

Fitness to Practise Policy and Procedures for Veterinary Nurse Students



**Harper Adams
University**

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1. Introduction: What is Fitness to Practise?

Professionals hold a position of trust and responsibility. The public expects professionals to conduct themselves in a way that justifies this trust and fellow professionals rely on their peers to uphold their profession's good reputation. Fitness to practise is about students demonstrating, in both their professional AND private lives that they can practise their profession properly, safely and with respect for the trust and responsibility placed upon them.

The concept of fitness to practise applies to students who will enter the regulated professions not only because of the special position they are in throughout their studies, but also because the regulatory bodies need to be satisfied that its incoming members can demonstrate good character in the period before entering the profession.

The Fitness to Practise Policy is separate to Harper Adams University's Misconduct, Attendance Monitoring and Fitness to Study policies, but students should be aware that considerations within one policy may invoke the procedures of other policies.

2. Fitness to Practise and Veterinary Nursing

Veterinary Nursing (VN) students, from early on in their course, operate not only in the academic environment of the University but also in the professional environment of veterinary medicine and surgery. This creates additional risks for animals, owners, professional colleagues and the veterinary nursing profession as a whole, who may all be potentially adversely affected by the unprofessional conduct of a VN student.

Veterinary nursing course providers have a responsibility to ensure that VN students are given the opportunity to develop their skills in a supportive environment, and must address any fitness to practise concerns. It is not possible to have an exhaustive list of professional behaviours that may generate concerns over a student's fitness to practise but, generally, the Fitness to Practise Policy would be instigated because of reasons relating to:

- i. Where animal welfare is deemed to be at risk
- ii. Where the health and safety of yourself, colleagues or the public were deemed to be at risk
- iii. Where your behaviour is such that it is deemed likely to bring the profession into disrepute

Where there is a serious or repeated concern about a student's ability to continue their course or their ability to practise after graduation, Harper Adams University may instigate the Fitness to Practise policy and procedures.

3. Principles of Behaviour for Veterinary Nursing Students

As previously mentioned, it is not possible or desirable to provide an exhaustive list of the types of professional behaviours that are expected of student veterinary nurses, or those that could call your fitness to practise into question. The following guidance sets out broad principles and example behaviours expected of students in the context of three key areas of the study of veterinary nursing.

The principles set out in this guidance are informed by some of the key principles of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS's) Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses. This code will apply to you when you register as a veterinary nurse with the RCVS.

Although you are not yet qualified or registered as a veterinary nurse, or directly subject to RCVS jurisdiction, you should familiarise yourself with the Code and aim to follow its general principles.

Students should also familiarise themselves with the RCVS Day One Competencies for veterinary nurses. These set out, in broad terms, what is required of newly qualified veterinary nurses, to prepare them for safe practice on day one of their career.

4. People

You will come into contact with a range of people in the course of your education and training. Maintaining working relationships is vital for practice and this will require effective communication skills and teamwork. You should begin to practise these skills with your fellow students, academic staff and supervisors.

4.1 What is expected of you when working with people?

- Professional accountability
- Honesty and integrity
- Independence and impartiality
- Client confidence and trust
- Respect

4.2 Behaviours

You can demonstrate you are fit to practise by:

- Communicating effectively with clients, the lay public, professional colleagues and responsible authorities; listening effectively and responding sympathetically to clients and others, using language in a form appropriate to the audience and the context.
- Being open and honest with clients and respecting their needs and requirements.
- Ensuring that you do not disclose information about a client to a third party, unless the client gives permission, or where animal welfare or the public interest may be compromised.
- Working effectively as a member of a multi-disciplinary team in the delivery of service to clients.
- Respecting the skills and experience of your supervisors and seeking their advice as appropriate.
- Recognising diversity and respecting the cultural differences, values and beliefs of others, including fellow students, colleagues and staff.
- Treating others politely, with consideration and with respect.
- Recognising and respecting that other people may question your fitness to practise and demonstrating insight and engagement with associated investigations.
- Being prepared to challenge the judgement of others if you have reason to believe their decisions could compromise animal welfare or safety.

4.3 Concerns

Failing to demonstrate the above behaviours may raise questions about your fitness to practise. In addition, the following are examples of particular concerns that may affect your fitness to practise:

- X Breaching client confidentiality without proper jurisdiction
- X Inappropriate or offensive behaviour towards fellow students, colleagues or clients
- X Failure to respect a client's instructions or going beyond the scope of consent

5. Private and Student Life

The RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses states that veterinary nurses must not engage in any activity or behaviour that would be likely to bring the profession into disrepute or undermine public confidence in the profession. As a student veterinary nurse, you should also uphold the reputation of your chosen profession at all times and consider how your behaviour and conduct could affect the trust that the public places in the veterinary profession.

Fitness to practise encompasses not only your professional competence and practical skills, but also the way in which you conduct yourself outside of the clinical environment. This includes your private life and your student life.

Remember that, wherever you are, you are representing the veterinary nursing profession and the university.

5.1 What is expected of you in your private and student life?

- Honesty and Integrity
- Maintenance of public trust and confidence
- Personal responsibility

5.2 Behaviors

You can demonstrate that you are fit to practise by:

- Taking responsibility for your own physical and mental health, seeking treatment and limiting practice if necessary, and communicating with the university.
- Abiding by the rules and regulations of the university and other organisations linked to your studies.
- Honouring commitments and taking responsibility for your work.
- Attending mandatory teaching sessions or negotiating alternative arrangements with the university.
- Submitting academic work on time.
- Ensuring good academic practice – no collusion, plagiarism, cheating, data falsification or fabrication
- Co-operating with formal investigations about you or others.
- Disclosing to the university if you receive a police caution or criminal conviction during the course.

5.3 Concerns

Failure to demonstrate the above behaviours may raise questions about your fitness to practise. In addition, the following are examples of particular concerns that may affect your fitness to practise:

- X Aggressive, threatening or violent behaviour
- X Substance misuse, e.g. drugs, alcohol and other substances that can impair performance
- X Dishonesty, cheating or plagiarising, including dishonesty outside the professional role
- X Criminal convictions or cautions
- X Misuse or ill-judged use of social media
- X Failure to seek medical treatment or other support
- X Refusal to follow medical advice or treatment plans

6. Practice

Student veterinary nurses, as part of their training, are required to administer some medical treatments and/or undertake minor surgery. Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) relates to the provision of this training, stating that you may administer 'any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity)' under veterinary direction. The following conditions apply:

- You must be enrolled with the RCVS as a student veterinary nurse
- The animal must be under the care of a veterinary surgeon and the treatment must be carried out at his or her direction.
- The treatment or minor surgery must be carried out in the course of the student veterinary nurses' training. In the view of the RCVS, such work should be undertaken only for the purpose of learning and consolidating new skills.
- The treatment or surgery must be supervised by a qualified veterinary surgeon or a registered veterinary nurse. In the case of surgery, the supervision must be direct, continuous and personal.
- In the view of the RCVS, a veterinary surgeon or registered veterinary nurse can only be said to be supervising if they are present on the premises and able to respond to a request for assistance if needed.

Although you are restricted by law on the clinical work you can do, you must act professionally and responsibly during your practical training. Under supervision, you will be trusted to work with animals and clients and you should be guided by the following principles of practice:

6.1 What is expected of you in practice?

- Professional competence
- Honesty and integrity
- Independence and impartiality
- Client confidence and trust
- Professional accountability

6.2 Behaviours

You can demonstrate that you are fit to practise by:

- Making animal health and welfare your primary consideration when attending to animals.
- Taking responsibility for your working practices.
- Conducting yourself in a professional manner with regard to professional and legal responsibilities.
- Being aware of legislation relevant to the welfare of animals.
- Working within the limits of your competence and ensuring that you do not go beyond the instructions of your supervisor.
- Being aware of personal and professional limitations, and demonstrating awareness of when, and from where, to seek professional assistance, advice and support.
- Ensuring that you are appropriately supervised when performing clinical tasks.
- Providing care that is appropriate and adequate.
- Being aware of the ethical responsibilities of veterinary nurses in relation to individual patient care and client relations.
- Respecting and maintaining client confidentiality.
- Reporting any concerns about colleagues or patients promptly and honestly and to the appropriate person.
- Understanding the need and professional obligation for a commitment to continuing education, training and professional development throughout your professional life.

6.3 Concerns

Failing to demonstrate the above behaviours may raise questions about your fitness to practise. In addition, the following are examples of particular concerns that may affect your fitness to practise:

- X Demonstrating a serious or persistent lack of insight into your limitations or lack of experience.
- X Deliberately ignoring or failing to follow instructions or advice
- X Taking unnecessary risks and compromising animal welfare
- X Suggesting that you have qualifications you do not have
- X Falsely completing/signing documentation

REMEMBER!

Academic achievement and practical competence do not guarantee the award of a veterinary nursing degree. A student must be able to demonstrate fitness to practise in all respects at the point of graduation. It is not possible to award a veterinary nursing degree with restrictions. A student may not be able to graduate until the conclusion of any fitness to practise investigation.

CONSIDERATIONS

Where a Fitness to Practise investigation is instigated, each case will be examined individually, taking into account factors such as:

- The seriousness of the offence and the risk involved to animals, colleagues, the public and yourself.
- The length of time you have been studying on the course
- Your clinical experience, competence and the support you have received in practice (where relevant)
- Any previous concerns relating to the same or similar issues
- Insight shown into the incident/concerns raised
- Is what you have done considered redeemable?

As an example of how the above could affect the outcome of a Fitness to Practise investigation:

A student due to graduate in a few months who is investigated because of offensive behaviour in public would be viewed in a more serious light, in comparison to a new undergraduate, due to the length of time they have been studying and working in practice, and the fact that at this stage in their learning, they absolutely should be more self-aware.

7. Procedure and Levels of Concern

The aim is to establish a suitable response by academic and support staff in circumstances where it is not considered appropriate to apply other student procedures in light of the concerns regarding a student's fitness to practise. Notwithstanding this, the University is not prevented by this procedure from implementing other approved procedures in circumstances where there are concerns regarding a student's health or well-being or their impact on that for others.

The procedure also covers circumstances within which a student will be signposted to other agencies, such as a local GP or a voluntary agency which can provide appropriate support and / or practical assistance, dependent on the student's circumstances.

In a situation where there is a perceived imminent danger to the student or others, serious risk of damage to University property or the University's reputation, the Vice-Chancellor is empowered to take immediate action to temporarily suspend the student from their studies and exclude them from the University's property, for a time period to be determined at their discretion. Such an action would invoke the Level 3 Fitness to Practise procedures which would be expedited as promptly as possible but normally within seven days of a temporary exclusion or suspension being applied.

Concerns about a student's health or behaviour should be acted upon promptly, as early action/intervention can often prevent a situation from developing into a crisis. This procedure incorporates three levels of concern. The cause for concern can result in the procedure being initiated at any level although it is hoped that most situations can be remedied by action taken at levels 1 or 2. The University reserves the right to vary the procedure as appropriate in the interests of fairness and/ or health and safety concerns for the individual or others. The particular level of concern and associated process to be followed will be at the discretion of the University.

If there are concerns about student confidentiality, staff members should consult with members of the Student Services team without revealing the student's identity. If it is then agreed that a significant / valid degree of concern exists, the staff member, in consultation with a senior manager, will direct the University's level of response. The particular stage of the process to be followed will be at the discretion of the University (depending on the perceived seriousness of any health problem/risk).

Level 1

Concerns emerge about a student's fitness to practise

A member of staff who knows the student (including but not restricted to academic or learner support tutors or student services staff) should approach the student in a supportive way and indicate that there is a concern about the

student's fitness to practise. The member of staff will ask the student to meet with them, giving at least 24 hours' notice and advise the following, along with providing a copy of this procedure:

- That the aim of the meeting is to discuss the concern(s), seek the student's perceptions and response, identify any additional, reasonable, support needs;
- Who else might attend the meeting (such as a representative from student services or the course team)
- That other appropriate members of staff might be consulted to assist with the matter and to provide support, e.g. counsellors
- That the student may be accompanied by an enrolled student

It should be made clear to the student that it is their responsibility to maintain their fitness to practise and that there is a recognised concern within the University.

The student and member of staff should agree on actions to be taken, and the student should be sent an email or letter within 5 working days summarising the meeting and the actions that have been agreed. In any situation where it is not possible to reach an agreement, the member of staff will determine the appropriate outcomes and actions. The outcomes might include, but not be limited to:

- An action plan being put in place (with the student's agreement, where possible)
- Reasonable support arrangements or reasonable adjustments being put in place
- The matter being referred to another level of the procedure (eg Level 2 or Level 3).

The student and staff member should also set a time for a further meeting to review the situation. The email or letter to the student should clearly indicate the time and place of this review meeting. The student should also be informed that the same or additional causes of concern could result in their fitness to study being more widely considered by moving to Level 2.

Level 2

Continued concern about a student's fitness to practise which has not improved as a consequence of intervention at level 1, or significant initial concern about a student.

The student will be invited to attend a meeting with a staff member with a general responsibility for students' fitness to practise (typically either the Centre or Placement Manager or/and Course Manager, although might include other staff who are familiar with the student's situation and their support needs). The member of staff or a representative from veterinary practice (where applicable) expressing concern will also likely be present. The student should be informed of the purpose of the meeting and advised of any documents they may need to bring. The student should be informed of the meeting in writing at least 24 hours before the due date. The student may be accompanied by an enrolled student, staff member, friend or family member or by a representative from the Students' Union. Students with disabilities may also be accompanied by a support worker appropriate to their needs.

The purpose of the meeting will be to ascertain the student's perception of the issues identified and also to ensure that the student clearly understands University expectations regarding their fitness to practise. It will be important to identify and agree an action plan following the meeting. In any situation where it is not possible to reach an agreement, the member of staff will determine the appropriate outcomes and actions. The outcomes might include, but not be limited to:

- An action plan being put in place (with the student's agreement, where possible)
- Reasonable support arrangements or reasonable adjustments being put in place
- Suspension from studies for a period of time to allow student to demonstrate insight into their actions/behaviour.
- The matter being referred to Level 3 of the procedure.

The consequences of not adhering to the action plan should be clearly outlined to the student. A short summary of the meeting, the agreed action plan and the consequences of non-compliance should be sent to the student within 3 working days of the meeting.

Regular review meetings should be set up with the student.

A student who does not accept the stage 2 outcome will be referred to Level 3 of the procedure.

Level 3

The most serious level of concern can be reached either through progression from Levels 1 and 2 or directly if there are significant and / or immediate concerns about the student's fitness to practise.

Within the Level 3 procedure, there are normally two elements:

1) A meeting between two members of the University's staff (typically one each from the student's course team and Student Services but not necessarily so) and the student to:

- Discuss the nature of the concern and how it may be managed by the University;
- Seek the student's perception and allow the student to respond to the concern(s);
- Seek appropriate input from other relevant members of staff and consider any relevant documents

and

2) A case conference (at which the student may at the discretion of the Chair (but will not normally) be present) attended by relevant members of staff and, at the discretion of the University, relevant external professionals to:

- Discuss the matter, consider any relevant evidence/reports and any potential action
- Make recommendations, including those as set out in the following, non- exhaustive list:
 - No further action is taken;
 - Matter referred to an earlier stage of the procedure;
 - Reasonable support or adjustments agreed;
 - The student is referred for appropriate medical assessment;
 - The student is withdrawn from placement;
 - An action plan is drawn up and put in place;
 - Student be permitted to continue on a part-time basis;
 - A period of voluntary interruption is recommended;
 - The student should be suspended / excluded / withdrawn from their studies.

A case conference will be called by the Chair of the Fitness to Practise Panel, the Head of Department for Animal Welfare, Production and Veterinary Sciences. The panel will comprise of staff members who are familiar with the student's situation and others who are independent of the student, as determined by the Chair. Typically, this will include at least three of the following, or their nominee, in addition to the Chair, who is deemed to be independent of the student: Centre or Placement Manager; Mental Health and Welfare Advisor; Student Counsellor; Learner Support Co-ordinator and the student's Course Manager or Senior Tutor. The purpose of the panel is to ascertain the facts of the case and to discuss an appropriate course of action. Witnesses, including from external sources, such as an appropriate practitioner deemed suitable by the Fitness to Practise Panel, may be called to provide oral evidence or to provide written statements at the discretion of the chair.

The student may, at the Chair's discretion, also be invited to attend at one point during the proceedings and may have an enrolled student, Students' Union representative or staff member to accompany them for support. Students with disabilities may alternatively, choose their support worker, or students undergoing counselling may choose to bring their Counsellor, including the University's Student Counsellor.

The case conference may consider various options including transfer to temporary or permanent part time study, other reasonable adjustment needs of a student, a period of postponement or withdrawal of the student.

The actions arising out of the case conference will be agreed, documented and circulated to all in attendance and to the student by the Chair of the Fitness to Practise Panel who has authority to implement the decision of the panel. All actions should have specific time frames where appropriate and adherence to such time frames will be a condition of any re-entry to programmes of study.

Where withdrawal for the course of study and possibly exclusion from the University's premises is determined, a letter should be sent via registered mail to the address at which the student has most recently confirmed as their home address and their University accommodation. The same letter should be sent to all the student email accounts known to the University.

Appeals against any outcome of the Fitness to Practise Panel's consideration of level 3 concerns should be made to the Director of Academic Services, in writing, within 21 days of the date of notification of the outcome, who will review the evidence considered by the Panel, in conjunction with the appeal lodged by the appellant. Appeals will only be considered on the following grounds:

- Procedural irregularity;
- Unreasonable disproportionate decision;
- New material evidence which was not previously reasonably available

The Director of Academic Services will review all written documentation and may, at their discretion, invite the appellant to a meeting to discuss any points of contention and consult with other University staff and external appropriate professional. The outcomes of the appeal may include one from the following, non-exhaustive list:

- Appeal dismissed;
- Decision overturned with a different outcome to that agreed by the Fitness to Practise Panel;
- Decision overturned.

The Director of Academic Service' decision in relation to the appeal is final and concludes the University's procedures. Once the University's appeals procedure has been exhausted, the student will be issued with a 'Completion of Procedures' letter and advised to contact the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) if they are dissatisfied with the outcome. The OIA will determine whether the student's complaint is eligible under its rules.

8. Returning to Practise

In the case of a postponement, a student should be informed of the written outcomes of the Panel hearing of the arrangements by which fitness to return to practise is agreed.

Each student's case will vary depending upon the context and specific circumstances out of which the original concern arose. In all cases, return to practise will be dependent upon evidence of fitness to practise and evidence of sustained engagement with appropriate support systems by the student.

Evidence that the panel will consider in making its judgement, may include:

- 8.1 statement from the student setting out their desire to return to study, their engagement with treatment to improve and maintain their fitness to practise, their intentions relating to future treatment, as well as their written permission for the University to request a written statement from the student's key health professional (if applicable). The student should seek guidance on who the University considers is suitably qualified as the key health professional who should make this assessment.
- 8.2 A statement from staff outlining any areas of concerns in relation to the student's fitness to practise about which they specifically seek advice or evidence from a health professional, in relation to the student's ability to cope with the demands of higher education and a career in a public facing role..
- 8.3 A statement from the student's key health professional, (where applicable) or a supportive statement from a relevant professional. Evidence submitted from the student's key professional (health or otherwise) should have sufficient knowledge of the student and their treatment and the demands of higher education and their chosen profession, in order to make an informed assessment regarding feasibility return to practise. In particular, specific reference should be made to the student's capacity to return to and commit to study and work, including an indication of the professional's judgement of the student's ability to cope with the following requirements of routine higher education level study:
 - Cognition
 - Pace
 - Persistence
 - Reliability
 - Conscientiousness and motivation
 - Interpersonal functioning
 - Honesty, trustworthiness
 - Stress tolerance
 - Other specific requirements.

Annex 1a illustrates a typical report template that a qualified professional (health or otherwise) is normally asked to complete, where a student's fitness to practise is a matter of dispute.

9. A fitness to practise assessment report

The University reserves the right to request its own appointed professional to provide their independent judgement of the student's fitness to practise or return to practice, alongside the associated reasonable adjustment needs.

The decision to allow a student to return to practise will be made by the Fitness to Practise Panel, taking into account evidence from the student, staff, professional(s) and any fitness to practise assessment reports. The student might be required to meet with the Panel to clarify aspects of the evidence provided to assist the Panel in making its decision. If the student is required to meet with panel members, or a sub-group of it, they may be accompanied by support worker,

enrolled student, Students' Union representative or staff member. The Panel must be assured of fitness to practise, taking into account the requirements of the regulatory body, the willingness and capacity of the student to comply with any conditions imposed, and the ability of the University to meet the identified support needs upon return.

The Panel's recommendation will be confirmed in writing, including any conditions of return to practise and notified to the student within five working days of the panel hearing.

When a student's return to practise is not permitted and the student wishes to challenge this, the student should appeal to the Director of Academic Services within 21 days of the notification, who will review the evidence considered by the Fitness to Practise Panel in conjunction with the appeal lodged by the appellant. Appeals will only be considered on the following grounds:

- Procedural irregularity;
- Unreasonable disproportionate decision;
- New material evidence which was not previously, reasonably, available

The Director of Academic Services will review all written documentation and may, at their discretion, invite the appellant to a meeting to discuss any points of contention and consult with other University staff and external appropriate professional. The outcomes of the appeal may include one from the following, non-exhaustive list:

- Appeal dismissed;
- Decision overturned with a different outcome to that agreed by the Fitness to Practise Panel;
- Decision overturned.

The Director of Academic Services' decision in relation to the appeal is final and concludes the University's procedures. Once the University's appeals procedure has been exhausted, the student will be issued with a 'Completion of Procedures' letter and advised to contact the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) if they are dissatisfied with the outcome. The OIA will determine whether the student's complaint is eligible under its rules.

A student's continued fitness to practise is the responsibility of the student, although the University will monitor this throughout the continuation of their studies. Regular review meetings should be arranged with the student's Senior Tutor so that a student's progress and attendance can be monitored and student support modified if necessary.