

UP caps SA's first cohort of veterinary nursing graduates

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UP is the only university in Africa that provides training for veterinary nurses.

The University of Pretoria's (UP) [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#) has heralded a new chapter in the education of veterinary nurses in South Africa by conferring veterinary nursing degrees (BVetNurs) on the country's first group of graduates.

The class of 2021 recently participated in the oath-taking ceremony, which was delayed as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. "We are celebrating this important milestone in the history of the Faculty of Veterinary Science and the country, and congratulate the class of 2021 with the achievement of a 100% pass rate," said Professor Dietmar Holm, the faculty's Deputy Dean for Teaching and Learning. "On behalf of the veterinary fraternity in South Africa, we welcome these new veterinary nurses to our community and wish them well in their careers."

As the only university in Africa that provides training for veterinary nurses, UP endeavoured to establish a modern, well-designed, integrated curriculum that was comprehensive in terms of content and educational approach, and which benchmarks well with any other veterinary nursing training programme internationally.

Formal training in veterinary nursing has been in the making at UP for decades. In 1958, Professor CFB Hofmeyr, then head of the Department of Surgery at UP's Faculty of Veterinary Science in Onderstepoort, motivated for the employment of medical nursing sisters. The appointments were granted in 1962, but the medically trained nurses experienced various shortcomings in the field. A two-man committee was then appointed to investigate the feasibility of training veterinary nurses in South Africa. Upon the recommendation of the committee, UP introduced a full-time two-year university diploma course in 1977. A revised diploma curriculum was implemented in 1995, with no subsequent changes made to the curriculum.



SA's first cohort of veterinary nursing graduates from UP had a 100% pass rate.

Years later, with the introduction of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework, the veterinary nursing diploma programme had to be reconceptualised in order to grant those with diplomas entry into postgraduate education. The Veterinary Nurses Association of South Africa petitioned the University to discontinue the two-year diploma programme and establish a three-year degree programme to afford students with a qualification in veterinary nursing the opportunity of postgraduate training. After an intricate application process, the BVetNurs degree, a professional three-year bachelor's degree, was accredited by the Council on Higher Education in September 2017.

The academic requirements of the South African Veterinary Council – as set out in the Day One Competencies (the knowledge, skills and attributes required of a veterinary nursing professional) – and the Higher Education Quality Committee were considered in the design of the curriculum, which began in November 2017. It was vital that the degree built on the strengths of the diploma, and added new and unique qualities. It was designed as a spiral integrated curriculum. This approach is also referred to as scaffolded learning, where progression is made from general theoretical veterinary principles about healthy animals to more advanced practical veterinary nursing, to the nursing of critical care patients. A backward programme design was followed, where three elements were aligned: the Day One Competencies (the starting point and desired outcome); the knowledge and skills required (the content); and valid assessment methods (related to outcomes).

During the design process, overlaps, redundancies and omissions in the diploma curriculum were identified and corrected. New topics were added, such as exotic animal and wildlife nursing, research methodology, animal welfare science, animal protection and public health. A professional skills programme has also been included, covering subjects such as self-awareness, achieving wellness, practice management and strategic client service, information management, cultural diversity and communication.

In January 2018, a macro-curriculum was approved by the BVetNurs Programme Committee, and in October 2018, a final meso- and micro-curriculum and study guides were also approved. The BVetNurs degree was successfully implemented in February 2019, with the enrolment of 38 students.

Not only has the degree built on the diploma's curriculum and included new topics, but it has also introduced new teaching approaches, which will ensure that enrolment numbers increase as the new degree matures.

The curriculum's innovative spiral integrated educational approach is its greatest strength. This allows for a deeper understanding of content and broadens its scope by blending content between disciplines so that clinical understanding and the application of real-life, multidisciplinary problems and cases can be carried out smoothly. Time is also set aside in the daily lecture roster for self-directed study, thereby shifting the emphasis from lecturer-centred teaching to student-centred learning. Greater emphasis has also been placed on hybrid/blended teaching, where some face-to-face contact time has been substituted with online learning activities.

"We celebrate with the pioneering class of 2021 and wish them well for the future," said Tamarin Fisher, President of the Veterinary Nurses Association of South Africa. "This has been the biggest milestone in the history of our 42-year-old profession. The new three-year degree will give qualified nurses the opportunity to enrol in postgraduate studies, which will hopefully culminate in the awarding of masters and PhD degrees."

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