

Reframing veterinary expertise: Science within the veterinary curriculum in Liverpool, 1904-1930

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This paper explores the changes that took place within British veterinary education in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Most significantly, this period saw veterinary education move from the private domain into the public – university – system. For the British veterinary profession, education resonated with special meaning: the private school system of the nineteenth century had established and maintained the profession's emancipation from medicine and distinguished the veterinarian from empirics. Private schools and the 'one portal' system were seen by many as vital to the autonomy and identity of the profession. The incorporation of veterinary training within universities therefore proved highly controversial, reflecting fears about the loss of control over entry into the profession, the demise of the 'veterinary art' and subordination to medicine within the university system. There were also concerns about the implications of university affiliation for the character of the profession and its practitioners, along lines of class and gender. Overall, the paper contributes fresh insights into the changing landscape of British veterinary education in a period in which the foundations were laid for a scientifically trained and research-oriented veterinary profession.

The paper highlights how institutional politics and professional interests exercised profound influence over the scope and pace of change. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of the changing 'market' for veterinary expertise, for example, declining demand for equine expertise and rising demand for companion animal medicine, and the evolving role of the veterinarian, for example, within public health, in driving educational reform. The paper focuses in particular on developments at the Liverpool Veterinary School, which as the first school to be formally integrated within the university system provides a rich site in which to explore the process of reform. Particular attention is paid to the changing content of the curriculum, notably the increasing emphasis placed on science and on clinical training, and the highly controversial introduction of the university veterinary degree. These developments coincided with wider changes – the expansion of the university system, the widening research role of universities and increased state support of research; the paper asks how these changes influenced the reform of veterinary training.

The paper begins with an analysis of the politics surrounding the inception and opening decade of the Liverpool School, established in 1904. The arguments made for and against university affiliation reveal what those on either side of the debate felt to be at stake, and cast new light on why some felt that veterinary education had to become more scientifically oriented – a reframing that, as this paper shows, was to prevail. The second section documents the establishment in Liverpool in 1914 of the university-based BVSc degree; comparison between this university qualification and the MRCVS Diploma provides fresh insights into the evolving content of the veterinary curriculum. The final part of the paper charts developments in Liverpool during the 1920s, focusing on the expansion of laboratory and clinical training, and the inception and impact of a new veterinary hospital, opened in 1929. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relationship between curricular reform and the changing market for veterinary expertise, and how both related to veterinary practice.

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