

Introduction

As Irish society becomes urbanised fewer veterinary nursing students have extensive animal handling experience prior to starting college, especially in relation to large animals. The Veterinary Council of Ireland (VCI) requires graduates to demonstrate "day one competencies" in the nursing care of all common domestic species (2007).

Objective

To explore why Irish students elect to study veterinary nursing and quantify their prior animal experience and workplace expectations

Implementation

To address this knowledge gap the first year veterinary nursing student cohorts at University College Dublin (UCD) and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) were surveyed via a SurveyMonkey© online questionnaire. Registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) were also surveyed for comparison.

Table 1: Survey objectives

1. To quantify the level of animal handling experience learners have at entry to the course
2. To explore learner reasons for wanting to pursue a career in veterinary nursing
3. To compare learner and registered veterinary nurses perceptions of competence
4. To identify the educational expectations of learners at entry to the course

Results

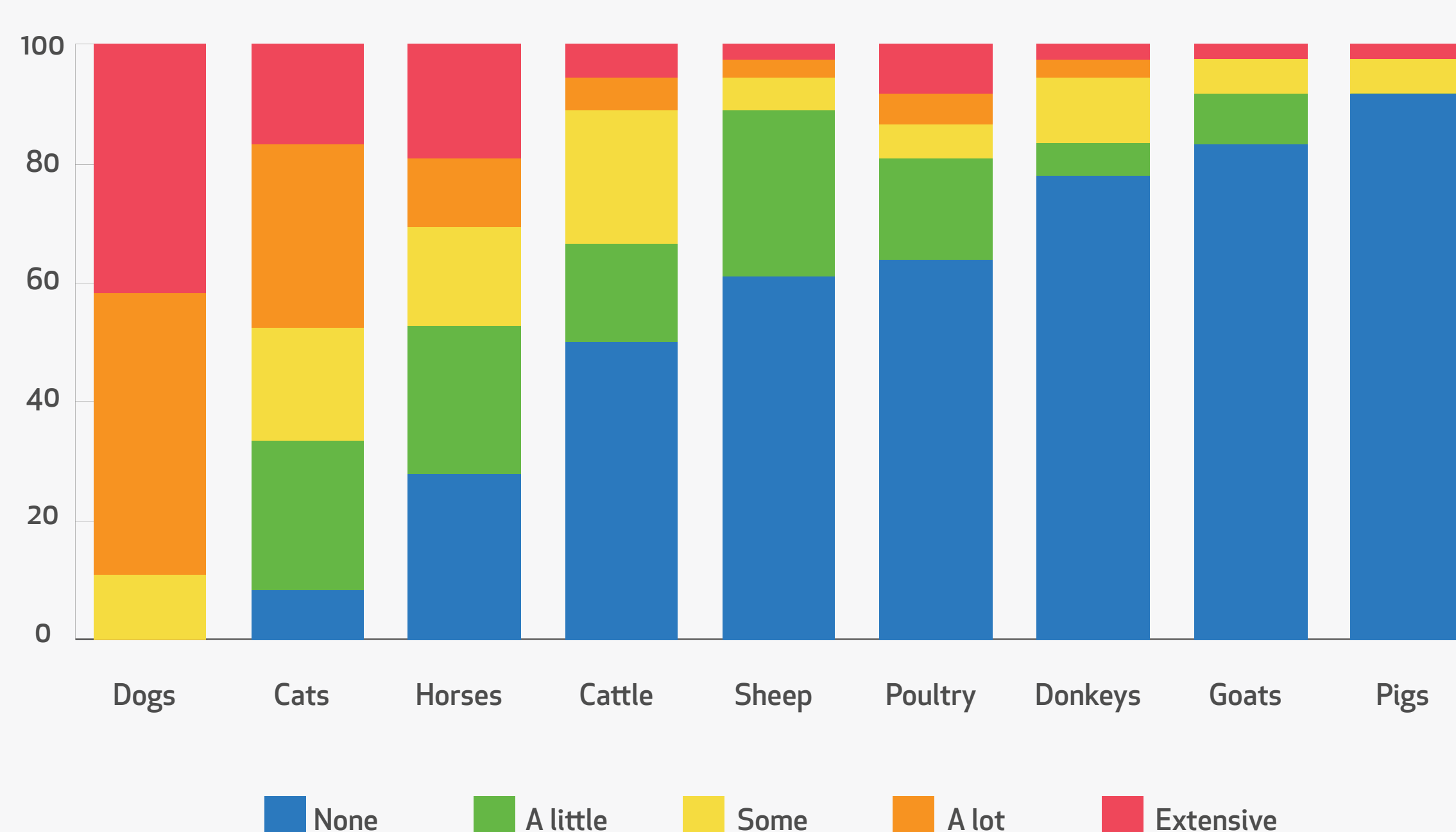
36 students (20 from UCD and 16 from DkIT) and 109 registered veterinary nurses responded to the surveys. The desire to work with animals was by far the most common reason that students had chosen to study veterinary nursing (figure 1).

Figure 1: Word cloud of learner reasons for wanting to become a veterinary nurse



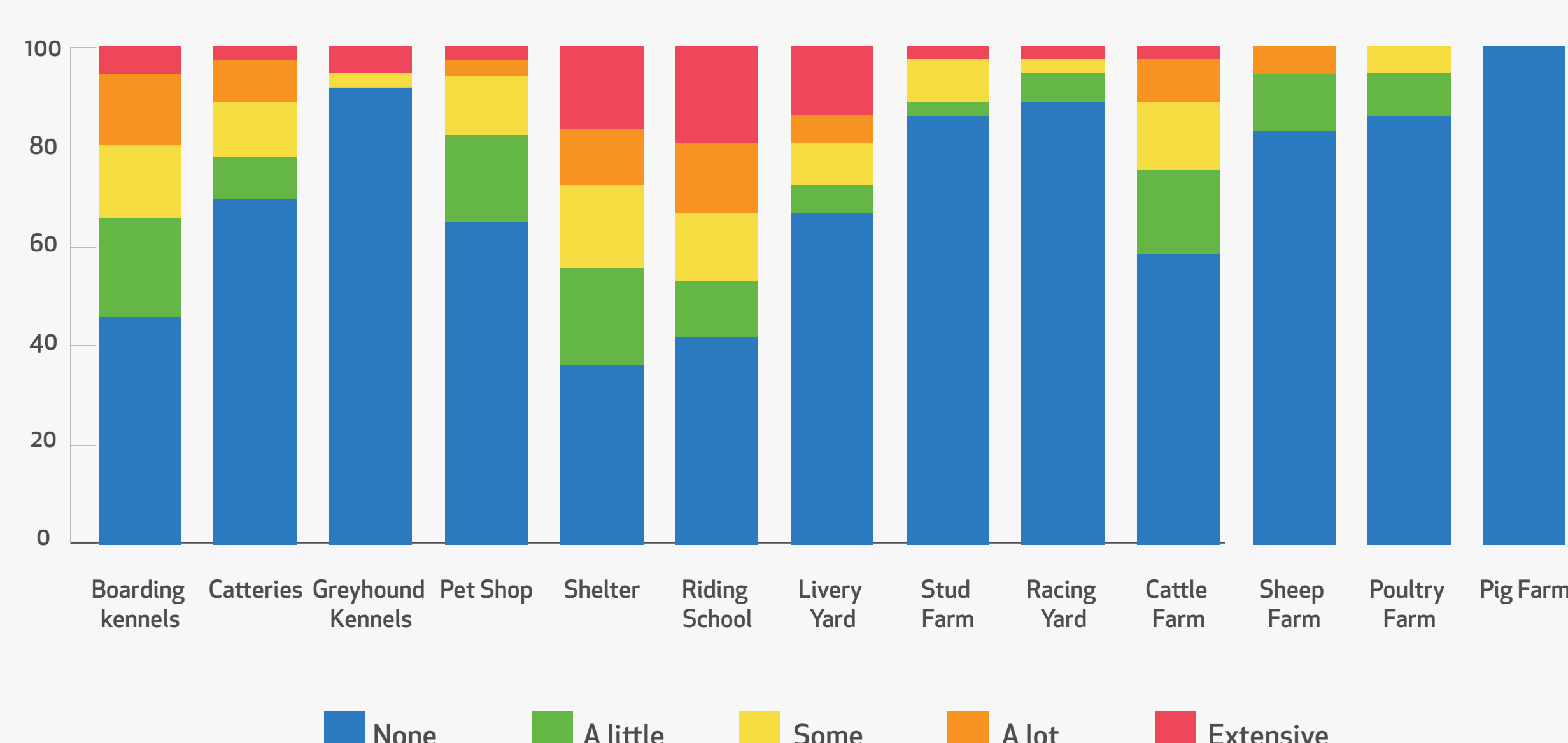
The surveys confirmed that the majority of students had limited animal handling experience (figure 2). Dogs were the only species that all respondents reported at least some experience with.

Figure 2: Animal experience at entry to veterinary nursing course



The experience gained appears to have been obtained primarily via privately owned animals, with low exposure rates reported across a range of commercial animal facilities (figure 3). Animal shelters (64%), riding schools (58%) and boarding kennels (54%) were the only facilities where more than 50% of respondents reported any experience.

Figure 3: Experience in animal facilities



88% of both students and RVNs identified competence with being able to perform a skill or task. Other important components identified by both groups were knowledge and being able to complete the task correctly and/or safely. However there were also some differences between the groups with confidence and experience being identified as components of competence by 30.3% and 7.6% of RVNs respectively, but only 11.8% and 2.9% of students (table 2).

Table 2. Components of competence identified by respondents

Competence component	Students	RVNs
Doing/able	88.2%	87.9%
Knowledge	32.4%	27.3%
Correct/safe	23.5%	36.4%
Confidence	11.8%	30.3%
To a standard	11.8%	13.6%
Having skill	11.8%	10.6%
Experience	2.9%	7.6%
Perform without help	2.9%	9.1%
Understanding	0%	10.6%
Make no mistakes	0%	4.5%
Teach others	0%	3%

Competence:

"the ability to perform the roles and tasks required by one's job to the expected standard" (RCVS, 2014)

Competence is a relative term and increasing levels will be expected to develop throughout a professional career. The emphasis on knowledge and performance that both students and RVNs associated with competence is correct.

However, a small number of students and RVNs associated attributes that only arise over time in the workplace as being necessary for competence:

- experience
- error-free performance
- the ability to teach others
- work without supervision

These attributes correspond to the autonomous phase of performance in the Fitts and Posner 1967 model of experiential learning of a skill (table 3).

Table 3. Fitts and Posner model of skill acquisition

Stage	Process	Characteristics
Cognitive	Gathering information	Large gains, inconsistent performance.
Associative	Putting actions together	Small gains, conscious effort.
Autonomous	Much time and practice	Performance seems unconscious, automatic and smooth. Not everyone reaches this level.

Conclusions

1. Veterinary nursing students are strongly motivated by the desire to work with animals.
2. Veterinary nursing students have limited animal handling experience at entry to the course.
3. The experience they do have primarily relates to individual privately owned pet dogs.
4. The majority have minimal or no experience with horses and/or farm animal species.
5. The ability to perform a task was identified as the key component of competence by both students and RVNs. However a minority also identified attributes that develop with experience as necessary for competence at graduation. This creates the potential for unrealistic expectations to be placed on new graduates in the workplace.

Recommendations

1. Educators should not assume that entrants to veterinary nursing courses already have animal handling experience.
2. Time and resources should be dedicated to practical animal handling training early in the course. Large animal skills may need extra attention.
3. Employers and colleagues of newly qualified veterinary nurses should be encouraged to provide appropriate levels of support and guidance as these new entrants to the profession gain the necessary experience to become proficient veterinary nursing professionals.

Ethics: Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee and the Dundalk Institute of Technology School of Health and Sciences Ethics Committee

References: Veterinary Council of Ireland (2007). Competences Form Veterinary Nursing Programme Validation. Unpublished.

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