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The Winding Path to and through a Veterinary Education PhD

Tierney Kinnison and Sylvain Dernas

Education was recently described by Professor Trudie Roberts (Director at Leeds Institute of Medical Education) at the VetEd Symposium, 2014 in Bristol, as the way to have the biggest possible impact in your career, as you reach the greatest number of people, through those you educate who then educate others: patients or clients and students. This inspiring, though somewhat daunting, thought was echoed by the other key note speaker at the conference, Professor Susan Rhind (Director of Veterinary Teaching at The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh). Both speakers declared no specific training in education and welcomed the new generation of those of us who have been through Masters or PhDs in education. After all, given that we appreciate the importance of education, we must also appreciate the scholarship of teaching. Masters and PhDs specific to veterinary education are relatively novel; but the number of students in these areas is growing. These students have vastly different backgrounds and are researching a variety of topics. In this careers article, 22 past and current PhD students of veterinary education and the veterinary profession wanted to share their journey to starting their PhD. It is hoped that by sharing our winding paths and our current research, we will encourage the next generation of veterinary educators to begin their research careers.

The authors contacted relevant individuals and asked for their collaboration in this article. While there are undoubtedly other students of these topics, both in the represented countries and beyond, they were not found, or have not yet responded to the authors' requests for collaboration. Information on the participating students can be found below.

Stage	Completed	10
	In progress	12
Country of study	UK	16
	Netherlands	5
	France	1
Background	Veterinary surgeon	12
	Other	10

The first projects were completed around 2006-2008. Nine of the 10 students who have completed their studies are still working specifically within veterinary or medical education. These individuals include Debbie Jaarsma, Professor in Medical Education at the University Medical Centre Groningen,

The Netherlands; Liz Mossop, Associate Professor of Veterinary Education at the University of Nottingham and Sarah Baillie, Professor of Veterinary Education at the University of Bristol. Undergraduate degrees of the non-veterinarians include: Animal Behaviour, Archaeology, Education Science, Engineering, Equine Science, Legal Science, Molecular Biology, Pharmacology and Social Science.

As indicated, the route to becoming a veterinary education PhD student is varying. The majority of projects however arose from a personal interest, developed during the course of previous work. These projects therefore tended to be attained through individuals finding funding for their own PhD research. The selection of quotes below demonstrates this desire to dedicate over three years to research in a particular area of interest.

“My background is in small animal first opinion practice and my interest in education has developed over the period of several years working as a clinical teacher with students at the PDSA in Glasgow.” Jennifer Hammond, University of Glasgow

“As an educational technologist, the catalyst for undertaking my PhD was a recognition that e-learning was only part of the range of resources and teaching methods that students depended on for learning.” Vicki H.M. Dale, University of Glasgow

“As a Veterinary Practice Manager, I first became interested in veterinary education through our EMS programme. Eventually I reached the stage of wanting to examine the processes involved in more detail”. Hannah Perrin, University of Kent

“I had taken a year out from practice to do the inter-disciplinary Masters at the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, University of Manchester. I was then offered a Wellcome PhD grant to stay and write a history of British veterinary practice focussing on small animals.” Andrew Gardiner, University of Edinburgh

“My lectureship involves the provision of a range of paraprofessional (veterinary) undergraduate and postgraduate courses. This, in combination with a personal interest in veterinary service delivery for companion animals, equine and farm clients gave rise to the initial project idea.” Alison Pyatt, Harper Adams University

Other PhD projects were advertised and individuals applied for them like a normal job. Examples include Katherine Adam who is now studying the future of farm animal practice, and Carrie Roder who has recently completed her PhD regarding the hidden curriculum.

“I moved into epidemiological research from practice and have worked on endemic diseases of rainbow trout and cattle. I gradually realised how much human behaviour affects animal health and productivity and developed an interest in the human side of veterinary medicine.” Katherine Adam, Royal Veterinary College

“Whilst still in the early days of my secondary school teaching career, I began to re-evaluate what was happening in my classroom. I stopped seeing teaching as simply information transfer and started to understand the wider implications of all my actions. I became aware of the hidden curriculum and my role within it. So I welcomed the opportunity to study the hidden curriculum at the RVC.” Carrie Roder, Royal Veterinary College

The idea for this article came out of a PhD pre-conference workshop at the Veterinary Education Symposium (VetEd) at the University of Bristol on 9th July 2014. The workshop allowed students from different universities and countries to come together and share experiences of undertaking a PhD in this specialist area. Due to the nature of the topics, and the fact that the PhD students undertaking them are often located within veterinary schools with other students carrying out very different work, for example in laboratories, this opportunity to meet others in similar situations proved very engaging.

The workshop highlighted that aside from feelings of isolation, there are other challenges to being a PhD student in these areas. For the majority of the students, their background is not within social science. Many of the projects they are involved in however make use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Therefore undertaking projects which utilise methods and theories related to questionnaires, case studies and so on can be challenging. As one student explains:

“The fact that my PhD was jointly supervised by the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science and the School of Sociology, led to a very steep learning curve and many challenges in trying to incorporate and meet the requirements of two such different academic disciplines.” Sally Everitt, University of Nottingham

Another challenge is time keeping. Whether this is because the PhDs are reliant on the participation of volunteers or because the student is conducting their research alongside their job. Kate Cobb from the University of Nottingham says “Studying part time alongside my existing role has been challenging but I have finally reached the writing up stage.”

Despite the challenges, students were thankful for the opportunities which had led them to this stage. Those who had completed their PhD relate that “doing a PhD has been an inspiring

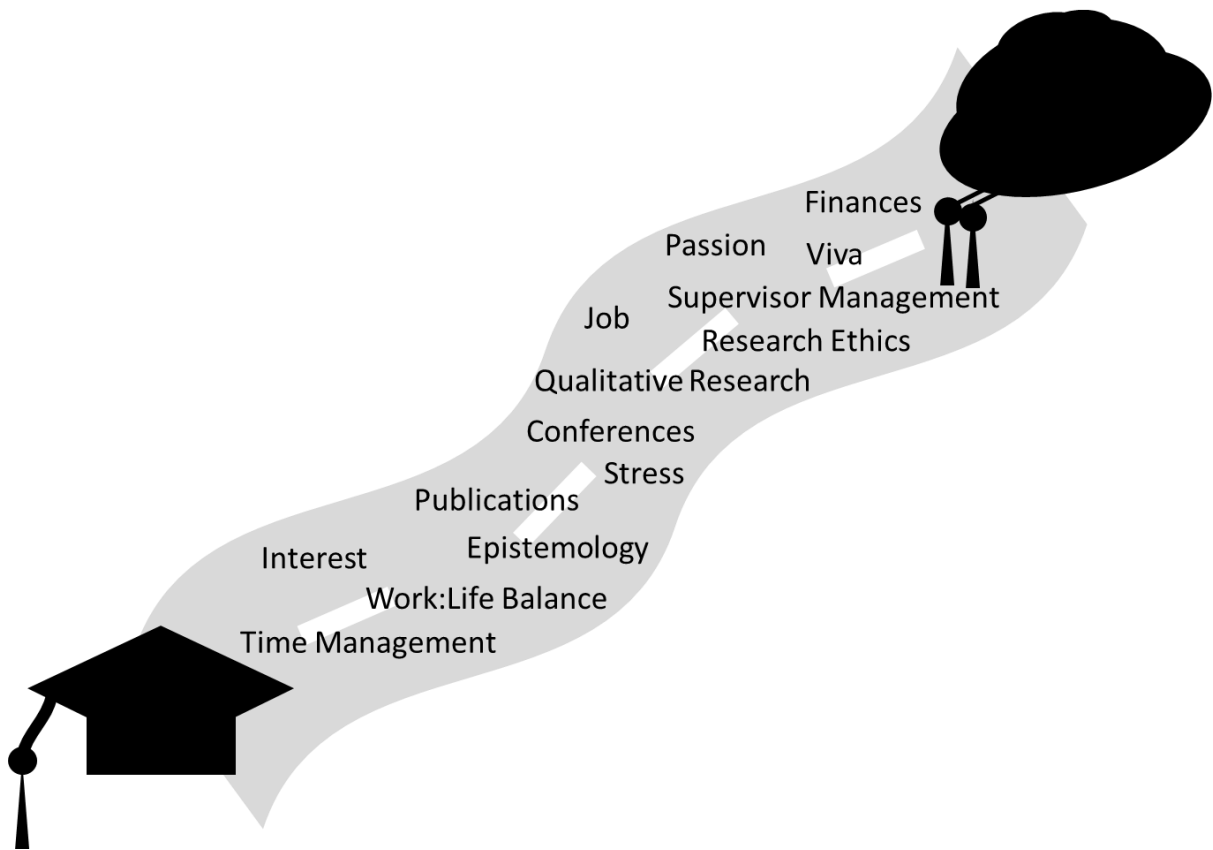
experience” (Esther de Groot, Utrecht University) and that the knowledge and skills they developed have assisted with their future work.

An online group has been set up to allow continuation of this new community within NOVICE (Network Of Veterinarians In Continuing Education) – www.noviceproject.eu. If you are, or were, a PhD student in this area, you would be welcome to join the group. You can also access the details of the 22 PhDs from the NOVICE group. NOVICE is a free network open to all veterinarians, veterinary students and veterinary educationalists.

The contributing PhDs students are: Katherine Adam, Sarah Baillie, Harold Bok, Kate Cobb, Vicki H.M. Dale, Sally Everitt, Esther de Groot, Sylvain Dernat, Andrew Gardiner, Erica Gummery, Jennifer Hammond, Debbie Jaarsma, Tierney Kinnison, Liz Mossop, Hannah Perrin, Alison Pyatt, Stephan Ramaekers, Carrie Roder, Annemarie Spruijt, Lorna Treanor, Claire Vinten, Martin Whiting



PhD Pre-Conference Workshop at the University of Bristol, 9th July 2014. The first members of the new community working hard



Some of the things a PhD student thinks about on the winding path to and through a PhD in veterinary education or the veterinary profession