

## LIVE Teaching Development Fund 2013 Application

### **@VetQs - an inter-professional veterinary Twitter forum for teaching, revision and lifelong peer communications**

#### **Applicants**

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#### **Abstract**

This LIVE Teaching Development Fund proposal is to develop and support a novel inter-professional veterinary teaching tool utilising social media that has previously been found demonstrably beneficial for education and professional conduct of undergraduate students in other fields. A pilot of the project using Twitter to host online revision sessions has been highly successful as a collaborative effort between the RVC and Nottingham Veterinary School, and this proposal is to formalise this into a long term, self-sustaining enterprise to include both veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing students. The initiative will not only provide a structured means for revision for students, with direct real-time input from a member of faculty, but it will also create a network of peers both horizontally across institutions and vertically throughout year groups. This will yield many benefits for engagement, peer support and alumni relations. We also aim to rectify recently highlighted deficiencies within the veterinary community of professional conduct and errors in interaction in the public domain on social media. The publicly accessible revision forum for final year veterinary students that will result from this application will teach undergraduate students to interact professionally on veterinary matters online and has already received support from the RCVS and the RCVS Trust.

#### **Background and Introduction**

In 2011, an inter-college initiative between staff at University of Nottingham Veterinary School (NVS) and the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) piloted a twitter forum to assist veterinary medicine students at both colleges in preparation for their final examinations. The hashtag #VetFinals was used for students to interact with an online academic on a student-selected topic, at set times, as part of a distance-learning facilitated revision seminar in preparation for examinations. The pilot endeavour was well received by the undergraduate students who participated in the live twitter debates, and those who read the summaries subsequently posted online. This LIVE Teaching Development Fund application seeks to formally develop this pilot into a fully functional long-term educational tool that promotes student learning and develops an intercollegiate, inter-professional, life-long learning social media network. The full project will be rolled out across veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing students. We anticipate the network will improve the new graduate experience by providing a safety net of communication with their cohort colleagues and back to their university lecturers. This initiative will promote greater and continued alumni engagement and connection with their *alma mater*, yielding positive benefits for all stakeholders. In addition, this project will provide valuable training, not available elsewhere in the formal curriculum, in professional online interactions.

Twitter is a key Web2.0 micro-blogging social media enterprise which started in 2006 and currently has

approximately 140 million active users sending 340 million tweets per day (Anon, 2012). Twitter limits users to sending messages ('tweets') of 140 characters or less which can include images and hyperlinks to any website using tinyURLs. This presents the unique challenge to users of interacting in precise, concise, and information-dense writing. Although it is possible to make Twitter accounts private, it is predominately designed as a public discussion forum and as a result places a burden of acute professionalism on the user. Notable errors in judgment by public users have resulted in numerous legal challenges (Rayner, 2011). Twitter was originally established as a form of social media, and its unique format makes it the most amenable medium for ongoing public dialogue, however, it is also ideal in the academic setting for 'ticker-style' news feeds and as an interactive tool for students and collaborators. It is currently used by many academic institutes to promote their work and by individual academics to promote themselves and their research, as well as being used by public bodies and charities (such as @RCVS\_UK). Currently, the RVC are the most active and followed veterinary school in UK and Europe on Twitter and have attracted many student and graduate followers from other institutions.

The inherent nature of Twitter as a collaborative environment and the principle of peer-to-peer sharing dovetails with recent trends in higher education towards student-driven, interactive teaching. It provides the ideal platform for open online learning, whilst maintaining social interaction and connection opportunities (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). Building on these advantages our proposal will also allow students to dictate the direction of their learning, to overcome many of the issues surrounding thresholds to learning in a profession. In a complex field such as veterinary medicine the integration of ideas and subsequent transformation proves troublesome to many learners, creating a threshold to genuine mastery (Meyer *et al*, 2005,2006). The notion of the "Ha-ha wall" further compounds this problem by making it extremely difficult for experts to relate well to students and to identify barriers to transformation and learning (Kneebone, 2009). Allowing students to self-direct their learning represents one mechanism by which this can be overcome. A second method is to give students the opportunity to engage with material in new ways, and in particular to experience the ways of thinking and practising that are expected of the veterinary team. As a key example, this project will begin the process of veterinary students interacting on cases with student veterinary nurses, as well as interacting with their peers at other institutes who will all have different approaches. Our proposal aims to give students a forum in which to grasp not only 'how veterinarians think', but also to start to 'think like veterinarians' (Wenger, 1999).

Twitter can not only support informal learning beyond the classroom (Ebner *et al*, 2010), but several controlled studies have demonstrated positive benefits of Twitter for more formalised academic and co-curricular discussions, with students and faculty both engaged in ways that transcend, yet still complement, traditional classroom activities. Increased engagement and grade averages have been demonstrated qualitatively and quantitatively and provide evidence of the benefits of Twitter as an educational tool in many disciplines (Elavsky *et al*, 2011; Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2008; Junco *et al*, 2010; Miners, 2010; Rankin, no date).

Alongside the educational goals of this inter-collegiate initiative, the project aims to deliver enhanced links between students across universities with their own *almae matres*, as well as the Royal Veterinary College, to develop life-long connections. This is an excellent marketing opportunity, providing the potential for delivery of additional educational material, CPD courses and peer to peer learning. In addition, a greater bond between students and their universities should enable and promote referral of cases. The opportunity afforded from establishing a well connected alumni base and raising the RVC's profile internationally on a public forum is compelling, but the potential ramifications for the connectedness of the profession as a whole are even more powerful. This proposal comes at a time when mechanisms for greater dialogue within the profession and between the profession and its governing body, the RCVS, are being sought.

In the modern, interconnected world our online interactions can be more visible than we realise. Recent specific incidents at the RVC regarding professional behaviour of students and staff on Facebook

demonstrate that students are not only increasingly active on social media sites, but that there is an urgent need to educate them on the risks inherent in discussing professional matters at an inappropriate level. Veterinary students are prone to over self-disclose on public social media sites (Coe *et al*, 2012), a trend which seems to persist beyond graduation. This can have serious ramifications for their career, their college and the profession of which they are a part. A recent study of veterinarians in Ontario showed that almost one quarter of early career veterinarians had material on their Facebook pages that could bring themselves, their practice or the profession into disrepute (Weijs *et al*, 2013). Inappropriate posting not only damages the public perception of the profession, it can also lead to disciplinary action from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). Civil action may also result from public breaches of confidentiality and data protection laws. Finally, guidelines issued to doctors advised that they should identify themselves by name when engaged in publicly accessible social media, because any material written by authors who represent themselves as doctors is likely to be taken on trust and may reasonably be taken to represent the views of the profession more widely (GMC, 2013).

These risks and the need for guidance are not confined to the more public online media. Informal observations of established veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses using private online discussion forums (such as VetSurgeon.org, or mailing lists such as Equine Veterinary Group UK), where the user is under the perceived protection of utilising a private forum, often reveal unprofessional derogatory, defamatory and even discriminatory posts. The RCVS remains a vicarious employer to all its members and recent civil cases involving private media (*Gosden v Lifeline Project Limited*, 2009; *Preece vs Weatherspoons*, 2010) demonstrate that unprofessional interaction on any closed social media format can still render the claimant subject to disciplinary action. The GMC has recognised the potential seriousness of issues arising from unfavourable online interactions and has advised both doctors and medical students about online behaviour. A recent information sheet outlined the expectation of respect and fairness between colleagues, and went on to warn that in all situations and all forms of interaction doctors should not bully, harass or make gratuitous, unsubstantiated or unsustainable comments about individuals. It is clear therefore that there exists a real and urgent need to facilitate the education of the veterinary community on online professionalism.

It is not possible, nor appropriate, to prevent the use of social media and thus a strategy needs to be developed to help students to use these spaces appropriately. It is well documented that the habits of conduct and attitude learnt during training become ingrained, so our veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing students must be given the opportunity for training and practice at professional online behaviour. The initiative presented in this application will seek to actively engage with students in the public forum of Twitter while they are still at university, to help shape professional habits in their use of social media.

### **Benefits to Learning and Teaching**

The main proposed benefits to teaching and learning from this application are:

- It is a useful tool for those students who wish to utilise it for revision, as demonstrated through the pilot use in 2011 and as evidenced in the literature (Ebner *et al*, 2010; Junco *et al*, 2010; Rankin, no date).
- It unites students in final year within a social media context that we hope will be a familiar platform for life-long education and will continue after graduation.
- It is an inter-collegiate initiative, promoting RVC BVetMed students to interact with Nottingham Veterinary School students in an academic format prior to graduating and potentially working together.
- It is an inter-professional initiative including veterinary students and veterinary nurse students, to help promote a greater understanding of the roles of the two professions, cultivating collaborative practice and ultimately providing improvements in client-centred clinical service delivery.
- It diversifies the individual student's circle of new graduate colleagues so upon initial employment they will have an increased chance of having a local new graduate with whom they are familiar.

- It provides a support for new graduates in isolated locations who do not have local support in their new jobs, their previous use of Twitter can continue to provide a contact discussion forum.
- The online discussion is in a public forum and thus promotes a greater understanding of online professionalism which is a necessary skill to be developed in modern graduates. This needs to be started within universities while in a safe environment.
- It will hopefully promote vertical links between the those who used the service one year to the cohort below currently undergoing exams and thus promote peer-to-peer learning and widen further the network of potential local contacts.
- Finally, if the students do 'follow' the staff facilitating the events it will promote alumni to retain links to their college. This will in turn be a marketing tool for the RVC to promote CPD, for graduates to refer cases to our hospitals, consider post-graduate opportunities at the RVC and potential donate money as part of the alumni association.

Using Twitter in university courses has been demonstrated to help students communicate with each other and faculty, it promotes informal learning, and importantly it allows shy or physically distant students a forum for increased participation, increases student engagement, and previously has improved overall course grades. We intend to undertake this project for the same benefit and it will be assessed using an established method explained below (Junco *et al*, 2010, 2012). Additionally we hope to promote life-long learning through establishing continuing connections of an academic nature through social media. The strength of this approach for engaging members of the community is demonstrated by the popularity of similar interactive forums such as the Wellcome Trust's #BrainQs Q&A, which recently featured @ProfDavidNutt.

## **Method and Timescale**

The Twitter accounts @VetQs and @VetFinals have already been secured, and the previous year's trial has demonstrated feasibility. A central hosting website will be developed using Orchard by Peter Nunn (LIVE). This site will host the schedule of #VetQs events with explanatory documents on procedures and online professionalism and etiquette. Over time a student-led Code of Conduct for online interactions will develop from this starting point, including guidelines for all modes of interaction and text, photos and information about patients. Alongside this, the website's main function will be to host the blog record of the live discussions for future review, tagged with metadata to facilitate searching. It will develop over the years into a veterinary student's FAQ board. Tweet records can be collated using Storify<sup>1</sup> software and can be modified and expanded by the academic facilitator through the addition of links, papers, images and videos to provide further explanation if needed.

VetQs sessions will be scheduled weekly according to faculty availability, initially in the weeks leading up to Finals exams, however, later to be rolled out across the year. They will be publicised on the web and via the @VetQs and individual faculty members' Twitter accounts. Each hour-long session will be faculty-led, but with the emphasis on student-collaboration. Faculty will sign on to the central single Twitter account, which will contain a log of all questions asked for future students to browse. If, after the event, students continue to ask questions to the VetQs account, these questions can be 'retweeted'. The discussion can then continue with students responding to each other. Answers from the VetQs account are therefore from the academic but answers to the retweeted questions are from students, fostering a collaborative peer-to-peer learning approach.

## **Internal Review and Publication**

Twitter automatically facilitates the recording of student uptake of the @VetQs service through logging the number of followers and questions posted. At the end of the first year of the project a structured opinion

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<sup>1</sup> Storify is a web tool commonly used to collate various news stories or twitter feeds about certain events. It is used routinely by Defra on their #AskDefra discussion boards. <https://storify.com>

survey on the service will be sent to all who have taken part in @VetQs forums and will be compared to a similar survey of students who have not utilised the service (Junco *et al*, 2012). This will allow the refinement of the project according student demand. At the end of the two year project, an assessment based upon a previously existing method (Junco *et al*, 2010) will be undertaken and submitted for publication in JVME or the Veterinary Record.

### Timescale

<b>Start September 2013 completed by August 2015</b>	<b>Time</b>
Step 1: Initial collaborators' meeting, including RCVS education officers	October 2013
Step 2: Development of website (Peter Nunn)	November 2013
Step 3: Development of online professionalism documents	November 2013
Step 4: Start of @VetQs sessions - Initial session run by RCVS Vice President Jacqui Molyneux. Followed by weekly sessions by academics from collaborating institutions.	January 2014
Step 5: Survey development and analysis, and project refinement	August 2014
<b>Step 6: Write end of year 1 report</b>	<b>August 2014</b>
Step 7: Following 1st year review and feedback, refinement of professionalism documents and initiation of second round of @VetQs	September 2014
Step 8: Invitations to all UK Vet schools to join in the project	January 2015
Step 9: Notify general professional press, e.g. VetTimes and VNTimes, to gain further users at national and international level.	January 2015
Step 10: Devise and run survey on the efficacy of the use of Twitter in veterinary education including all key stakeholders and the public bodies. This will run as an RP2 research project (if appropriate to the student) to further facilitate interest in the study of online professionalism.	June-July 2015
Step 11: Write and submit a publication on twitter use in veterinary medicine in Medical Education or JVME.	July-August 2015
<b>Step 12: Write up final project for LIVE Newsletter</b>	<b>August 2015</b>

### Outline Budget

	<b>(£)</b>
Travel for initial collaborators meeting with RCVS to provide support for the project	200.00
Promotional material to advertise the events at the RVC and Nottingham	400.00
Purchase of professionalism books and publications to which the RVC does not have access for means to write the online documentation, provide resources to students and to write up the final paper	300.00
Reimbursement of student time to develop online professionalism documentation, instructional material for use of the forum and maintenance of the VetQs calendar. (2 years for 50 hours each at £9.00 per hour)	900.00
Development of the @VetQs website by Peter Nunn (7 days @ £200/day)	1400.00
Purchase of tablets for use by additional academic staff to facilitate forums (e.g. iPad Mini or equivalent, 8 32Gb @ £349)	2792.00
Reimbursement of student time to Storify the Twitter discussion and upload to the website (2 years for 50 hours at £9.00 per hour)	900.00
Travel expenses for Vet Ed Symposium to present outcome data (2015) for 2 collaborators and RP2 student	1500.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>8392.00</b>

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