

Biting off more than you can chew!

Can first year programs successfully meet the challenge of the current emphasis on education best practice?

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In 2006 James Cook University established a 5 year undergraduate Veterinary Science degree, featuring 8 equally weighted subjects in 1st year and a more integrated approach in years 2-5. Two purpose designed 1st year subjects called Veterinary Professional Life 1 and 2 have been developed to provide a Veterinary context and feature a portfolio, Personal and Professional Development workshops and a Mentoring program. This nuts and bolts session will explore the design of these elements of the first year learning experience and engage participants to address the challenge of designing first year programs to successfully meet the current emphasis on education best practice.

Introduction

The first year curriculum is under significant pressure and scrutiny with respect to embedding a broad range of teaching and learning initiatives relating to: the First Year Experience (FYE), Work Integrated Learning (WIL), generic skills, early exposure to professional competencies and accreditation or auditing processes. This nuts and bolts presentation discusses the development of a new degree program, the Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) at James Cook University (JCU), and challenges the presenters and participants to develop strategies to manage the challenges associated with the first year curriculum.

Session Outline

- 5 minutes: Introduction and presentation of the context of the session.
- 10 minutes: Participant identification of the challenges in developing first year programs.
- 5 minutes: Presentation of key elements of the JCU BVSc first year program.
- 10 minutes: Identification of key practice points for the design of the first year curriculum.

The First Year Learning Experience

The first cohort of students commenced studies in the JCU BVSc in 2006. The first year program features 4 subjects in each of the two semesters and primarily introduces students to the foundation biological sciences such as Zoology, Botany, Biochemistry, and Cell Biology that serve diverse programs including the BVSc, BBiomedSci, and BSc. A feature of the year are two purpose designed subjects, Veterinary Professional Life 1 and 2 which are delivered to BVSc students only and provide a veterinary science context to the year. The subjects introduce students to the range of career opportunities available to graduates; diversity of animal breeds and characteristics; various animal industries; human animal bond; and animal ethics. The subjects also incorporate key elements central to the planned approach to the first year experience including the Veterinary Mentor Program; a series of Personal and

Professional Development (PPD) Workshops; and a portfolio called the Professional Portfolio. These are explored in more detail below.

The Professional Portfolio

Portfolios provide students with opportunities to engage in deep learning and develop desirable professional attributes such as reflective practice and an aptitude for life-long learning (Scholes et al., 2004; Gordon, 2003). The Professional Portfolio is scaffolded around reports relating to three learning activities; i) Case studies, ii) Animal Handling, iii) PPD Workshops, and as such is significantly more directive than many portfolios.

Collectively these learning activities:

- *Engage students in areas of high interest to Veterinary Science students.* Case studies introduce students to the breadth of the veterinary profession. The associated report engages students in small groups to identify with the breadth of the knowledge, skills and attitudinal base of the profession. Animal handling activities provide opportunity for students to develop basic skills in the safe handling of a broad range of animals.
“I found myself picturing my life as a veterinarian in years to come, imagining I was actually involved in this case and considering exactly what I thought I would need to know upon diagnosis and what I would do in relation to the ethical issue involved”
- *Engage students in collaborative learning.* Case studies and PPD workshops are completed by students within groups (mentor groups).
“More discussion than actual answers to the black and white questions was required for Case Study 2 as there was a significant amount of moral and ethical concern associated with the case study. This discussion and consideration was invaluable as it became clear to us that this is one of the most significant parts in the day to day life of a veterinarian”
- *Require students to reflect on experience.* Case study reports require students to reflect on the collaborative learning experience and the attitudinal aspects of the case. Animal handling and PPD reports require students to reflect on their individual learning experience.
“This ability to be able to accept other people’s ideas and belief is vital to working successfully in a group in society.” “The most challenging aspect of Case Study 1 was the co-ordination of group activities and communication within the group. As a group member I found it difficult to initially voice this particular concern constructively. The second PPD workshop had focused on this personal weakness.....”
- *Promote an integrated approach to learning and enable students to place learning delivered within a veterinary context.* By their very nature cases provide an authentic integration of the learning experience.
“Case study 2 has been interesting to work on. I was thrilled to know that some of the terms used in describing the effects of cancer and the drugs used to fight it have been covered in our Biochemistry subject. It is all starting to make sense now why we have to learn it.”

Personal and Professional Development Workshops

Within health professional programs external pressures such as high-profile legal cases and evolving accreditation requirements have driven professions to evaluate professional principles and the associated training provided to students. This has resulted in the development of a range of PPD curricula/courses (Talbot, 2005). Across the first year of the JCU BVSc student groups supported by mentors participate in 5 PPD Workshops (16 hours total) focusing on the following areas: understanding and managing self; interpersonal communication skills; group and team work; time management; conflict management.

“The first workshop made me wonder about the role my personality plays in my life and what type of veterinarian it will make me” “After discussing the results of the MBTI test the group realised

there might be clashes of personalities between group members as there is a mixture of personality types” “I cannot stress enough the appropriateness of the team workshop content and the timing for the current group situation...”

The Veterinary Mentor Program

A significant trend in undergraduate health courses has been the implementation of learner-centered, small group learning programs. Significant learning outcomes have been associated with these programs however they can be resource intensive and can struggle to deliver a uniform quality of experience for students. The Veterinary Mentor Program draws on a number of aspects of best practice in adult education (Westberg and Jason, 1996) that small group learning can facilitate: retention of material; deep and collaborative learning; understanding and valuing difference; and reflection on experience. In the Veterinary Mentor program students are randomly allocated to groups of 6-7 facilitated by a trained mentor. Mentor groups engage in case studies, PPD workshops and where appropriate animal handling practicals. Important roles for the Mentor Program in first year are to care about students and provide access to an experienced learner who encourages an enquiry based approach to learning.

“Appreciated mentors being at meetings – a positive influence – brought points not considered to attention and drew more out”

The Ongoing Challenge

At the macro level arguably the most significant challenge is one that educators constantly face. The simple fact is that one size does not fit all! This is as true for the diversity of students enrolled in a program as it is for the diversity of staff engaged in the program. Both the PPD workshops and Mentor program face challenges focused on cost and the identification and measurement of high quality outcomes enabling costs to be appropriately evaluated. At the more micro level a number of ongoing challenges have arisen such as:

- Development of cases that engage students in a collaborative, reflective and integrated approach to learning and yet are appropriate for 1st year students.
- Development of assessment strategies that guide students towards desired approaches to learning and validly and reliably measure student performance.
- Renewal of the casual mentor staff group and improving consistency of student experience.

References

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