

# Barriers affecting BAME students' access and attainment in veterinary higher education

Part 1 – Setting the scene [DOI 10.1080/17415349.2021.2002746](https://doi.org/10.1080/17415349.2021.2002746)



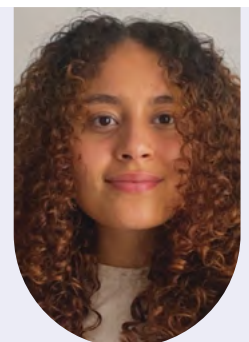
Ciar Pembroke, RVN

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3082-6562>

Davies Veterinary Specialists, Higham Gobion, Hitchin

✉ [ciarpembroke@gmail.com](mailto:ciarpembroke@gmail.com)

Ciar has always had an interest in animals. She studied animal management at Shuttleworth College before completing a bachelor's degree in veterinary nursing at Middlesex University in 2021. She is now enrolled in the post registration programme at Davies Veterinary Specialists.



**ABSTRACT** This paper aims to identify the barriers affecting black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students' access to, and attainment in, veterinary higher education in the UK. This will help acknowledge and understand why the veterinary sector is the least diverse profession in the UK (Gyles, 2018), with veterinary nursing being worse than veterinary medicine. In Part 1, the background and contextual information will introduce the reader to the racial issues that can affect access and attainment prior to and when attending university. This includes the current veterinary environment, facts and diversity figures among admission processes, and potential benefits of a diverse student body and workforce.

**Keywords** BAME, veterinary education, diversity, racial issues, white privilege, Black Lives Matter

## Introduction

This paper aims to identify and construct solutions to the barriers to access and attainment in veterinary higher education for BAME students. The experiences that impact on BAME students' chances of aspiring to, pursuing and attaining a veterinary qualification are the areas of inquiry. These experiences may include aspects of primary or secondary education, pet ownership, exposure to veterinary or animal-related practice, university admissions processes and experiences during university.

The broad term 'BAME' describes groups that are marginalised based on the colour of their skin or cultural heritage; it does not describe one homogeneous group (Alexander et al., 2015) and discrimination and prejudice will vary among individuals. Intersectionality such as gender expression, sexuality, disability and religion are beyond the scope of this text, as these subgroups face dissimilar discrimination and barriers that deserve individual investigation (Sanders & Rose-Adams, 2014).

The literature identified focuses on veterinary medicine (VM) or veterinary surgeons (VSs) as research relating to the diversity of veterinary nurses (VNs) and the related educational pathways is currently non-existent. However, the concepts identified can be extrapolated to the veterinary nursing degree qualification and aspects of the apprenticeship route, as both require large amounts of work experience (mostly voluntary) and high grades.

The reader should be mindful that they are not subconsciously influenced by the deficit model, which pertains to people of colour being genetically unintelligent compared to their white counterparts,

allowing academic failures to be attributed to this lack of intelligence (Sanders & Rose-Adams, 2014) rather than to processes designed to advantage white students; this formed the basis of an unofficial segregation policy for schools in the 1960s (Subnormal: A British Scandal, 2021) and the precedents set by this are still influential today.

## Methodology

An extensive research strategy was utilised to obtain the relevant data and resources for this topic. A three-part PICO (population, intervention, comparison and outcome) (Thomas, 2016) concerning the topic provided structure to the search (Williamson & Whittaker, 2020). Keywords, substitutes and similar concepts were then used interchangeably to broaden the yield of the search. A total of 12 databases were utilised. Other forms of searching included personal correspondence via email with Fabian Rivers, an accomplished VS who has helped raise awareness of this topic, and the British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society, part of the RCVS diversity and inclusion groups.

The final papers were selected according to inclusion and exclusion criteria mainly based on the scarcity of results. Rejected results were due to the difficulty in extrapolating parallels with the veterinary industry. For example, the National Health Service has historically sought employees from Commonwealth countries, unlike the RCVS, which instead has ties with mainly Eurocentric and westernised countries, with only 1.3% of VSs qualifying in Asia, Africa (excluding South Africa) and South America (Robinson et al., 2019b), and fewer than 10 respondents in the VN survey stating a country outside of Europe (Robinson et al., 2019a). The experiences of students were included, as the learning environment in the UK has had an attainment gap between racial groups for over 25 years (Gillborn et al., 2017), and it would be naive to believe this does not also reflect a barrier to higher education.

## Background

Institutional racism within the veterinary sector has recently been debated, with the RCVS President Mandisa Greene stating that she did not believe the profession was institutionally racist and "*change is a marathon, not a sprint*" (Loeb, 2020a). The latter statement suggests there is a problem in the profession surrounding race that requires complex changes.

A petition sparked by the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement was created by veterinary practitioners calling for the RCVS to investigate racism within the profession, which gained over 1,200 signatures (Burns, 2020). The RCVS was founded in 1844 (RCVS Knowledge, 2020), a time when former slaves were still seen as a "loss of property" by the UK government. Retrospectively, it can be assumed that the foundations

of the institution would have reflected the racist societal precedents of white exceptionalism and exclusivity. These white-superior values are still subtly echoed throughout the UK's educational systems and society, as institutions fail to acknowledge or develop any new practices or understandings to combat the inequalities (Sanders & Rose-Adams, 2014). Within the veterinary profession, despite the efforts of the RCVS diversity and inclusion groups, superficial discussions have not resulted in any formal policies (Loeb, 2020b), meaning there are neither internal nor external pressures to enact change.

## Facts and figures

The most recent figures for ethnic diversity within the UK veterinary profession are 3.5% BAME and 96.5% white for VSs (**Figure 1**) (Robinson et al., 2019b) and 1.9% BAME and 98.1% white for VNAs (**Figure 2**) (Robinson et al., 2019a). Both are significantly below the national average of 14.4% BAME (Vet Record, 2020). This issue of under-representation seems to be systemic throughout the veterinary career path as 95.1% of students in VM courses are white (Advance HE, 2018). A more recent figure in a report by Association of Veterinary Students (AVS) and British Veterinary Association (BVA) (2020) states 92% are white (**Figure 3**), in addition to 94.9% of academic staff in VM also being white (**Figure 4**) (Advance HE, 2018).

For such a small minority of the profession, the second most reported type of discrimination in the BVA report (2019) was racism, which received 2,445 responses to two separate surveys, where 9% of racist occurrences were experienced by students who were also least likely to report incidents due to not having the confidence to complain. It may be assumed that acts of racism would

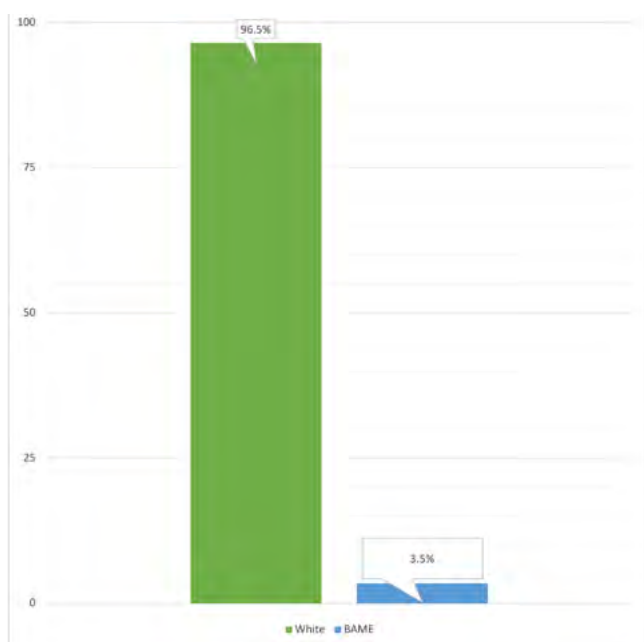


Figure 1. Diversity data for veterinary surgeons.

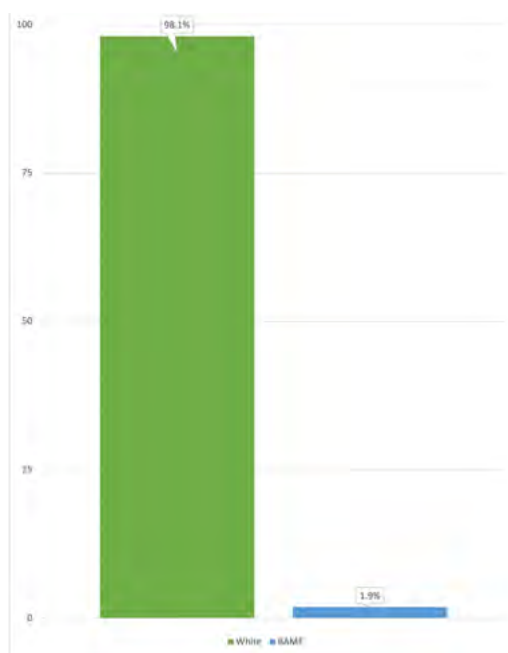


Figure 2. Diversity data for veterinary nurses.

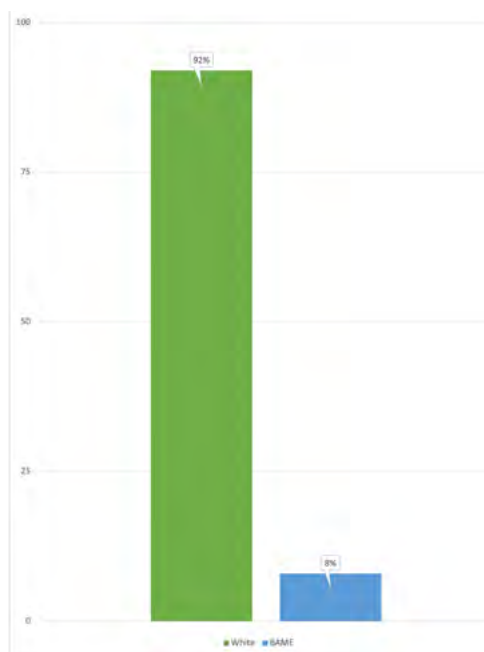


Figure 3. Diversity data for students studying veterinary medicine.

come from clients, but the report found that 47% came from senior colleagues and, in some cases, veterinary staff would face gaslighting by senior staff, undermining or ignoring a complaint about racism from a client (BVA, 2019). This type of psychological manipulation means staff are less likely to report racism in the future due to second-guessing their own experiences. When students on placement are exposed to this conduct, it creates a negative precedent for their future careers and aspirations, along with discrimination-related stress, which is linked to anxiety and depression (Mills, 2019).

A third of veterinary students are reported to show signs of depression in their first year of studies

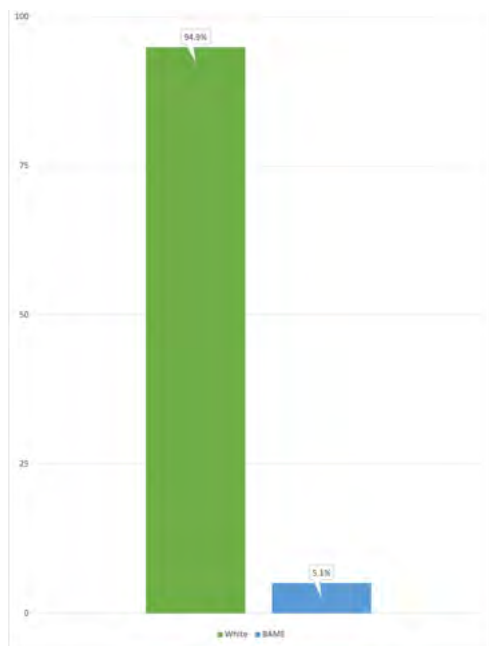


Figure 4. Diversity data for staff on veterinary medicine courses.

(Jackson & Armitage-Chan, 2016). This is exacerbated for BAME students by feelings of isolation and non-belonging. In 1992, polytechnics in the UK became universities and were allowed to award their own degrees, welcoming a range of students who would not have attended university prior to these changes. BAME students are more likely to study in these post-1992 institutions and, more specifically, in the Greater London area. For example, more black students study at the University of East London than in the top 20 UK universities combined (Sanders and Rose-Adams, 2014). This statistic shows that the feelings of belonging and familiarity are very influential. However, not many post-1992 institutions offer VM degrees, meaning 98% of veterinary students are being trained at pre-1992 universities typically associated with white, middle-class students (Jackson and Armitage-Chan, 2017).

Pre-1992 institutions have been slow to adopt successful schemes for boosting diversity, so BAME students who do study VM there face many challenges, including interacting with peers who do not resemble them, and who have had more opportunities, and financial and educational privileges. As many as 24% of VSs who qualified after 2016 were previously privately educated (Robinson et al., 2019b). This is a significant over-representation of the 6% of UK schoolchildren who attend private school (Vet Futures, 2015).

Furthermore, 46% of veterinary students have an average financial shortfall of £2,000 each year, while 67% of students are unaware of, or do not use, the financial grants available for placement (AVS and BVA, 2020). This financial burden can become overwhelming and warrants the need for extra support for BAME students, especially those from widening access routes (Sanders and Rose-Adams, 2014).

## Admissions processes

Admissions teams and procedures impact the future composition of the sector and are regarded as the gatekeepers of the profession (Andrews, 2009). Institutions need to acknowledge the differences between a white, privileged, privately schooled student and a less privileged BAME student, as they will be unfairly compared when looking solely at grades and work experience. Bourne (2020) highlights that getting work experience on a farm is much easier for someone who lives nearby and can afford to work for free, compared to a student from a first-generation immigrant family who lives in an inner-city environment and relies on part-time work. This highlights the determination of less privileged BAME students who have had to work harder to meet the criteria for a veterinary course (Bourne, 2020). However, BAME students who have not managed to meet these criteria are discouraged from the profession despite having the potential to excel when given the correct resources.

Typically, students from below-average schools perform better at university than those from above-average schools (Wyness, 2017), so lowering grade requirements for certain students would not be setting them up for failure. This requires universities to give clear, transparent information on how contextual factors are used, as well as advice and guidance for the admissions process, and information on the financial aids that are available (Boliver et al., 2017).

Information on the variety of career paths in the veterinary industry is not being shared with primary and secondary school students – instead, students are told by advisors to consider different career paths (Andrews, 2009). Despite BAME students having higher aspirations than their white counterparts (Platt & Parsons, 2018) – with black Caribbean girls rating ‘vet’ fifth in their top job aspirations, and BAME parents supporting and encouraging their children’s high aspirations – this is not maintained and translated into veterinary qualifications.

## The benefits

The value of having a diverse workforce includes driving innovation, increasing profitability, and encouraging a range of perspectives (Dos Santos, 2020), as well as increasing morale and reducing staff turnover (Alworth et al., 2010). Raising awareness and teaching cultural humility in both education and the workplace reduces prejudice, bias and stereotypes, resulting in less discrimination and a support network if such events were to happen.

The profession is not currently representative of the public it serves (Loeb, 2018), so VNs and VSs cannot meet the expectations and needs of all clients (Alworth et al., 2010), whether in food standards, preventing disease or small animal practice.

Within student VNs' university experiences, increasing BAME numbers does not equal equity (Dos Santos, 2020). However, well-managed, inclusive and diverse programmes can positively affect both minorities and majorities by enhancing problem-solving skills, active thinking, intellectual skills and motivation (Alworth et al., 2010). The rationale is to acknowledge the barriers that BAME students currently face in their educational environments, so tangible and effective recommendations can be made to uphold the veterinary profession's legal (Equality Act, 2010) and moral obligations. This also takes advantage of what a diverse population has to offer.

In summary, Part 1 has briefly identified some of the current issues that allow racism to continue in veterinary environments, such as a lack of formal RCVS policies, a clear minority of BAME individuals throughout the educational pathway and workplace, and a lack of support for BAME students. In Part 2, the barriers identified and their possible solutions will be discussed, in addition to their limitations.

## REFERENCES

- Advance HE (2018) Equality and Higher Education: Staff Statistical Report 2018. London, Advance HE.
- Alexander, C., Arday, J., Ahmed, S., et al. (2015) Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy. London, Runnymede, pp. 7–44.
- Alworth, L., Ardayfio, K.L., Blickman, A., et al. (2010) Diversity in laboratory animal science: issues and initiatives. *Journal of the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science*. 49(2), 138–146.
- Andrews, F.M. (2009) Veterinary school admissions in the United Kingdom: attracting students to veterinary careers to meet the expanding needs of the profession and of global society. *Revue Scientifique et Technique – Office International des Epizooties*. 28 (2), 699–707.
- AVS & BVA (2020) AVS/BVA Student Market Research Results 2020. Available from: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3359/avs-bva-research.pdf> [Accessed 11 December 2020], pp. 5–27.
- Boliver, V., Crawford, C., Powell, M. & Craige, W. (2017) Admissions in Context: The use of Contextual Information by Leading Universities. London, The Sutton Trust, pp. 3–36.
- Bourne, D. (2020) Inclusivity, privilege and bias. *Companion Animal*. 24 (11), 553.
- Burns, C. (2020) Members call upon RCVS to investigate structural racism. Available from: <https://www.change.org/p/rcvs-members-call-upon-rcvs-to-investigate-structural-racism> [Accessed 14 April 2021].
- BVA (2019) BVA Report on Discrimination in the Veterinary Profession. Available from: <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/2991/bva-report-on-discrimination-in-the-veterinary-profession.pdf> [Accessed 10 December 2020], pp. 2–10.
- Dos Santos, D. (2020) What can we do about diversity and inclusion? *Vet Record*. 187 (2), 76.
- Equality Act (2010) Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents> [Accessed 14 April 2021].
- Gillborn, D., Demack, S., Rollock, N. & Warmington, P. (2017) Moving the goalposts: education policy and 25 years of the Black/White achievement gap. *British Educational Research Journal*. 43 (5), 845–874.
- Gyles, C. (2018) Challenges for the veterinary profession. *Canadian Veterinary Journal*. 59 (4), 339–342.
- Jackson, E. & Armitage-Chan, E. (2016) Undergraduate Student Retention and Attainment in Veterinary Medical Education. Heslington, York, Higher Education Academy, pp. 9–21.
- Jackson, E.L. & Armitage-Chan, E. (2017) The challenges and issues of undergraduate student retention and attainment in UK veterinary medical education. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*. 44 (2), 247–259.
- Loeb, J. (2018) Is the RCVS council as diverse as it should be? *Vet Record*. 182 (25), 704.
- Loeb, J. (2020a) Change is a marathon, not a sprint. *Vet Record*. 187 (2), 52–53.
- Loeb, J. (2020b) Moving beyond words on diversity. *Vet Record*. 187 (2), 47.
- Mills, G. (2019) Shocking levels of discrimination found. *Vet Record*. 185 (2), 34–35.
- Platt, L. & Parsons, S. (2018) Occupation aspirations of children from primary school to teenage years across ethnic groups. Available from: [https://lucindaplatt.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/9948\\_cls\\_paper\\_occupational\\_aspirations\\_of\\_children\\_tp.pdf](https://lucindaplatt.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/9948_cls_paper_occupational_aspirations_of_children_tp.pdf) [Accessed 11 December 2020].
- RCVS Knowledge (2020) The history of the RCVS. Available from: <https://knowledge.rcvs.org.uk/heritage-and-history/history-of-the-rcvs/> [Accessed 14 April 2021].
- Robinson, D., Edwards, M., Akehurst, G., et al. (2019a) The 2019 Survey of the Veterinary Nurse Profession: A report for the Royal Veterinary College of Veterinary Surgeons. Brighton, Institute for Employment Studies, pp. 2–131.
- Robinson, D., Edwards, M., Mason, B., et al. (2019b) The 2019 Survey of the Veterinary Profession: A report for the Royal Veterinary College of Veterinary Surgeons. Brighton, Institute for Employment Studies, pp. 7–178.
- Sanders, J. & Rose-Adams, J. (2014) Black and minority ethnic student attainment: a survey of research and exploration of the importance of teacher and student expectations. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*. 16 (2), 5–27.
- Subnormal: A British Scandal. (2021) [Documentary]. Shannon, L. (dir.). London, Rogan Productions, Lammas Park and Turbine Studios.
- Thomas, C. (2016) Sources of knowledge for evidence-based care. In: Ellis, P. (ed.) *Evidence-Based Practice in Nursing*, 3rd edition. London, Sage, pp. 24–42.
- Vet Futures (2015) Taking Charge of our Future: A Vision for the Veterinary Profession for 2030. Available from: <https://www.vetfutures.org.uk/resource/vet-futures-report/> [Accessed 27 March 2021].
- Vet Record (2020) RCVS: 'Thank you for petition on racism'. *Vet Record*. 186 (19), 625.
- Williamson, G. & Whittaker, A. (2020) *Succeeding in Literature Reviews and Research Project Plans for Nurses*. London, Sage.
- Wyness, G. (2017) *Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged Students and the University Admissions Process*. London, The Sutton Trust, pp. 3–30.

Reflective professional development notes. To access hyperlinks to the references, scan the QR code on page 3.