

Introduction

Veterinary nursing regulators identify “day one competences” for graduates (Veterinary Council of Ireland, 2007; ACOVENE, 2008; RCVS, 2014). However these may not reflect the actual workplace performance expectations of veterinary nursing students, recent graduates, colleagues and employers.

Fernandez *et al.* (2012) noted that a broadly accepted understanding of the term competence is lacking in the medical literature. There is an absence of published data about competence perceptions within the veterinary nursing profession.

Aim

To explore the perceptions of competence amongst Irish veterinary nursing undergraduate students and registered veterinary nurses (RVNs).

Methods

This survey was part of a mixed methods study to quantify and explore the demographics, prior animal experience and competency perceptions of Irish veterinary nursing students and practicing veterinary nurses. A combined qualitative and quantitative or “mixed methods” study can give a more complete picture of the research topic than either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011).

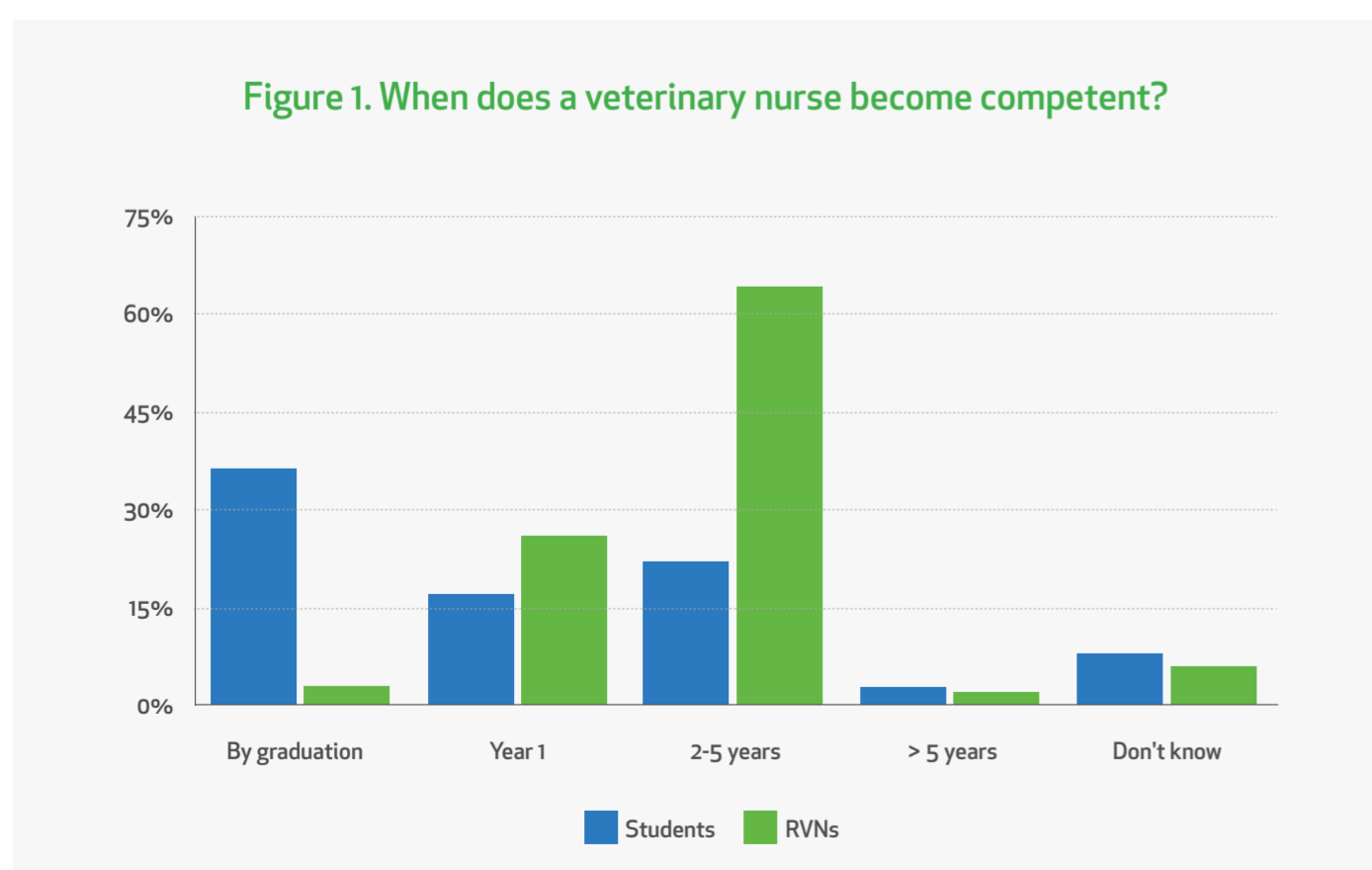
Research approval was granted by the Dundalk Institute of Technology School of Health and Science Research Committee and the University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

The first year veterinary nursing student cohorts from DkIT (31 students) and UCD (44 students) were invited to participate in the study. Online surveys were completed by 36 students, 20 from UCD and 16 from DkIT, to give a student response rate of 48% (33 females, 3 males). Veterinary nurses registered with the Veterinary Council of Ireland (RVNs) were also invited to complete an online survey and 75 responses (74 females, 1 male) were received. Follow up focus groups were held with both UCD and DkIT student volunteers.

The survey data was collected anonymously via SurveyMonkey® and exported to Excel for Mac 2011® and Nvivo 10 for Mac® for quantitative and qualitative analysis respectively. The focus group transcripts were thematically analysed in Nvivo for Mac®.

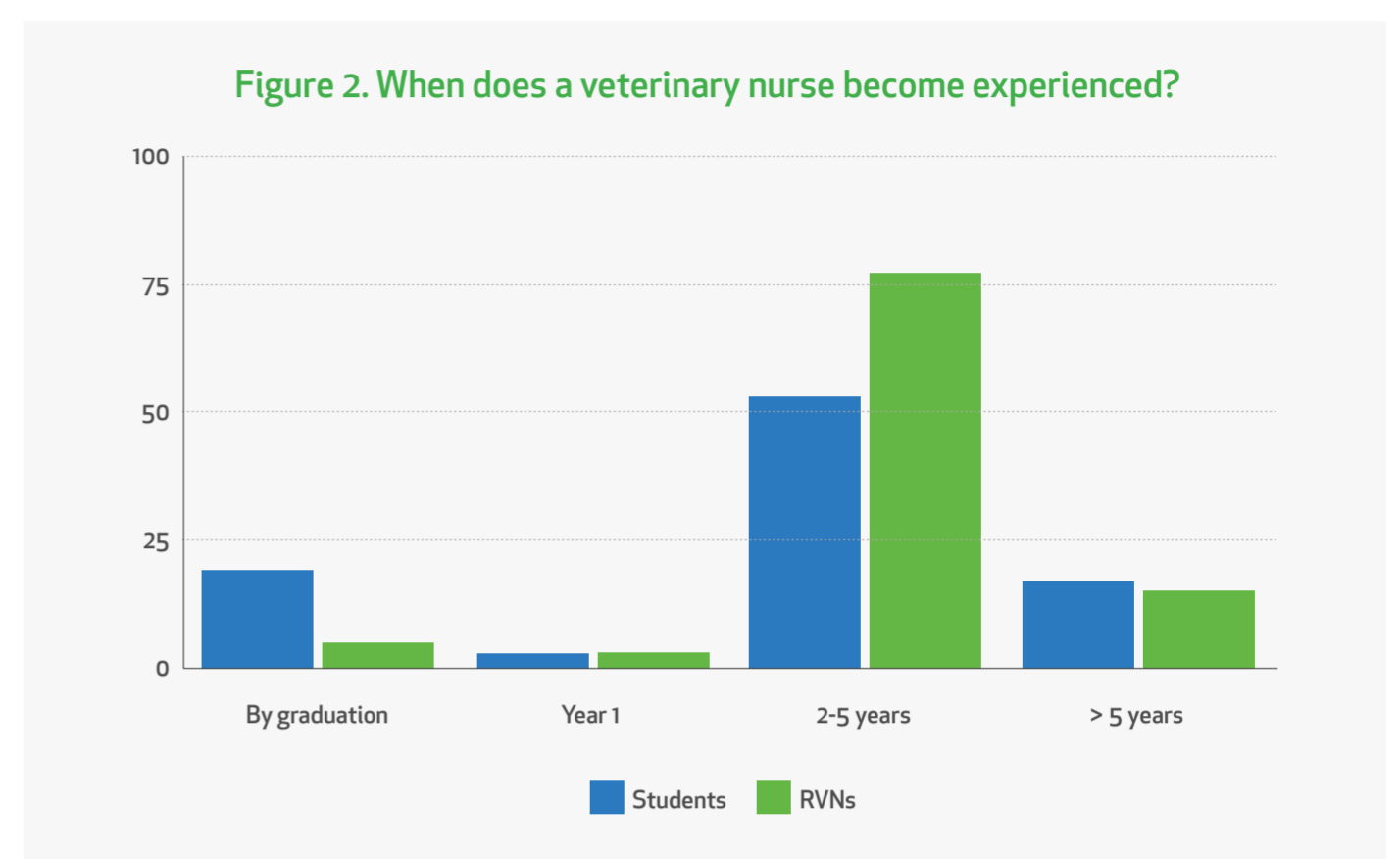
Results

Both students and RVNs broadly defined competence as having the ability and knowledge to do something correctly. However RVNs placed a heavier emphasis on the importance of experience. 36% of students but only 3% of RVNs expected a veterinary nurse to be competent at graduation (figure 1).

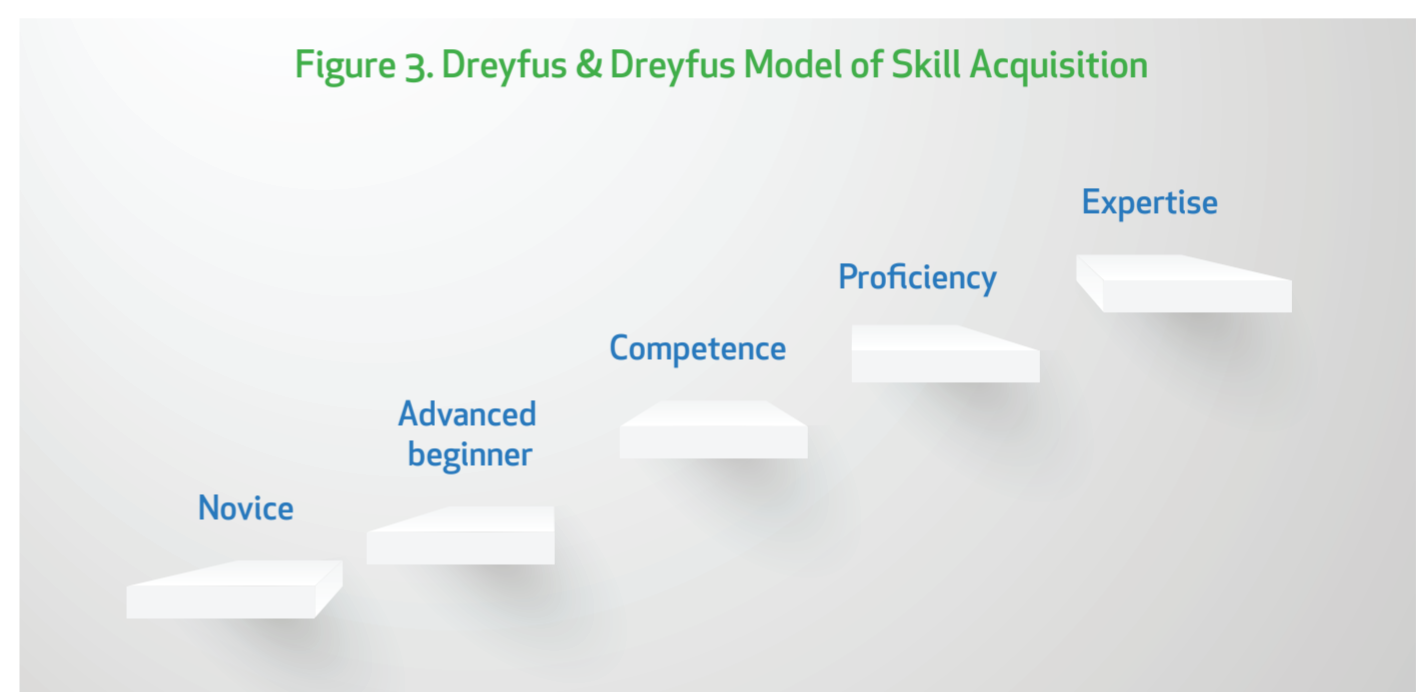


Students differentiated competence from experience: over half (53%) expected to become competent at college or during their first year in work but indicated that experience would take 2-5 years to attain. An additional 17% of students expected to need five years or longer in practice to become experienced (figure 2).

RVN responses indicated that they perceived experience to be a necessary component of competence. 64% of RVNs felt competence took 2-5 years to attain and 77% indicated that a RVN would also become experienced during this time frame.



The RVN responses correspond to Benner's view (1984) that newly graduated nurses are at the level of advanced beginner on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition (figure 3).



Although the survey responses indicated that students generally expected to be competent close to graduation, the focus group responses demonstrated an awareness that the role of a RVN is broad and competency with unfamiliar tasks/species was not a given:

“It takes time like any job. You're not going to go into any job you get straight away and be confident that you're doing everything completely right. You need to learn from the experiences” (UCD student).

“You're never going to be fully competent in everything. You learn all the way through your career... things are constantly being updated, how to do things, the proper procedures, you're constantly learning as you go along” (DkIT student).

Conclusions

The perception of competence and when it arises differs between RVNs and students, with most RVNs expecting graduates to need experience in practice before becoming fully competent. By expecting to be competent almost from the outset many graduates may be placing unrealistic expectations and excessive pressure on themselves.

New graduates could benefit from explicit management of their expectations by more experienced colleagues as they transition from college to the clinical workplace.

References

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