

Being a Veterinary Student – What Helps to Sustain the Veterinary School Journey?

Summary of Results from the Student Wellness Survey 2015

By

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Overall Summary

In August 2015, a collaborative project between the Institute of Veterinary, Animal and Biochemical Sciences (IVABS) and the School of Social Work was implemented to conduct an online survey focusing on the experiences of third-year, fourth-year and fifth-year veterinary students. This survey explored the changes in lifestyle and wellbeing that have occurred since these students embarked on their veterinary undergraduate training. The survey consisted of questions which required students to identify the support mechanisms they employed in order to cope with the rigorous demands of the programme. If these support mechanisms were not utilised, reasons for not doing so were requested. The survey also solicited information on the students' perception of their ability to engage in different kinds of activities (hobbies, part-time employment, socialising, sport and exercise etc.) since embarking on the veterinary science programme. The viewpoints of students on the importance of maintaining good mental health and wellbeing throughout their training were also collected. Finally, the veterinary students' degree of awareness of the financial costs of their veterinary training, including the additional costs incurred throughout the degree, was determined. There were also open-ended questions which encouraged the participants to express their views on the kind of advice they felt would have been useful to receive as new veterinary students. These open-ended questions also asked students to share their thoughts on how best to maintain positive wellbeing throughout the veterinary undergraduate programme.

Descriptive statistics were used to report the participants' demographics and to describe their responses on support mechanisms employed, participation in extra-curricular activities and their opinion on mental wellbeing. Selective narratives, from students who responded to the open-ended questions, were reported.

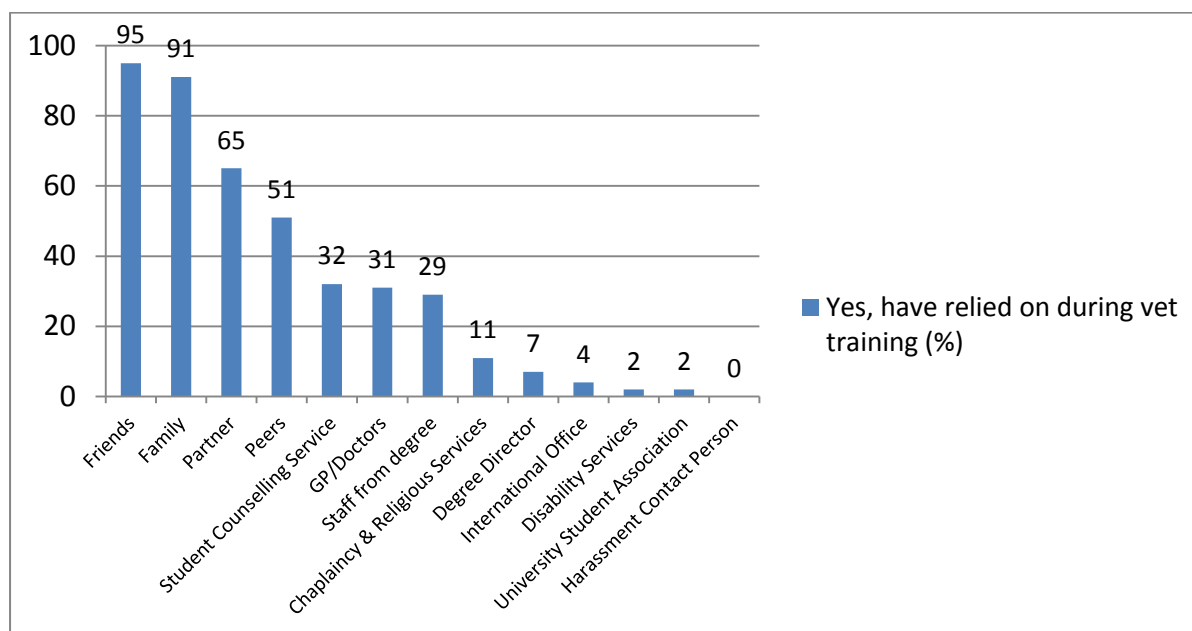
Overall, a total of 123 veterinary students completed the survey with 31% of respondents from Year 3, 25% from Year 4 and 43% from Year 5. Female students comprised 80% of the participants. Over 84% of the respondents identified themselves as New Zealand citizens (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptions of study participants

Items	Number (%)
Years enrolled	
Year 3	38 (31%)
Year 4	31 (25%)
Year 5	53 (43%)
Other	1 (0.8%)
Gender	
Male	24 (20%)
Female	99 (80%)
Citizenship Status	
New Zealand citizen	103 (84%)
International student	20 (16%)

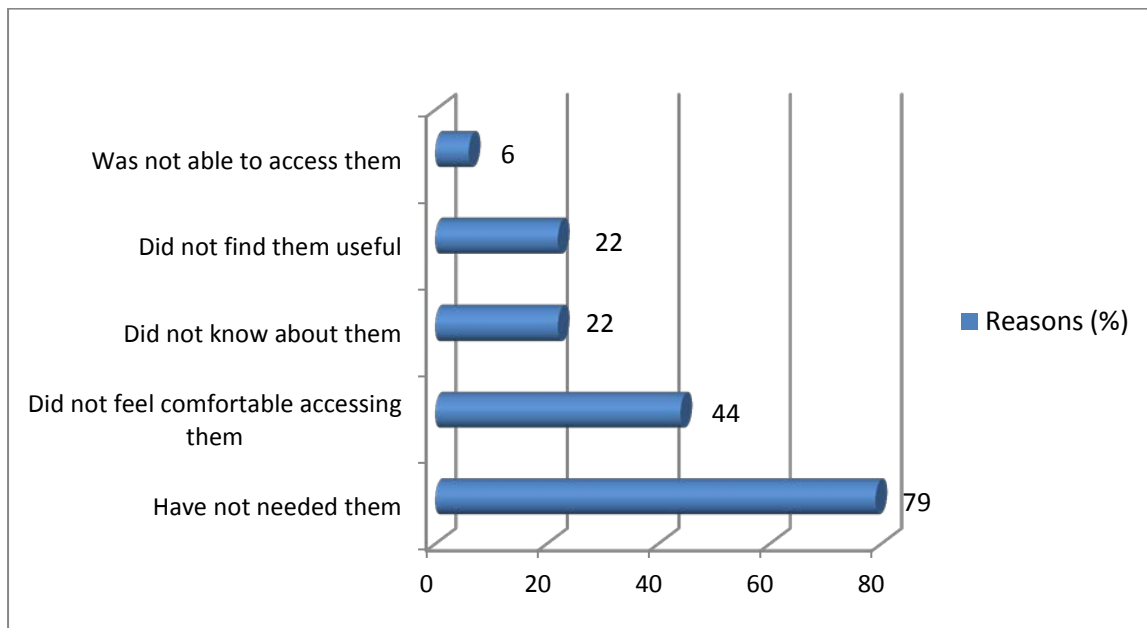
Most of the participants considered friends (95%) and family (91%) as their main support mechanism during their veterinary training (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Support mechanism veterinary students have used during their training



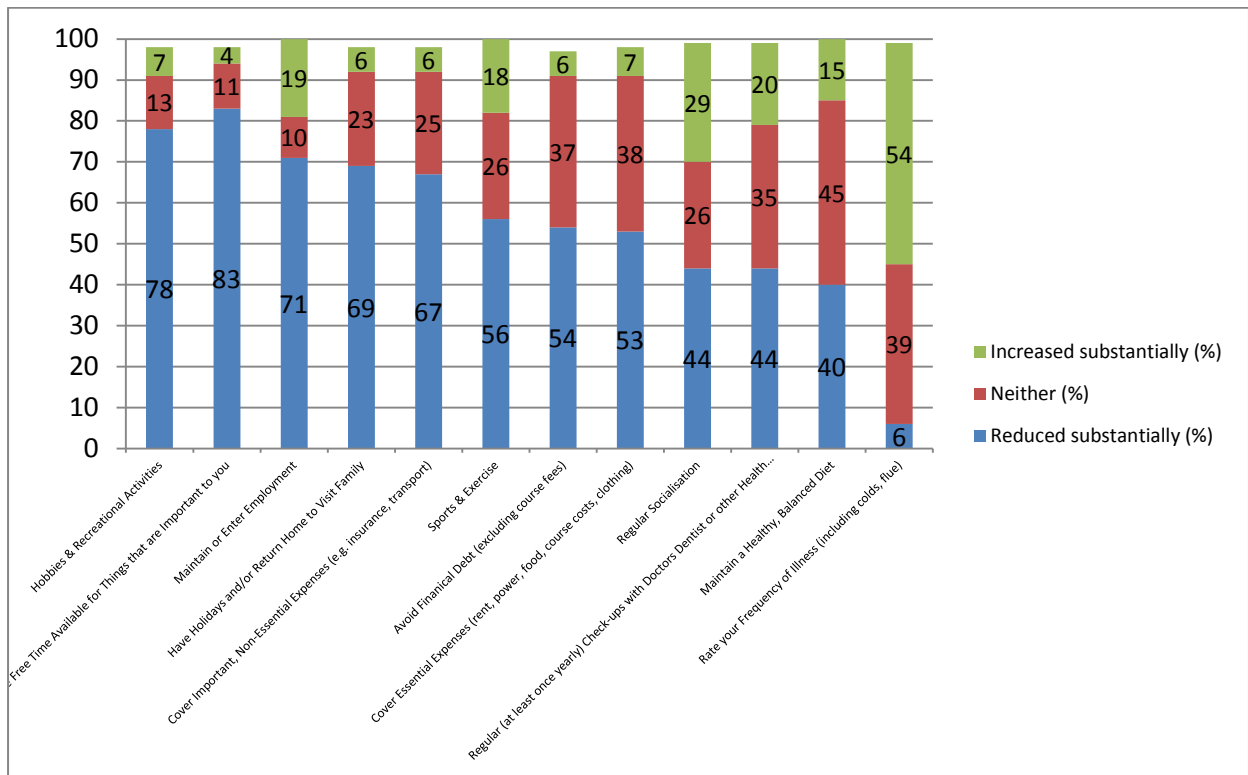
The main reason veterinary students cited for not using some of the support networks available (student counselling services, university student association etc.) was that they did not feel they needed them (79%). Nearly half of the students (44%), however, confessed that they did not use these services as they did not feel comfortable accessing them (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reasons veterinary students have NOT used some of the support networks



Over 80% of the students reported a substantial reduction in adequate free time available to pursue activities that were important to them. Many students bemoaned their inability to engage in hobbies and recreational activities (78%) and to maintain or enter part-time employment (71%) during their undergraduate veterinary programme. Moreover, over half of the students (54%) reported a substantial increase in experiencing frequent illnesses such as colds and influenza (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The ability of veterinary students to engage in certain activities during veterinary training



Two-thirds of the student respondents (66%) reported that they were mostly unaware of the extra costs incurred throughout the undergraduate veterinary programme (e.g. for protective clothing, stethoscopes, text books, transport and accommodation costs during external placements). In order to manage these additional costs, 46% of students reported relying on parental financial assistance, while 37% confessed that they had to borrow extra money from financial institutions to survive. Twenty percent of student respondents reported that they had to take on part-time employment in order to cover these extra costs (see Figure 4). Some of the respondents commented on how they had managed these extra costs:

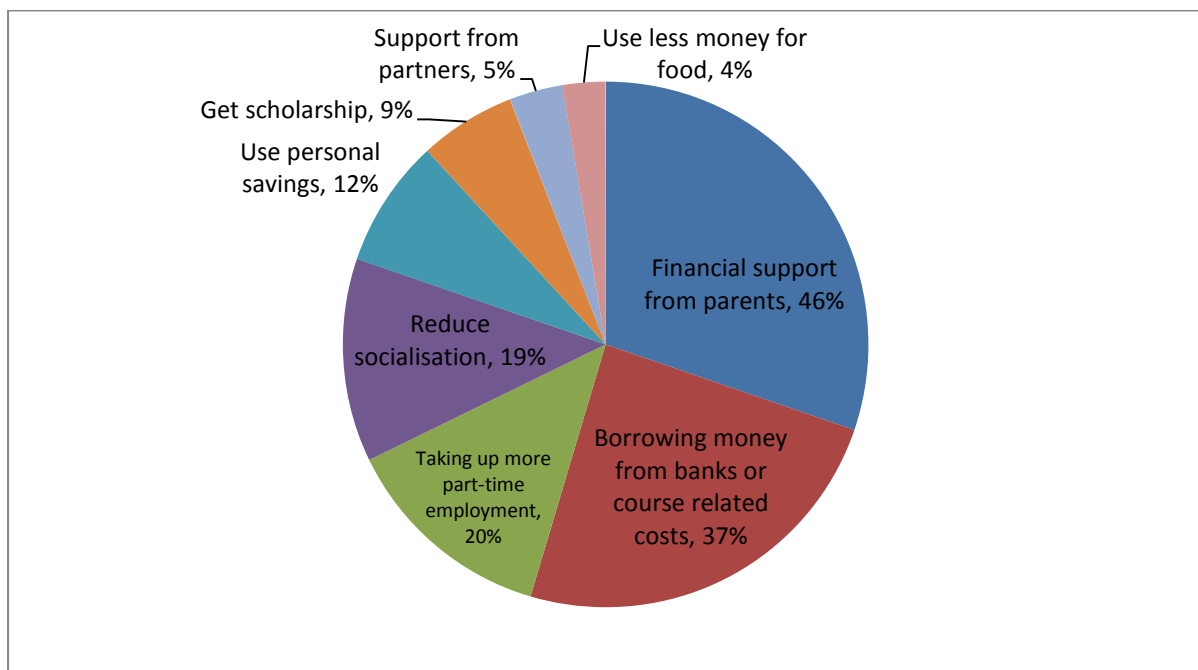
I had “emergency money” previously stashed away with sufficient funds to cover unexpected expenses.

I have taken out bank overdrafts (that are always maxed out), and bank student credit card (\$500 limit), borrowed money from family and working 3 different part-time jobs.

My parents help me out, so I am forever grateful that costs/expenses are not another whole level of stress added to my experience in vet school. I have seen my friends and close colleagues suffer a great deal because of all the unexpected added expenses that are not accounted for in their personal budget during vet school.

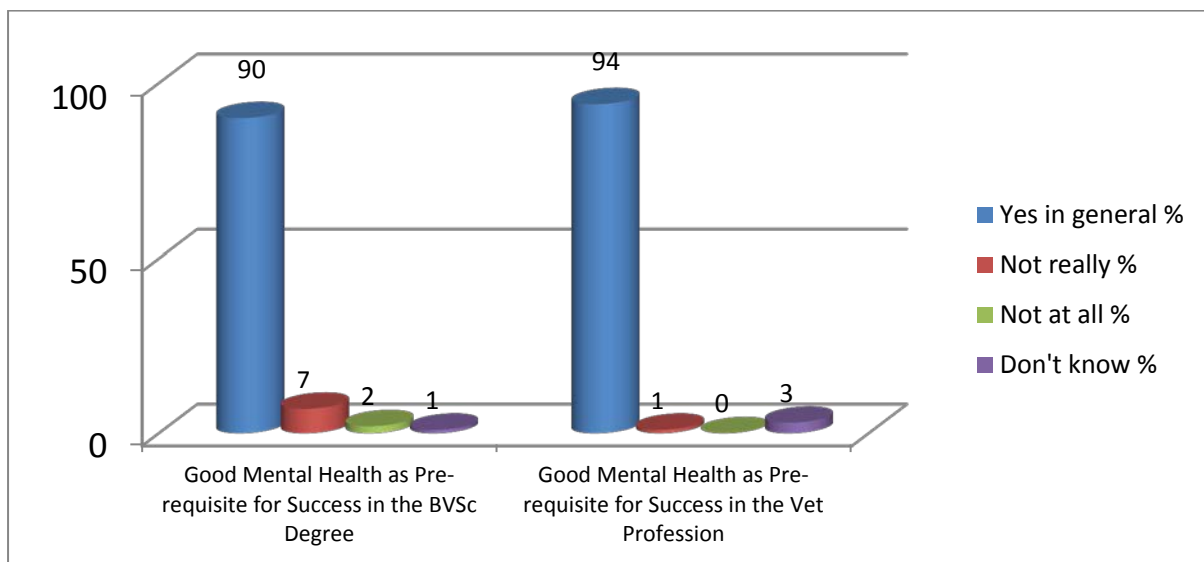
Initially when we first got into vet school, there was a large list they sent out of all these things that you will need and must have immediately, but really won't actually use until the summer/next year. This was frustrating as you then had to collect a bunch of money quickly and then had boots sitting around for the next 4 months.

Figure 4: How veterinary students manage/prepare for the additional costs incurred throughout the degree?



When students were asked whether good mental health was a pre-requisite for success in the veterinary undergraduate degree and in the veterinary profession, 90% of respondents indicated that it should be a pre-requisite for success in the veterinary degree while 94% responded that it should be a pre-requisite for success in the veterinary profession (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Student response to the requirement that good mental health is a pre-requisite for success in the BVSc degree and in the veterinary profession



Respondents were asked to provide any advice they felt would be useful for new veterinary students. The following summarises the key messages derived from the students' responses:

- Ask for help if you need it (there is no shame attached to this)
- Make friends in veterinary school and develop a support network
- Form study groups
- Live with good people/flatmates
- Keep in contact with your friends and family outside of veterinary school
- Save as much as you can initially because the final year of study is expensive
- Try and seek advice from older/senior years
- Learn from your mistakes
- Maintain a good study-life balance and continue to pursue your hobbies and interests
- Try not to stress, it will all be ok in the end
- Be prepared for four and a half years of hard work

The following are a selection of the students' suggestions on how to maintain positive wellbeing during veterinary school.

Budget carefully, especially for placements

Talk to older years about what textbooks are needed and try to buy textbooks second hand, often you don't need the latest edition as its only minor things that have changed so if you can pick one up for cheap it's a good bonus

Try to go to the social events to meet other people and have a break from studying all the time

Vet School is something that you need to be committed to doing whole heartedly

Make sure you have a hobby that has nothing to do with vet so you remain balanced

Get on top of school work so there is no need to worry at the last minute.

Communicate with classmates. Support each other.

You are going to be wrong, often. But it doesn't matter because EVERYONE else is in the same boat - so don't be shy; get stuck in, ask/answer questions.

Talk to the more senior vet students as much as possible. They were in your position quite recently so will have great tips to avoid making the mistakes they made.

Get onto your work. Make a schedule and stick with it. Doing that might assure you have free time too

Plan as far ahead as you can, and try get info out of upper years about upcoming costs and vet school events and paper requirements so they can all be budgeted for, both in time and money.

Ask for help, counselling is a really good tool to use whether you feel like you needing it or not. We're not good at asking others for help but it's a really important part of the degree. And surround yourself with people that aren't judgemental, that will support you in terms of trouble, not just drinking buddies.

Just because you got into the degree doesn't mean everything else is free. "It's all about ATTITUDE. To quote one of our lecturers during a lab class: ""If you think you can, or you think you can't, you're probably right." "Trust in yourself"; you know your stuff.

Use the services available. See a counsellor even if it's for little things. Use the cheap medical care. Sign up to the gym. If you don't know who to talk to about someone just email someone, they will help direct you to the right person. "Your health has to come first. Eat well, sleep enough, do things that make you happy outside of vet school."

Don't take anything personally, and don't beat yourself up if you get a bad result; you can't possibly be good at everything and the best way to learn is to make mistakes. So don't dwell on them; LEARN from them"

Look after yourself and friends well, and as hard as this might be, I feel it is good to try to stay connected with your close friends and family as much as possible, because 5 years is a long time to continually sacrifice the time with those you love. Remind yourself of what's truly important to you ☺

The teaching staff will be your future colleagues so get to know them as part of a team. They aren't like your primary or high school teachers.

Write down the reasons why you wanted to come into vet school in the first place, to remind yourself when times get tough throughout the degree. Don't give up your hobbies once getting into vet school. Making time for them will be hard but there is a high pay off in positive mental (and physical) well-being Talk truthfully about your experiences with people you trust, like family and friends. Tell them both the good and bad, they will understand. Eat healthy and exercise! Embrace the social side of vet school, it will get you through! Do not compare yourself to others.

A talk from students in the higher years (NOT the staff) addressing how to study and what to study. Would like to know how to be more efficient and I feel other students

could help me with this. It is so important to have friends in your year that can help you out!

Don't be afraid to use the counselling service proactively, if you need even a small bit of advice better to go now than crashing in study week.

We would like to thank the veterinary students who participated in this survey and provided us with their insights on issues and strategies used during their veterinary training journey. We hope the results from this survey will provide us with the opportunity to work with the BVSc Programme and the Student Counselling Services to support veterinary student wellness at Massey University.

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