

Jobs and Skills Australia: Draft CSOL Targeted for Consultation

Occupation 361311 Veterinary Nurse

Submission by:

Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)

28 May 2024

This submission has been prepared by the *Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)*.

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About us

Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)

Established in January 2021, *Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)* ('The Educators') comprises a group of 11 educators including current and former teaching, research and clinical academics associated with bachelor's degree programs in veterinary technology or veterinary nursing, respectively. They include:

Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing, Melbourne Polytechnic in partnership with La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria

[Redacted text block]

Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, The University of Queensland, Gatton, Queensland

[Redacted text block]

Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales

[Redacted text block]

Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, The University of Adelaide, Roseworthy, South Australia

[Redacted text block]



Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales

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Biographies for ‘The Educators’ are attached as Appendix 2. ‘The Educators’ are unified by a desire for collaboration and innovation in advancing allied veterinary health disciplines such as veterinary technology and veterinary nursing in higher education. They are also passionate about preparing professional graduates to meet Australia’s animal health and welfare needs and to complement the role of veterinarians in interprofessional veterinary teams in clinical and non-clinical fields.

Submission Overview

Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia), thank Jobs and Skills Australia for the opportunity to provide a submission on Australia's Skills Needs regarding the Veterinary Nurse Occupation 361311 via the consultation process on the Draft Core Skills Occupations List (COSL).

As key stakeholders in the education, training and employability of bachelor's degree veterinary technologists (commonly referred to as 'veterinary technicians') and veterinary nurses (See Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms), our submission will address key areas relevant to the COSL under the headings of ANZSCO Codes and Draft COSL Targeted for Consultation.

ANZSCO Codes

Firstly, the ANZCO (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022) statement concerning *Occupation 361311 Veterinary Nurse* requires updating. ANZSCO states that in Australia the skill level and qualifications for veterinary nurses correspond with, "AQF Certificate III including at least two years of on-the-job training, or AQF Certificate IV (ANZSCO Skill Level 3)". This does not align with the definition of a veterinary nurse held by The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia (VNCA), the professional body for veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists.

The VNCA defines a "Veterinary Nurse" as one who holds a formally recognised veterinary nursing qualification and maintains their currency of knowledge and skills within the veterinary nursing profession (VNCA, 2024a). The current Australian national qualification for Veterinary Nursing is the Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing and the additional qualifications of the Diploma of Veterinary Nursing General Practice, Emergency and Critical Care, Surgery and Dentistry as per the Animal Care and Management Training Package (ACM40112) (VNCA, 2024).

Similarly, the list of tasks assigned to a 'Veterinary Nurse' within the ANZSCO framework (2022) does not accurately reflect the complexity and scope of the veterinary nurse's role today. Many veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists work in veterinary specialist practices with a broad range of veterinary specialists (for example in internal medicine, cardiology, oncology, ophthalmology, radiology, dentistry, surgery and emergency and critical care) requiring a much higher level of nursing skills and knowledge. We refer to the website for Brisbane Veterinary Specialist Centre (BVSCa, 2024) as an example of the complexity of veterinary specialist practice and the scope of nursing practice in a specialist veterinary hospital (BVSCb, 2024).

Additionally, the ANZSCO (2022) statement does not include the approximately 1000 bachelor's degree qualified veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists; the latter having participated in the veterinary and allied animal health workforce since 2003 (Clarke, 2004; Clarke, Schull and Coleman, 2009). The majority of veterinary technologists (and graduate veterinary nurses) work in a veterinary nursing role, or higher, in veterinary practice (Clarke, 2004; Clarke, Schull & Coleman, 2007; Clarke et al., 2019). The VNCA (2021) acknowledges that both veterinary technologists and veterinary nurses 'play a vital role in the veterinary healthcare team'. Bachelor's degree qualified veterinary

technologists and veterinary nurses are, along with vocational-qualified veterinary nurses, eligible to register with the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician (voluntary) Registration Scheme launched by the VNCA in 2019 as a foundation for mandatory national registration and regulation (VNCA, 2024b). Currently, the VNCA and the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC), which accredits all Australasian veterinary schools and manages the assessment of veterinary qualifications for migration and of specialist qualifications, are successfully collaborating on a national veterinary nurse and veterinary technologist registration and regulation project (AVBC, 2023).

‘The Educators’ would welcome acknowledgement of bachelor’s degree veterinary technologists (Occupation title: Veterinary Technologist) and veterinary nurses by the ABS in the ANZSCO Code Framework and by Jobs and Skills Australia in future labour market research and publications.

Concurring with this, ‘The Educators’ lodged a submission on the 5th December 2023 for the ABS’s review of descriptions and skills levels for animal care occupations within the ANZSCO Codes Framework. The submission substantiated a need for inclusion of bachelor’s degree veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists in the Framework as key members of the veterinary and allied animal health workforce. In addition, substantial evidence was provided for the creation of an Advanced Veterinary Nurse/Veterinary Technologist classification (available on request).

Draft COSL Targeted for Consultation — Occupation 361311: Veterinary Nurse

‘The Educators’ welcome Jobs and Skills Australia including the *Occupation 361311: Veterinary Nurse* on the Draft COSL Targeted for Consultation as current government data and publications regarding this professionalising occupation are limited and inaccurate. This is indeed problematical considering Veterinary Nurses and Veterinary Technologists perform a significant and interdependent role with veterinarians in animal health care teams throughout Australia in clinical practice (VNCA, 2021) and in non-clinical roles such as animal biosecurity and in animal welfare agencies (Clarke, Schull & Coleman 2009; Clarke et al., 2019). Following on from the human health care model, the complexity of contemporary veterinary service delivery—driven by advancing technology and the higher expectations of informed clients (consumers) who view their pets as members of their family (AVA, 2015; Chur-Hansen, 2010)—requires an interprofessional team approach comprising veterinary nurses (and technologists) and other key support staff led by veterinarians (Kinnison, May & Guile, 2014; Clarke, Henning, King, Coleman & Schull, 2015).

As previously mentioned, the occupation of Veterinary Nurse in Australia is significantly advanced along the professionalisation continuum in having a professional body, the VNCA, a code of professional conduct (VNCA 2024c), and specialised training and education. This includes a Certificate IV and Diplomas of Veterinary Nursing in the vocational and education training (VET) sector (training.gov.au, 2024a; training.gov.au, 2024b) and three Bachelor of Veterinary Technology programs (The University of Queensland, Charles Sturt University and The University of Adelaide) and a Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing (Melbourne Polytechnic/La Trobe University) (Appendix 2).

Furthermore, the Western Australian government recently enabled full registration of veterinary nurses, and for the first time a veterinary nurse, Michelle Foxcroft, was appointed a member of the Veterinary Practitioners' Board of Western Australia (2024). National registration of veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists is gaining momentum with the launch of the AVNAT registration scheme (VNCA, 2024b) by the VNCA in 2019 and the formalisation of the AVBC/VNCA collaboration on the veterinary nurse and veterinary technologist national registration project in 2023 (AVBC, 2023). Veterinary nursing is on a rapid upwards trajectory of becoming a fully-fledged profession. In many states, veterinary nurses and technologists are already endorsed in legislation to obtain a veterinary radiation licence, administer drugs and poisons under veterinary supervision and as authorised microchip implanters for small animals (VNCA, 2024d; Veterinary Surgeons Board of Queensland 2024).

Very importantly, mandatory national registration of qualified veterinary technologists and veterinary nurses will enable accurate data collection for labour market analysis and research, and policy development by government. At present, there are no reliable data on the Australian veterinary nursing labour market, particularly for bachelor's degree graduates and those with international qualifications (e.g. Veterinary Technician Specialisations) (VTS) (NAVTA 2024). Accurate data collection is in the best interests of Australia's animal health and welfare (companion, production, wild and feral animals), national biosecurity and the public good.

Current data, albeit unreliable, indicates that there are 15,900 veterinary nurses employed in Australia (JSA, 2024): comparable to the number of 14,000 veterinarians (AVA, 2021). Based on the AVA's workforce data, it is estimated there is approximately one veterinarian per 2,172 pets (Oakley-Newell, 2022). This ratio does not compare favourably with practice management research from the United States indicating that a full-time veterinarian can provide a good quality service to between 750 and 1,100 patients annually (Baralon et al., 2021). It is therefore critical that veterinary technologists and veterinary nurses are afforded the professional recognition they have earned for their significant contribution to veterinary service delivery, particularly at a time of a national and global critical veterinarian shortage. The value of veterinary nurses (and technologists) is substantiated in international literature where there are calls to expand their scope of practice and increase their autonomy as true professionals to help mitigate the current shortage of veterinarians (RCVS, 2021; Cushing, 2022).

That said, like veterinarians, burnout rates in veterinary nurses and technologists are high with over half of veterinary nurses reporting high levels of burnout (Deacon & Brough, 2017). As well as the physical and mental health impacts on the individual, burnout has also been linked with increased medical errors, reduced productivity, and increased turnover, thereby having detrimental effects on animal welfare, staffing shortages, and business costs (Chapman et al, 2024). Contributors to burnout in veterinary nurses and technologists include low remuneration and high workloads, with a recent survey of Australian veterinary nurses and technologists showing that 70% are negatively impacted by these factors (VNCA, 2023). Ongoing workforce shortages can therefore be expected to contribute to the loss of experienced veterinary nurses and technologists from the industry and

exacerbate the current situation. Professional recognition, along with increased remuneration and defined career pathways, would go a long way to addressing the high attrition rates and reduced job satisfaction of veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists. Accurate representation in government data and ANZSCO Codes classifications are an also important element of professional recognition.

Recommendations

Based on the above evidence, 'The Educators' request in-depth stakeholder engagement with the occupation of Veterinary Nurse to determine the true status of this emerging profession in Australia including their recognised qualifications and titles ('veterinary nurses' and 'veterinary technologists'), the nature and extent of skills shortages, the reasons for those shortages and formulating solutions. The following key stakeholders should be consulted:

1. Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia.
2. Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)
3. Bachelor of Veterinary Technology and Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing graduates in key industry positions.
4. Veterinary Nurses and Technologists with a Veterinary Technician Specialisation.
5. The Working Party for the national registration and regulation of veterinary technologists and nurses in Australia (To be advised).
6. Program Directors/Coordinators at educational institutions delivering bachelor's degrees in veterinary technology and veterinary nursing.
7. Employers of graduate Veterinary Technologists and Veterinary Nurses.

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Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms

This glossary has been provided to assist the reader’s understanding of the titles ascribed to bachelor’s degree qualified graduates from the Bachelor of Veterinary Technology and Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing in Australia— distinct from Certificate IV and Diploma qualified veterinary nurses trained in the Vocational Education and Training sector.

Term	Definition
<i>Veterinary nurse</i>	According to the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, a ‘veterinary nurse’ is one who holds a formally recognised veterinary nursing qualification. The current Australian national qualification for Veterinary Nursing is the Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing. Additional qualifications include a Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing, Associate Degree of Veterinary Nursing, Diploma of Veterinary Nursing (General Practice), Diploma of Veterinary Nursing (Emergency and Critical Care), Diploma of Veterinary Nursing (Surgical) and Diploma of Veterinary Nursing (Dental).
<i>Veterinary technologist</i>	A formal title for a graduate of the three-year Bachelor of Veterinary Technology in Australia based on titles used by the American Veterinary Medical Association. Not commonly used.
<i>Veterinary technician</i>	A commonly used title for graduates of the Bachelor of Veterinary Technology in Australia.
<i>Allied veterinary health professionals</i>	A group title for all bachelor’s degree qualified graduates (Bachelor of Veterinary Technology and Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing) in Australia.
<i>Higher education</i>	Australia’s higher education (HE) system is made up of universities and other institutions that play a critical role in fueling innovation, driving productivity and giving students the skills they need for future success (Department of Education Skills & Employment, 2021).
<i>Vocational education and training</i>	Vocational Education & Training (VET) sector qualifications are outcome-based and focus on the occupational skills and competencies gained, and are provided by government institutions, called Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, as well as private institutions. The Certificate IV and Diploma of Veterinary Nursing are VET Qualifications.

Appendix 2: Educator Biographies









