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Emma has a keen interest in promoting animal welfare and runs a company called Pet Train, which provides first-aid training for the General Public. It also delivers the Animal Nursing Assistant qualification to students, on a distance learning basis. In her own time, Emma is welfare officer for a branch of Cats Protection, and looks after her two children, as well as a Labrador retriever called Hazel, three cats, chickens and tortoises.

Masters Degree in Veterinary Nursing – a student's view

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ABSTRACT: The Master's Degree in Veterinary Nursing now offered by Harper Adams University College, Shropshire, delivers a wide range of modules that are aimed to suit our varied profession. The Degree offers choice and flexibility and is ideally suited to Registered Veterinary Nurses working in a range of roles.

Even before I qualified as a Registered Veterinary Nurse, I had ambitions of continuing my education within the veterinary sector. After completing the Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing qualification, I noticed a piece in the *Veterinary Nursing Times* about Harper Adams University providing a Masters Degree in Veterinary Nursing (MDVN).

I had known I wanted to acquire further qualifications, but was unsure in which direction I wanted to go; so this seemed like the perfect route to take.

As in my case, Registered Veterinary Nurses are increasingly furthering their knowledge by studying postgraduate qualifications and, in turn, widening the level of nursing skills provided to patients in practice. This article discusses this Degree and, hopefully, will encourage others to have a go.

Eligibility

Because this is a postgraduate qualification, applicants must normally have a Degree or equivalent qualification in order to be eligible to enrol. I do not have a formal Degree, but credits gained through the AVN Diploma were sufficient for enrolment onto the Masters.

Many qualifications state that you have to be able to undertake a predetermined number of hours in practice in order to complete the units but this has not been the case for me. Although some modules may well be easier to study with practical application, I am currently not in practice and have not had a problem so far. This is also facilitated because Masters level

study requires a significant focus on the theoretical science rather than the practical.

The other major entry requirement was suitable references from other professionals, including one from a previous educational tutor.

What does the Degree cover?

Initially, the concept of a Masters in Veterinary Nursing seemed a little strange to me, as these Degrees are generally aimed at a very specific subject; however, ours is a diverse profession and the Degree offers significant flexibility in the modules that can be studied.

The Degree is made up of two years of formal units and then a final research project. There are three distinct pathways from which to choose:

- Veterinary Nurse Practitioner
- Veterinary Rehabilitation Nursing
- Veterinary Oncology Nursing.

Each unit takes around a year to complete and each contains three modules. This flexible approach allows students to fit the modules in with personal and practice interests. I chose to do the Veterinary Nurse Practitioner and Rehabilitation option, which proved to be very interesting. It covered most of the SQP modules, animal behaviour and running clinics.

Modules were assessed by means of assignments and examinations. In

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particular, the analgesia module was very comprehensive and it definitely got the ‘old grey matter’ working! As a result, it has increased my level of knowledge of the nature and processes of pain and the ways in which we can inhibit pain in our patients.

The behaviour module has been the most stimulating so far. Feline behaviour has always been of interest because of my involvement with Cats Protection, and as a result of my study it is now something I am considering taking further.

The final-year research project, is certainly giving me a headache at the moment as it’s a bit of task deciding what to do. There are no boundaries regarding what you can research; but, thankfully, there is plenty of support to help me in the right direction.

How much time does it take up?

Of course, studying for a Degree is not something that should be undertaken lightly – not least because it requires a significant time commitment. I would estimate that I have been spending around seven hours a week studying, which increases around exams and assignment deadlines.

The surprise for me and, I think, some of my peers, was the amount of independent study that was required. Guidance notes, which point students in the right direction, are posted on the forum each week, and these will also normally include a task to complete; but there is significant emphasis on self-directed study.

On reflection, working at Masters level does involve greater emphasis on self-directed learning as opposed to the spoon-feeding we may have been more used to as VN students.

The most time-consuming aspect of the study for me is the amount of research required for the assignments; with the

focus being on the use of an evidence-base to support your assertions. It not good enough merely to write down your own opinion.

Time must be spent in using valid research to explore differing viewpoints and to analyse and compare evidence in order to construct a valid answer. This takes a bit of getting used to; but veterinary nurses with first Degrees should be used to doing it from their work on previous qualifications.

Format

Each of the modules lasts around three to four months, with three modules being completed each year. The Degree is presented in a distance-learning format, with students attending study days at the university in Shropshire. Although these days are ‘optional’, students are encouraged to attend them. I have gained a lot from attendance because, as well as the formal study, there is the opportunity to discuss issues with peers and tutors.

The module notes are delivered on an electronic-learning hub – this is a virtual learning environment (VLE), which could be described as an online classroom, where notes are posted, assignments are set and students can communicate via a forum.

Most of the modules include one assignment and an examination. Both vary in structure – there have been formal written exams and pre-seen ones. I especially enjoyed the animal behaviour examination as we were expected to question a fictitious client about a behavioural problem, decide what the problem was and then write a behaviour plan.

For those not wanting to commit themselves immediately to the full Masters Degree, there is the option to sit each of the years individually and attain a postgraduate certificate. This does break the qualification down into more manageable sections and makes the task ahead seem less daunting.

Advantages of having a Masters Degree

Completing a Masters Degree will stand out on any CV and demonstrate that the prospective employee has been able to apply themselves to a significant level and length of study. It shows a high level of commitment, and, in highly-sought-after positions, this may well make you ‘stand out from the crowd’.

Two of my peers on the course are working in large referral practices and have chosen modules that will increase their knowledge and the skill level suited for their practice – the rehabilitation and oncology modules are ideal for this.


As our profession develops, it is of great importance that we contribute to evidence-based medicine. The Masters Degree, featuring a significant research project – that students are encouraged to publish where possible – will contribute to this knowledge base. This was one of my personal reasons for undertaking the Degree, as completing a PhD has always been an ambition of mine.

Not having previously taken a Degree, I saw this as a chance to prove that I could commit myself to this level of study; and, furthermore, it has also given me a clearer understanding of the area of research on which I hope to focus.

The significant level of knowledge that holders of a Masters Degree gain also means that they may be ideally placed to pass this on to other veterinary nurses in a teaching context.

Conclusion

A Masters Degree would be an excellent choice for many veterinary nurses who wish to develop their career, and I have personally gained significant personal satisfaction from my studies.

Now that undertaking 45 hours of CPD over three years is a professional requirement for RVNs, it is well worth considering applying for this exciting new qualification. 

References

RCVS (2013) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for veterinary nurses [Online]. Available from <http://www.rcvs.org.uk/education/cpd-for-vns> (accessed 20 April 2013).