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Women's Entrepreneurship and the Future of the Veterinary Profession

Colette Henry and Elizabeth L. Jackson



The veterinary profession, once traditional and predominately male, is becoming increasingly feminized, with women now making up some 80% of the veterinary student population, and over half the veterinary workforce. Given the fact that there are significantly fewer female than male business owners and entrepreneurs globally, across all sectors, there are growing fears that



women will not come forward to take on the veterinary business and entrepreneurial leadership roles previously filled by men. This raises concerns in relation to the future of the profession as a whole. In this article we discuss some of the reasons behind the current gender disparity in veterinary business and entrepreneurial leadership roles, and suggest some potential solutions. Specifically, we highlight the role of veterinary schools in shaping the female veterinary business and entrepreneurial leaders of the future.

Key words

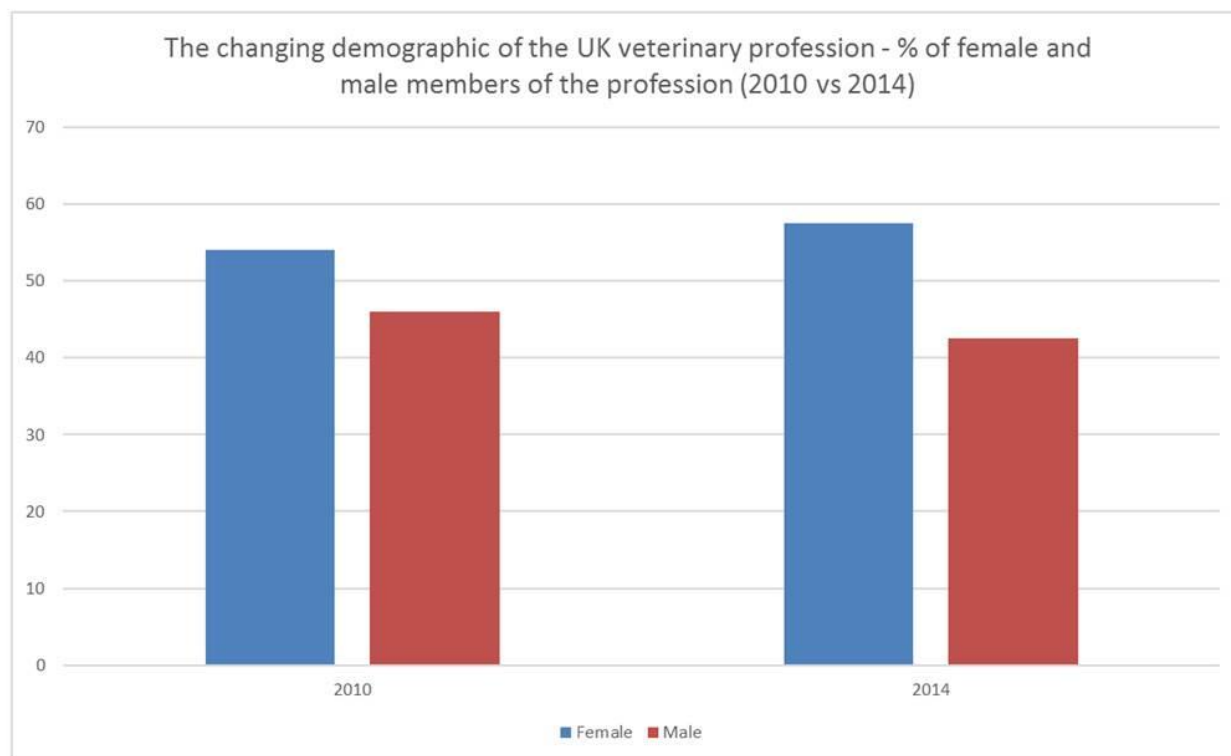
Veterinary profession, women, entrepreneurship, careers, education, curriculum, SMEs.

Introduction

The veterinary sector is witnessing an unprecedented shift toward a predominately female workforce, with women now making up around 80% of the veterinary student population (Woodfield, 2014) and over half of practicing veterinarians. Figure 1 gives us an idea of the extent of the demographic change in the profession in recent years.

Furthermore, recent data (Buzzeo et al, RCVS, 2014) suggest that today's veterinary profession is characterized by young female vets, mainly working full time in small animal practices. Yet there are surprisingly fewer women than men at principal/director/partner level in these 'veterinary Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)'. In fact, there are more than twice as many male as female sole principals, and more than four times as many male as female directors or equity partners. Another example is the leadership roles that are filled by men in the profession. While Table 1 below shows the gender imbalance within leadership roles, it also provides further evidence that, despite an increase in the number of women entering the profession, leadership roles – whether business or clinically-oriented - are still being filled by men.

Figure 1. The Changing Veterinary Demographic



Source: Adapted from RCVS (2014, p. 16)

Table 1: Gender imbalance and positions of leadership in the UK veterinary profession

	RCVS* specialists		RCVS Fellows	
	1994	2014	1994	2014
Male	87%	60%	92%	90%
Female	13%	40%	8%	10%

Source: Vet Futures (2014) (* Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons)

In this short article, we aim to highlight the need to address this gender imbalance. We discuss some of the reasons behind the current disparity in veterinary business and entrepreneurial leadership roles, and suggest some potential solutions. We focus specifically on the role of veterinary schools in shaping future female veterinary business and entrepreneurial leaders.

Women in the workplace

There is a strong body of evidence supporting the view that women in the workplace across a range of sectors continue to be disadvantaged by their gender, and are often seen as unsuitable for business leadership or management positions because of concerns around maternity leave and family responsibilities (Carter & Marlow, 2007; Henry, 2008). Given the veterinary profession’s particular reputation for unsociable working hours and the potential vulnerability of late night emergencies in isolated locations, some of the fears highlighted by researchers over a decade ago (Slater & Slater, 2000) still seem to be valid today. More disturbingly, perhaps, are the more recent concerns around women veterinarians’ mental health and well-being, with the finding from one particular study that women in the profession may be at greater risk of suffering from depression than their male counterparts (Bartram et al., 2009). Evidence of this nature, when

considered in conjunction with mainstream gender debates (Marlow & Patton, 2005), leads to fears by some commentators that the feminization of the veterinary profession could have a detrimental impact (Henry, Baillie & Treanor, 2010). A reduced level of respect for the profession, decreasing revenues and a diminishing level of specialization as a result of women focusing solely on small animal practices are just some of the concerns that have been voiced by commentators.

Employment preferences of male and female Vets

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA, 2015) recently published research about the employment preferences of female vets. They found that, while men want to work more hours per week, women want to work fewer hours per week - particularly those female vets who were five years post-graduation.



Source: © Royal Veterinary College

Intuition suggests that this is because women want to balance work-life with family-life. The consequence of this knowledge is that vet practices of the future will be dominated by women who may be forced to perform better under conditions of reduced work hours. As such, vet practices of the future will have multiple employees fulfilling full time roles. This will require a high level of human resource organization, which is particularly important in a health care sector such as the veterinary profession, where clients often want consistency with the practitioner treating their pet. All of this suggests an urgency to ensure that women approaching the profession are adequately equipped with leadership and entrepreneurial skills, not only for their own survival and job satisfaction, but also for the sustainability of the profession. Since it appears that women will be leading the vet profession in years to come, it is essential that they develop the relevant skills - such as human resource management, effective communication and establishment of emotional

boundaries, among others - to fulfil leadership roles to avoid the profession potentially being led by “men with loud voices.” Entrepreneurial skills would include creativity, innovation, business planning and financial management. Such skills could help ensure the sustainability of the private (SME) sector and generate potential new veterinary products and services.

Career disillusionment

Recent surveys also suggest that female vets are disillusioned with their future career trajectory. Not only do they seem disinterested in both potential business leadership roles within existing veterinary practices, and entrepreneurial roles required to establish new ones, but also some may be planning to leave the profession altogether. The RCVS (2014) presents data to show that women are more dissatisfied than men on the grounds of four key areas of work satisfaction thereby raising serious concerns about the future of the veterinary sector:

1. Satisfaction of salary level,
2. The support given by their employer,
3. The profession offers good opportunities for those wishing to work part-time,
4. The profession is a ‘family-friendly’ profession in which to work.

The gender and career literatures have reported for some time that women tend to have lower career expectations than men, and are more likely to limit their aspirations because they believe they lack the necessary capabilities (Bandura, 1992). With specific regard to the veterinary profession, there had been some (earlier) evidence to suggest that women veterinarians rate their financial, business and management skills lower than their male counterparts (Brown and Silverman, 1999). Interestingly, such skills, in conjunction with self-efficacy development, tend to be lacking in veterinary educational curricula, despite their growing importance in veterinary practice (Kogan et al., 2005).

Cross-sectoral trends in women’s entrepreneurship

If we start to consider the general trends in women’s entrepreneurship across other sectors, these concerns become even more pronounced. Let’s just reflect on what we know already:

1. Women – not only in the UK but in the majority of countries - are half as likely as men to start a new business – any business;
2. Women tend to perceive business leadership and entrepreneurship differently to their male counterparts;
3. Women tend to have less belief in their business and entrepreneurial leadership abilities than men;
4. Business leaders and entrepreneurial role models tend to be predominately male.

In short, regardless of the reasons, and regardless of the business sector, women are simply less prepared than men to come forward to take on the role of entrepreneur or business leader. If these trends are reflected in the veterinary sector – and so far, we have no reason to suggest that they won’t be – then who will lead and/or create the veterinary businesses of the future if women simply don’t want to (or feel they can’t)?

Towards a solution

So, what do we do? Well, one thing is certain: we must not think that we can just do nothing. That strategy didn't work for women's entrepreneurship generally, so there is no reason to think it might work within the veterinary business sector. Reflecting on this evidence, it seems incumbent on the entire veterinary profession to adopt a proactive approach to managing the gender shift. Given that fundamental skills such as self-efficacy are not static and have the potential to change over time (Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004), and that targeted education has been shown to make a difference in other sectors (Wilson et al., 2007), it would seem logical to assume that structured intervention in veterinary curricula could have a significant and positive impact.

If we want to avoid a drastic reduction in the number of private veterinary SMEs, a significant increase in corporatization (currently at 20% of practice ownership but predicted to be at 50% by 2020), and a profession that is run by the 'best of the worst', then we need to stop talking about the 'problem' and start implementing solutions. In this regard, there isn't a single big solution. Rather, it's going to take several small but strategic solutions being implemented across the sector - an incremental rather than a radical approach to solving the problem. If we look at the veterinary profession as being part of a wider animal health system (see Figure 2 below), then we can immediately see how every stakeholder – whether male or female - has an important role to play in developing the future of the sector from a business and entrepreneurship perspective. Indeed, by sharing their experiences of the profession, acknowledging that the masculinized veterinary workplace must now make way for a more feminized profession, male veterinarians could play a critical role in developing future female veterinary leaders. For example, by mentoring young female veterinarians and providing them with real career development and leadership opportunities in their practices, experienced senior male veterinarians could send a very positive signal to the rest of the profession.

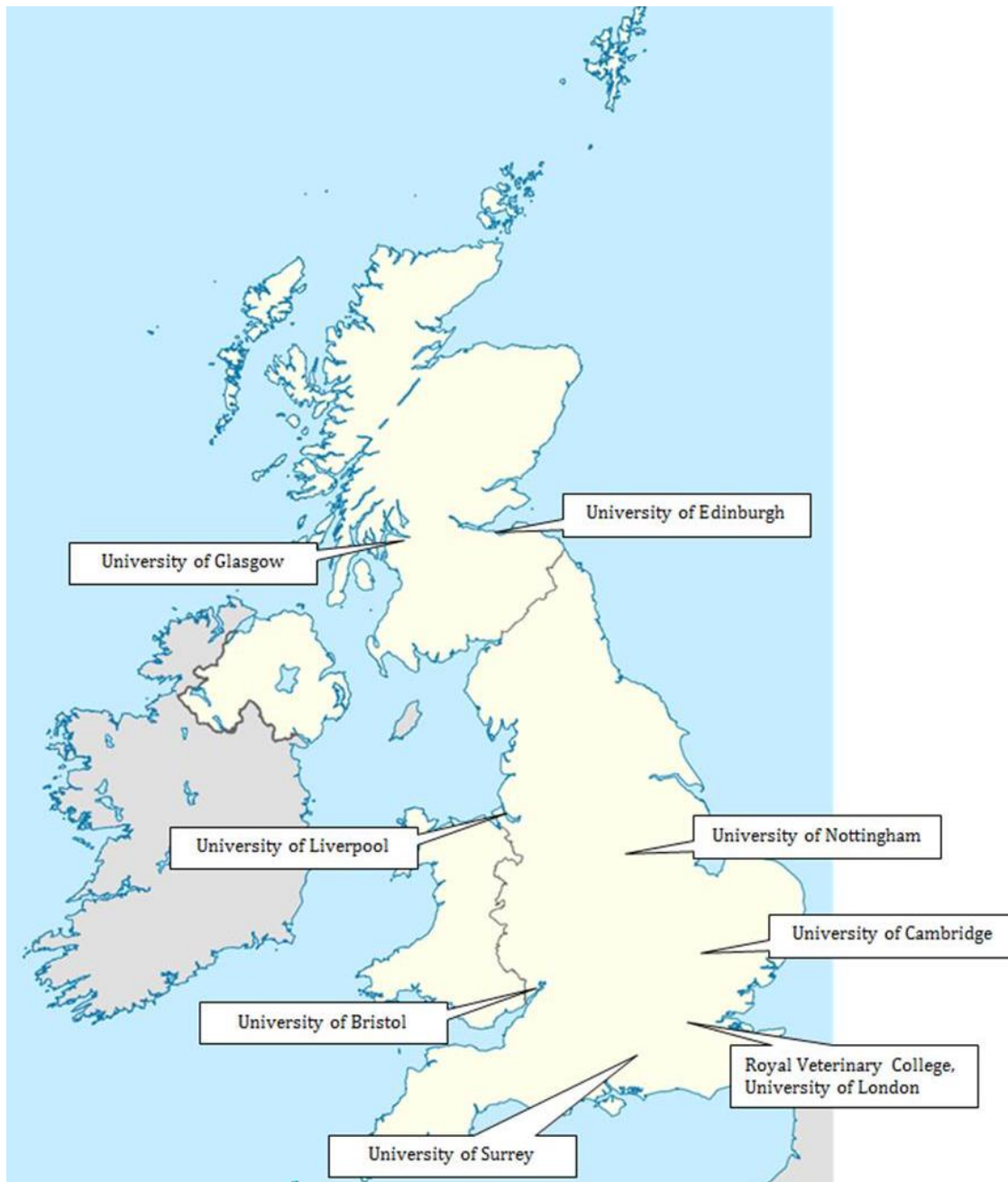
Figure 2: The Wider Animal Health System



Opportunities and challenges for Vet Schools

While every stakeholder in the animal health system is important and can have an influence, clearly, vet schools are at the heart of the system because they have a captive audience of young and enthusiastic veterinary students over a prolonged period. Thus, the eight vet schools that currently exist in England and Scotland (see Figure 3 below) have a huge opportunity to develop young women's entrepreneurial and leadership potential. However, first and foremost, veterinary educators need to be particularly mindful that women have a different perspective on business and entrepreneurship when compared to men, and this needs to be accounted for in module content and pedagogy.

Figure 3. Map of Veterinary Schools in the UK



Source: Adapted from Wiki Commons

Furthermore, veterinary educators need to focus on 'integrating' rather than 'inserting' business and entrepreneurship into the curriculum. Here, they face a dual challenge. This consists of:

1. Encouraging veterinary students to accept that a veterinary practice is essentially a business - an "SME" to be precise – rather than a free service or not-for-profit venture.
2. Encouraging female vet students to see themselves as SME leaders and entrepreneurs to the same extent as their male counterparts.

So, a change of mindset is required - hence the critical role of veterinary educators in preparing future veterinary business leaders and entrepreneurs. The veterinary curriculum of the future may need to include some grounding in gender theory, self-efficacy development, business management and enterprise skills, creativity, confidence-building (Henry & Treanor, 2012), and some discussion around workplace challenges and career management would feature strongly in the module content. Appropriate case study and reading material may also need to be identified, along with potential internal and external experts to assist in curriculum delivery. Furthermore, with regard to supporting graduates already in practice, vet schools could also have a valuable role to play in providing entrepreneurship CPD (Continuing Professional Development) programmes. Other avenues to explore could be creating inter-professional links with women leaders and entrepreneurs in other professions and sectors who face similar workplace challenges, e.g. teachers, accountants and lawyers.

Conclusions

The two-pronged approach to develop both under and post graduate business and entrepreneurial leadership potential, as outlined above, could be highly effective, facilitating opportunities for female veterinary undergraduates to learn from young female graduates who are developing their entrepreneurial skills in the workplace. In terms of making this new way of thinking effective, Taylor and Robinson (2009) suggest that veterinary adult education (both university and CPD) requires a response to the growing number of female students, so that female-centric ways of knowing (e.g. care and responsibility) are better balanced with male-centric ways of knowing (e.g. justice and understanding rights and rules).

However, notwithstanding the above discussion, veterinary schools are only one component of the animal health sector. Private practices, the corporate sector, professional bodies and those involved in the wider animal health system also have an important role to play in working alongside veterinary entrepreneurship educators. Perhaps it's time for some joined-up thinking here, so that we can develop a truly collaborative veterinary entrepreneurship/business education system for the future - one that both accounts for and values the contribution of women.

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About the authors

Professor Colette Henry is Head of Department of Business Studies at Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland, and Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurship at UiT - The Arctic University of Norway. Her previous roles include Norbrook Professor of Business & Enterprise at the Royal Veterinary College, London, and President of the Institute for Small Business & Entrepreneurship (ISBE). An invited Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce (RSA), Colette is also Editor of *the International Journal of Gender & Entrepreneurship* (IJGE). She has published widely on topics relating to women's entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship education and training, the creative industries, social enterprise and veterinary business. Her latest book - *Veterinary Business & Enterprise* - has just been published by Elsevier. Colette is also a Visiting Professor at Birmingham City University, and a Visiting Fellow at CIMR, Birkbeck, London. You can contact Colette @ Colette.Henry@dkit.ie

Dr. Elizabeth Jackson is a Lecturer in Business at the Royal Veterinary College, UK. She joined the College in 2014 and is responsible for teaching business and entrepreneurship to veterinary, veterinary nursing and bio-veterinary science students, as well as post-graduate students. Elizabeth's research interests include developing the profile of veterinary business management in the profession, understanding veterinary business structures and working with food supply chains to improve efficiency. Upon completing agribusiness marketing under-graduate studies at Curtin University in Western Australia, Elizabeth spent time working in various aspects of the grain industry: operations, human resource management and biotechnology. During this time, she was studying for an MBA. Elizabeth then went back to full-time PhD study to examine the behavioural determinants of farmers and their attitudes toward using forward contracts for selling wool. This qualification led to a lectureship at Newcastle University (UK) where Elizabeth lectured in agribusiness management, food marketing and supply chain systems. You can contact Elizabeth @ eljackson@rvc.ac.uk .

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