Are non-academic criteria needed in veterinary student selection?

by Eloise Jillings, Massey University

When hiring a new graduate, what are the top considerations an employer looks at in determining how well suited that person may be to their practice? Feedback from employers shows that knowledge and technical skills are typically assumed given that the graduates have completed the veterinary programme. It seems that more often the key considerations are their non-cognitive (non-academic) skills, including attributes such as communication, interpersonal skills and their ability to “fit” into the clinic team and culture.

Given that there is a low rate of attrition of students once selected into the veterinary programme, some have argued that deciding to admit a student to veterinary school is equivalent to granting a practising licence (Kogan & McConnell, 2001). Thus, the veterinary student selection process acts not only as a gateway to the veterinary degree programme but also to the profession. Because considerable emphasis is placed on the non-academic attributes of each new graduate employee, one might wonder if these attributes should also be considered in the veterinary programme selection process.

I gave a presentation recently at the Society of Dairy Cattle Veterinarians (DCV) conference in New Plymouth, discussing the veterinary student selection process and asking whether non-academic criteria are needed in the veterinary student selection process. This article expands on that presentation.

Looking back at veterinary student selection

Historically, the selection of Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) students at Massey University has been heavily weighted towards academic performance and remains so currently. In 1995–96, the pre-selection period was reduced from one academic year to one semester, and the STAT-F test was introduced to provide a non-academic selection criterion. This test is designed to assess a candidate’s “ability to understand and analyse material and to think critically about issues”. Since 1996, the BVSc student selection process for domestic students has remained largely unchanged.

Whether or not this selection process is appropriate is difficult to gauge because, while it ensures students are likely to be academically capable of completing the degree programme, it is unknown how well it correlates with success or longevity within the veterinary profession.

Inevitably, whatever selection process is used, some students will not be awarded places in the programme, even though they might have made “a really good vet” – at least in some one’s estimation. Regardless, feedback from the profession and changes in international practice in the selection of veterinary students suggest it would be timely to review our own selection processes.

A review of the process of selection of BVSc students has begun, with the intention to implement changes, if any, in 2015. As this review will be a fairly significant undertaking, it is unlikely to be repeated again for quite a few years. Thus, whatever is decided will probably be around for some time.

Part of the selection review process includes seeking feedback from the veterinary profession. If you have ever come across a student and thought “why did they let this person into vet school?” or conversely “I wish all vet students were this good”, this is your chance to help influence the process by which they are selected. The input of veterinarians into the future of veterinary student selection via the survey on non-academic criteria in veterinary student selection would be greatly appreciated. The link to the survey is: www.surveymonkey.com/s/vetselectionsurvey

What is the selection process now?

New Zealand Government-subsidised students (domestic students) are selected into the BVSc programme on the basis of their academic performance in a minimum of one and a maximum of four semesters of science study at a New Zealand university.

In 2003, the first intake of non-New Zealand Government-subsidised (international) students was accepted into the programme. Because these students have not usually studied in New Zealand it necessitated the introduction of a modified process for their entry (Figure 1). International students are divided into two groups. Group 2 students are selected on the basis of at least two years of science-based university level study overseas and directly enter the professional programme (semester two, year one). International students who do not meet the criteria for Group 2 come to New Zealand and take classes in semester one to compete for entry into the veterinary programme in the same manner as domestic students (Group 1 students). International students do not compete for the same places as domestic students.

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Veterinary student selection is made following availability of results (grades) from semester one, with selected students beginning the BVSc programme proper just under two weeks later in semester two. This results in a small window of about 10 days in which selection is completed; hence, the process has to be realistic in terms of resources and time committed.

**Eligibility for selection**

There are four eligibility criteria for selection into the BVSc degree (Figure 2). Students must meet all four criteria to be eligible for selection into the veterinary programme.

- Do academic grades beget a good veterinarian?
- Is this mode of selection any better or worse at predicting success as a veterinarian than any other?

**What kind of student does this process select?**

Generally, the students selected into the programme are highly motivated, competitive and intelligent. Researchers have suggested that the very characteristics rewarded by acceptance to veterinary school (competitiveness, self-focus) are the antithesis of the team mentality and concern for others that are essential characteristics of successful veterinarians (Chadderdon et al, 2001). Despite this, we are fortunate our students are generally both smart and personable, but, because there is no direct consideration of non-academic criteria in the current admissions process, the non-cognitive characteristics of our students can be variable.

Domestic applicant numbers have steadily increased over the past 20 years, as have the number of students meeting the eligibility requirements. In 2010–13, there were about 300 applicants, of whom about 180 met the eligibility criteria. This has placed increasing upward pressure on the WGPAs needed to be selected. In 2013, the grade point average cut off for selection was just under half-way between an A– and an A average. That is a higher grade than the BVSc programme management think is necessary to ensure adequate academic rigor to meet the demands of the BVSc course, which experience suggests is around a B+.

It also begs the question of whether we are missing out on good applicants who would make great veterinarians but are being excluded by an extremely high WGP cut off. Moreover, the difference in selection score between those selected and those who miss out is often minute and may represent a fraction of a grade from a single class.

**The best admission process**

What is the best veterinary admission process? The answer, like so much in veterinary medicine is "it depends". Multiple factors are involved and vary between veterinary programmes and countries. They include:

- the aim and mission of the veterinary programme and the veterinary profession
- the desired characteristics of the veterinary graduate
- the focus of the veterinary profession in the country of interest

What works for one programme may not be appropriate for another. Each programme
needs to critically reflect on the above factors and tailor its selection process to achieving those outcomes.

Additional selection criteria used at other veterinary schools

Several other criteria are factored into the selection process at other schools. On the opposite end of the spectrum to Massey University, Colorado State University, where applicants are selected entirely on objective assessment, and Utrecht University, where students are selected by lottery. However, most programmes assess a combination of academic performance (grades +/- standardised tests) and non-academic criteria.

Commonly used methods to assess non-academic criteria in other programmes include the following.

Interviews

Classic panel interview

This is usually a single interview with multiple interviewers that lasts typically from 20–60 minutes. The format of these varies widely from unstructured to highly structured. As such, the reliability (consistency of an assessment under the same conditions) of these types of interviews can be poor. Currently, the resource requirement of panel interviews precludes their use in the Massey University process, particularly given our timeframes for selection.

Multiple-mini interviews

These are usually a set of six to 12 interviews, most commonly 10 minutes long. The applicant is presented in a scenario and has a few minutes to prepare before being interviewed about the scenario. Each scenario is aimed to assess one or two specific characteristics. The multiple-mini interviews is considerably more reliable than the panel interview and it can be conducted in a much more efficient timeframe.

Portfolios

Factors commonly assessed via a portfolio are:
- Animal experience
- Previous work experience
- Background – rural versus urban
- Letters of recommendation.

Can we select on gender?

There is a world-wide phenomenon that the gender distribution of graduating veterinarians has swung from being predominantly male 20–30 years ago to being predominantly female now. Massey University veterinary classes are now between 70–80 percent women and 20–30 percent men. It is even more skewed in many US veterinary schools, which often have classes of more than 90 percent women.

It has been suggested that more males need to be selected into the programme. It would be illegal to select (or not select someone) on the basis of gender. Interestingly, the proportion of male applicants and female applicants who end up being selected into the degree is similar at a ratio of 1:4. Thus, the lower number of males selected into the programme has nothing to do with their intelligence or aptitude but everything to do with the proportion of applicants. In other words, because roughly four times as many women as men apply to the programme, so the number of women who are selected is also roughly four times that of men.

The future of veterinary student selection at Massey University

Factors to consider in the student selection review process, and on which we seek your views, include the following:
- Should non-academic factors be included in veterinary student selection?
- If so, what non-academic factors should be considered?
- Is there a role for members of the veterinary profession to be involved in selection?
- How could non-academic factors be assessed in a fair, reliable and valid way?
- What are the timeframes, logistical requirements and resources required to implement desired changes?

We encourage members of the veterinary profession to have their say in reviewing the selection process of their future colleagues, by participating in the survey found at: www.surveymonkey.com/s/vetselectionsurvey

References


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