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## **Vocation, belongingness and balance: a qualitative study of veterinary student wellbeing**

### **Abstract**

An elevated risk for suicide among veterinarians has stimulated research into the mental health of the veterinary profession, and more recently attention has turned to the veterinary student population. This study sought to qualitatively explore UK veterinary students' perceptions and experiences of university life, and to consider how these may impact upon wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen students from a single UK school, who had been purposively selected to include male, female, graduate, widening participation and standard entry perspectives across all five years of the course. Three main themes were identified; a deep-rooted vocation, navigating belongingness and finding balance. Participants described a long-standing aim to become a veterinarian, with a determination reflected by often circuitous routes to veterinary school and little or no consideration of alternatives. Although some had been motivated by a love of animals, others were intrinsically interested in the scientific and problem-solving challenges of veterinary medicine and most expressed strong feelings of empathy with animal owners. The issue of belongingness was central to participants' experiences, with accounts reflecting their efforts to negotiate a sense of belongingness both in student and professional communities. Accounts also frequently reflected a degree of acceptance of poor balance between work and relaxation, with implications of a belief that this imbalance could be rectified later. Findings from this study support initiatives aiming to nurture a sense of collegiality among veterinary students as they progress through training and on into the profession, as well as highlighting future avenues for research.

### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen an increasing focus on wellbeing in the veterinary profession, partly because of proportional mortality ratios (PMR) for suicide among veterinarians indicating increased risk for suicide in comparison even with other high-risk populations, including doctors and dentists<sup>1,2</sup>. This also raises the question of where wellbeing in the profession begins. It is valuable therefore to further our understanding of wellbeing in the veterinary student population.

Studies using validated psychological scales have shown that UK and US veterinary students experience lower levels of wellbeing and poorer mental health than the general population<sup>3-6</sup>. Factors contributing to stress among US and Australian veterinary students include heavy workloads, academic worries, time pressures, work-life balance and concerns about the responsibilities of professional practice<sup>7-10</sup>. However, the relationship between stress and wellbeing is not straightforward. Powers<sup>11</sup> found that while students reported certain stressors associated with studying veterinary medicine, they did not feel inordinately stressed and were positive about their veterinary school experience. Another study found that veterinary students did not experience excessive stress, but did report greater levels of subjective stress<sup>6</sup>. However, as these studies involved single populations and did not directly compare with other student groups, it is unclear whether the experiences and mental health of veterinary students differ from those of other similar student populations.

Anecdote and opinion are often used to propose that poor wellbeing in veterinary students, and by implication the wider profession, is related to the inherent characteristics of those who are successful in securing a place at veterinary school. For example, it is often suggested that veterinary students are encumbered with the burden of being high achievers and possess maladaptive personality traits, such as perfectionism, which render them vulnerable to poor mental health. It is also suggested that

veterinary students select their chosen degree because of a love for animals and poor 'people skills'. However, there is no research evidence to support these claims.

Most empirical research to date has been quantitative and researcher-led. The use of qualitative approaches is also important, to complement quantitative research by investigating student perspectives without the imposition of pre-formed theory or hypotheses. Qualitative approaches have been effectively used in researching medical students' experiences and perceptions of mental illness<sup>12-14</sup>, for example indicating that medical students feared negative repercussions from disclosing mental ill-health and felt that they should be invulnerable to illness.

The aim of this study was to explore veterinary students' perspectives and experiences of student life, with a view to improving our understanding of their general wellbeing and ways in which this could be optimised.

## **Materials & Methods**

*Recruitment:* Veterinary students at the Royal Veterinary College who had participated in an earlier questionnaire-based survey<sup>3</sup> had been asked to provide contact details if they were willing to take part in an individual, face-to-face interview. Interviewees were then purposively selected to ensure different perspectives were heard: male and female students from each of the five years of the BVetMed programme, graduate-entry students, widening participant students (Veterinary Gateway programme) and standard-entry (straight from school) students.

*Interview design and conduct:* The interview schedule was designed in consultation with an external psychologist and members of the institution's student support staff. Flexible, broad, open questions were used to initiate discussions of the topics of interest, with sub-questions and prompts used as required to encourage elaboration and clarification. Key topics of interest were motivations to study veterinary medicine and experiences to date of being a veterinary student, including social, academic and personal challenges.

Interviews were conducted on campus, in June 2010, by a member of the institution's administrative staff who was not involved in teaching or student support and who was a trained counsellor. Interviews were scheduled for a maximum of 60 minutes and audio-recorded for transcription. Students signed a consent form at the beginning of the interview. The study was approved by the RVC Ethics committee.

*Data analysis:* Interview transcripts were analysed using a modification of the thematic framework method<sup>15, 16</sup>. First, all transcripts were read to gain an overview of the diversity of responses, with initial topic coding of all content (familiarisation). Half of the transcripts were then reviewed to refine topic coding, using an iterative approach to merge similar codes or divide broad codes into more specific codes, to ensure consistency and lack of duplication. This topic-level framework was recorded in an Excel file, with a row for each topic code, a column for each interviewee and relevant text from interview transcripts recorded in each cell. The remaining interviews were then analysed by applying this framework (indexing and charting), allowing for identification of new topic codes and ongoing refinement of the framework. Final codes were then arranged into subthemes and overarching themes as in standard thematic analysis (mapping and interpretation). This structured approach enabled comparison of data across cases (individual interviewees) while maintaining the context of each interview, and provided a transparent means for analysis conducted by one researcher (JC) to be reviewed and corroborated or challenged and refined by a second researcher (EL).

## Results

### **Participants**

Twenty students were invited for interview but for two of these a convenient time could not be found. The details of the 18 students interviewed are summarised in Table 1. All names are pseudonyms. Interviews lasted between 37 and 67 minutes with a median time of 52 minutes.

### **Findings**

Three over-arching themes were identified in the interview data: a deep-rooted vocation, navigating belongingness and finding balance.

#### *A deep-rooted vocation*

The long road to veterinary school

Most participants described how becoming a veterinarian was a long-held ambition, which often developed during childhood and to which they had remained committed for many years. For example Zoe recounts how:

*My mum loves to tell everyone about how when I was about two I decided I wanted to be a doctor for animals, when I didn't know what that was, so I suppose the idea's always been there.*

For many, the desire to be a vet had always been part of their lives and pre-dates memory. This was considered a common narrative of the typical veterinary student, as reflected by Rebecca, who said *"It's the usual story – I have wanted to be a vet since I can remember"*. Participants' determination to fulfil this ambition and to attain a place on the veterinary degree, was marked by persistence in the face of a variety of obstacles, regardless of which they retained a single-minded focus on their goal:

*On my route to university I had to resit my A-Levels and I have done a degree before I came to this one (...) that was three years and then I had a year out working in science just because I needed to get some money to come back. But the whole time that was my goal (...) Yes, I'm 100% sure it's the thing I want to do. (Sophie)*

Some participants could conceive of no alternative to becoming a vet, as Rachel says *"I've never actually wanted to do anything else (...) I'm lucky enough to have been able to do it because I honestly don't know what else I would have done."* Gina echoes this, describing how the veterinary school *"offered me this lifeline"*. However, not all participants expressed such single-minded ambition; some recognised the transferable skills obtained through the veterinary medicine degree:

*I might not be a vet forever but I think I found the course interesting and if I do go into research or something it will be in a related area so I think even if I don't spend my entire life practising as a vet it will have been the right course. (Zoe)*

#### **A caring profession**

Some participants were motivated to pursue veterinary medicine because of a love for animals, as described by Sophie: *"at interview they always ask you why you wanted to be a vet and they always say 'don't say it's just because I love animals', but for me it really was that"*. Two participants doubted their "people-skills" and considered that they related better to animals than people. For example:

*I don't relate that closely to people, just because that is the kind of person I am - I am quite sort of isolated in myself. And so you know, just having that bond [with animals] and that relationship and having something to look after that depends on you and that you can sort of love and take your mind off things that are stressful - it's definitely helpful (...) I have never really related to people in the same way as I had with animals. (Rebecca)*

However, this was not a common thread in the participants' narratives. For many, the appeal of veterinary medicine lay in the variety it offered, an interest in science and an enjoyment of problem-solving, and most participants expressed strong feelings of empathy with pet owners:

*It really upset me, you know, when the owners were really quite upset... I would get a bit teary, but that's more for their loss...they know it's best for the animal - it's the owner's commitment and the attachment that breaks your heart. (Rachel)*

This empathy extended to the participants' decisions to study veterinary medicine rather than human medicine. There was a sense in which human medicine crossed a boundary that was 'too close for comfort':

*I couldn't be treating humans as such directly. I didn't think that would suit me...I think it's almost a boundary to cross, whereas with - like dissections for example, [I get] stuck in, don't mind what it is, but when you talk about medic students that would have, obviously humans in dissection. (Jonathan)*

Identifying with other people meant that human medicine was "too close to home... it's kind of, it could happen to me" (Duncan). While recognising the close connection between human and veterinary medicine, some participants discussed, for example, how difficult breaking bad news about human patients must be:

*I would quite like to be a [human] surgeon but then it's easier to tell someone that their dog died than their child died or something, I think that came into it quite a lot. There's a lot of pressure and although I would do my best to keep an animal alive obviously, it's just - having a human life (...) great rewards but also great losses. (Adam)*

Here, animals were not viewed like children and the loss of a human life was emphasised as more devastating than that of an animal.

## **Navigating belongingness**

### **Social belongingness**

As in many walks of life, new social bonds and friendships among students were often initially established on the basis of chance meetings, for example, via allocation to shared accommodation or on social events during freshers' week. This was reflected by Cath who said that friendships formed "very randomly – it was completely based on people you meet in the first week in queues". Sarah echoed this, saying "I got really, really lucky with my flat (...) we all got on really well instantly". Others, however, recounted being less 'lucky', with Zoe describing how "I got put with a girl that I really didn't get on with and I had quite a miserable year (...) I took a long time to settle in". Although frequently arbitrary, these initial interactions have the potential for considerable influence upon students' wellbeing and feelings of belongingness at university.

In contrast, students who enjoyed sport were bonded by shared interests and team membership:

*Freshers' week – I had an amazing time. I didn't get to know that many people though. I think freshers went too quickly to know people but pretty quickly I made friends, got a social circle, rugby – I got put with forty guys who are pretty much the same as me, so yeah there is a group of four boys that I am very close with and that's through rugby.*  
(Adam)

Students without a sporting interest needed to seek different means to connect with others. However, some perceived the traditional university freshers' week, characterised by alcohol-based activities and events tailored for extroverts, to present a barrier in getting to know others:

*The trouble with fresher's week is it's arranged by the party animals in the year above, so it tends to be a lot of nights in nightclubs and not a lot of anything else and I don't dislike clubbing, but it's not the best way to get to know people.* (Zoe)

Others felt personally disadvantaged by virtue of being more reserved or not being part of the drinking culture:

*Most people as soon as they get there they're getting pissed with each other and within the first three weeks they know everybody. Whereas it takes me three weeks before I get the confidence up to start putting myself out there...and by that time everybody has already made their social groups and they are pretty much resistant to anybody else going in.* (Chloe)

There was a sense that if friendships were not found during this critical early period, an opportunity to form close bonds had been missed and established social groups were closed off to new members. Some participants had concerns about being labelled on the basis of first impressions, which they felt were difficult to discard or challenge:

*My problem is, you get such a first impression from people, and especially in the first year that stays for the whole first term at least (...). I think the problem for me is that they then got this association with me that I don't like going out and I don't like partying. I do, I love it, but I wouldn't do it every week."* (Sarah)

Breakdowns in early friendship groups, possibly as a result of rocky foundations relating to the element of chance, also undermined feelings of belongingness, discouraging some from re-engaging with the student community:

*I did have a falling out with one person in particular, which kind of alienated me from the group of friends that I otherwise would have been going out with (...). After that it was a bit unpleasant and I decided I didn't want to be in that arena anymore and spent a lot more time with my friends from home because it was just a lot more comfortable.*  
(Anna)

### **Academic Belongingness**

Participants described a challenging transition from secondary education to higher education, often involving shifting perceptions of their own academic abilities:

*It's really odd because everyone that comes here is a high achiever – I think that was what was really hard, to know you are good enough, but there's so many other good people too and that you aren't therefore good enough. (Megan)*

Belonging to a new academic community can undermine previous confidence and competence when accustomed to attaining high grades with less effort at school:

*I was devastated [by low mark in first term]...I spent all of Christmas break thinking 'crap - can I actually do this?' (...). It was massive. The first two weeks of the second term I was still miserable, until I got the Christmas essay, which I did extraordinarily well on. (...) the 45% I got on the Christmas exam was just - like that is abysmal - you don't deserve to be here with scores like that. (Ollie)*

Megan was also shocked by a disappointing mark, but felt supported by the university to work to her full potential and in this sense was welcomed into the academic community:

*They sent me a thing that was like - it's the group for people who are struggling - and that really shocked me. I didn't realise this was so bad. I thought that was for people that failed and getting that email was really - oh my gosh, I'm doing really badly. It quite scared me and then I went to the meeting and it was really supportive. They were like - look you're not doing badly. Most of you are passing, just we don't want it to be that you're not settling in or something, or you're struggling to find where the line is that you need to work to. And I think that's partly what had happened in my essay. I wasn't sure where the line was so I just sort of made it up.*

Other participants described adjusting to more independent learning and being unsure where the academic goalposts lay. For example, Sarah described how “people have found it a difficult transition to make from being in a school where everything was structured, everything was set for you - suddenly it's very different”. Along with the social independence of university comes the expectation to work more autonomously; an expectation that some found difficult to manage, while others were more pragmatic:

*As long as I pass everything I'm happy. I'll still get the same job if I get 55% or 95%. At school I was a lot more competitive. At school if I wasn't the top one or two of the year I would have been bothered by it whereas I got here and sort of went 'oh everyone's much better than me' and so I just adapted to it and wasn't so bothered (...). It was quite a big change but I think I've adapted to that quite well now. As long as I'm not failing I'm happy. (Zoe)*

Some participants expressed concerns about the prospect of failing, but not simply because they had always previously excelled and not experienced failure before, as might be assumed. The potential consequences of failure, such as resitting, were a cause of anxiety:

*Fear of failing is the biggest form of exam stress by far – it comes to things like time, having to come back and do resits and to possibly resit years and things like that versus just pressure to try and excel as much as possible – the avoid failing fear keeps me awake at night. (Michael)*

These are realistic concerns, with practical and material repercussions. Chloe highlighted the financial implications of failing; “It’s over £3000 a year tuition fees plus accommodation costs, plus if you have to re-do a year that’s all that again”, while Rebecca described how her “parents can’t cope with the stress of thinking that I am going to have to re-sit”. It seems that the cost of failing is high for students both on a financial and emotional level. However, some participants felt that the prospect of failure would be worse than the reality, reflecting a ‘growth mindset’ view that it would result in overall improvement:

*I think 98% of people here have never failed anything. Never had any experience of failure (...) sometimes you think ‘please, just fail something and then you will understand – it’s not that bad, you can really take it’ (...) If I fail something I would be devastated but at the same time I would know that I would have to have a better crack at it next time. (Mark)*

A perceived competitive atmosphere was felt by some participants to undermine feelings of belongingness and mutual-support. For some this was a predominant source of stress:

*It’s quite a high-pressure atmosphere and there’s a lot of competitiveness and things like that around. It’s only the social side of things, the people side of things that has sent me running off home to get away from it all, rather than the work. (Anna)*

While for others there was a sense of being the odd-one-out in not engaging with competition:

*I think a lot of people here are a lot more competitive than I am and maybe that’s why they feel that they can be part of the sort of group dynamic and it doesn’t intimidate them (...) but I certainly feel it kind of gets in the way – I don’t feel comfortable in a group where that kind of vibe is going on. (Rebecca)*

However, not all participants shared this view of a competitive atmosphere and instead characterised a more supportive community:

*I don’t think it’s that competitive, I think there’s good enough camaraderie especially during rotations. Everyone is going through a stress together and tries to help each other out (...). In our rotations people weren’t – at least in my groups – weren’t very competitive. We knew where our individual interests were and we tried to make sure that if there was an opportunity for only one of us to learn a skill – try to let them do it. (Michael)*

### **Professional Belongingness**

Participants talked about how they related to qualified members of the veterinary profession, both on clinical rotations within the veterinary school and out in practice. Rumours and notoriety surrounded some rotations. For example Anna said that “I’ve got [named rotation] next which - apparently that’s hell, everyone says it will suck the soul from you”. While the fear elicited by these rumours was often unfounded as reflected by Rachel: “you always hear horror stories before you start (...) I actually really enjoyed it” the rumours appeared to be perpetuated among students and not defused by the reality of positive experiences. In fact, participants were overwhelmingly positive about rotations, in particular with regard to being treated as colleagues by members of the profession:



*It's been brilliant because one of the residents is really friendly, really chatty. We were with him last week and luckily we're with him again this week, so that's quite nice because it feels like you're working with a friend, which is really good. Actually, most of my rotations so far have felt like that. (Anna)*

Far from the fearful projections of rotations garnered by rumours, most participants characterised them as an edifying experience, enhanced by the support of senior clinicians. There was a feeling of being taken under the wing of the profession, which encouraged a sense of belongingness.

*It's very good because there is always someone there to support you, so it is not like you finished vet school and now you have to go to a job and you have got to do it on your own with all the responsibility - there is always someone there to either help you or to take responsibility if things go really wrong, so you are eased into it quite well. (Dan)*

Students felt proud of the increasing sense of professionalism they experienced, and valued professional relationships with clinical staff:

*As we have started these rotations you can visibly see people changing and becoming more positive and better able to deal with things (...) you know the bond with [members of staff] really develops after the first few weeks of rotations. (Mark)*

Practising veterinarians who are not in academic institutions are also involved in veterinary students' training. Participants described varying degrees of collegiality in their extra-mural placements. For example, Anna felt welcomed into one practice and by association the profession:

*They're a really nice practice. They're very keen to try new things and do new procedures and they're very progressive. The people there are amazing. Like within a couple of days of being there, everyone knew who I was, everyone was saying 'do you want to come to lunch with us? Do you want to do this, do you want to do that, do you want to come to the pub with us?' which I've never really had before in other placements. And the two main vets, who are responsible for new graduates, are really keen to teach. They're really keen to get you going and develop your practical skills.*

However, contrary to Anna's experience, in which there is a sense of investment in the future of the veterinary profession, Gina felt that some veterinarians were 'out of touch' with what it is like to train for the profession, taking an air of superiority rather than of constructive encouragement:

*I think some of the practices lose sight of what it's like to be a student, you know, when you don't know what you're doing and some of them just expect you to be able to do it, and that's quite hard sometimes, when you think 'you had to do it, you know, just give me a chance' (...). Some of the older vets, or even some of the younger vets are, you know, quite arrogant and they think, they're a vet now and they're above you and sort of forget what it's like to be a student, or choose to ignore it.*

The culture fostered in rotations and in practice may shape the extent to which veterinary students feel they belong in the profession.

### **Finding balance**

The issue of 'balance' was a strong theme across all interviews, with indications of a tendency to accept an imbalance between work and relaxation as well as identification of a need to balance the intensity of the veterinary school environment with non-veterinary relationships or outside support.

### **Habitual life-work imbalance**

Participants discussed the challenges of finding an acceptable balance between working sufficiently hard on their studies and having enough good quality down time. For example, Chloe described a level of academic diligence that worked and was manageable in secondary education, but had now become problematic. Referring to not knowing how to relax suggested that she had never proactively sought to develop a habit of balance in her life.

*Going back to the initial question of how do I relax. I often don't really. I don't know how to relax really. And I think that's a lot of the problem because I have always been very attentive to my studies. But before, I haven't had this much to study so it's just been... I've done it all and then I relax because I've done it.*

Another participant tended to put in a great intensity of effort during term time, followed by a similarly great intensity of socialising outside of term time, describing almost a binge approach to life rather than a healthy balance. There is an element of postponing balance because of the 'means to an end' nature of the current situation:

*[Learning] doesn't come easy, so there's a lot of hours and effort and that, but I know it's a means to an end, a good end. ... I just do all the hours I possibly physically can, so I know I can't have done anymore... When I'm at college in term time I work as much as I possibly can and then when I go home I kind of just switch off - I go out as much as I can, see as many people as I can, because I'll have just spent...as many hours of the day that I can working. (James)*

Some described the study habits of other students, particularly at exam time, as being beyond what they considered reasonable:

*Some of my friends just seem to fall to pieces around exams and I think that, although they're important and I would like to do well in them, there's no point in getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning and working through till midnight. I need to have a life and I need to still go to my job and just do other non-exam things... you know, have half an hour to walk the dog or, you know, go out for dinner. (Anna)*

There was a recognition in some accounts that this intensity of effort was driven by the underlying single-minded and probably deep-rooted determination to achieve the ultimate goal of becoming a vet:

*[My housemate works] way too much...I think the difference is that... I would never put veterinary before my own life. I'm doing veterinary because I think it will be an amazing job. I think it will give me an amazing life but I am not doing it because it's what I have to do. If I don't do veterinary I'm not going to self-implode and die and I think that's one of the differences. (Megan)*

### **Social balance and support**

It is perhaps understandable from these descriptions of the study environment that people would feel the need to counterbalance this intensity. James stated that "If I stay more than six weeks or so then

*I do get a bit agitated and just want to go home for a bit”* and Mark felt that socialising with other vet students was not effective ‘down time’:

*If we do meet up, all we're talking about is cases we've seen, exams we are revising for, because we are all going through the same process so you talk about the same things. Whereas if I am meeting someone that has got their art exhibition on or is doing architecture, you know, has taken the day off - it takes the.. diffuses the stress and tension out of everything.*

People with outside friendships or with family nearby tended to rely on these for moral support and felt that this helped them achieve a more effective balance:

*I know a lot of people do find the course gets a bit intensive and overwhelming and can be a bit like oh you want to get away from veterinary stuff but I think that has never really been a problem with me because the majority of my social life is outside.*  
(Rebecca)

However Rebecca also commented that one disadvantage of this was that it could interfere with relationships within the student community:

*I would kind of make time to go and see [my boyfriend] when there wasn't something planned and there were maybe things, impromptu things that I missed out on with friends from college. You know, it's always the way I think - if you go to university with a relationship from outside it does kind of pull you away from the social life in college.*

Others appreciated being with their fellow students who could empathise with their situation by virtue of being ‘in the same boat’, providing an informal peer-support mechanism, while at the same time recognising disadvantages of this:

*[Being surrounded by vet students] can have its advantages in terms of, if you're stuck on something there's always someone that you can ask and all your friends are sort of in the same boat as you so if you've had a really awful day... they'll all sort of empathise with you. But I do find it very frustrating sometimes. I think it's quite a specific sort of person who wants to be a vet. And a lot of the things that irritate me about myself irritate me about everyone else on the course as well, so sometimes it can feel like you're in a little bubble that doesn't have any grasp with the real world.* (Zoe)

While people often referred to relying on their peers, friends or family for informal support, there was little reference to formal support channels, despite awareness of their availability. Mark touched on potential reasons for this when he said: “*People who need help are either too low or – yeah, too low, too proud – there's something that stops them*”. However, none of our participants referred more directly to stigma associated with help-seeking, and Rebecca offered an alternative perspective:

*[Turning to college student support provision] is not something I have ever really considered. I view [the college] as more of an academic institute and that's the academic side of things and it's not really involved in my personal life. And if I have personal problems I try and sort them out myself.*

Interestingly, Rebecca’s comment suggested that for some a lack of help-seeking might reflect a tendency to take a unilateral view of ‘the institution’ as being responsible only for academic issues rather than the whole person.

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first participant-led, qualitative study of students' experiences at a UK veterinary school. We explored participants' general experiences in order to further understanding of the issues likely to affect wellbeing and quality of life both as a veterinary student and as a qualified member of the veterinary profession. While previous work has suggested what these experiences may be, this study sought to document students' perspectives. As such the aim was to gather a holistic view of students' experiences, rather than focusing on those who had experienced poor mental health. In keeping with the inductive approach used, the interview schedule was deliberately flexible, enabling participants to raise their own issues rather than imposing existing theories or researcher assumptions upon the discussions. A heterogeneous sample of the wider veterinary student population was used to gain a comprehensive overview of different perspectives. Despite this heterogeneity, there was considerable constancy between participants' accounts. Furthermore, although this was a single school study, discussions and analyses were focused on issues likely to be relevant to veterinary students elsewhere.

In fact, many of the issues described here are not unique to being a veterinary student. Most would be experienced by other higher education students or in general life. The challenges faced by veterinary students are typical of other populations, and yet they are shaped by context and culture, with implications for wellbeing and how this may be enhanced.

The long-standing vocation described by many participants, which is also reported in studies of medical students,<sup>17-18</sup> set the scene for and continued into the other themes. It is an important theme because an absolute long-term focus on one career to the exclusion of any alternatives leaves little room for flexibility should that career not live up to expectations—a real possibility in view of a recent report that half of almost 2,000 veterinary graduates indicated that working as a veterinarian had not met their expectations.<sup>19</sup> Some reasons for this have been highlighted in other studies showing that veterinary graduates felt unprepared for the realities of working in practice and frequently worked in isolation with little supervision<sup>20, 21</sup>. This had a negative impact upon wellbeing and contributed to feelings of depression and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, a study of veterinarians with a history of suicidal ideation or behaviour found that two-thirds of those interviewed had considered leaving the profession but did not do so because they felt they had no alternative career options<sup>21</sup>. Given the single-minded determination to become a veterinarian, and the competition for places on the veterinary degree, it may be difficult for veterinary students or graduates to accept or admit that they no longer want to pursue the same vocation, leading to feelings of being trapped and negative consequences for mental health. This highlights the importance of signposting other career options to veterinary students, supporting the transition from veterinary school to the profession and fostering an atmosphere of collegiality within the profession so that students and new graduates feel welcomed and supported.

It could be argued that participants' frequent expressions of empathy for pet owners challenge a popular notion that students choose veterinary medicine rather than human medicine simply because of a desire to work with animals instead of people, or that veterinary students struggle to relate to other people. These findings resonate with a study by Rhind et al<sup>22</sup>, which identified that students recognised and valued the importance of being able to communicate effectively and establish a rapport with their clients. However, a recent study involving veterinary students indicated a decline in empathy as training progressed, as has been reported in some studies of medical students, and

suggests that we must consider how to counteract this decline<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, the distress our participants reported experiencing when witnessing clients' distress also highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining healthy emotional boundaries on empathy, with the development of what is described by Ekman<sup>24, 25</sup> as 'compassionate empathy' over 'emotional empathy', to guard against poor wellbeing or burnout.

The theme of belongingness featured strongly in participants' accounts. Baumeister & Leary<sup>26</sup> argue that the need to belong is a universal human need which, when thwarted, severely impacts upon health, adjustment and wellbeing. Belongingness also features as an element in both the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide proposed by Joiner<sup>27, 28</sup> and the Integrated Motivational-Volitional Model of suicidal behaviour proposed by O'Connor<sup>29</sup>. Arguably, for veterinary students with so much invested in even getting into veterinary school, the need to find belongingness within the veterinary community is sharpened. Furthermore, while arbitrarily-formed friendships or difficulties in adjusting to a new academic environment, for example, undoubtedly also occur in other student populations, veterinary students will also be professional peers in later life. Therefore belongingness that is thwarted or undermined during veterinary training may have longer lasting implications.

The perspective of the university as a purely academic institution rather than a source of support or a body that cares about or is responsible for people in a more holistic manner, is an interesting observation. Although the effect of stigma on student help-seeking behaviour is often discussed and is undoubtedly important,<sup>e.g.12,30,31</sup> there is also evidence that it is not always the most dominant factor<sup>32-35</sup> and that the effect of social identity is not straightforward<sup>36</sup>. It is therefore worth considering how fostering belongingness within the veterinary academic or professional community might affect perspectives on collective interest in, or responsibility for, individual wellbeing.

Finding a degree of work-life balance is an enduring challenge for people in all walks of life and is clearly not peculiar to vet students or the vet profession. However, given that poor work-life balance is a recognised occupational stressor, it is interesting to hear students' perspectives on whether they have or are developing good life-work balance habits, or whether there is a tendency to accept a highly unbalanced life, especially if it is regarded as a temporary situation. Arguably, people who had to work hard to get their place in vet school or who have historically succeeded because of a great intensity of effort have a greater challenge in finding balance, having already developed a habitually unbalanced pattern of working behaviour.

Although this is the first UK study to present a qualitative analysis of student perspectives, it is unlikely that veterinary teaching staff will find the issues raised surprising. Much work is being done in different institutes around the world to address these and other issues through aspects of veterinary training. At the RVC, we have recently piloted an orientation programme based on similar successful programmes elsewhere, such as the Cougar Orientation and Leadership Experience (COLE),<sup>37</sup> in which experiential learning techniques are used to help students develop a culture of support and a sense of community. Training in self- and social-awareness and management are combined with an academic paradigm shift whereby students are encouraged to avoid comparing themselves with others, to understand that they are no longer competing, and to adopt a mindset in which the disappointment of failures or other setbacks is mitigated by recognising their value as learning experiences. We envisage that ongoing and future research will build upon the findings of this study,

and further explore how the issues we have identified can be mitigated through programmes such as these.

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