

**Submission
No 140**

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Southern Cross University

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The Hon. Mark Banasiak MLC
Chair, Portfolio Committee Number 4 – Regional NSW
NSW Legislative Council
Parliament of NSW

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Dear Mr Banasiak

We thank Portfolio Committee No. 4 for the opportunity to make this brief submission regarding its inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW.

As a public educational institution Southern Cross University is naturally and always concerned with matters of skills, training and workforce. However, as a proud regional institution, we are especially interested in the unique nature of regional communities, the importance of regional training options, and the workforce challenges faced by those living and working outside of our state's major metropolitan centres. One of these challenges concerns veterinarians and veterinary nurses, which intersects with our mission in the additional sense of being a key profession to the agricultural and tourism sectors which surround us in Lismore, Coffs Harbour and the Tweed/Gold Coast.

While the shortage of veterinarians and veterinary nurses is not limited to rural and regional areas, as with almost all workforce issues such areas are disproportionately affected compared to metropolitan parts of our state. The nature of the animals found in these areas (including wildlife and animals used in primary production) presents further challenges to cohorts of veterinary graduates whose study, and lifestyle and vocational preferences, are immediately more suited to caring for domestic pets than livestock and native animals.

In light of the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW, Southern Cross University plans to offer a degree in veterinary science/medicine (which would lead to registration as a veterinary practitioner) from academic year 2025, as well as degree and diploma qualifications in veterinary nursing. Professor Jon Hill has been appointed to oversee the establishment of academic programs in veterinary science/medicine and veterinary nursing.¹ While this process is still underway, we expect to have our first 40 or so veterinary science/medicine students graduate at the end of 2029.

This will obviously increase the supply of veterinary graduates into the workforce (and it can be assumed that most will go into clinical practice, at least initially), which touches on point (a) in the Committee's terms of reference. However, our academic programs are currently being designed to address some of the more specific and underlying structural issues the Committee has referred to.

In addition, we note the *Rethinking Veterinary Education* report, the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand's independent expert review of those countries' veterinary science education capability which calls for significant reform of veterinary education, and which aligns in many respects to the approach Southern Cross University is taking in designing its curriculum.

It would be inappropriate to pre-empt the accreditation processes of either the University's Academic Board or the various regulatory bodies, however we would make the following comments on issues raised in the Committee's terms of reference (ToR) and in *Rethinking Veterinary Education*:

- **Admission academic courses** – Southern Cross University takes seriously its obligations to the communities in which it operates, and is proud of its significant cohorts of typically underrepresented groups (including indigenous students, students with a disability, first-in-family and low socio-economic status) and the success they have achieved. We will ensure a wide admission process which focusses not just on academic excellence as traditionally understood, but which incorporates a focus on students with a demonstrated interest in rural and regional practice.²

¹ Professor Jon Hill BVSc, PhD was most recently Executive Dean of Science, Health, Education and Engineering at Murdoch University and is a former Dean, Head of School, and Professor of Veterinary Reproduction at the University of Queensland.

² Terms of Reference (h); *Rethinking Veterinary Education* recommendations 2, 3.

- **The Southern Cross Model** – All veterinary programs will be taught using the University’s innovative Southern Cross Model which will enable a deeper, immersive learning experience for students centred on greater interactivity and connection with real-world applications. The shorter, more focused six-week unit structure gives students a greater sense of momentum and motivation as they achieve milestones quickly. Student success rates (especially for many underrepresented cohorts), course satisfaction levels and teacher satisfaction all increased under the Southern Cross Model pilot programs.³
- **Mental health** – Southern Cross University will embed practitioner mental health considerations in every course, giving students the opportunity to reflect not only on their professional practice, but on personal well-being, and to create sustainable habits of self-care.⁴
- **Veterinary nursing** – Nurses (including untrained, certificate-qualified and degree-qualified) play an important role in all categories of modern veterinary practice, with that importance increasing due to the shortage of veterinarians. Southern Cross University’s veterinary science/medicine program will incorporate modern approaches to veterinary workforce and veterinary practice, and the crucial role of the veterinary nurse. In addition, we will develop veterinary nursing degree and diploma courses which will take into account prior learning where applicable and which will interact seamlessly with holders of certificate qualifications from TAFE and other RTOs.⁵
- **Apprenticeship training model** – The Southern Cross Model allows for “apprentice” style training during which students undertake supervised employment in a practical setting. This not only ensures graduates have the necessary practical skills and on-the-job experience on day one, but it also reduces opportunity costs of study through student employment, and increases immediate supply of (untrained and later, partially trained) veterinary nurses and assistants.⁶
- **Overseas trained veterinarians** – As with many occupations, regulators, industry groups and professional associations have all considered encouraging the immigration of overseas trained veterinarians (although there is hardly a consensus position). As with all professions, there is significant variation between the training received in different jurisdictions, meaning that there is significant variation in what is required for overseas trained graduates to achieve registration in Australia. Southern Cross University is already a popular study choice among international students, with almost 3,000 currently enrolled. Once established, our veterinary school will not only offer international students (many of whom, experience shows, will eventually choose to live and work in Australia) the opportunity to study veterinary medicine or veterinary nursing, but will also offer appropriate bridging courses to overseas veterinary graduates, with accommodation options at our Lismore campus and in surrounding towns.⁷
- **Rural and regional veterinarians** – Southern Cross University’s focus in veterinary science/medicine – as in areas such as health, education, business and law – will be to prepare graduates for a variety of professional settings, but also to ensure they have a good understanding of regional issues and are equipped for work in regional areas. Our veterinary education will be delivered from a rural campus with a curriculum currently being designed to include topics and experiences that are particularly relevant to rural veterinary practice. This will include holistic farm and preventative animal health programs which require students to develop an in-depth knowledge of farming systems and analytical skills, with subjects being taught by large animal practitioners. We are already in the process of establishing partnerships with rural veterinary practices, government and the agricultural industry, which will allow students to hone these skills with experienced supervisors and mentors.⁸
- **Veterinary care for wildlife and during emergency situations** – Southern Cross University prides itself on being part of a community which, especially in the Northern Rivers – has suffered disproportionately the effects of draught, bushfire and floods, especially over the last decade. Through our strong ties to the community we already have links with, for example, the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital. Our veterinary and veterinary nursing programs will leverage those relationships to provide our students with the unique skills and knowledge they need to care for injured wildlife and native animals, especially in the aftermath of natural disasters.⁹

³ See <https://www.scu.edu.au/southern-cross-model/>.

⁴ Terms of Reference (c); Rethinking Veterinary Education recommendations 7.

⁵ Terms of Reference (d).

⁶ Rethinking Veterinary Education recommendations 10.

⁷ Terms of Reference (e).

⁸ Terms of Reference (h).

⁹ Terms of Reference (i).

Southern Cross University supports the work of the Committee in its inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW, and thanks you for the opportunity to make this submission.

While there is obviously no magic solution, we believe the establishment of an additional veterinary school in regional NSW (which will only be the eighth in Australia and the third in NSW) will go some way to mitigate medium- to long-term supply issues for both veterinarians and veterinary nurses, as well as addressing many of the attendant issues raised by the Committee, and in reports such as Rethinking Veterinary Education.

Southern Cross University would be grateful to receive the Committee's support and encouragement as it continues with the establishment of its veterinary school and veterinary programs. To this end, we would be pleased to further assist the Committee in its inquiry, and would welcome the opportunity to appear before it during the public hearings. Contact, in the first instance should be with Chris Ashton, Executive Director, Stakeholder Strategy & Relationships on [redacted] or by email [redacted].

Your sincerely

Professor Tyrone Carlin
Vice-Chancellor and President

Professor Jonathan Hill
Dean

Southern Cross University

Coffs harbour
Northern rivers
Gold Coast

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