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## British Veterinary Union in Unite (BVU) Proposals for the Future of EMS (AHEMS and CEMS)

Throughout this document, we refer to EMS (Extra Mural Studies) and further define EMS as AHEMS (Pre-Clinical/Animal Husbandry Extra Mural Studies) and CEMS (Clinical Extra Mural Studies). When we refer to EMS, we mean both AHEMS & CEMS.

### Summary of Proposals

#### AHEMS & CEMS:

The BVU vision for **AHEMS** of the future is for a larger portion of animal handling experience to be built into term-time teaching, reducing the number of weeks of AHEMS required. AHEMS should *not* be the main source of animal handling education. Instead, animal handling should be part of the course, taught by **qualified and certified educators**. Universities should allocate time within the academic year for AHEMS placements to be completed, and students should not be expected to undertake mandatory AHEMS placements during their holidays.

The BVU vision for **CEMS** of the future is a set number of weeks of integrated term-time placements in Veterinary practices, at safe, accredited, and quality-assured workplaces. Placements should be organised by the course providers and be within easy commuting distance of the student's home or term-time address, or with independent accommodation provided at no extra cost to the student.

These changes would allow students to have their holidays free for downtime and holiday jobs and would remove the financial burden of EMS from students almost entirely.

The BVU recognises that these proposals would create extra work and costs for the universities but feel this is reasonable. Students are paying to receive a degree in



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Veterinary medicine and if the requirement (set by the RCVS) is a number of placement weeks, then it should be an integrated part of the course, as is the case for students of human healthcare professional roles.

### Accommodation:

The BVU believes that where students cannot commute, **independent** accommodation is vital for students on EMS placements, and if this is not provided adequately by the placement, the universities should provide each student with a budget or provide its own accommodation (this could be easily managed in a manner similar to claiming expenses with an employer for accommodation while undertaking CPD with a maximum budget per night).

Our definition of independent accommodation is that the student has access to a lockable bedroom, a lockable bathroom, and basic cooking facilities. Students should not be reliant on placement providers for food. Accommodation could be on-site, or off-site with a reasonable commute. **These basic accommodation requirements are a necessity for student safeguarding whilst on EMS placements.**

### Safety & Working Hours:

Students should never be made to feel that they must stay on an unsafe placement, and should they need to leave part way through a placement for any reason, hours completed should be accepted by the university, without exception.

Students on EMS placements should not be expected to work more than 40 hours per week and should receive rest in line with the Working Time Regulations which apply to employed adults. Flexible working patterns and reasonable adjustments must be available to all students. It should be the responsibility of the university, and the RCVS in the case of CEMS, to ensure EMS placement providers are aware of and comply with these requirements. This empowers students to enter the world of work with an understanding of a healthy work-life balance, which will improve retention in the Veterinary profession going forward.



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*The Veterinary sector is suffering a mental health crisis; although this crisis is multi-factorial, poor terms and conditions of employment and poor work-life balance are certainly contributory factors. By expecting students, as the current AHEMS and CEMS systems do, to work long hours with inadequate breaks during the working day and inadequate rest periods each week, term, and year, we are teaching the next generation of Vets that this is the norm. Many students are burnt-out before they even join the workforce, setting them up for exploitation as new graduates. The BVU is passionate about affording students on placement the same rights they will have as employees.*

## **CEMS Administration:**

The BVU believes that it would be sensible to have a central CEMS administration system, arranged collaboratively between the universities and the RCVS. This could be implemented in **two stages**: the first stage would continue to expect students to book their own placements but to do so through a centralised booking system, which could be developed to also include student and placement feedback. The second stage would be implementing a central team to organise placement booking across the country, with each university providing at least one member of staff to work in this centralised operation, plus some additional staffing from the RCVS.

The BVU accepts this would be a huge undertaking, and understands changes cannot be made overnight, but students are the future of the profession, and CEMS in its current state is not fit for purpose. This system would modernise CEMS and bring the veterinary profession in line with human healthcare education.



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## CEMS Quality Assurance:

The BVU believes that quality assurance and recognition of CEMS providers must be addressed. CEMS accreditation standards could be built in the Practice Standards Scheme (PSS), allowing participating practices to advertise their achievement of the award – we believe this would be a prestigious award for practices to publicise, as it would increase their recruitment prospects as well as being seen favourably by clients.

This could be linked to the VetGDP programme but needs to include practice-wide training modules for all staff, as well as Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) training. Over time, the CEMS accreditation scheme could become mandatory in order to achieve other PSS awards, to ensure the number of CEMS providers remained adequate for the growing number of veterinary schools, and students.

The scheme could also provide some recognition for the great work practices are doing in hosting and mentoring CEMS students, and other rewards could be built into the scheme over time, including CPD discounts from the RCVS and the universities whose students would be benefiting. The BVU does not believe the RCVS should be rewarding CEMS provision with direct funding.



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Contents of the full policy document:

[Summary of proposals](#) ..... Page 1-4

[Contents](#) ..... Page 5

[The current state of EMS](#) ..... Page 6

[What is the BVU vision for AHEMS in the future?](#) ..... Page 7

[What is the BVU vision for CEMS in the future?](#) ..... Page 10

[RCVS EMS database](#) ..... Page 12

[Funding for EMS](#) ..... Page 14

[Recognition for CEMS providers/ accreditation](#) ..... Page 15

[Appendix 1](#) ..... Page 17



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## The current state of EMS

It is common knowledge that the current system of EMS has a number of problems which need to be addressed. Many other organisations and individuals have produced in-depth documents on these issues, and we do not wish to focus here on problems, but on solutions, and an EMS vision that is fit for the future.

However, it is prudent to outline our main concerns, as our vision is created in order to address them.

The BVU is particularly concerned about safeguarding issues on EMS placements – including sexual harassment, discrimination, inadequate health and safety, long working hours, inadequate breaks, and inadequate accommodation. There are also numerous accessibility issues for disabled students on EMS placements.

We are concerned that by subjecting veterinary students to such conditions, almost invariably during time that should be for rest (university holidays), we are setting these students up to normalise exploitative working conditions and often to be burnt out before they've even entered the veterinary sector as employees. **If, as a profession, we seek to improve the retention of veterinary surgeons, we must start by revolutionising EMS.**

EMS is incredibly expensive to students, and the costs associated with EMS placements are a source of inequality among students. There is also inequality associated with the procurement of EMS placements, and in the way EMS placement attendance is handled by some of the universities.

There is a real variability of learning experiences on EMS placements, with no real quality assurance in place.

Additionally, those who provide EMS placements, particularly CEMS, receive no recognition, and within the practices that provide CEMS, those who take on the responsibility of mentoring and teaching students report this is undervalued within their teams.

Finally, one of the key issues appears to be the lack of responsibility for EMS on all sides – from practices to course providers to the RCVS.



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## What is the BVU vision for AHEMS in the future?

The BVU vision for AHEMS of the future is for a larger portion of the animal handling experience to be built into the course, reducing the number of weeks of AHEMS required.

Animal handling varies hugely between different farms and other animal organisations, and the BVU does not believe this is a reliable method of teaching. **Animal handling should be taught as part of the course, by qualified and certified educators.** This teaching should be integrated into the course and provided via a mixture of teaching modalities, such as lectures, time spent on university farms, and practical sessions.

AHEMS should *not* be the main source of animal handling education, and including animal handling as part of the course allows students to practice skills throughout the year, rather than in concentrated bouts which are more easily forgotten.

The BVU appreciates that some animal handling is taught in this manner, but overall, there is too much reliance on AHEMS. There is a large scope for universities to expand and improve their animal handling teaching, and to take responsibility for ensuring students are taught this safely and correctly.

One way in which this could be implemented is for universities to build relationships with nearby farms, in a partnership capacity. This still allows students to be provided with the opportunity to gain “real world” experience of working farms and other animal handling environments, whilst the university takes responsibility for ensuring learning objectives are taught correctly, safely, and accessibly within the structure of the course. The development of partner farm relationships would allow universities to better safeguard students.

In this instance we are referring to partner farms being used as part of the animal handling teaching within term-time, rather than offering AHEMS placements to some students.

**Universities should allocate time within the academic year for AHEMS placements to be completed, and students should not be expected to undertake mandatory AHEMS placements during their holidays.** These changes should remove the financial burden



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of AHEMS from students almost entirely. AHEMS placements should be organised by the course provider, and course providers must take responsibility for ensuring placements are safe, accessible and satisfy the learning requirements.

Due to the lack of RCVS jurisdiction for farms, and the large number of safety concerns which are raised to us (predominantly around farm AHEMS), **we believe the university/ course provider should provide funding for independent accommodation for students on AHEMS, if this is not provided adequately by the placement** (this could be easily managed in a manner similar to claiming expenses for with an employer for accommodation while undertaking CPD with a maximum budget per night).

Independent accommodation – could be on-site, but it is paramount the student has access to a lockable clean bedroom, a lockable clean bathroom, and basic cooking facilities. Students should not be reliant on placement providers for food. Some may feel these are basic requirements for accommodation, but unfortunately, they are often not met.

Student safeguarding must be the priority, and students having access to independent accommodation (as detailed above) is paramount to ensuring safety.

Students should never be made to feel that they must stay on an unsafe placement, and should they need to leave part way through a placement for any reason, hours completed should be automatically accepted by the university.

Students on AHEMS placements should not be expected to work more than 40 hours per week and should receive rest in line with the Working Time Regulations which apply to employed adults. Flexible working patterns and reasonable adjustments must be available to all students. It should be the responsibility of the university to ensure placement providers are aware of and comply with these requirements.

This empowers students to enter the world of work with an understanding of a healthy work-life balance, improving retention in the Veterinary profession going forward.

The BVU proposes that with the changes detailed above, AHEMS could be reduced to 4 weeks. **However, it is important to note that the exact number of weeks of AHEMS is not the most important change the BVU wants to see – it's the integration of the**





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placements into term time, the provision of independent accommodation at no additional cost to the student, and greater responsibility for proper animal handling teaching from the course provider in formats other than AHEMS placements.

The BVU recognises that these proposals would create extra work and costs for the universities but feel this is reasonable. Students are paying to receive a degree in Veterinary medicine and if the requirement (set by the RCVS) is a number of placement weeks, then it should be an integrated part of the course, as is the case for students of human healthcare professional roles.



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## What is the BVU vision for CEMS in the future?

The BVU vision for CEMS of the future is a set number of weeks of integrated term time placements in Veterinary practices, at safe, accredited, and quality-assured workplaces. Placements should be organised by the course providers and be within easy commuting distance of the student's home or term-time address, or with accommodation provided at no extra cost to the student.

This would allow students to have their holidays free for downtime and holiday jobs and would remove the financial burden of CEMS from students almost entirely.

The BVU recognises that these proposals would create extra work and costs for the universities but feel this is reasonable. Students are paying to receive a degree in Veterinary medicine and if the requirement (set by the RCVS) is a number of placement weeks, then it should be an integrated part of the course, as is the case for students of human healthcare professional roles.

Placements being organised by the universities would create a level playing field for students from all backgrounds.

The BVU proposes a centralised system for placement allocation, which would be overseen by the RCVS. However, if this is within the remit of the universities, they must ensure the systems they put in place for placement allocation are fair and equitable; for example: prioritising students with only a term-time address for placements close to the university or with accommodation provided, and prioritising disabled students for those placements which meet their accessibility criteria.

This central CEMS administration system, to be arranged collaboratively between the universities and the RCVS, could be implemented in **two stages**: the first stage would continue to expect students to book their own placements but to do so through a centralised booking system, which could be developed to also include student and placement feedback. The second stage would be implementing a central team to organise placement booking across the country, with each university providing at least one member of staff to work in this centralised operation, plus some additional staffing from the RCVS.



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VETERINARY  
UNION** in Unite



These changes proposed above are in line with placement provisions for students of human healthcare professional roles in the UK, (students do not have to source their own placements or accommodation).

The BVU proposes a placement accreditation scheme (outlined in later section). Placement providers needing accreditation would provide quality assurance, and safeguarding. Practices being able to advertise their CEMS accreditation status would allow for recognition and reward to those providing good placements which are high quality, safe and accessible.

The BVU would suggest that the CEMS time requirements are reduced to 18 weeks (6 weeks in each clinical year). **However, it is important to note that the exact number of weeks of CEMS is not the most important change the BVU wants to see – it is the integration of the placements into term time and the change from CEMS placement organisation by the student to allocated placements organised by the course provider.**

Students on CEMS placements should not be expected to work more than 40 hours per week and should receive rest in line with the Working Time Regulations which apply to employed adults. Flexible working patterns and reasonable adjustments must be available to all students. It should be the responsibility of the university to ensure placement providers are aware of and comply with these requirements.

This empowers students to enter the world of work with an understanding of a healthy work-life balance, improving retention in the Veterinary profession going forward.

*The Veterinary sector is suffering a mental health crisis; although this crisis is multi-factorial, poor terms and conditions of employment and poor work-life balance are certainly contributory factors. By expecting students, as the current AHEMS and CEMS systems do, to work long hours with inadequate breaks during the working day and inadequate rest periods each week, term, and year, we are teaching the next generation of Vets that this is the norm. Many students are burnt-out before they even join the workforce, setting them up for exploitation as new graduates. The BVU is passionate about affording students on placement the same rights they will have as employees.*



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## RCVS EMS Database

At present, each university has its own EMS database – and other databases for EMS placements exist as well. The RCVS has also proposed a new database.

For an EMS placement database created by the RCVS to be worthwhile, it must provide something the others don't. There is a real opportunity for a centralised, trustworthy database to be run by the RCVS, but if it aims to run in conjunction with databases from ten different universities (and more in the future), it is creating additional unnecessary workload, at a cost to RCVS members (both financial and in taking time away from the staff which could be better spent on other projects).

Our proposal is for the universities and the RCVS to collaborate in a much bigger project – an all-encompassing centralised EMS database, through which placements can be found and booked, as well as facilitating student assessment forms, and post-placement feedback.

The BVU understands that this would be an enormous undertaking and not feasible under the RCVS' current timeline. We believe it would be better to give this database more resources (time, research, funding, and collaboration) and create a database that satisfies a genuine need.

Any such database needs all questions for placements registered on to it to be mandatory – otherwise questions may be skipped that do not seem a priority to the placement but are to students, or marginalised groups of students.

In stage 1 where students are still booking their own placements, students should be able to search by each category on the database. Accessibility tick boxes should be included, and students should be able to search by each option on this list. ([See appendix 1](#)).

Such a database needs to be actively managed by a team of full-time staff – this could be managed with shared responsibility across the vet schools, by the RCVS itself, or by a combination of both. The latter would be the BVU's preference.



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The database **must** have feedback facilities. Feedback does not have to be publicly displayed or can be moderated prior to public display if appropriate. Feedback must be actively investigated by the team managing the database – or referred to the appropriate authorities for investigation (the RCVS or the police for example) – especially feedback raising safeguarding concerns.



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## Funding for EMS

The BVU believes that EMS provision requires further funding than it currently receives.

Primarily, we believe additional funding should be given to students directly, to cover the costs associated with travel, accommodation, and insurance. We believe these costs must be borne by the course providers, as EMS is part of the veterinary degree that students are already paying to receive.

We believe that by instituting a centralised system to manage placement organisation for students, some of these costs could be reduced.

Additionally, we believe there should be funding from the RCVS to support a centralised placement allocation system, to manage a comprehensive EMS placement database, and to support a CEMS placement provider accreditation scheme (see below).

The BVU does not believe course providers, nor the RCVS should be funding placement providers directly. We are aware there has been some discussion in the past of “direct funding,” such as a set fee per student taken on. However, we believe this would be incredibly costly, and not particularly cost-effective.

As a large number of CEMS placement providers are veterinary corporations; direct funding (as seen for NHS placements, for example) would see RCVS members’ money channelled directly into large corporations, which the BVU would not support.



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## Recognition for CEMS Providers / Accreditation

The BVU proposes a future accreditation scheme for veterinary practices providing CEMS placements. Initially we would envisage a voluntary scheme, with the possibility of becoming mandatory in the future.

Such a scheme could be linked the vetGDP scheme, as many of the same skills are needed to nurture new graduate veterinary surgeons as to mentor CEMS students. There would need to be additional training modules on supporting CEMS students specifically, and unlike the VetGDP training, much of this training should be team based to ensure the whole team is up to date on how to support CEMS students in practice. CEMS students spend a lot of time on placement with receptionists, Veterinary Care Assistants, Registered Veterinary Nurses, and other team members, who can teach them valuable skills, but we must ensure these team members have had the training to properly undertake this role.

We believe mandatory Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) training for the whole team should be built into the scheme, which will be valuable for the whole profession.

The BVU would expect training for achieving EMS accreditation status to be funded by the RCVS and have no direct cost to the practice.

The CEMS accreditation could be built in the Practice Standards Scheme (PSS), allowing participating practices to advertise their achievement of the award. We believe this would be a prestigious award for practices to publicise, as it would increase their recruitment prospects as well as being seen favourably by clients. Practices could advertise to the public as well as the rest of the profession that they are a “vet student training practice” in the same way that practices currently advertise being a “vet nurse training practice.” New graduates would know that the practice had met certain standards, which would be viewed beneficially, and students (during stage 1) would be more likely to book placements there, which is often a route to recruitment. More experienced vets might also be likely to look favourably on this award when applying for jobs.



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The scheme could also provide some recognition for the great work practices are doing in hosting and mentoring CEMS students, and other rewards could be built into the scheme over time, including CPD discounts from the RCVS and the universities whose students would be benefiting.

Having an CEMS accreditation scheme would also be the first step to building quality assurance into the EMS system for students and universities, as there is currently little to no quality assurance in terms of provision from the practice hosting students.

Over time, the CEMS accreditation scheme could become mandatory in order to achieve other PSS awards, to help ensure the number of CEMS providers remained adequate for the growing number of veterinary schools, and students.





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## Appendix 1

The BVU envisages an accessibility questionnaire as part of the proposed RCVS EMS database. Practices would be required to tick “yes” or “no” to each question. These would be mandatory fields that the practice could not leave blank when submitting their practice onto the database.

During stage 1 where students are still booking their own placements, students could filter any search results by as many of the accessibility tick boxes as they require. Then, during stage 2, placement/EMS administrators could filter search results by as many of the accessibility tick boxes that any student requires.

The BVU is working closely with Affinity Futures, BVCIS, BVEDS, BVLGBT+ and Unite’s equalities teams to create a comprehensive guide for the RCVS on what these questions would include. We hope this will allow a range of invested individuals and groups to contribute to this accessibility questionnaire. Some examples are listed below and are by no means exhaustive – we welcome any contributions individuals may have to add, please email them to [bvu@unitetheunion.org](mailto:bvu@unitetheunion.org) with the subject as “EMS Accessibility”.

- Is the practice wheelchair accessible?
- Is there a hearing aid loop available at the practice?
- Does the practice have an accessible toilet?
- Is there a team member who can use BSL?
- Is the placement able to provide a seat for the student whilst watching consultations and surgery?
- Are there gender-neutral toilets?
- Does the practice have a sanitary station in the bathrooms?
- Is there a quiet room or space where students can take a break if they become overwhelmed? (Separate to the staff room)
- Is there a public access green space within 5-minute walk of the practice?
- Are there parking facilities?
- Is the practice accessible by public transport?
- Does the practice have height adjustable tables in consult rooms and theatre?