reviews

Title: The transition into veterinary practice: opinions of recent graduates and final year students

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Dr Wyer

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the helpful and constructive reviewers and editors comments on the above manuscript. The points are addressed individually in the text below. The manuscript has been amended using ‘tracked changes’. The survey instruments and instructions to respondents are now included as additional files.

Yours sincerely

Susan M Rhind

A. Organization and Presentation

One reviewer notes the absence of a clear description of how you defined your target population and went about recruiting them. This is designed neither in your abstract nor in the body of the manuscript. It needs to be described in detail under your ?Methods? section. On the other hand, you currently present information regarding who actually responded to your survey, across 3 veterinary schools, in your ?Methods? section. This information reflects the results of your targeting and recruitment methods and should correspondingly be presented under your ?Results? section, both in the abstract and in the body of the manuscript. Finally, the reviewers note that your tables lack transparency as well as independence. Please consider having one or more individuals not familiar with your study look at the tables alone, without access to the rest of the manuscript, and report to you what is and is not clear regarding the data presented.

We have greatly expanded the methods section to include the detail on recruitment and rational for the methods chosen in each school. The methods section in the abstract is also expanded

B. Full description of methods

Somewhat related to the preceding comment, a more generous description of methods used in your study is required to make it fully possible to evaluate the validity of the results. As noted previously,
this includes a full description of the population you targeted and how you went about recruiting them, your goals with respect to number of completions across the different academic centers, etc. You also need to complement your description of quantitative methods with one respecting your qualitative methods. You clearly undertook a thematic analysis of the qualitative responses to the survey. However, this is not described in the paper, except in sketchy form in the ?Results? section. Finally: Please include both your survey instrument and the instructions to respondents so that the editor and reviewer can better understand what the survey subjects were actually responding to.

Methods section expanded and response rates discussed in more detail in the limitations section. The surveys used and instructions included as additional files.

C. Clarity of writing

The reviewers note the presence of many sections of the manuscript in which overly complex sentence structures interfere with clarity. Please take careful note of the specific examples identified by the reviewers and editor and consider enlisting the services of a ?reader? highly fluent in English to help improve the quality of the manuscript overall in this respect. Throughout the manuscript, please avoid unnecessary abbreviations that further serve to retard reader comprehension.

Entire manuscript reviewed with this in mind and several changes made to improve clarity

D. Limitations

The manuscript requires a limitations section, which could be placed either immediately before or immediately after the Discussion section. One of the limitations in question has to do with how you constructed your rating scale (see below). Others might include the implications of your response rates, which varied widely across the 3 schools you apparently targeted and peaked at 56% of recent graduates in one school, and of your corresponding recruitment methods.

Limitations section included addressing both limitations of the Likert scale methodology and response rates. New section also includes comment on future work.

E. Relationship to previous literature

The reviewers identify the need to address prior literature on this subject in terms of the rationale for your own inquiry and also the relationship of your results to those of previous investigations. Please carefully consider the specific directions of the reviewers in this regard. Your revision will be sent to both reviewers for secondary review to ensure that they are satisfied with your responses.

Additional references included:


SPECIFIC COMMENTS FROM THE EDITOR

Abstract

P. 1: Background: some of this section is a description of methods. Please keep content pertaining to background (introduction), methods, results, discussion and conclusions distinct, both in the abstract and in the body of the manuscript.

Several alterations made to address this

P. 2: Methods: You need to describe how, specifically, you defined and targeted your survey population and how you went about recruiting them. You need to do this both in the abstract and in the body of your article. You need to summarize your quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyzing the results of your survey. This is a mixed methods study. I.e. it involved both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. These need to be delineated and described.

Expanded text to address this

P. 2: Results: Please summarize the response rates by category across the target populations and institutions. Please delineate your results summary in terms of quantitative and qualitative methodology and by group (senior trainees versus recent graduates). Please spell out CPD and avoid abbreviations that will not be immediately self-evident to readers here and throughout the manuscript.

Response rates now included by category and abbreviations expanded
Introduction

P. 3, Par. 4, L. 2: This is a very awkward sentence. An alternative might be: ??recent veterinary graduates ?.believe might serve to ease the transition from???..?

Sentence altered

Methods

P. 3, Par. 5, L. 6-7: You have included a ?neutral? or ?undecided? category in your categorical Likert scale, i.e. ?indifferent?. Such a category introduces an element of disorder which can interfere with the assessment of dimensionality of the overall scale and confound interpretation of results. 1 Since this is not something you can remedy at this stage of your project, you need to acknowledge and address it, together with other limitations of your research, such as the marked variability in your response rates, in a separate section labeled Limitations.

Now addressed in the new limitations section

P. 3, Par. 5, L. 7-8: The ?project group?, the target population, the approach to distribution of the surveys and recruitment all need to be described in much more detail here.

Section expanded

P. 4, Par 3: The segment under ?Participants? belongs under Results.

Section moved and expanded

P. 4, Par. 4: Please also describe your approach to analyzing the qualitative responses to your survey in this section. How did you approach the process of identifying independent themes etc.

Qualitative section expanded

Results

P. 13: Table 1: Please note the reviewers? comment regarding redundancy between Tables 1 and 2 and consider ways of remedying this limitation in your presentation. Column 2 of both tables is unclear. What do ?RG? and ?FYS? mean and what do the numbers reflect? Please include adequate legends for your revised table(s) so as to allow the reader to understand the data they represent without having to go into the text of the article.

Legends amended and table removed

Discussion

Some of the content of your discussion section actually belongs in the Results section, for example, P. 11, Par.3.

Deleted or moved as appropriate

Reviewer’s report-1
1. Major compulsory revisions

1.1 Introduction and Discussion. Requiring a more thorough and analytical discussion of findings relative to published literature. Need to compare with those from previous, similar studies undertaken in USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere over past decade, e.g., Walsh's report of recent graduate and staff defining the attributes expected of graduating veterinary medical students, part 2: external evaluation and outcomes assessment (Walsh DA, BI Osburn, RL Schumacker, Spring 2002; 29(1): 36-42) and Hardin JVME 34:5 p683-688, 2007. Walsh et al JAVMA 219:1358 (2001)

We have included 2 of these references and addressed their findings in the introduction and results. Hardin and Ainsworth et al (2007) we felt was not of direct relevance to our study as it focuses on how well prepared graduates felt not on how important or otherwise they felt the particular list of attributes was. In general we have expanded introduction and discussion to encompass further the global perspective.

1.2 Results. Rework table 1 and 2. Currently these appear to be so highly overlapping as to be redundant. The rationale for separately presenting important/very important and very important data only is not explained. There may be alternative ways to present the differences that are revealed by analysing data in both ways- the question is, what is the significance of the differences revealed by the two different tables?

We have removed the original table 1 and replaced with table 2 with a clearer explanation in the text for the rationale.

1.3 Methods

Provide sufficient description of the methods used for selecting students/grads for interview, questions asked, and structure of analysis of explanatory comments- to enable someone to repeat the work. Detailed description of the methods and recruitment at the level of each of the participating schools is now included.

1.4 Discussion.

Discuss the importance of graduate attributes including non technical skills like communication being taught in an appropriate context. There is an extensive literature on this, for example Barrie, S Higher Education Research and Development 51:214-241, 2006. The context for learning makes a large difference to the way students engage with developing these attributes. We agree with this point and have included reference to the BEME review on the subject and an additional more recent reference supporting this point.

1.5 Context

The paper assumes a good to excellent knowledge of the typical UK vet school curriculum and intricacies of RCVS requirements (day 1 and year 1) which are less familiar to international readers, e.g., in discussion the reference to Selbourne, 1997. Provide more explanation of the curriculum structure common to the 3 schools and assessments used in final year (which clearly drive students perceptions of what is most important, particularly the knowledge base required).
Context is now expanded upon in the introduction. The section on research now includes additional more recent references of relevance. Buss et al (2009) and Rosol et al (2009)

2. Minor essential revisions
2.1. Don't use the term "vet" in shorthand- has a different meaning in USA
   Noted and changed
2.2. Identify number of respondents, response rate etc in abstract
   Added
2.3. Table legends- not at all clear- reword,
   Reworded
2.4. address the very small sample size of interview material, selection of interviews, structure and validation of analysis methods used
   More information included in methodology section to explain

2.5. Number the interview comments to show where they came from same individual
   Done
2.6. Don't shorthand to "final years"
   changed

3. Discretionary revisions
3.1. Introduction. the point on workplace dissatisfaction and stress is linked to graduate attributes, but no evidence presented that better developed grad attributes makes veterinarians more likely to succeed in practice (sadly, it can often be the highest achievers who suffer most profound distress as practice can fail to meet their expectations or enable their professional development)
   we agree with this point and consider it would be a very useful place to take future research in this area.
3.2. Conclusion/discussion might reflect on the different outcomes and assessment/evaluation that final year and new grad vets are subject to and the impact this has on their perceptions of what is most important. Do these students sit final year exams, for example?
   This has been expanded upon in the text to improve understanding of the context for the students and the curricula.

3.3. Table 3 the format for a makes the second part of the table unclear
   These tables have been reworked into a separate table 2a, 2b and Table 3 for clarity and improved presentation

Reviewer's report: 2
Major Compulsory Revisions:
A major differentiating factor in this manuscript is the exploration of the attributes that are rated very low by recent graduates and final year students. I would argue that it can be expected that FYS would see these as of lesser importance, but believe that the RG responses would need to be contextualised to the type of practice/veterinary activity they are involved in i.e. large referral practice or
two-man branch etc. This would surely have an impact on time available to read up on cases and therefore the relative importance of veterinary clinical knowledge and research skills.

We have considered this statement and have now included more information on the respondents practice type. Nearly all the respondent were in mixed or small animal practice. We did not explore the size of the practice as we recognise that the pressure on new graduates are similar regardless of the practice size and type.

Minor essential revisions:
I found sentence construction to complicate understanding from time to time - see for example lines 6-10 in "Background". Also, 3rd paragraph of discussion, second last sentence - there are too many arguments in the sentence, making understanding difficult. I would try to reduce the number of arguments per sentence to one only. In this paragraph, reference is also made to an appreciation of the importance of communication skills in client compliance. This seems logical, however I did not find any evidence supporting the claim. Did any RG / FYS comment on this? If so, such a statement/data needs to be presented.

The specific text on client compliance has been removed

I think that the article would read much easier if repetition of certain phrases were reduced. "it is clear" in two sentences after each other just doesn't read nicely and creates the impression that the authors are "rambling on".

Amended

Spelling mistake in line 2 of "Relative ranking of attributes" - I believe it should be "an" instead of "at". There also seems to be inconsistent use of "competences" and "competencies". I would suggest to stick to "competences". I wouldn't use the word "unpack", even in parentheses, but would replace it with "explore" or "explain".

These points are all addressed in the new version

Discretionary revisions:
I am curious about the understanding (my own, the authors' and of course the respondents') of the attributes "problem solving skills" and "decision making skills". A lot of this is, in my opinion, contingent upon veterinary clinical knowledge, and I believe that there could be confounding of data. Perhaps, a more in-depth evaluation of these concepts could be considered in future research? I don't think this can be changed in the current article, but do believe it is something which might be mentioned as a limitation of the current study.

We agree this is a very interesting point and have included comment on this as future work in the limitations section.