

7 August 2007

Mr. Dave O'Connell
Case Officer
Advocacy Division
Competition Authority
Parnell House
14 Parnell Square
Dublin 1

RE: PROFESSIONS STUDY – VETERINARY SURGEONS

Dear Mr. O'Connell,

Thank you for providing the HEA with an opportunity to comment on the training of veterinary surgeons in Ireland. I apologise for the delay in replying. As mentioned in our phone conversation, I was on annual leave until early July and your letter had only just come to my attention.

In the absence of a consultation paper, it is somewhat unclear as to the particular issues on which you are seeking our comment, but following from our conversation, I am aware that you are concerned with the number of veterinary training places available and even suggested the possibility of opening a new veterinary school. I have therefore outlined some general comments that might assist in informing further discussion on these points.

Role of HEA

Firstly, I would like to point out that the universities are autonomous institutions. The Universities Act, 1997 sets out their statutory objectives and functions. Within these objectives, and within their individual budgets, they have the freedom to innovate and to develop programme provision in anticipation of, and in response to, the economic, social and cultural needs of society and student demand.

Universities make decisions regarding programme provision on the basis of perception of student demand and perception of national needs and in the context of their own institutional mission and strengths. CAO data indicates that the higher education system has been, on the whole, responsive to changes in student demand.

Within a system, which allows for institutional innovation in programme provision, institutions have demonstrated the capacity for self-regulation.

The situation is slightly different in the institutes of technology, which experience less autonomy. However, since the designation of the institutes under the remit of the HEA earlier this year, the HEA is in the process of assisting the institutes to adopt a more strategic and autonomous focus.

Within this overall context, the HEA is not directly involved in course determination or provision in higher education. However, where there are skills needs identified by Government or in the event of major new developments (e.g. a recent example is the introduction of graduate entry programmes to medicine), the HEA manages competitive processes for the determination of new courses providers.

Supply and Demand Factors

It is acknowledged that veterinary medicine is a course associated with high student demand and hence requires high CAO points in order to obtain a place (for example in 2006, 402 students listed veterinary medicine as their first preference and 70 were awarded places). However, student demand is just one side of the equation. Consideration must also be given to the labour market demand for veterinary graduates. The HEA works closely with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs¹, as well as other relevant departments and organisations, in order to assist in addressing identified skills needs. The HEA has not been approached by the Department of Agriculture and Food, or any other organisation, concerning a shortage in the supply of veterinary surgeons in Ireland and is not aware of any such labour market shortage. Any attempt to provide additional training places in the absence of this labour market demand would require that serious questions would need to be answered regarding the longer-term employment opportunities of additional graduates.

Cost of Providing Veterinary Education

When considering increases in the provision of veterinary training places, or indeed the creation of a new school, serious attention would have to be paid to the cost of training veterinary graduates. Veterinary training is one of the highest cost courses in higher education, second only to dentistry, e.g. the cost per student of undergraduate veterinary education is 2.3 times greater than the unit cost of medicine and 3.3 times greater than the unit cost of business education. Postgraduate research in the veterinary area is very important for Ireland but the costs at this level are also very significant. In the light of these exceptionally high costs, there would have to be clear evidence of the labour market need before increasing the numbers of veterinary places.

It is also important to point out that significant capital investment has also been put into veterinary medicine recently with the move of UCD's veterinary school from Ballsbridge to Belfield.

¹ The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs was established in 1997. The group is composed of representatives of business, employees, education, Government departments and State agencies. It acts as the central, national resource on skills and labour supply for the enterprise sector and an overall strategy for enterprise training in Ireland.

Scale of Veterinary Schools

Consideration would also need to be given to the appropriate size of veterinary schools. From a preliminary examination of veterinary schools in the UK, it appears that the school at UCD, which enrolls on average 75 new entrants annually, is on a par with the size of the UK schools, and is smaller than some, e.g. the school in Edinburgh enrolls 95 new students annually. In the event that additional places were required in veterinary medicine, initial consideration would have to be given to expanding existing provision, rather than creating a new school.

I trust that the above comments will be of assistance to you in the context of furthering your report on veterinary medicine. We would welcome an opportunity to comment on the draft report. Should you have any questions or would like to meet in order to clarify any outstanding issues, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

Caitríona Ryan
Head of Policy and Planning