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Introduction

To attain essential 'day one' skills, veterinary students gain experience in the clinical workplace. This project seeks to gain a critical understanding of the clinical workplace from the student and placement provider perspectives, as part of the 'Enhancing Clinical Learning in the Workplace' (ECLW) project. This is a collaborative project between the Royal Veterinary College (University of London) and the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science (University of Nottingham).

Methods

A pilot study was conducted with a group of five final year students and their rotation leaders on the 'Small Animal Surgery and Radiology' rotation at the Queen Mother Animal Hospital (RVC), to trial different research methods and to gain insights into workplace learning. Unstructured and structured observations, interviews and a focus group were used, and data collected using a digital audio recorder, a FLIP digital video recorder and a notebook.

Results

Each of the research methods used in the study had strengths and weaknesses which were demonstrated in the pilot. The team members at RVC and SVMS considered these and a decision was determined about which methods would be suitable for the main study.

Emerging themes - examples

Staff hierarchy within the hospital

"I think that there is a difference in what you get from each [member of staff], with the interns and the nurses you are able to practice techniques but with the clinicians and the residents, it is more knowledge based learning. The clinician will take the whole general picture, you do the work up with the resident like the consult, you put in the catheters with the intern and then you do the surgery with the clinician."

Day one skills

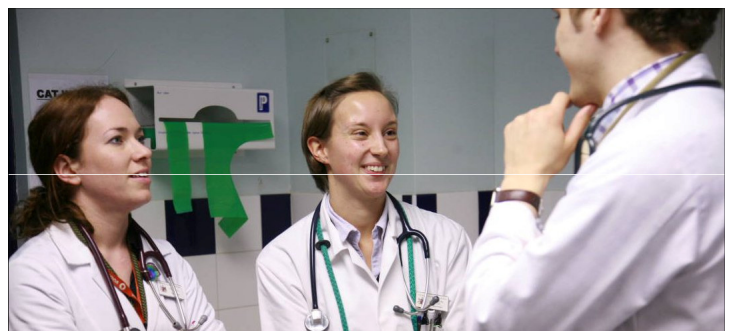
"The day one skill recording sheets should be brought into all the rotations, I think they would really help us remember what we had done, and really look at what we need to practice."

Student group dynamics

"Gender of a group is really important, the mixed groups tend to work better together, the girls do work harder than us but we often bring a relaxed atmosphere if things are getting pressured ... we try to bring enjoyment to the rotation and to work through any stress or worries that do arise as a group."

Research methods	Strength	Weakness
Structured observations	Developing a structured table before data collection is relatively free of observer bias.	A pre-designed table with responses may miss interactions and ignores change or development.
Unstructured observations	Provides personal first-hand experience of the role and heightens understanding of it.	There is the possibility that you can collect too much data, which requires extensive time to transcribe and analyse.
Focus groups	Discussions in a group setting will allow for interactions and issues to arise which may not have been accessible in an interview.	Members of a focus group can move off topic quickly and focus on less important issues, therefore the facilitator has less control.
Interviews	These allow for gathering an in-depth view of an individual's experiences.	Interviews on a one to one basis are time consuming, and the data entry is more resource intensive than for focus groups.

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of the research methods



©RVC, photographs do not show students in this study

Conclusion

Different research methods were piloted in the clinical workplace to determine which ones would be feasible for the main study. Unstructured observations worked well and allowed the researcher to compile a profile of the student group and the placement provider. Structured observations proved to be unpractical and unreliable in the active hospital environment and will therefore be omitted for the main study. The focus group engaged the students in a meaningful discussion; however, it was decided that pre- and post- interviews would best capture individual experiences and detect whether a change had occurred in terms of student learning.