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Distance learning from Dublin

Distance learning is growing in popularity as a method of accessing continuing education. Diane Cashman, of University College Dublin, explains that this is particularly true in Ireland where many vets and nurses live in rural communities

FOR veterinary professionals who are unable to commit to full-time campus tuition, distance learning is growing in popularity. Barriers to studying include the time and costs of travelling to university campuses. This issue is particularly noticeable for University College Dublin (UCD), as it is the only veterinary school on the island of Ireland, and many vets and nurses are located in dispersed rural communities across the country.

Veterinary medicine at UCD is exploring alternative methods to deliver graduate programmes and continuing education. Online education, for example, offers students the opportunity to study at a time and place that is flexible, thereby accommodating the busy lifestyle of a typical veterinarian.

Improving broadband infrastructure is enabling UCD to offer and deliver programmes online to veterinary practitioners across Ireland. Meanwhile, the development of online social networking technologies supports the implementation of innovative teaching and learning approaches. Online communities can be established and fostered to enable students to exchange knowledge,



Picture: Catherine McCahey

ideas and experiences in order to solve problems and discuss cases. This type of interaction between students encourages deep learning and fosters strong collaborative links.

Learner-centred approach

UCD is developing a suite of distance education programmes aimed at graduates who wish to participate in continuing education. To date, two programmes have been developed: the graduate certificate in canine sports medicine, and the graduate certificate in dairy herd health. The educational philosophy of the programmes is based on implementing a learner-centred approach to instruction to encourage self-directed learning, situational inquiry and collaborative learning. Both programmes are delivered using a blended approach that merges elements of online learning and face-to-face tuition.

The graduate certificate in canine sports medicine was designed to provide veterinary practitioners with the knowledge, skills and

attributes required for the veterinary care of racing and breeding greyhounds and other canine athletes. The programme is aimed at veterinary practitioners working, or interested in working, with racing greyhounds.

Students undertake four taught modules covering topics on the greyhound industry, canine clinical pathology and pharmacology, orthopaedics and soft tissue injuries, reproduction and breeding. Two further modules (dissertation and case log) encourage students to explore a topic of their choice and to reflect critically on their interactions with cases in their practice.

The graduate certificate in dairy herd health has been designed as a direct response to the challenges facing Ireland's dairy industry in the 21st century, and is based on the disease priority themes that have emerged from Animal Health Ireland's expert opinion (a Delphi study).

On the modern dairy farm, it is the complex interaction of diseases, their relationship with nutritional strategy and housing environment, and the fundamental influence of social and attitudinal factors that make prevention and control of these diseases such a challenge. An integrated approach to herd health will be required to address the complex issues. ▶

Students on this programme will be equipped with tools for herd data analysis, practical herd evaluation skills, and an ability to integrate the multiple facets of dairy herd health in order to develop holistic herd-level solutions that are set in the context of herd profitability and animal health and welfare. The course draws on experience gained by the UCD Dairy Herd Health Group in investigating many herd problems throughout Ireland. There are six key modules, which run consecutively and last for an eight-week period: herd health investigation skills; dairy herd fertility; nutrition and production diseases; milk quality and mastitis; calf health

and heifer rearing; and biosecurity/infectious diseases and parasite control.

These programmes are delivered over an 18-month period and use innovative online-learning activities coupled with hands-on teaching of clinical skills at the UCD Lyons Farm or the UCD Veterinary Hospital.

Ten days are scheduled over the duration of the programme for practical sessions, which students are expected to attend.

Each week, students are expected to contribute to a range of online learning activities, and this will require approximately 10 to 12 hours of work per week. The learning activities involve contributing to an online

community to discuss relevant topics in the area. The use of an online community discussion forum that will have a predetermined tutor input will assist in creating an innovative educational experience for participants. Problem-based learning will ensure that participants are exposed to relevant case study material in an environment where their peers' views and their own can be discussed to the benefit of all. Finally, some material is taught by e-lectures where participants can take the tuition at their own pace and convenience.

■ For more information, e-mail karen.holland@ucd.ie or visit www.ucd.ie/vetmed

Ten-minute chat

Simon Wolfensohn is the principal of a small animal practice in a rural town close to Swindon in Wiltshire. For almost 20 years he has divided his time between the practice and serving as a magistrate in Swindon. His other diversions from veterinary work are fly-fishing, flying and running.

What made you become a JP?

Because of a long-standing interest in the criminal law and its effect on society, and the belief that, while the rule of law is vital to a civilised existence, it is equally important that the common man is able to participate in the administration of justice. Magistrates are appointed for their personal qualities, background and experience, but above all, to my mind, to apply common sense to the law and act as a bastion against the indiscriminate power of the state. I also wanted to find an activity that would take me out of the surgery by way of providing intellectual challenges and doing something worthwhile in society. JPs are unpaid and come from all walks of life, ranging from professionals to postmen, and are broadly representative of society generally, so my veterinary degree had no bearing on my appointment.

How did your involvement develop?

Since being sworn in I have become very involved in all aspects of the magistracy – it's one of those things that can easily take over your life! Sitting in court, training and participating in all the other activities with which magistrates are involved provides many transferable skills that are of use in the veterinary world, especially with respect to staff management and talking to clients. At the moment I am chairman of the Bench in Swindon, which involves a large number of meetings dealing with administrative

matters, representing the views of the local magistracy to Her Majesty's Court Service, which runs the show, and in discussions with a number of other organisations such as the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. I am also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Magistrates' Association.

What is a typical day like?

A day in court will see you dealing with a broad range of cases, including shop thefts, motoring offences, assaults of varying degrees of seriousness, burglaries, drug offences and much more. Every day throws up difficult decisions, especially when you are faced with sending someone to prison for the first time – as our liaison judge has said, he has an easier role because generally he just has to decide how long the sentence should be!

What do you not like?

The downside to serving as a JP is that you don't get paid for it and, although you can claim expenses for travel and loss of earnings, you will undoubtedly be out of pocket, as the rates for loss of earnings are pretty low.

Why is it important?

I believe that the current system works pretty well, and I would hate to see the role of the magistrate diminished or taken over by professional judges who are much more a part of 'the system'.

What advice would you give to anyone interested in becoming a magistrate?

It is another world, which I would totally recommend as a diversion from the day job. You will come away from court having spent a day, or a half day, concentrating on something other than your own pressures, thankful that you do not suffer the privations of so many



Simon Wolfensohn about to fly some visitors at a charity day at Oxford airport

of the defendants, and safe in the knowledge that you have given your time to something that is both necessary and personally rewarding, on behalf of your local community.

What's the best piece of advice you've been given?

The best piece of advice I ever got was from a very experienced JP, who had been a railway worker in Swindon. He adopted a very serious tone, and I sat up straight and paid attention in the expectation of a gem of advice – and he said, 'When you get a break, go and have a pee: you never know how long you're going to be stuck in that courtroom.'

What was your proudest moment?

To be elected as the deputy chairman of the Magistrates' Association, the body that represents most of the 30,000-plus magistrates in England and Wales.

... and your most embarrassing?

My most embarrassing moment in court was when I asked a man I was sitting with if he knew who the really scary-looking woman at the back of the court was. 'My wife,' he replied.

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Diane Cashman

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