

QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES IN THE UK

In the UK, all universities are subject to overall quality assurance monitoring by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA is responsible for advising government (through the Privy Council) on the granting of degree awarding powers to institutions of higher education, as well as overseeing universities' quality assurance systems for the award of degrees. QAA also provides guidance on the minimum threshold academic standards a student must achieve to be eligible for the award of a degree, in accordance with the national qualification frameworks. In the UK, higher qualification levels are set out in QAA's "UK Quality Code for Higher Education – The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies".

RCVS is recognised as a Professional Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) by the QAA, and takes part in a collaborative forum of Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies with the QAA in order to share best practice on accreditation, and facilitate the mutual exchange of relevant information relating to quality, making regulation more efficient and reducing duplication. A pre-condition for approval of their veterinary degrees is that veterinary schools must be part of an institution of higher learning accredited by an organisation recognised for that purpose by its country's government. RCVS only considers veterinary schools for approval which are part of a university with government awarded authority to award degrees.

RCVS routinely shares its accreditation information with QAA, as well as taking into account QAA's reports on institutions during its own accreditation activities. RCVS expects all universities offering veterinary and veterinary nursing programmes to meet all of QAA's quality assurance requirements, including complying with the national qualification's frameworks and the Bologna declaration, which sets out a series of guiding principles designed to ensure comparability in standards and quality of higher education qualifications. RCVS also expects the universities it monitors to comply with the QAA subject Benchmark Statements and QAA codes of practice.

RCVS, in collaboration with the QAA, the UK veterinary schools and the UK veterinary nursing programme providers, produced the "Subject Benchmark Statement for Veterinary Science" and the "Subject Benchmark Statement for Veterinary Nursing" which describes what veterinary and veterinary nurse degrees should cover, listing the knowledge and skills included within the courses. These statements include expressions of the "professional / employment related abilities that graduates would be expected to have developed during their higher education and associated practice based experiences". It should be noted that the 'Day One' skills that are annexed to the "Subject Benchmark Statement for Veterinary Science" have since been superseded by the 'Day One' competences (2020) and for Vet Nurses, the RCVS VN Day One Competences (2015) apply.

For overseas veterinary schools accredited by RCVS, the veterinary surgeon degree awarded must be recognised as a professional qualification for veterinary surgeons by the relevant authorities (government and/or veterinary licensing body) in its own region/country.

The Royal Charter, in recognising veterinary nurses as a profession, requires the RCVS to hold a register of veterinary nurses who have undertaken an approved qualification. Maintaining the register includes the approval of qualifications that can lead to professional registration; these are known as Licence to Practise Qualifications. Qualifications that lead to registration can be either at Further Education (FE) or Higher Education (HE) level. The requirements for such qualifications are set out in the "RCVS Awarding Organisation and Higher Education Institution Handbook", and it is the responsibility of the RCVS to accredit, in line with these requirements, all FE and HE qualifications that lead to professional registration.

Higher education institutions offering veterinary medicine degrees or veterinary nurse training fall under the quality assurance remit of QAA and the programmes offered by these institutions are, in addition, subject to routine monitoring by RCVS. This routine monitoring has three main approaches:

- Review of new programme applications to ensure they meet the RCVS standards, allowing graduating students to register as MRCVS or RVNs. The process is as follows:
 - A panel of experts will attend the university, having reviewed the submitted evidence, and discuss any questions or concerns that have arisen during the review.
 - A report is then compiled, providing detail on the discussions which occurred as well as issuing commendations, recommendations and suggestions for the university to address.
 - The university will then respond to the report and the commendations, recommendations and suggestions.
 - For Veterinary Medicine degrees, the final report is provided to the Primary Qualifications Sub Committee (PQSC) to consider and recommend accreditation status to the Education Committee. For Veterinary Nursing programmes, the report is considered by the VN Education Committee, who make the decision on whether the programme will be suitable to allow graduates to join the Register of Veterinary Nurses, and thus whether accreditation is granted or not.
- Quality monitoring throughout the accreditation cycle, which lasts for seven years for VS and five years for VN, to ensure the standards continue to meet the RCVS criteria. This includes annual monitoring data to be submitted and reviewed.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND STRUCTURE OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS (UK)

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons was established in 1844 by Royal Charter to be the governing body of the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom. Its statutory duties operate under primary national legislation and are currently laid out in the Veterinary Surgeons Act (VSA) 1966. RCVS is also designated as the “Competent Authority” for the veterinary profession under European Union legislation (VSA, section 1a).

Duties of the RCVS include regulation of the professional conduct of both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, professional conduct hearings and associated disciplinary actions, maintaining the registers of members and associates of the college and operation of the voluntary veterinary Practice Standards Scheme. The RCVS is the sole veterinary regulator in the UK governed by primary legislation in the form of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. Its authority to regulate the veterinary nursing profession is conferred through its Royal Charter, a revised version of which was granted to the College in 2015. A significant component of RCVS activity is the setting and monitoring of standards in veterinary education, for both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

Setting and monitoring the standards for the education of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses is a key responsibility of the RCVS. Section 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act specifies that those who hold a veterinary degree from a UK veterinary school which has received a Privy Council Recognition Order are entitled to be registered as Members of the RCVS (MRCVS). Only Members of RCVS have the legal right to practise veterinary surgery in the UK. Membership of the RCVS therefore constitutes the UK “licence to practise” for veterinary surgeons. Section 5 of the Act gives the RCVS the duty to supervise courses of study followed by students training to be veterinary surgeons in the UK. The Act specifies that the RCVS can appoint visitors to visit universities and to observe examinations (Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, section 5 (2)). In addition to visiting universities, the Act allows the RCVS to request other information from universities “as to the course of study and examinations leading to the degree to which the recognition order relates”. Under this provision, RCVS is able to monitor standards at UK universities on a regular basis, not just through the formal process of periodic accreditation visits. The RCVS regulates the veterinary nursing profession through the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 Schedule 3, the Royal Charter 2015, the Veterinary Nursing Registration Rules 2017 and the Veterinary Nurse Conduct and Discipline Rules 2014 to protect the public interest and to safeguard animal health and welfare.

Under the Act, the RCVS advises the Queen’s Privy Council, which is a formal body of advisers to the Sovereign of the United Kingdom, on whether a UK university should have a Recognition Order. However, this is a historical technicality and, to all intents and purposes, the decision on whether or not to approve a given degree programme is made by the RCVS. The official statutory Recognition Order is issued by the Privy Council and remains in place until the RCVS advises the Privy Council otherwise. RCVS also accredits non-UK veterinary degrees, for example in USA, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa, under a separate section of the Act (VSA Section 6) and through mutual recognition agreements with the relevant authorities in those countries.

Regulation of the professional conduct of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses is one of the primary statutory duties of the RCVS. RCVS publishes a “Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons” and a “Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses”, by which both professions must abide. Failure to comply with the code of conduct can result in disciplinary action, overseen by the RCVS, against the individual veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse. This could lead to the removal of their name from the RCVS register of members or RCVS register of veterinary nurses, thereby removing their right to practise their profession.

The RCVS statutory and Charter duties are steered and governed by a Council of 26 members that meets three times a year.

The current breakdown of Council members is as follows:

- 15 elected members - elected to Council by the profession itself
- 3 appointed members for the eight universities with a veterinary school
- 2 appointed veterinary nurses
- 6 appointed lay members
- In addition, the Chief Veterinary Officer is an ex-officio observer.

The RCVS Veterinary Nurses Council (VNC) has overall responsibility for all matters concerning veterinary nurse training, post-qualification awards and the registration of qualified veterinary nurses.

The current breakdown of VNC is as follows:

- 6 elected members - elected RVNs to VNC by the profession itself
- 2 appointed members - appointed veterinary surgeon members
- 4 lay members - appointed by VNC
- 2 appointed members – appointed veterinary nurse members

Both Councils are supported by a system of Committees. RCVS policy issues put forward by working parties or the secretariat go first to Committees for recommendation and, if recommended, on to Council for approval or rejection.

The four statutory committees of RCVS are:

- the Preliminary Investigation Committee (PIC),
- the Veterinary Nurse Preliminary Investigation Committee (VN PIC),
- the Disciplinary Committee (DC),
- the Veterinary Nurse Disciplinary Committee (VN DC)

The standing committees are:

- Advancement of the Professions committee
- the Audit and Risk committee
- the Education Committee,
- Finance and resources committee
- Registration committee
- the Standards Committee

RCVS accreditation activities are reported through the Primary Qualifications Sub-Committee (PQSC) which reports to the Education Committee and the Veterinary Nurse Education Committee (VNEC) which reports to the Veterinary Nurses Council.