Matching expectations

IT might come as a surprise to some of them, but UK veterinary students seem to be more satisfied with the education they are receiving than many of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe.

This is one of the findings of a recently published survey undertaken by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) and the International Veterinary Students’ Association (IVSA) to provide some insights into the labour market for veterinarians, and to help new graduates to make informed decisions when choosing which veterinary field to work in. The survey, in which students were asked to complete an online questionnaire, was conducted between October 2014 and February 2015. A report of the survey has recently been published1 and, although not all of the European veterinary schools are represented, the findings are of interest nonetheless.

In one of the questions, students were asked whether their veterinary education was teaching them the right skills and competences. The UK (represented in the FVE/IVSA’s analysis by responses from students at the University of Bristol) scored highest on this, with 66 per cent of respondents indicating that they did, while, for the other European schools included in the analysis, the percentages ranged from 10 to 44 per cent. Students in the UK seemed to be more satisfied than students elsewhere in Europe with the amount of practical skills training they received, as well as with the amount of socioeconomic skills teaching, which could be interpreted as suggesting that they felt they were being better prepared for practice.

Asked which veterinary field they wanted to work in after they graduated, most of the students responding to the survey (70 per cent) chose ‘practitioner’, with the majority of those wanting to work with companion animals. Given the significance of the veterinarian’s role in food hygiene, the proportion indicating an interest in this area was relatively low, with about 5 per cent of students saying they wanted to work as ‘hygienists’ – about the same proportion as indicated that they would like to work with bees. A potentially more encouraging finding of the survey was that about 20 per cent of the respondents said they would like to work in research.

The FVE/IVSA’s survey report draws attention to the wide range of career opportunities available to veterinarians and suggests that students might benefit from more careers advice. This observation would seem to be borne out by the finding that, although there was clearly variation between institutions and countries, about half of the respondents did not feel they were receiving enough information about different possible veterinary careers.

Given all the debate in the UK over the past couple of years about the effect of increasing numbers of veterinary students on future employment, it is interesting to see from the survey results that, compared to some of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, UK students feel relatively confident about their future career prospects. When students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement ‘Too many newly qualified veterinarians are graduating from veterinary schools’ on a scale of 1 to 10, the average score for UK students was 5.5, which was lower than for eight of the other 10 countries included in the analysis. Similarly, with a score of about 5, students in the UK were less inclined to disagree than students from most other countries with the statement ‘Newly qualified graduates find it easy to gain employment in the veterinary profession.’ This seems likely to reflect different priorities in countries where ‘oversupply’ of vets is already considered to be a issue.

Also of interest was the finding that, when asked ‘After graduation, would you consider looking for a job abroad?’, only 15 per cent of respondents said no. 57 answered yes, while 29 per cent said yes but only if they could not find a job in their own country. This reflects the increasingly international nature of the veterinary profession and chimes with one of the findings of an FVE survey of the veterinary profession published earlier this year (VR, June 6, 2015, vol 176, p 582). Summarising the findings of that survey, the FVE reported that a high percentage of veterinary professionals were considering or had considered emigrating to work in another country, and that this was more prevalent in countries where unemployment was higher.

Views will inevitably vary among students within veterinary schools, let alone nationally and internationally, so there is a limit to how many conclusions can be drawn from a survey of this kind. Nevertheless, veterinary schools in the UK might take some comfort from the finding that their students feel they are being better prepared for working in practice than seems to be the case elsewhere. At the same time, for all the concern that has been expressed about the possible impact of overproduction of graduates, practice employers in the UK are currently reporting anecdotally that they are having difficulty recruiting suitably experienced vets. This needs to be looked into, as something isn’t quite adding up.

1. FVE IVSA Veterinary Student Survey March 2015. www.fve.org/news/download/IVSA%20FVE%20Veterinary%20Student%20Survey.pdf. Accessed July 29, 2015

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