

HOW LOVE OF ROWING STEERED CAREER OF LEADING ACADEMIC

Author : Joel Dudley

Categories : [Vets](#)

Date : May 23, 2011

Joel Dudley interviews Quintin McKellar, vice-chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire, about what has motivated him throughout his life

MANY vets seem to decide on their career long before they can spell the word veterinarian and those heading for academia often know soon into their undergraduate degree that they would like to take a PhD.

But Quintin McKellar, who has been RVC principal and director of the Moredun Research Institute, and is now vice-chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire, admits it was a passion for rowing rather than a steadfast ambition that led him into academia. Not only did his love of rowing encourage him to become a leading light in veterinary science and British education, it also took him to the 1986 Commonwealth Games, where he rowed for Scotland. The 52-year-old Glasgow graduate has lost none of his enthusiasm for the sport and still rows for a club in Hertfordshire.

As a boy growing up in rural Scotland he helped vets when they came to his family's farm, but he didn't decide on a veterinary degree until towards the end of his time at school. He said: "My dad was a sheep farmer and I came from a hill sheep farm in the west of Scotland, which was about as close to being peasant farmers as you could be in Britain. My dad was enthusiastic that I didn't become a farmer.

"I enjoyed working with the animals and helping vets when they came up to the place, but I wasn't one of the people who thought he was going to be a vet from the age of four. I made my decisions

later, when I started to think about whether to go to university and which one.”

Fabulous school

Recalling his years as a Glasgow undergraduate, postgraduate and young academic, he said: “I loved my time at Glasgow – it’s a fabulous vet school and I had a really great time there. Towards the end of my degree I took up rowing and, as I wanted to continue with this, I took the opportunity to do a PhD in parasitology, so I could stay in Glasgow. I was still doing a bit of rowing at the end of that time so I was keen to stay on again for a while after the PhD. The Commonwealth Games were coming up and I was rowing for Scotland and I thought the games was a good target to aim for.

“A job came up in the department of veterinary pharmacology. The head of department, Jim Bogan, was also an athlete – he was a great runner. I guess he kind of knew that part of my incentive for staying on was sports-driven. I remember him saying at the interview, ‘If you come would you commit to five years?’ and I agreed to this if they took me on. I loved the teaching and loved the research I did in the department.”

So, would he have taken a PhD and become an academic if it wasn’t for his passion for rowing? “No, I would have been a cow vet for sure. The only real incentive for me staying on was my sport, but that’s not to say I was unenthusiastic about the research as I thoroughly enjoyed it, unravelling experiments and seeing the outcomes.”

Commenting on his team’s performance at the Commonwealth Games, he said: “We came fifth in two events – I did the men’s eights and the men’s coxless fours. We were beaten in both events by the big bears of the rowing world, who were Australia, England, Canada and New Zealand. I thought we did pretty well – in the eights we were 10 seconds behind Australia, who went on that year to become world champions.”

Prof McKellar has passed on his enthusiasm for rowing to his four children and he still rows competitively. “I row for a lovely little club in Broxbourne on the River Lea. We like to call ourselves masters, but we are actually geriatric.”

Role change

Prof McKellar’s role at Glasgow changed dramatically in 1988 as a result of the sudden death of the head of his department. “Very sadly, my boss, Jim Bogan, was run over and killed. So I was, unexpectedly, asked to take on the role of head of the department of veterinary pharmacology. I enjoyed the job very much. I guess it was because I had that responsibility that when the directorship of Moredun Research Institute came up, I was able to get it. For me, at the time, it was just manna from heaven – I couldn’t believe I had got that job as young as I was.

“Moredun is such a wonderful little institute with an extraordinary history. It was established by farmers in the 1920s and, essentially, farmers have had a controlling part in running it. It has done a great deal of the fundamental research into animal diseases and developed many vaccines over the years. I was at Moredun for seven years and they were very happy years.”

Asked if healthy competition between the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh extended to Moredun, Prof McKellar replied: “It went beyond being a healthy competitiveness – it was a bloodthirsty competitiveness between Glasgow and Edinburgh. After I moved to Edinburgh I went back to visit Glasgow and one of my former colleagues said my move to Edinburgh had raised the IQ of both cities.”

Prof McKellar left Moredun in 2004 to become RVC principal, a position he held until becoming vice-chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire in January.

Reflecting on his time at the RVC, Prof McKellar said: “I had seven very happy years at the RVC. It’s an extraordinary organisation. Its independence gives it great flexibility and also means it has to live or die by its own efforts. There are no safety nets as there are with most multifaculty universities. Because the University of London has these independent colleges, such as the RVC, we had to fight for everything we got. The college is full of extremely hardworking, energetic, dynamic individuals who are always happy to embrace change. There was continual change during the time I was there.”

Regarding the economic and political context in which the RVC functioned for much of the time he was there, and highlighting the impact of the economic downturn, Prof McKellar said: “The first five of seven years I was there were years of general prosperity for higher education when there were large amounts of money being put into the system and, in particular, into infrastructure. So there was a great deal of development, building and renewal of old buildings going on at the college.”

In relation to the growing number of RVC students and number of veterinary graduates in the UK, Prof McKellar said: “Was it a good thing to grow an organisation like the RVC? There were two factors that bore down on that. One was, ‘Is there actually a demand in the market for an increased number of vets?’ and the second was, ‘Is it more efficient and effective to run an organisation with a larger number of students and, consequently, a higher budget?’

“For the former it did appear to us, and we’ve been proven right, that there was capacity in the market. The other veterinary schools, with the possible exception of Cambridge, have since increased their numbers. It remains to be seen if, in the long term, as the number of graduate vets increases, the market can bear that number. What I would say, however, is that the veterinary programme is a very flexible degree. It has intellectual flexibility so people can do other things, even if the veterinary market does reach capacity.

“In terms of critical mass and the efficiencies of scale that the growth in student numbers gave the

college, it was fantastic. It certainly allowed much more flexibility in developing new programmes and allowed building and expansion.”

Progressive

Despite the RVC being the first veterinary school in Britain and one of the oldest in the world, Prof McKellar is adamant the degrees offered and teaching methods are among the most progressive. “Without question, the RVC has the most modern, well thought out, carefully crafted curriculum of any of the veterinary schools. It has a fabulous spiralling, scaffold curriculum, which allows kids to come in as dependent learners into an environment that converts them into independent learners. It’s a super curriculum – and one of the best in the world.”

Given this enthusiasm, why did he leave? “I’d been there for seven years. I’m only 52, so I could have been there for another 12 or 15 years, but I don’t think that would have been good for the RVC to have one principal for that length of time, or for me. The opportunity came up at the University of Hertfordshire, which is a fabulous university. It’s only six miles from home, so I didn’t have to move house and upset the family.

“Good fun”

“It’s a much bigger job in terms of the complexity and size of the organisation and it’s fantastic coming from a mono-discipline into a multi-discipline institution. Walking round and seeing all the aeronautical engineers and historians, fashion designers, rocket builders and the nursing faculty is such good fun.”

Being involved in setting tuition fee rates has been a key task during Prof McKellar’s first months at Hertfordshire. However, as a veterinary scientist, one of his primary concerns is the impact rising fees will have on students and graduates. “The Government has spoken to various mortgage companies that have said that the average debt burden on students will not put them off giving mortgages to graduates in the future. I wonder if that will be the case for veterinary students, because of the significantly higher level of debt they will have.

“I suspect most vets are so vocationally driven that they will continue to do what they would like to do. But, in any sector, eventually the financial realities of life impact. If people genuinely can’t afford to make a living that covers their debt repayment and everything else, they will not do that job – they will do something else. There is a potential risk in that respect, but it will be offset largely by the desire that many people have to become vets and work in that environment. It’s almost a lifestyle choice.”

An even greater concern to Prof McKellar is the impact of graduate debt levels on those seeking to undertake postgraduate work and go into academia. He said: “Vets are graduating with very significant debt levels and then being asked to do another three years, at very low salary rates, for

a PhD. I think people are forgetting that, as well as the impact it will have on your earning potential at the start of your career, it will also impact on your pensionable service at the end. Anyone who has a veterinary degree plus a PhD will have done at least eight years without paying into a pension. You would have to have an awfully big return thereafter and pay significantly more than average to bring up your pension contributions over the shorter number of years you have left. If you choose to become an academic it's not as if your earning potential is going to be terribly high. The only other option is the pharmaceutical industry."

Prof McKellar was succeeded at the RVC by Stuart Reid, who was one of his students. Prof Reid was dean of the University of Glasgow's School of Veterinary Medicine from 2005 until becoming RVC principal. Paying tribute to him, Prof McKellar said: "I was pleased with Stuart's appointment, not only because he's from Glasgow. He clearly is a dynamic, experienced, energetic and committed person who will, I think, do a fantastic job."