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A qualitative study of final year student veterinary nurses' career plans and expectations.

**Abstract**

The limited longevity of veterinary nurse's clinical careers is a current challenge faced within the veterinary industry. In order for the veterinary nurse job vacancies to be filled, it is essential for graduate veterinary nurses to be motivated to seek employment in clinical practice. The aim of this study was to explore the career plans and expectations of final year student veterinary nurses.

Online semi-structured interviews, with ten final year student veterinary nurses, were used to collect qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

The results revealed that there were aspects of clinical practice the participants were looking forwards to and others they perceived would be challenging and may threaten the longevity of their clinical career. An example was the demanding nature of the job role.

All participants expressed a desire to work in clinical practice following their graduation, but were aware that they were unlikely to have long-term clinical careers. It is recommended that veterinary nurse educators should support students to develop the resilience necessary for them to face the challenges of clinical practice and also help them to gain the transferrable skills they may require for alternative future career paths.

**Key words**

Motivation, Veterinary Nurse, Student, Career Plans, Values, Beliefs, Perceived Cost

**Key points**

1. Motivation for graduate veterinary nurses to seek employment in clinical practice is essential to address the current workforce shortages in the profession.
2. Working as Registered Veterinary Nurses in clinical practice was a plan shared by all participants.
3. Participants were looking forwards to some aspects of the VN role and highlighted others they were expecting to be challenging and could limit the longevity of their clinical careers.
4. Retraining as a veterinary surgeon, lecturing, and working as a canine hydrotherapist are examples of the alternative future career options participants had considered.
5. Veterinary nurse educators should equip students with the necessary tools to support their wellbeing, and with transferable skills which could be applied to another vocation if required.

## Introduction

Workforce shortages and the increase in pet ownership, seen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have contributed to the challenges faced by members of the veterinary nursing (VN) profession. Leading to high numbers of registered veterinary nurses (RVN) expressing a desire to leave clinical practice in the next five years (Robinson *et al.*, 2020; RCVS, 2022).

The high numbers of RVNs choosing to leave clinical practice each year was attributed to reduced levels of intrinsic motivation by Coates (2013). Who concluded, that despite the meaningful nature of the VN job role, factors such as stress, lack of recognition and low levels of pay, contributed to RVN's desire to seek alternative careers. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) (2022) suggest that further research is required to understand why individuals leave the VN profession and what their future career plans are.

The findings of Page-Jones and Abbey's (2015) research show that membership of the veterinary professions gives people a strong sense of identity and that their careers help to define who they are. They also suggest that veterinary professional identity is formed while VNs and VSs are training and that veterinary educators should be aware of the influence they can have. Armitage-Chan and May (2019) build on this and highlight that veterinary educators act as role models and help to validate student's newly formed professional identities. The research of Cake *et al.* (2020) was similar. They focussed on the identity of veterinary students and found that they have a strong sense of vocational identity that stems from their love of animals and gives them the intrinsic motivation required to pursue a veterinary career. Both the findings of Page-Jones and Abbey (2015) and Cake *et al.* (2020) highlight how people who personally identify as animal lovers are drawn to the

veterinary professions because they believe this will enable them to align their personal and professional identities.

A person's memories, their interpretations of experiences, and their previous achievements all affect the level of motivation they have for a particular task. Influencing their expectation of success and helping them to determine whether to engage a task. This decision is an ongoing process. When a person engages with a task, they will have new experiences and possible achievements which will lead to them creating new memories that will then influence their decision to engage with similar tasks in the future. For example, the experiences a student veterinary nurse (SVN) has during their clinical placement will influence their decision to persist with their future career as an RVN (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Eccles and Wigfield, 2020).

Theories of motivation, such as the Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), can be used to identify how a person's values and beliefs have influenced their choice to engage with a particular task, for example planning their career as an RVN. Within the SEVT there are four Subjective Task Values (STV). Firstly, intrinsic value, which is the value associated with the anticipation of enjoying the task. Secondly, utility value, which is how useful the task is perceived to be. Thirdly, attainment value, which is the perceived importance of engaging with the task, and finally, the perceived cost, which is the potential detriment associated with the task. The factors a person considers when making a decision can be attributed to the different aspects of the STVs and their motivation for a task can be analysed to reveal detailed insights (Eccles and Wigfield, 2020).

In order to increase the number of practicing RVNs it is necessary for VN graduates to have a desire to have a long-term career in clinical VN practice. The aim of this research was to apply the STVs of the SEVT and explore the future career plans and expectations of final year SVNs. The findings could then be used to inform future teaching practice for VN educators. The research question the study aimed to address was, how do the values and beliefs of final year students, on a BSc (hons) VN programme, impact their desire to seek future employment in the VN industry?

## **Methods**

Online interviews via Microsoft Teams, with ten participants, were used to collect qualitative data. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided a basic framework to ensure all of the core questions were asked, but also allowed for emergent topics to be explored (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The interview questions can be seen in appendix A.

The participants were selected using convenience sampling, and were recruited from a cohort of 42 final year students on a BSc (hons) VN programme (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). It was essential to recruit final year students because they were near enough to the end of the programme that they were likely to have a realistic idea of their future career plans (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019). The students were informed about the research project via an in-class announcement and those who put themselves forward to participate provided informed consent by completing an opt-in consent form. An online survey, using Qualtrics, was used to collect basic demographic data and also asked the

participants for an estimate of how long they envisaged they would work in clinical practice as an RVN for following their graduation (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). There were 14 respondents to the survey. A total of ten participants who indicated a desire to work in clinical VN practice for a variety of timeframes, ranging from five to 30 years, were invited to participate in the online interviews. The decision to select ten participants was based on the number of participants used for similar research projects (Matusovich, Streveller and Miller, 2012; Peters and Daly, 2012; Harniman, 2023). Prior to commencing the data collection for the main study, a pilot study was conducted with three participants. Following the pilot study some minor adjustments were made to the interview questions to improve their efficiency (Chiesa and Hobb, 2008; Starkey, 2014; Kallio *et al.*, 2016).

#### *Ethical considerations*

The Ethics Committee at Hartpury University approved the project prior to the commencement of the data collection and assigned the reference number ETHICS2021-01. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) guidelines were considered during the design of the project. The dynamics associated with the researcher being a senior lecturer and the participants being students was taken into account. The data were anonymised, by assigning pseudonyms to each participant, and securely stored in accordance with The General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) (2018).

#### *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The process was closely adhered to and included assigning initial codes and then refining the codes in to four final themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2021). The final themes can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Final themes

<b>Theme number</b>	<b>Final theme name</b>
<i>Theme 1</i>	Career plans
<i>Theme 2</i>	Wellbeing
<i>Theme 3</i>	VN Career Longevity
<i>Theme 4</i>	Academic achievement

## Results

### *Results for theme 1 - Career plans*

The participants shared information about the type of veterinary practice they would like to work for in the future. Some wanted to work in a larger hospital. For example, *“I can’t see myself wanting to work anywhere but in a hospital environment”* (student-1). Some wanted to work in a smaller clinic. For example, *“I know I want to get into a small clinic”* (student-2).

Many of the participants gave examples of things they enjoyed about the VN role. Examples included, *“I still love the job itself and I can’t wait to get back into practice”* (student-2) and *“I would like to be in a profession which means something to people, yeah, it will be nice to have a label and say like yeah I am a professional”* (student-9). Another participant commented on the challenges faced by VN managers and highlighted this as something they would not like to do in the future, *“I personally find it difficult to believe that you can be a nurse, a good nurse, and a good manager”* (student-10).

The participants, with the exception of student-7, discussed the alternative careers they had considered, despite not being specifically questioned about this during their interviews. The most popular was to become a VN lecturer, see table 2. Comments provided by participants



suggested they considered the alternative careers they discussed to be superior to VN. For example, *“in the RSPCA or some, something a bit further up like that”* (student-3) and when talking about their plans to retrain to be a veterinary surgeon a participant shared, *“I think that knowing that I am progressing towards something greater”* (student-8). Others suggested that their alternative career options would have less pressure than VN, *“I am interested in, canine hydrotherapy, still, still helping animals, but in a different way, maybe with not so much pressure”* (student-9).

Table 2: The alternative career aspirations discussed by participants

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Alternative future career aspirations</b>
<i>Student-1</i>	Canine Hydrotherapist
<i>Student-2</i>	VN Lecturer or work in a laboratory
<i>Student-3</i>	RSPCA officer or the armed forces
<i>Student-4</i>	Veterinary Surgeon
<i>Student-5</i>	VN Lecturer or pharmaceutical sales
<i>Student-6</i>	VN Lecturer or recruitment
<i>Student-7</i>	No alternative career discussed
<i>Student- 8</i>	Veterinary Surgeon or RSPCA officer
<i>Student-9</i>	Canine Hydrotherapist
<i>Student-10</i>	Expressed a desire to leave the VN profession, but did not specifically mention an alternative career

### *Results for theme 2 - Wellbeing*

The participant’s discussed a variety of wellbeing matters relating to their future career plans. Some participants commented on the impact that the demanding nature of the VN job role has on their mental health and wellbeing, an example is, *“it’s like very draining in a lot of aspects, so physically, mentally, emotionally”* (student-7). Some participants discussed the impact that assisting with euthanasia had on their mental health and expressed a desire to avoid that part of the job. For example, *“euthanising animals that used to get me a lot when I was in placement, especially when I was in the hospital 'cause that would happen a*

*few times a day, probably why I want to stick to smaller practices 'cause it doesn't happen so often" (student-9).*

It was evident that some participants found the lack of understanding others have for the VN profession frustrating. Comments included, *"I think just general pressures of the job as well, obviously as you know it's not all sort of cuddles with puppies as much as everyone likes to say that and obviously like the, uh, euthanasia side and you know seeing animals like gravely ill" (student-5).*

Some of the participants highlighted concerns about the high suicide rates of staff working in the veterinary industry. For example, *"depression, anxiety, burnout and worse than that with suicide rates as they are. I think all these things can contribute towards this" (student-2).*

### *Results for theme 3 - VN Career Longevity*

The participants were reluctant to share the challenges they felt that RVNs face when working in clinical practice, many of them considered their answers for a long time before responding. A key challenge highlighted by participants was the longevity of the career, with many participants sharing that they thought it was unsuitable for older people. Examples included, *"I don't know if it's realistic that'll be doing it 'til I'm like 60" (student-4) and "the old, oldest practicing nurse that would probably be seen who's been physically practicing and doing all the sort of physically demanding parts were probably about 35, so I don't really see a lot of older nurses" (student-6).*

Future family related plans dominated the discussions about work life balance in the participant’s responses. Some participants highlighted concerns about the inflexibility of the VN role. For example, *“because it is quite demanding, you know, it's long hours that you work and they're not always catered around children, you know dropping off at school and picking up times. I think sometimes people do leave the profession 'cause they find something that fits more into their lifestyle”* (student-6).

The participants were asked to talk about their salary expectations, they all provided a figure that they think would be realistic for newly qualified RVNs to be paid. The figures provided ranged from £17,000 to £23,000 per year. The salary expectations of all participants can be seen in table 3. Most participants commented that the pay for VNs is low and highlighted this as a factor which could limit their VN career longevity. Comments included, *“I do think it's quite disgusting that practices will happily pay that, but expect so much from someone that's barely on minimum wage”* (student-3). A participant who was a mature student, provided a different perspective, they shared, *“I’ve just had lower paid jobs, RVNs are not well paid, but I'll be getting more than I have been”* (student-2).

Table 3: Participant’s salary expectations

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Participants salary expectations</b>
<i>Student-1</i>	£18,000
<i>Student-2</i>	£17,000 to £18,000
<i>Student-3</i>	£20,000
<i>Student-4</i>	£23,000
<i>Student-5</i>	£20,000
<i>Student-6</i>	£18,000 to £21,000
<i>Student-7</i>	£23,000
<i>Student-8</i>	£20,000
<i>Student-9</i>	£20,000
<i>Student-10</i>	£18,000 to £20,000

#### *Results for them 4 - Academic achievement*

A few participants discussed a desire to complete additional qualifications and how their VN degree would enable this. For example, *“it opens so many doors to kind of master's degrees or certificate holders and stuff like that it, it opens so many doors and finally gives you the freedom and recognition”* (student-1).

Some commented on their degree enabling them to seek employment as an RVN and that their degree had equipped them with the skills they require for the job role. For example, *“you can go straight into a job and you're ready for that and you've got all the skills that you need”* (student-4).

#### **Discussion**

The aim of this research was to identify the values and beliefs that motivated final year veterinary nurses' future career plans and expectations. All participants shared plans to seek employment as RVNs following graduation. Their desire to join the VN profession can be attributed to the high levels of intrinsic value they place on promoting animal welfare and their belief in the importance of the role of an RVN has links with the attainment STV described in the SEVT. They also place value on their desire to utilise the skills they acquired during their degree and to be part of a profession which aligns to the utility STV in the SEVT (Dunne *et al.*, 2018; Eccles and Wigfield, 2020; Harniman, 2023).

Links were made between the demanding nature of the VN role and the mental wellbeing of veterinary staff. Patient euthanasia was discussed by a number of participants as an aspect of the role they found particularly traumatic. Brscic *et al.* (2021) have a similar finding in

their research and report that veterinary professionals have a high level of empathy for animals which increases their distress when it comes to euthanasia. They suggest that veterinary curricula should cover how to deal with animal death, grief of pet owners and moral stress to help to prepare veterinary professionals for dealing with challenging situations. Although VN training programmes do incorporate discussion of animal euthanasia, specifically preparing SVNs to deal with the emotional trauma associated with animal euthanasia would be advantageous.

Several of the participants shared concerns about the high suicide rates within the veterinary professions. Other research links the high suicide rates in the veterinary profession to the emotionally traumatic nature of the work (Roberts, Jeremin and Lloyd, 2013; Milner *et al.*, 2015; Deacon and Brough, 2021). In order to prepare VNs for their clinical careers, it is necessary for universities to provide students with suitable wellbeing support to foster a culture of openness, to empower SVNs to share their concerns and receive support to help them to maintain the motivation they require to engage in long-term clinical careers. The recommendations of Reynolds and Reynolds-Golding (2023) are similar, they suggest that VN educators should equip SVN with a '*toolkit*' of support for their emotional wellbeing.

The low pay associated with the VN profession was a cause for concern for most participants with one describing it as "*disgusting*". It is clear from the findings that the participants believe that the pay is not representative of the job role. This is a common finding in VN research and is reflected in the average salary estimations provided by careers websites, with both UCAS and the National Careers Service providing estimates for new graduates that are only marginally above the national minimum wage (Robinson *et al.*,

2020; National Careers Service, 2024; UCAS, 2024). Silverwood (2021) describes the low pay as “*the financial plight of the VN*” and states that many VNs are paid less than hospitality workers. They speculate that if the low pay continues then the nationwide shortage of VNs will get worse. Hamlin (2019) makes the point that the global animal related industries are highly lucrative and that this is not reflected in VN pay. With the findings of these authors in mind, it is no wonder that most of the participants of this study had feelings of dissatisfaction when it comes to their salary expectations.

All but one of the participants, without being directly asked, shared details of alternative career options they had considered. Some participants stated that they would like to do “*something greater*” than VN, this would suggest that they did not feel that the VN profession will enable them to fill their potential (Page-Jones and Abbey, 2015). All of the alternative careers considered by the participants were animal related and even the participant who was considering the armed forces wanted to join the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. Demonstrating that the participant’s value animal welfare and that they would be able to apply the transferrable skills acquired from their VN degrees in their chosen alternative careers. Some of the reasons given for considering other careers included topics that have already been discussed, such as low pay and lack of responsibility. There were also suggestions that the VN profession is not suitable for older people due to both the physically demanding nature of the job and the lack of flexibility which people with child care responsibilities may find prohibitive. The RCVS (2022) report has similar findings and also highlights the need for further research into the career plans of RVNs who leave the VN profession as a requirement.

The aspects of the VN job role that participants felt could limit the longevity of their clinical careers can all be attributed to the perceived cost STV of the SEVT. If the perceived cost of engaging with an activity outweighs the benefits, then the person's motivation to continue will be reduced and in the case of VNs this reduction in motivation could lead them to leave clinical practice and seek alternative employment (Eccles and Wigfield, 2020). Alongside ensuring that VN graduates have the necessary knowledge and skills, VN educators should act as positive role models to validate their student's newly formed professional identities, to ensure they are prepared for clinical VN practice and have a suitable level of resilience to negotiate challenging situations (Armitage-Chan and May, 2019).

### *Limitations*

The participants were known to the researcher, this could be a limitation because it increases the likelihood for the researcher to make assumptions of the participant's meaning when interpreting the data. To minimise the possibility of this, the thematic analysis process was closely adhered to. It is also possible that the established rapport between the researcher and the participants could be an advantage and helped the participants to feel relaxed during their interviews and provide detailed insights into their experiences (de la Croix, Barrett and Stenfors, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The participants all expressed a desire to work as RVNs in clinical practice and held the belief that the VN role of is worthwhile because it would enable them to have a positive impact on animal health and welfare. Alongside this they recognised that they were likely to encounter challenges that may limit the longevity of their VN clinical careers and had already considered alternative career options.

Emotional trauma, associated with certain aspects of the VN role, is commonly encountered by RVNs working in clinical practice. In the context of the SEVT, the anticipation of experiencing emotional trauma will relate to the perceived cost STV and high levels of perceived cost lead to a decreased motivation to persist with the task.

Another aspect of the RVN job role that could be considered a perceived cost is the low pay. VN salaries have been regularly discussed in published literature and the majority of the participants in this study held the opinion that the VNs salaries are not reflective of the work they do. The lack of flexibility of the VN job role is also a cause for concern. All of these factors contribute to lower levels of motivation and may then prompt VNs to make the decision to leave the profession.

VN educators should accept, that in accordance to current research, members of the VN profession are unlikely to spend their whole career working in clinical practice, they are likely to leave and to seek employment with a greater level of autonomy, higher pay and less emotional trauma. In light of these findings, VN educators should support SVNs to develop the resilience required to face the challenging nature of clinical practice. They should also ensure that graduate RVNs have the transferrable skills they would require if they choose to seek an alternative future career.



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## **Conflicts of Interest**

None

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## **Appendix A - Interview questions**

1. Can you tell me about the plans you have for your career following graduation and what has influenced your decision to make these plans?
2. Can you tell me about what completing your degree and working as an RVN following graduation will mean to you?
3. Can you tell me about the challenges you think RVNs face when working in clinical practice?
  - a. What affect do you think these challenges have on RVNs working in clinical practice?
  - b. Do you think the challenges you have highlighted will affect you?
4. Can you share what you believe the salary expectations of a graduate RVN are?
5. In your questionnaire you identified that you would like to work as an RVN in clinical practice for [insert number of years] number of year. Please can you explain to me the reasons why you would like to work as an RVN for this length of time?
6. Can you explain what you imagine your lifestyle to be like following graduating and becoming an RVN?
7. Can you sum up what you think it takes to be a good RVN?
  - a. Has your opinion on this evolved as you have progressed through your student journey?