

## Introduction

As Irish society has become urbanised fewer school leavers have extensive animal experience, especially of large animal handling. Veterinary nursing training has also moved from a workplace-based model to undergraduate training, thereby reducing the amount of time students spend “hands on” with patients. These changes pose challenges for educators, who must teach safe handling of all common domestic animal species to students (VCI, 2007).

## Objective

To quantify prior animal handling experience amongst entrants to the Irish veterinary nursing profession.

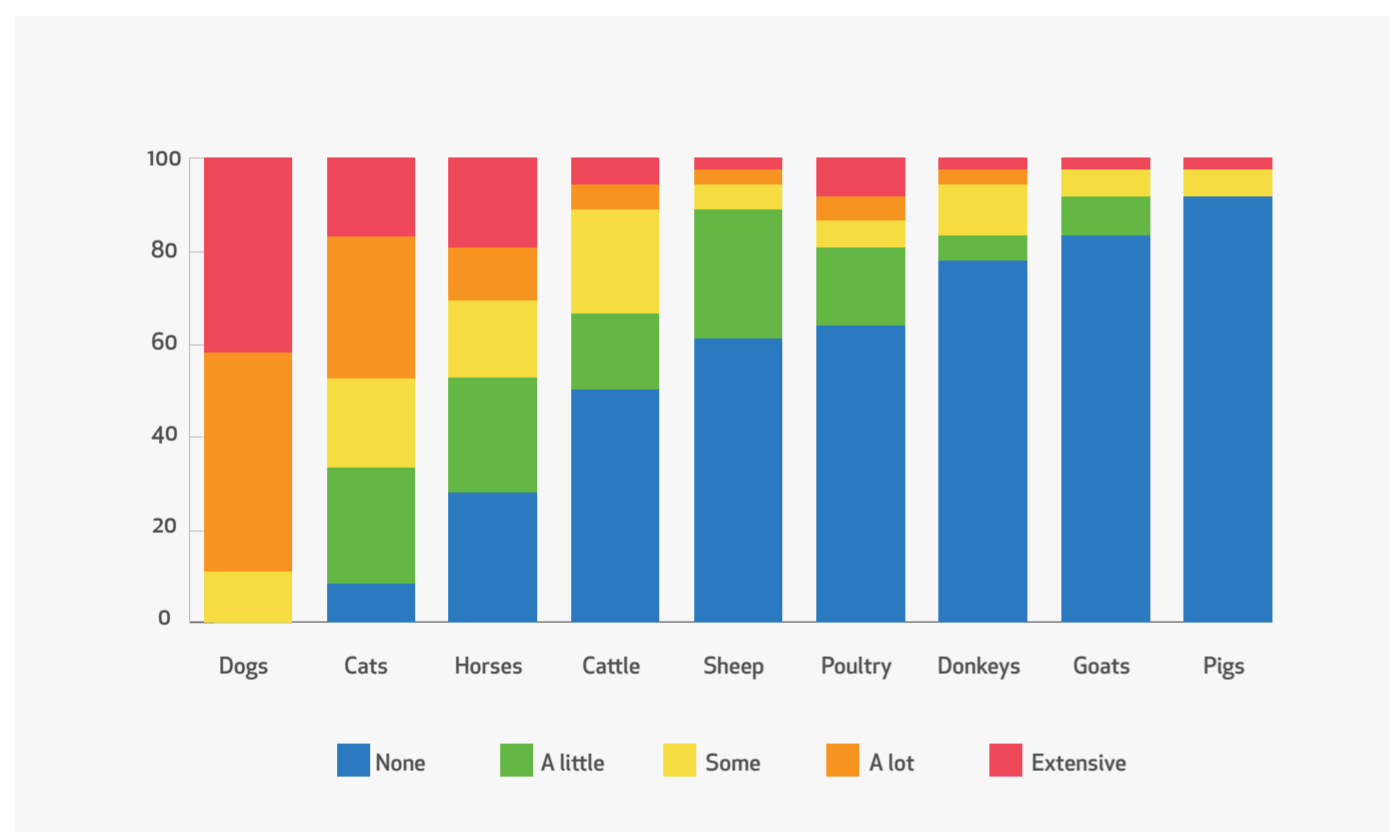
## Implementation

36 first year students enrolled on two Irish veterinary nursing courses (3 males, 33 females) completed an online questionnaire via SurveyMonkey©. A focus group was held with 6-8 participants from each student group to explore the survey findings in more detail.

## Results

Surveys:

**Figure 1: Animal experience at entry to veterinary nursing course**



Data analysis of the surveys revealed all respondents to have had some experience with dogs. 8% reported no feline experience and 28% no equine experience. The majority lacked experience with farm animals (figure 1).

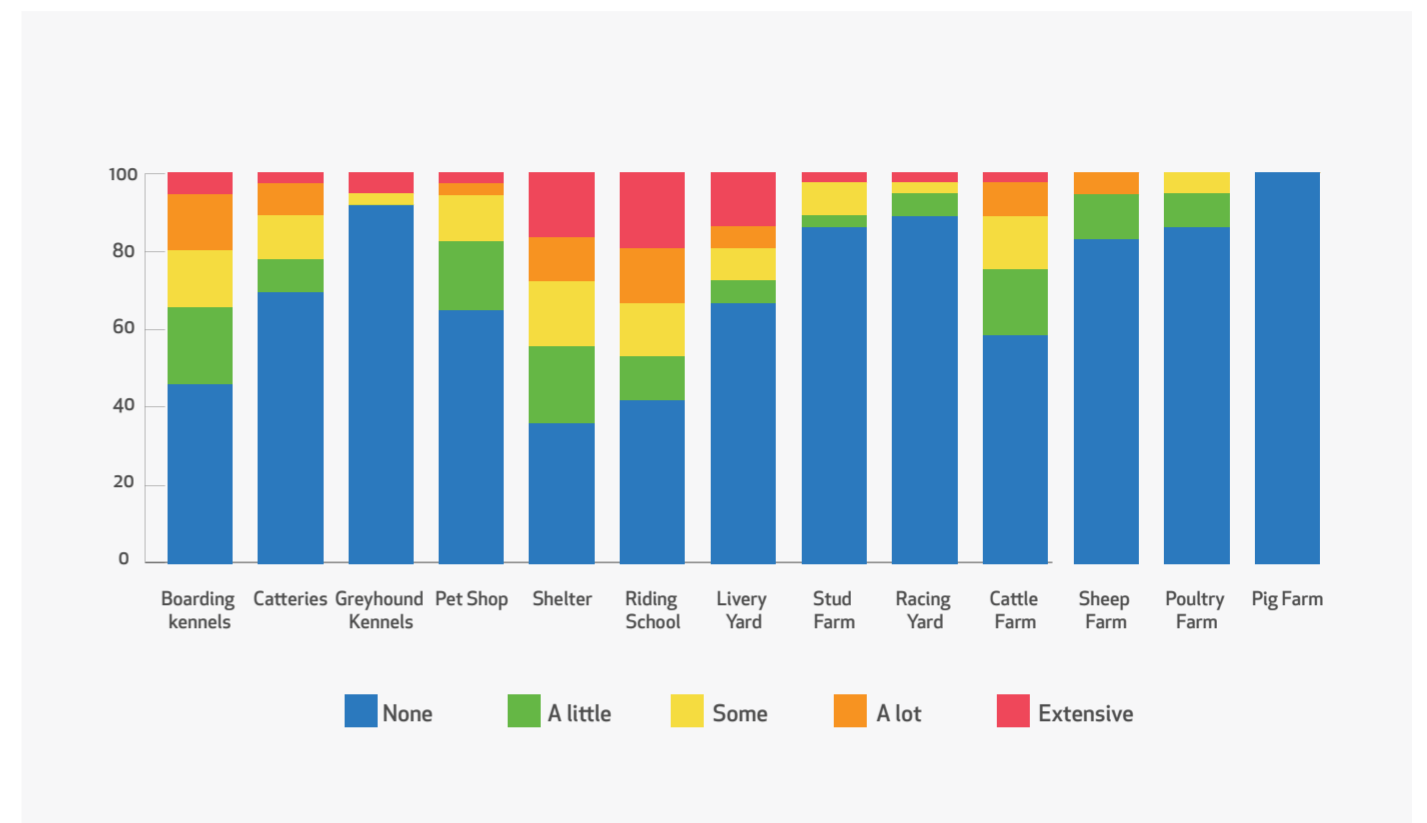
Despite this apparent lack of experience, a love of animals and the desire to work with them were the primary reasons cited by participants as to why they had chosen veterinary nursing as a career (table 1).

**Table 1. Reasons for wanting to study veterinary nursing**

Reason for wanting to be a veterinary nurse	Percentage of respondents
The love of animals	59%
Desire to work with animals	47%
Job satisfaction	44%
Interest in science and learning	38%
Improved career prospects	38%
Step to another career (veterinary medicine, animal physiotherapy)	9%
Travel opportunities	9%

The experience gained appears to have obtained primarily via privately owned animals, with low numbers of respondents reporting experience in commercial animal enterprises (figure 2).

**Figure 2: Experience in animal facilities**



## Focus groups

The participants identified the following reasons for their limited animal experience:

- Lack of opportunity in urban areas to interact with animals other than pets.
- Lack of opportunity was also identified by those who lived in rural areas but not on a farm. They observed large animals but had little or no interaction with them.
- Some participants were wary of cattle and horses due to their large size.
- Lack of interest was not reported as a reason for avoiding unfamiliar species, although a minority of participants reported a dislike of cats.

The students differentiated occasionally encountering animals, e.g. during holidays on a farm, from actually working with and becoming confident in handling them:

**“It’s like going out in the country, you know, cows everywhere and horses. The horses I’d tend to go over to and be feeding them a bit of grass or whatever. But the cattle then, you just kind of look at them from afar. [Farm experience] was kind of the first time getting up close and personal with an actual cow, even though I’m living in the middle of [a rural area].”**

## Conclusions

1. Veterinary nursing students are strongly motivated by the desire to work with animals. The role is perceived as an interesting and rewarding career.
2. Despite a strong interest in animals, the majority of students have limited animal handling experience on entry to the course.
3. The experience they do have primarily relates to privately owned pet dogs. Most have little or no experience with large animals, or in commercial animal facilities.
4. It is a reported lack of access, rather than a lack of interest, that prevents students from obtaining more extensive animal handling experience.

## Recommendations

1. Educators should not assume that veterinary nursing entrants already have animal handling experience.
2. Animal handling training requires specific attention and resources early in the course, especially in relation to horses and/or farm animals.
3. There appears to be a lack of opportunity for prospective students to gain practical animal experience prior to entry into a veterinary training course. This may require a joint approach by educators and the wider veterinary profession.

**References:** Veterinary Council of Ireland (2007). Competences Form Veterinary Nursing Programme Validation. Dublin (unpublished).

**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 & Sciences Ethics Committee.

**Correspondence:** karen.dunne@dkit.ie

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank all the veterinary nursing students who participated in this study.