

**Submission
No 77**

**INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Professor Richard Whittington

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Disclaimer: This response consists of personal professional opinion and does not represent the views of the University of Sydney.

I have an ongoing appointment as Emeritus Professor in Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney. This is an honorary appointment following a continuing appointment as Chair of Farm Animal Health at the same university (2002-2017). Prior to that I was employed by the NSW Government in the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (1984-2002) and in veterinary practice in Australia and the UK.

In 2005-2006 I undertook semi-formal research to try to understand the veterinary workforce crisis (there was a shortage of rural veterinarians at that time). The outcome was published in the Australian Veterinary Journal to leave an historical record and is attached to this submission.

The attachment contains a great deal of material that I will not repeat but to quote one section: "In the aftermath of the calamitous events associated with an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease in the United Kingdom in 2001, and concerns that Australia might be challenged, the Federal Government released a review of rural veterinary services in 2003. It was recommended that measures be taken to strengthen demand for rural veterinary services, and that attempts to increase supply 'would be futile'. Nevertheless the government supported the creation of two new veterinary schools, at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga and at James Cook University in Townsville. Combined with increases in enrolments at the established schools, the numbers of new veterinary graduates in Australia will be unprecedented (Figure 1)."

The implication and my prediction was a surplus of graduates and a crash in graduate salaries. Everything I predicted was WRONG. Instead there is a workforce shortage. Possible reasons include:

- university enrolments comprising a significant proportion of full fee paying international students who may lack local attachment
- graduates exiting the profession soon after graduation for various reasons which could include poor employment conditions, life issues, lack of mentoring in early years after graduation and being generally ill-equipped by their background or by their university educational experience. Certainly comparing the educational experience in my era (BVSc 1974-1979) with today's curriculum things are very different: staff-student ratios (worse), course length (shorter), course depth (shallower). There are insufficient resources in university veterinary schools to properly assess graduate outcomes in veterinary science, or to question whether the curriculum is contributing to workforce shortage. Despite regular curriculum review there is instead there is a very sad and a near complete inward-looking focus on financial survival of veterinary schools in Australia; this inevitably feeds back into "how things are done".

Formal research has been done in the past by Heath and others, and published in the Australian Veterinary Journal; various recent reviews may lack rigour. In the absence of current, objective data, it would be speculative to focus on any one cause. An appropriate general recommendation would be to commission authoritative research involving veterinary expertise as well as social science expertise to gain a proper understanding of the problem. This may lead to practical recommendations with some chance of success.

Richard Whittington
Camden NSW
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