

How to apply to vet

Thinking of becoming a vet? Admissions director **Joyce Wason** explains what you need to do

Only seven UK universities offer veterinary degree programmes, with an estimated 850 places available. Entry to veterinary medicine is therefore very competitive, and it pays to prepare well before submitting an application.

Your first decision is which of the seven UK vet schools you will apply to — you can only apply to four UK schools in one year and your application has to be made through UCAS (www.ucas.com). The closing date for applications is mid-October. You should use the other space on your UCAS application to apply for an alternative course as a backup. You cannot be penalised for selecting an alternative course as each university can only see your application to them — it is a sensible thing to do. Most veterinary science degrees take 5 years; Cambridge is a 6-year course.

Each of the seven UK vet schools offers an excellent standard of veterinary education and after graduation you can register to become a Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (MRCVS). Glasgow, Edinburgh and the Royal Veterinary College in London are also approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), which means that you have the option of practising in the USA or Canada without sitting additional lengthy and costly clinical professional examinations.

Entry requirements

GCSEs

- Minimum of five A grades, including chemistry, biology and physics (or the science double award).

- AS grade A physics can compensate for achieving grade B at GCSE.
- Minimum of grade B in maths and English language

A-levels

- Minimum of grades AAA, in chemistry, biology (or human biology) and a third academic subject at A-level.
- Taking a fourth A-level will *not* necessarily increase your chances of being offered a place and might lessen the grades you get in the other three subjects, but it is best to check with your preferred universities beforehand.

See individual vet school websites for most recent requirements and other qualifications, including the International Baccalaureate, as these can vary from school to school.

BMAT

BMAT is the Biomedical Admissions Test. This 2-hour exam is split into three sections:

- aptitude and skills
- scientific knowledge and application
- a written task

The BMAT relies on the skills and knowledge that candidates should already have, so it does not require a huge amount of additional study. It normally takes place around 1 November. You can often take the test at your school; if not, there are open centres around the country where you can take it. At present only Cambridge University and RVC require this examination; however this changes frequently. Check out the website for more details on the examination: www.bmat.org.uk

Work experience

Work experience gives you a better insight into what a career in veterinary medicine will involve, so that you can be sure you want to be a vet. It means that admissions tutors will know that you have a good idea of the profession, both the up sides and the down sides. Contrary to popular opinion, being a vet is not a particularly glamorous job. Can you cope with the sight of blood and bad smells? It is not every day that cute fluffy animals are brought into the surgery by responsible owners. Being a vet can involve long hours, sometimes on cold, wet winter nights.

Most veterinary schools require at least 6 weeks' work experience. If you can, it is best to get this in a variety of different establishments — for example, small animal practice, large animal practice, equine practice, zoo, wildlife park, veterinary laboratory, abattoir, cattery, kennel, horse

With practice, students develop the skills needed to examine all sorts of patients



Joyce Wason

school

stable, farm. It is recognised that not everyone will be able to gain experience in all the examples listed, and experience may be limited by the opportunities available to you. However, you should be able to demonstrate that you have tried hard to gain experience in a variety of disciplines. Work out what you want to do, and then find someone in your area who can offer a placement, and send them a letter introducing yourself. Websites are a great source of information, and your local vet may be able to help with introductions to other disciplines.

During your work placements you should make sure that you listen and learn — ask questions, without being intrusive. If you are working on a farm, you should be aware of the breed of sheep or cattle you are dealing with, the common problems of the animals and their treatments. In the vet's surgery you should pay attention to routine consultations — which diseases are puppies and kittens vaccinated against? You should discuss the positives and negatives with the vets you are working with so that you know what to expect. It is a good idea to keep a diary of your work experiences — this will help when you are completing your UCAS application.

References

It is not *essential* to ask for references at the end of every placement, but it is good to have them if possible. Some vet schools require submission of references with your application; others will ask you to bring references with you if you are called for interview. Again, it is best to check the requirements for each school beforehand.

Extracurricular activities

It is important that you have hobbies and interests. This shows that you are a well-rounded applicant, with interests beyond studying, and some extra-curricular activities demonstrate that you have the skills and qualities necessary to be a good vet. Can you work well as part of a team?

Weblinks

UK veterinary schools

Bristol: www.bris.ac.uk/vetscience

Cambridge: www.vet.cam.ac.uk

Edinburgh: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/vet

Glasgow: www.gla.ac.uk/schools/vet

Liverpool: www.liv.ac.uk/veterinary-science

London (Royal Veterinary College): www.rvc.ac.uk

Nottingham: www.nottingham.ac.uk/vet



Equine vet training at the Weipers Centre, Glasgow

Joyce Watson

Are you able to function independently if required? The veterinary profession can be quite stressful and it can be good to escape from work from time to time. Vet schools are keen to know that you have already developed hobbies outside of work and study, which you really enjoy.

UCAS personal statement

A good personal statement is well thought out with no spelling or grammatical errors. All this takes time, so don't leave everything until the last minute. One of the most difficult aspects of the personal statement is fitting in all the information. It is important to say what motivated you to pursue a career in veterinary medicine, and what particular qualities and experience you feel you can bring to the profession. Include a short list of your work with animals and veterinary surgeons. If you are selected for interview, most vet schools will send you additional forms to complete in which you can expand on your work placements, so don't get too bogged down with trying to fit everything you have done into your personal statement.

Write a few sentences about one or two highlights from your work experiences, and what you have learned from them. Be completely honest — don't list anything on your application that you would not be able to discuss fully at interview. Include your hobbies and interests, and any positions of authority you have held — team captain, school prefect etc. Add information about non-veterinary experience, such as working as a waiter or waitress in a busy restaurant, on the checkout desk of a supermarket or in a retail store over Christmas. Such work proves you can multi-task, handle stress, but, most importantly, that you can communicate with a variety of people. Remember, every animal that a vet sees is associated with a person — a farmer, breeder or devoted owner. Ask other people to read your statement and give you feedback, and make sure you proofread it before submission.

Teaching and research at the University of Glasgow

Joyce Wason



The admissions committees of most vet schools see a huge number of applications each year, and since a lot of applicants are given advice and model answers are available, personal statements often appear to be quite similar, and not particularly exciting to read. You should make your application personal to you, and add something unique that makes you stand out from the crowd. However don't be too 'off the wall' — different people have different perspectives and you never know who will be reading your statement.

Interviews

Interviews differ from school to school, so familiarise yourself with each school's interview procedure by checking their websites. Some schools stick to traditional interviews with a panel of people who ask questions about your application and work experience, while others have moved towards MMI (multiple mini interviews), where a variety of attributes and skills are tested during the process.

You should be able to talk about your work experience and what you have learned — this is why it is important to ask questions when you are undertaking your work experience. You may also be asked some ethical questions — for example, what do you feel about animals being used for veterinary and medical research? There are no right or wrong answers to some of these questions, but the admissions committee needs to know that you have given some thought to the less glamorous, but currently necessary, sides to the profession.

If there is something related to veterinary medicine that is topical in the press at the time of your interview, you should have a basic knowledge of the subject. You are not expected to have all the answers to halt an outbreak of avian flu, but you should have an idea of how it all began.

After the interview

Given the number of places available, and the large number of people applying, you should bear in mind that not everyone is successful with their first application. Each year, there are around 1500 applicants for just 72 places at the University of Glasgow. It can be soul-destroying to have committed yourself to several weeks of work experience, as well as

concentrating on your studies, only to find that your application has been rejected. Don't take rejection too personally — each admissions committee has a really difficult job when making decisions.

If you ask for feedback, be aware that it may be limited, and schools can only give feedback to the applicant — not to a third party (such as your teacher). Don't call when you are upset or angry, and don't continually call or email. Where admissions tutors provide feedback on unsuccessful applications, the criticism may appear minor compared to your perceived strengths. The standard of applications is very high, and hundreds of people may be just as qualified as you, with a lot of practical experience. Tough decisions have to be made. Rejection from anything in life is harsh, but don't despair. Once you have overcome your initial disappointment and frustration, keep on top of your studies (if you don't get the grades, you will never get a place). If you can take a gap year, use your time productively, expand your practical experience where you can, and try again. If you decide to go abroad, make sure that you are available in the UK when the schools are conducting interviews.

Cost

Currently you will be paying up to £9000 per year for tuition fees. Then you need to consider the cost of accommodation, books and travel. Vet students are also required to undertake extramural studies (EMS) during the holidays, making it difficult for them to take on a summer job to earn some extra money. Extramural placements are an essential element of undergraduate veterinary education. Students must complete a minimum of 38 weeks EMS during their course, which should normally consist of 12 weeks pre-clinical and 26 weeks of clinical placements.

EMS provides students with a great opportunity to gain real-life work experience that enhances their university-based studies. While the universities are responsible for teaching the skills that the student needs when they first graduate (the 'Day One Competences'), it is on EMS placements that students can further practise the animal handling and clinical skills that they first learn at university. They can also build their experience of dealing with clients and with members of a veterinary team.

Studying veterinary medicine is a lot of hard work, but it will lead to a fulfilling career and you will be well rewarded.

Further reading



A useful book that discusses entry and touches on life as a vet student is: Shivelton Queen, C. (2010) *Vet School: My Foot in the Door*, Quintessential.

Joyce Wason is the Director of Admissions and Student Services Manager for the University of Glasgow, School of Veterinary Medicine. Joyce has worked in the university for 25 years and has been involved in veterinary admissions since 1994.