Modular CertAVP: horses for courses

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Claire Milligan explains why approaches to this qualification have been updated and outlines participants’ feedback on new study options for modules

CANDIDATES working towards the modular postgraduate Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (CertAVP) say flexibility is key to the success of the qualification.

Introduced in November, the CertAVP has replaced the RCVS Certificate as the first level of postgraduate qualification that the RCVS awards. Like its predecessor, it is designed as a broad foundation from which vets can then deepen their studies and progress towards a postgraduate diploma and – for the ambitious – a fellowship.

If you are part way through the old-style certificate, though, don’t worry; you can still complete it under the old rules.

The modular qualification gives vets much more choice about how and what they study, and means that vets have a choice between pursuing either a general CertAVP or – by choosing appropriate modules and submitting to a final assessment – a named or “designated” certificate. Alternatively, vets can simply take individual modules and build up credits over time in any of the subjects that interest them.

Freda Andrews, head of education at the RCVS, says: “We think this is an improvement on the previous system, in which you were forced to choose one subject route and stick to it no matter how your career changed. For example, if you move from a mixed to a small animal practice, you can now choose modules that reflect your changing interests. All modules will be listed in full on the
certificate, so it will be clear which subjects have been studied.”

Although the RCVS has developed or approved the content of all the modules, and candidates still need to enrol with the RCVS – which awards the qualification – module assessments are now done by RCVS-accredited universities, rather than by the RCVS. For the CertAVP, vets now have 10 years in which to complete the qualification – twice as long as under the old arrangements.

“I started an RCVS certificate in veterinary cardiology in the late 1990s but then moved abroad for a few years and never finished it,” says Bronwen Eastwood, who is enrolled at the RVC for the RCVS CertAVP (Small Animal Medicine).

“I work 35 hours a week in a busy small animal practice and have two small children, so there’s little time for extra studying,” Bronwen explains, and also notes the “lack of tight time constraints” and opportunities for distance learning under the new arrangements.

Rachael Winder, one of the first candidates to complete modules at the RVC towards the new qualification, is also enthusiastic.

“I’m a bit of a technophobe and initially I was doubtful about the distance learning,” she says. “But it’s been excellent and, as I’m based in Lancashire, it’s cut down study-related travel.”

Rachael was considering postgraduate study and chose to wait for the modular system to come in, which she thinks is “a better fit with the realities of small animal practice”.

She adds: “I had heard the old small animal certificates could be difficult to complete without a lot of back up from your practice.”

Subject variety

Harriet Thomas, enrolled on the CertAVP (Emergency and Critical Care) at the RVC, likes the modular approach. “It covers a really diverse range of subjects – not just the very academic, but also topics like practice management,” she says.

Around 80 modules are available, with many modules on offer at more than one university. Since October, the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool and the West of England (in conjunction with Hartpury College), have joined the RVC and the universities of Middlesex and Cambridge to be able to offer assessments and courses. These institutions report growing interest in the CertAVP and, since enrolment for the modular certificate in November, the RCVS has signed up 229 vets.

Rachel Whittington, director of extramural veterinary education at the University of Edinburgh’s Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, says her department has taken around 100 enquiries.
Jill Macdonald, course coordinator at the University of Liverpool’s department of clinical veterinary science, says she “already has many bookings, mainly for a complete equine certificate, but also for separate modules where candidates are enrolled for other modules elsewhere”. She confirms that candidates can still enrol for new equine and key skills modules starting soon.

At the University of the West of England, modules will be assessed at Hartpury College, and the first cohort of candidates will enrol in the spring. Modules that have been agreed so far include small animal practice, production animal practice, equine practice and professional and clinical key skills.

For vets who don’t want to go the whole hog and get the certificate, taking individual modules can be useful to stay abreast of best practice and develop their skills. It is also an excellent way of fulfilling the RCVS’ CPD requirements.

“All vets need to maintain their competence in the areas in which they work,” says Freda. “This underpins the requirement for CPD. You can count study for any of the CertAVP modules towards your CPD requirement, whether or not you enrol for the full certificate.”

How does it work?

Vets can choose to be assessed for different modules at the RCVS-accredited universities. To count modules taken towards the certificate, vets need to enrol online (at www.rcvs.org.uk/modular) before being assessed. Since the certificate is designed to carry on where the Professional Development Phase (PDP) leaves off, newly qualified practitioners must complete their PDP before they can enrol. Vets must have had at least three years of practice experience before they can be awarded the full qualification.

Modules are split into three categories: A, B and C. Vets need to gain at least 60 credits to qualify. Of these 60 credits, 20 must come from two compulsory core modules: clinical key skills and professional key skills. Vets then need a further 40 credits from the B and C-list modules, with at least 10 coming from B list modules (see chart).

The two compulsory modules are broad based and aim to cover ground that all vets need to work effectively in practice, including topics such as welfare, clinical audit and emergency care, as well as sometimes undervalued skills, such as business management and communication.

The C modules are more tightly focused to let vets finetune their studies. Modules can be taken in any order, although as the C modules have a narrower scope, it may make sense to do the broader-based A and B modules first. Most “designated” certificates also require a separate final (synoptic) assessment once all the modules have been passed. However, the CertAVP title is available without this for those who prefer to select a broader mix of modules.
We sometimes get asked: if the old-style certificate system wasn’t broke, why did we fix it? The answer is simple: the system needed an overhaul to fit the realities of modern practice and everyday life. Freda says: “Vets can now tailor their studies to suit their own interests and practice needs – and change direction as their plans change. We understand that people have to juggle the needs of modern practice with their family lives, and we hope that giving more choice about studies and making additional time available to complete the certificate will help.”

By extending accreditation to institutions beyond the traditional veterinary schools, and encouraging universities to work in partnership with subject-expert organisations, organisers are trying to increase opportunities for assessment in different subject areas as well as locations. Middlesex University, for example, has taken this opportunity to team up with training provider Vet Learning. Around 40 candidates have signed up for assessment on the core modules and some for its CertAVP(VetGP) programme.

Vet Learning director Chris Whipp says he is enthusiastic about providing “an evidence-based programme to recognise the unique skills of the veterinary general practitioner”. He says the first candidates will complete the core modules within the next three months, with the first cohort taking the CertAVP (VetGP) due to qualify next July.

All universities must offer an assessment-only option for vets wishing to self study for modules. However, allowing the universities to assess also encourages universities to offer different study methods, such as e-learning, self study, practical workshops and more traditional courses. At the University of Liverpool, for example, the new equine module courses can be taken purely by e-learning or with practical workshops too.

“Before, it was a difficult step to fit the certificate into a busy practice,” says Catherine McGowan, an RCVS-recognised specialist in equine medicine, who emphasises the effectiveness of e-learning in a modular system that “brings the support of peers and mentors into the vet’s own practice”.

Those involved in developing the new qualification have worked hard to ensure standards stay as high as they were under the old postgraduate certificates. Assessment is subject to external quality control and the expertise of universities has been drawn upon to deliver assessment.

“It is understandable that vets considering enrolling for modules would like to know as much as possible about the standard and the process of the assessment,” says Matthew Pead, academic director for professional appraisal and development at the RVC. “Candidates will find the level of assessment similar to the previous certificate structure. This will be easiest to observe in areas where there is a direct comparison, such as the specific C modules.”

Dr Pead says the certificate has been “carefully structured so there is no ‘easy route’”.
“Which ever route a candidate chooses to take through the variety of module options, the amount and level of assessment will be similar,” he explains. “Flexibility comes from allowing candidates to work at their own pace, because the new assessments measure standards, rather than the pace at which candidates study.”

Ava Firth, course director for the emergency and critical care modules at the University of Glasgow’s faculty of veterinary medicine, agrees. “It is brilliant to be able to give people a path to higher education that lets them progress at their own pace,” she says. “The modular system has a lot of potential.”

Best-practice approaches have naturally been updated, and the syllabus content reflects these changes. Unlike the old system, where failure in one part meant a vet needed to retake the entire exam, individual modules can be retaken. It is hoped that these changes will help vets fit their studies with the needs of busy practices and modern family responsibilities. After all, the RCVS wants to see more veterinary surgeons who start the certificate complete it.

• Further information is available at www.rcvs.org.uk/modcerts
The structure of the modular certificate, showing the three categories: A, B and C.
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