



Subject benchmark statement

Veterinary nursing

Draft for consultation

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How can I use this document?

This document is a subject benchmark statement for veterinary nursing, that defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies.

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of programmes of study in veterinary nursing or related subjects
- a prospective student thinking about studying veterinary nursing, or a current student of the subject, to find out what may be involved
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of a graduate in veterinary nursing.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this subject benchmark statement can be found in QAA's glossary.¹ QAA has also published a general guide to quality assurance in higher education.²

¹ The QAA glossary is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary.

² A general guide to quality assurance can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality.

About subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements form part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) which sets out the Expectations that all providers of UK higher education reviewed by QAA are required to meet.³ They are a component of *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards*, which includes the Expectation that higher education providers 'consider and take account of relevant subject benchmark statements' in order to secure threshold academic standards.⁴

Subject benchmark statements describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas, and in respect of particular qualifications. They provide a picture of what graduates in a particular subject might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their programme of study.

Subject benchmark statements are used as reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design within a framework agreed by the subject community. Further guidance about programme design, development and approval, learning and teaching, assessment of students, and programme monitoring and review is available in *Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality* of the Quality Code in the following Chapters:⁵

- *Chapter B1: Programme design, development and approval*
- *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching*
- *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning*
- *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review.*

For some subject areas, higher education providers may need to consider other reference points in addition to the subject benchmark statement in designing, delivering and reviewing programmes. Other reference points may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, national occupational standards and industry or employer expectations. In such cases, the subject benchmark statement may provide additional guidance around academic standards not covered by these requirements.⁶ The relationship between academic and professional or regulatory requirements is made clear within individual statements, but it is the responsibility of individual higher education providers to decide how they use this information. The responsibility for academic standards remains with the higher education provider who awards the degree.

Subject benchmark statements are written and maintained by subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The process is facilitated by QAA. In order to ensure the continuing currency of subject benchmark statements, QAA initiates regular reviews of their content, five years after first publication, and every seven years subsequently.

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode. The Quality Code aligns with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, available at: www.enqa.eu/pubs_esg.lasso.

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx

⁵ Individual Chapters are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-B.aspx.

⁶ See further *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the subject benchmark statement where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.⁷

Equality and diversity

The Quality Code embeds consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. Promoting equality involves treating everyone with equal dignity and worth, while also raising aspirations and supporting achievement for people with diverse requirements, entitlements and backgrounds. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in, and responsibility for, promoting equality.

Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for people who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning. In addition, disabled students and non-disabled students are offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever necessary.

⁷ See further the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General Introduction*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-introduction.aspx.

About this subject benchmark statement

This subject benchmark statement refers to foundation degrees and bachelor's degrees with honours in veterinary nursing.⁸

This is a new subject benchmark statement, first published in 2014.⁹

Note on alignment with higher education sector coding systems

Programmes of study which use this subject benchmark statement as a reference point are generally classified under the following code in the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS): D310.¹⁰

Foreword

Since the inception of the Registered Animal Nursing Auxiliary (RANA) training scheme in 1961, the qualified veterinary nurse has become an essential part of modern veterinary practice. The original RANA qualification was based on the training scheme for State Enrolled Nurses. It incorporated a two-year training period largely based in practice with optional attendance at college for up to 25 per cent of that time. The qualification was conferred following success in written and practical assessments, and submission of a record of competence of skills completed while in practice.

The veterinary nursing degree was first introduced in 1990 and incorporates the former vocational qualification. In some respects the basic elements of training and assessment remain very similar but attendance at a higher education provider is now compulsory and the record of competence of skills is far more comprehensive. The introduction of the veterinary nursing degree is seen by the veterinary profession as an important step in the development of a specific professional identity for veterinary nurses. As the profession of veterinary nursing gains maturity, graduates have been a catalyst in the ongoing development of a specific knowledge base in the nursing care of the veterinary patient. This growing maturity is also reflected in the development of this subject benchmark statement.

⁸ Foundation degrees are at level 5 in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2008) (FHEQ); bachelor's degrees are at level 6 in the FHEQ and level 10 in the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (2001).

⁹ Further information is available in the *Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognition-scheme-for-subject-benchmark-statements.aspx.

¹⁰ Further information about JACS is available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1776/649/.

1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this subject benchmark statement is to make explicit the nature and the academic standards of degrees in the area of veterinary nursing. The statement clarifies the boundaries of the subject area and the specific threshold standards for foundation degrees, which are located at level 5 on the *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and bachelor's degrees with honours, which are located at level 6 on the FHEQ and level 10 on the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF). The subject benchmark statement does not constitute definitive regulatory criteria for individual programmes or qualifications, but provides a framework of reference within which foundation and honours degrees in veterinary nursing may be offered.

1.2 Subject benchmark statements are used:

- to inform the design of programmes and to evaluate the success of programmes in achieving the requirements set out in the benchmark standards
- by external examiners and QAA to assist them in assessing consistency of academic standards between higher education providers
- by potential students and employers to help them understand the abilities and qualities of mind that programmes of higher education set out to develop.

1.3 The statements allow for variety and flexibility in the design of programmes accommodating a measure of diversity and innovation between higher education providers that reflects the individual strengths of each.

1.4 The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) is the regulatory body for the veterinary profession in the UK. It maintains a non-statutory register of veterinary nurses. To apply for entry to the register, veterinary nurses are required to have completed a registrable qualification and the required training hours. Foundation degree and bachelor's degree with honours programmes which are approved by RCVS and titled 'veterinary nursing' are considered registrable qualifications and graduates of these programmes are entitled to apply for entry to the register. Programmes which are not approved by RCVS may not be titled 'veterinary nursing', so may carry titles such as 'animal health science'; graduates of these programmes are not eligible to automatically apply for entry to the register. Only those appropriately registered with the RCVS may use the title Registered Veterinary Nurse (RVN) or refer to themselves as veterinary nurses.

1.5 RVNs agree to adhere to the Code of Professional Conduct for veterinary nurses. They agree to be accountable for their actions as professionals and to maintain their level of clinical skills and knowledge by undertaking relevant and regular continuing professional development.

2 Nature and scope of veterinary nursing

2.1 Veterinary nurses provide professional care for sick animals and support for their owners. They are trained to provide a high standard of nursing care based on a sound knowledge of the patient's condition and its individual needs. Veterinary nurses are able to:

- apply their skill and knowledge in the provision of nursing care, enabling veterinary patients to achieve the best possible quality of life, whatever their condition, while ensuring that the welfare of the patient is not compromised
- play a significant role in promoting animal health and welfare by supporting and educating owners and members of the public.

2.2 While primarily based in small animal practice, veterinary nurses may also work in a wide variety of both clinical and non-clinical settings. These include equine and exotic practice, teaching, research and commercial environments. The small animal veterinary nurse role is diverse and includes supporting clients via an increasing number of nurse clinics that form part of modern veterinary practice. The role encompasses technical expertise in processing diagnostic tests such as radiographic images and laboratory procedures as well as the nursing and caring for veterinary patients and supporting their owners.

2.3 Under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, the RCVS is responsible for overseeing the education of UK veterinary nursing students; the registration (and, pre-2003, the listing) of UK veterinary nurses; and, the fitness to practise (conduct, health and performance) of RVNs, in order to safeguard the interests of the public and animals.

2.4 Registration as a veterinary nurse demonstrates to employers and the general public that RVNs are maintaining their clinical skills and knowledge and are accountable for their professional conduct. The Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses states that veterinary nurses seek to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care and to fulfil their professional responsibilities, by maintaining five principles of practice:

- professional competence
- honesty and integrity
- independence and impartiality
- client confidentiality and trust
- professional accountability.

3 Subject knowledge and understanding

3.1 Programmes in veterinary nursing leading to foundation or honours degrees aim to develop students' knowledge and understanding in the following subject areas:

- anatomy and physiology
- pharmacology (the study of how drugs work)
- husbandry and dietetics across a spectrum of species
- delivery of nursing care to support veterinary patients suffering from both medical and surgical conditions
- supporting patients and clients in an emergency and critical care context
- maintaining a clinical environment and infection control
- working as part of the surgical team and management of the theatre environment, including maintaining aseptic and sterile conditions in a variety of contexts
- legislation affecting the veterinary practice and its employees as well as general legislation covering the keeping of pets
- respect for different cultures, values views and beliefs, and the requirements of anti-discriminatory practice.

3.2 It is anticipated that holders of degrees in veterinary nursing are proficient in the delivery of nursing care across a spectrum of species including the following:

- cats
- dogs
- species commonly kept as pets in the UK including rabbits and small mammals and appropriate species of reptiles and birds.

3.3 Additionally they also have at least a basic level of knowledge and competence in the husbandry and nursing care of the following:

- horses
- endemic UK wildlife
- exotic species not commonly seen in the UK.

4 Subject-specific and generic skills

4.1 Veterinary nurses develop a range of clinical, technical, personal, professional and generic skills, underpinned by the knowledge areas and covering a variety of animal species, as described in section 3.

Clinical and technical skills

4.2 Programmes in veterinary nursing aim to develop students' competence across a spectrum of clinical and technical skills, including:

- handling and restraint of a variety of species
- planning and delivering appropriate nursing care to a variety of species
- advising and supporting clients in the care of their pets
- performance of diagnostic procedures and tests
- documenting and communicating the results of procedures and tests
- wound management
- fluid therapy and the administration of drugs via a range of routes
- preparing patients, the clinical environment and equipment for veterinary procedures
- maintaining anaesthesia
- radiographic and laboratory techniques.

4.3 Nursing skills are developed both within the classroom and the workplace. Practical placements ensure students are able to apply the skills taught by the higher education provider in a real life situation.

Personal and professional skills

4.4 Programmes are designed to ensure students are aware of ethical principles, cultural diversity, legislation and the personal and professional responsibilities associated with being a RVN as set out in the Code of Professional Conduct.

4.5 Students develop the ability to:

- work as part of a multi-disciplinary team to deliver health care services to patients and clients on behalf of employers. This incorporates excellent communication skills and the ability to maintain a professional relationship with clients, colleagues, the public and a broad spectrum of organisations in the context of emotional and economic pressures
- respond appropriately to situations and circumstances that require the application of an ethical and moral standpoint, recognising the potential risks and utilising knowledge of relevant legislation where necessary. This may include acting as an advocate for patients and clients and maintaining a confidential standpoint at all times
- use research and data to inform decision making and take personal responsibility for their actions
- maintain a self-reflective approach to their professional practice in order to identify areas for improvement and development.

Generic skills

4.6 Programmes enable students to acquire effective communication, information technology, team working, problem-solving and evidence-based practice skills. Students develop skills in research methodology where appropriate for the specific programme. Programmes leading to a bachelor's degree with honours incorporate a research project or other self-motivated individual study leading to a thesis, dissertation or report.

5 Teaching, learning and assessment

5.1 Strategies and methods for teaching, learning and assessment are determined by individual higher education providers and aim to complement the broad learning outcomes for foundation or honours veterinary nursing degrees.

5.2 The ultimate goal of student learning is a reflective and critical approach to the application of knowledge and skills in veterinary nursing. In order that graduates are able to develop the ability to learn independently, an emphasis is placed on student-centred modes of learning and teaching, to foster a professional approach to lifelong learning.

5.3 Assessment strategies ensure alignment between learning outcomes and learning and teaching methods and may vary between higher education providers. A variety of assessment styles may be employed to test the spectrum of knowledge and skills required by a qualified veterinary nurse. Ongoing formative assessment allows for feedback on performance alongside summative judgements throughout the programme.

5.4 Assessment of competence and subsequent fitness to practise is determined in partnership between academic and clinical nursing staff. An integral aspect of all programmes is clinical practice, by means of a period of placement within a suitable clinical environment that meets the current requirements of the RCVS.

6 Benchmark standards

6.1 The following benchmark standards are defined as the threshold for foundation degrees (FHEQ level 5) and bachelor's degree with honours (FHEQ level 6/SCQF level 10) respectively. They reflect the professional competence requirements for registration as a veterinary nurse.

Foundation degree (FHEQ level 5)	Bachelor's degree with honours (FHEQ level 6/SCQF level 10)
Working as a professional veterinary nurse: expectations	
Graduates should be able to:	
manage themselves, their own professional practice and that of others in accordance with the Code of Professional Conduct, recognising their own abilities and limitations	manage themselves, their own professional practice and that of others in accordance with the Code of Professional Conduct, and critically evaluate their own abilities and limitations
transfer knowledge and skills to a variety of clinical settings and unexpected situations	select and apply knowledge and skills to complex and unexpected situations
work in collaboration with clients and colleagues to identify and provide the healthcare requirements of patients	implement strategies to promote and evaluate collaborative working with patients, clients and colleagues
provide empathetic support to patients, clients and colleagues in changing and stressful situations	anticipate and deal with potential stressful situations in an empathetic manner whilst minimising risk where necessary
practise in accordance with the professional, ethical and legal framework	recognise the complexity of the professional, ethical and legal framework and its impact on decision making and practice accordingly
exercise personal responsibility and decision making across a range of situations	critically evaluate personal responsibility and decision making across a range of situations
contribute to public protection by creating and maintaining a safe clinical environment	select and implement a range of quality assurance and risk management strategies to create and maintain a safe clinical environment

delegate healthcare to others, as appropriate, ensuring effective supervision and monitoring	provide appropriate levels of guidance, role modelling, mentorship and support to others
understand the role of self and of others, including when delegation, supervision and seeking advice is appropriate	critically analyse roles within the veterinary healthcare team
demonstrate empathy with patients and clients and act as an advocate for them when appropriate	counsel clients and act as an advocate for them when appropriate
participate in the development of an evidence base in clinical practice and understand the importance of such work	plan and execute research and development work, including the development of the evidence base of clinical practice
participate at an appropriate level in multi-disciplinary healthcare	participate at an appropriate level in multi-disciplinary healthcare
recognise the need to develop existing skills and acquire new competencies	recognise the need to develop existing skills and acquire new competencies

Foundation degree (FHEQ level 5)	Bachelor's degree with honours (FHEQ level 6/SCQF level 10)
Principles and concepts: application	
Graduates should be able to:	
select and apply theories, concepts and principles to deliver holistic care	demonstrate critical understanding of research-based knowledge and the application to practice
recognise potential risk and intervene to prevent, where possible, complications occurring	contribute to the development of protocols to guide the provision of quality care and minimise risk
analyse and interpret relevant education/promotion information and use this knowledge to promote health and well being	capitalise on the potential for health improvement through the development of health education/promotion strategies
use appropriate research and other evidence to underpin decisions that can be justified, even when made on the basis of limited information	articulate and justify decision-making and problem-solving processes associated with practice

undertake and document a comprehensive, systematic and accurate assessment of the physical, emotional and social needs of patients and clients	use relevant theoretical and research evidence to inform a comprehensive, systematic assessment of the physical, emotional and social needs of patients and clients
assess priorities in practice and deliver care competently to meet identified need	monitor and update priorities within a changing environment and communicate appropriately
formulate and document a plan of care with the collaboration and consent of clients in the best interest of the patient	critically evaluate research findings and use these to inform changes to planned care
demonstrate accountability for care delivered, taking into account social, cultural, spiritual, legal, political, economic and welfare factors	demonstrate an ability critically to challenge the care delivered, taking into account dynamic social, cultural, spiritual, legal, political and economic factors
accurately document and evaluate the outcomes of professional interventions	critically evaluate outcomes of professional interventions, adjusting care accordingly
participate in team work that respects and uses the contributions of workers in a variety of healthcare situations	contribute with skill and confidence to effective multi-disciplinary working
recognise the moral and ethical issues that relate to patient care	critically evaluate the moral and ethical issues that relate to patient care

Foundation degree (FHEQ level 5)	Bachelor's degree with honours (FHEQ level 6/SCQF level 10)
Subject knowledge, understanding and associated skills	
Graduates should be able to:	
demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the subjects underpinning nursing and the skills required of a veterinary nurse	apply knowledge and understanding of the subjects underpinning nursing and the skills required of a veterinary nurse to provide creative solutions in care situations
understand and apply the values that underpin anti-discriminatory working practices	understand the differences in beliefs and cultural practices of individuals and groups and recognise and challenge discriminatory practice
communicate effectively with colleagues and clients, carers and other professionals using a range of media	confidently present information orally, in writing and, where appropriate through the use of technology, to provide coherent and logical arguments in the support of decision making
engage in and disengage from therapeutic relationships with the client and patient through the use of effective interpersonal skills	manage therapeutic relationships with the client and patient through the creative use of theories and skills, demonstrating ethical discernment and clinical judgement
provide safe and sensitive care through the use of practical skills and knowledge of current best practice	use practical skills and knowledge with confidence and creativity to enhance the quality of care
interpret and use data with the aid of technology to enhance the management of care	critically analyse and interpret data and appraise their value for care delivery and management
use reflection to enhance professional practice	use reflection to appraise, evaluate and enhance professional practice

Foundation degree (FHEQ level 5)	Bachelor's degree with honours (FHEQ level 6/SCQF level 10)
Generic skills	
Graduates should be able to:	
articulate opinions and formulate arguments effectively in speech and writing	employ enhanced language skills to articulate opinions and formulate arguments effectively in speech and writing
learn independently and utilise problem-solving skills	learn independently and show a good ability for self-critical reflection
demonstrate understanding of the principles of evidence-based practice	understand and apply the concept of evidence-based practice in the clinical environment
collaborate and plan as a team member and contribute to the work of a team	contribute proactively to the aims and organisation of a team
use information and communications technology competently and effectively to include information gathering and retrieval	use information and computer technology to enhance verbal and written presentations and to facilitate data analysis
demonstrate competence in skills transferable to the workplace	demonstrate self awareness and confidence in skills transferable to the workplace
demonstrate knowledge of and respect for different cultures, values, views and beliefs	demonstrate knowledge of and advocate respect for different cultures, values, views and beliefs
maintain a non-judgemental position in all aspects of their work and avoid stigmatising any category of client	maintain a non-judgemental position in all aspects of their work and avoid stigmatising any category of client
adopt a sustainable approach to all aspects of veterinary nursing practice	adopt a sustainable approach to all aspects of veterinary nursing practice
adopt a reflexive approach to their professional practice including the identification of opportunities to improve individual and team working practices	adopt and maintain a reflexive approach to their professional practice and that of others within the team, including the identification of opportunities to introduce novel approaches to patient care and management of the clinical environment

Further references and information

- Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
www.rcvs.org.uk/home/
- RVCS 'I want to be a veterinary nurse'
www.rcvs.org.uk/education/i-want-to-be-a-veterinary-nurse/
- RVCS Veterinary Nursing Bye-Laws
www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/veterinary-nursing-bye-laws/
- RVCS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses
www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-nurses/
- Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1966/36/contents
- Veterinary Nursing and Auxiliary Services National Occupational Standards
[www.lantra.co.uk/getattachment/94343e18-b741-4c7a-8458-f7cc4a970e7f/Veterinary-Nursing-and-Auxiliary-Services-\(July-2010\).aspx](http://www.lantra.co.uk/getattachment/94343e18-b741-4c7a-8458-f7cc4a970e7f/Veterinary-Nursing-and-Auxiliary-Services-(July-2010).aspx)

Appendix A: Membership of the benchmarking group for veterinary nursing (2014)

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