

"The advantage for practices," says Kathy, "is that their VNs become more enquiring, and more confident academically - which can also be challenging!" Giving VNs the chance to progress academically can also help with motivation and retention, and practices can get more out of VNs who are confident and up-to-date, such as better informed contributions to revising practice protocols.

Both the Myerscough and RVC courses are 'blended learning' - a mix of mainly online learning with some face-to-face residential study. Both courses start with an induction period at the college, and Myerscough College structures a series of residential study weekends into the course.

Hayley Carne, a senior surgery nurse at the RVC's Queen Mother Hospital, is doing the Graduate Diploma in Professional and Clinical Veterinary Nursing, and likes studying online as "it fits in well with shifts and funny hours," although she says it took a bit of getting used to as you have to go out and find things for yourself. Learning online is very different from the "chalk and talk," as Kathy puts it, of VN training, however regular coursework, specialist tutors, and online discussion and collaboration help keep up momentum and give you support.

Support

Although the majority of both courses is delivered online, support from employers and veterinary colleagues is essential. "Primarily, this means access to case studies and academic support - veterinary surgeons have been to university and know what is expected," says Kathy. "Vets can also discuss matters like scholarly referencing with VNs, and encourage academic discussion at work. Help with access to journals and textbooks is useful too - as is time for study and research." The written exam is taken at the practice so the VN's practice is asked to provide an invigilator who is either a vet or VN to sit in with the VN during the exam.

The DipAVN is a huge step up from the NVQ and is meant to be challenging - and as the credits are also transferable within the higher education system, universities recognise them for entry onto degree-level qualifications. The workload is demanding and Rachel advises VNs to think carefully how they will manage this alongside their job. But if you are seeking career progression and want to develop your nursing practice, then this new route to the qualification might be exactly what you are looking for.

Further information about the DipAVN can be found at www.rcvs.org.uk/DipAVN.

For information about courses whose modules attract credits that can be used to qualify for a DipAVN, please contact Kathy Kissick, Myerscough College or Perdi Welsh, RVC.



Can EAEVE and the FVE ensure parity of European standards of training?

Dr Robin G Oakley, Director, European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) Evaluation/Accreditation Programme

Consistency of European standards

The quick answer, at present, is "no". The more considered answer is that EAEVE can have a significant influence on the overall standard of veterinary education offered by its 97 member establishments, since membership obliges all members to submit to a "peer evaluation system" within a limited period of time and then every eight to ten years. There are 110 training establishments in Europe and EAEVE currently covers 86% of the field. Whilst national legislation and local conditions vary considerably, the EAEVE/Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) Evaluation Programme uses as its basis the training guidelines laid down in the Directive 2005/36/EC, whether the member establishment being visited is within or without the European Union.

Prior to 2007, it was the norm that three to five visitations would be made per year. One does not need to be a whiz-kid in arithmetic to realise that, at that rate, it would take over 20 years to visit all member establishments. For this reason, the whole system has been reorganised, rationalised and modernised. New Standard Operating Procedures were introduced in 2008 and a new streamlined visitation schedule has been in use since autumn 2007, which reduces the burden of time and commitment for both the visiting team and the establishment being visited, without adversely affecting the outcome.

The EAEVE process involves two stages. The first is a complete evaluation of the course contents and facilities by an expert team of six, which can lead to approval. Stage 2 investigates the quality assurance procedures in place (including student critiques) to examine and control the quality of the teaching offered by the staff; passing this stage results in accreditation. In 2009, EAEVE/FVE will make 10 full Stage 1 evaluation visits and two Stage 2 visits, as well as two revisits. In 2010, 15 Stage 1 visitations are currently planned. Two Stage 2 visitations have also been applied for in 2010, and a joint RCVS/EAEVE visit to the RVC will cover Stages 1 and 2 in February 2010.

It is hoped that the number of 'approved' and even 'approved and accredited' establishments will rise continuously, because these status groups will offer a virtual certainty that the veterinary education offered is of an acceptable European standard.

EAEVE is striving to improve itself on an ongoing basis and is making a significant effort to meet the membership requirements for ENQA, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, and to generate recognition from the European Commission that teaching establishments approved by EAEVE/FVE offer graduates adequately trained to become Official Veterinarians as defined in the Annex to Food Hygiene Regulation/2004/524/EC, without further examination.

EAEVE has just had its annual General Assembly in Hanover (28-29 May 2009), where many of the "tools" necessary for the rapid enhancement of the Association's aims and objectives in relation to the harmonisation of training across Europe were approved.

The European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) was founded in 1988 and has 97 member establishments. It aims to support, promote and develop veterinary education in Europe in all its aspects. For more information, including lists of approved institutions, visit www.eaeve.org.