THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH VET SCHOOL

Codifying The Culture
Insights and Recommendations

JUNE 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2021, the Vet School commissioned The Culture Builders to deliver a programme of work that would provide insight into the current state of the culture and, importantly, to provide recommendations that would take the Vet School forward in the most positive way.

In communication from Senior Leadership, the work was clearly aligned to the Vet School Strategic Plan:

"Integral to achieving our ambitions is to make sure we; 1) keep all our people at the centre of everything we do; 2) focus on our values and living them in our actions; and 3) continue to strengthen and re-energise the School's culture (our collective beliefs, behaviours and ways of working). That is why we have embarked on a programme to identify our cultural strengths and weaknesses and where we have opportunities to evolve during the years ahead on the Easter Bush Campus."

The communication also "recognised staff concerns given the findings from recent staff surveys, negative headlines about the Vet School and the wider pressures faced by the University." A firm commitment was given to ensure the programme was held to the highest standards of objectivity, anonymity and confidentiality enabling all participants to contribute freely in one to one conversations and group sessions with assurances that their insight would be shared without identifying them in any way. The quotes contained within this document are not directly attributed to individuals.

In response to how the work was positioned, the people we spoke to were positive about being asked to give their feedback on culture. They saw it as an encouraging sign that they are free to comment on what is working and what is not. Some even described it as 'brave' for senior leaders and Head of School (HOS) to open up a cultural dialogue, especially in light of a climate that has included negative press coverage. The caveat, we heard, is that people want their input to be translated into action so that confidence can be renewed in the process of seeking out views and ideas resulting in real and ongoing changes.

External validation provides people with a great deal of affirmation that the Vet School is a success and that the outside world holds the institution in very high regard. To match this, pride and emotional resonance is derived from the brilliance and sheer hard work that is evidenced by people daily in their roles. There is a very positive narrative around attributes such as 'tenacity', 'dedication' and 'self belief', all applied with tremendous drive and commitment towards achievements that contribute to animal health and society more widely.

We observed that reference to the term 'Vet School' met with some resistance from the start of our conversations. The nomenclature, people reflected, does not represent the nature of all the work that is done or all the people who do it. Having a name that is not seen to represent all parts of the Vet School creates a feeling of disconnection that may explain some of attitudes to culture that are counter to the fulfillment of the overall strategy.

Low awareness of the strategy and values as well as the different structures that operate across the institution, are also seen as barriers to working as a joined up organisation that can operate in an integrated, collaborative way. Contrasting this, the subcultures within each specific area of the School are very strong and considered to be the dominant cultural forces shaping people's experience of work.

Often, in our feedback sessions, people were asked to comment on the culture at the Vet School as a whole but we found their reference points were specifically anchored in what they observed and felt about their immediate team. It appears that the individual parts of the institution are operating as islands within the same geographic location and require more reasons to bring their resources and capabilities together to become a more powerful collective force.

There is much to be valued about the subcultures and people reported great team spirit and peer support within their specialist teams. However, the silos do have less positive impacts on the culture and leaders were described as being territorial about their areas of the Vet School. They are not seen to operate as a cohesive senior team. Where cooperation and collaborative working happens, positive outcomes occur including more diverse and fulfilling careers that act as a powerful force for attraction and retention of talent.

To an unusual degree, in our experience, people commented on what they had heard or were told about the Vet School culture as opposed to what they themselves experienced. This is a feature that we want to highlight because it helps us consider just how strongly perceptions and hearsay may be influencing what people believe. People reported that they genuinely struggle to determine the truth, good and bad, about some aspects of the culture that do not resonate with them.

It is felt that a less formal, dialogue based, style of communication would help to provide a more rounded picture of what was happening and provide people with the opportunity to ask questions in an open way. Curiosity and the need to examine the facts is seen as a cultural strength and this could be an area to build on: providing the right level of detail for example, around change programmes, would increase engagement and initiate working groups for the ownership of action plans.

In our recommendations we also use the term 'mythbusters' to describe focused campaigns that would aim to dispel any misleading or inaccurate interpretations that could be hampering cultural progression. One example would be to provide a clear explanation of the tools and processes available to all with regard to job vacancies. This would directly counter the perception, in some areas, that people are directed towards roles and given an unfair advantage in selection.

In our sessions and interviews, we heard experiences that we might best describe as 'outliers'. These reports come from people who have stories to tell that differ, sometimes radically, from what we hear from the main body of participants. Their reflections on culture, good and bad, are often extreme and important for us to hear and consider. At one end of the spectrum we heard examples of a working environment that individuals find to be very supportive, friendly and offering unlimited opportunity. Interestingly, some of the new joiners we spoke to pointed out just how good their onboarding experience was. People with a positive story to tell advocated very strongly for the great elements of the culture to be amplified and talked about concerns that the Vet School would not be represented fairly unless their voices were heard. The view they hold is that some turbulent times have generated a negative narrative that could be dominating the cultural climate but did not necessarily fairly represent the majority of experiences.

At the other end, we heard from people who felt at some point in the institution's history a switch happened and the culture became increasingly toxic. They cited interpersonal conflicts at the most senior level as the root cause of some of the issues and spoke about lack of transparency, biased decisions around career progression and their concerns about being marginalised if they spoke up.

It is rare to find such a high level of passion in an organisation to the degree that it inspires people to pour their heart and souls into their work and witness their colleagues being equally committed.

We believe there is a high percentage of investors at the school - by that we mean people who put in a lot of discretionary effort - rather than savers who do a good job but are less inclined to go above and beyond what is needed. In many ways this is cultural gold and works very successfully when people are in an upward spiral of achievement and good career progression at the Vet School. However, overcommitment does present some risks. If and when people face any setbacks or barriers to them achieving their professional goals, the level of disappointment they feel about the organisation letting them down is felt very deeply.

We took into account all of these divergent views but our approach and methodology is designed to draw out a middle ground, the collective view and pull out opportunities to build on what is good and address what is not working. One implication of our recommendations is a greater investment in engagement communications and the resources of Human Resources, Leadership and Development. This will be necessary to progress the cultural goals in a sustainable way.

We believe that there are many opportunities for the strategy and values to be lifted off the page by positive cultural change and for the Vet School to excel in the area of staff and student experience beyond what has been achieved to date. There is a huge opportunity to build more collaboration and a feeling of being united toward a shared purpose across the campus. The new academic year provides a springboard for this in so many ways. The recruitment of a new Head of Roslin is also a huge opportunity, together with bringing the Senior Management Groups into a team (not just group). In the increasingly competitive world of education, we know these factors will be a major differentiator for the Vet School and the University.

We believe the insights provided and our recommendations, once implemented, will provide the very best cultural foundations to build the future and create a happy and productive environment where individuals can flourish. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you on this.

The Culture Builders

CULTURE ACTION PLAN (CAP) GRID ELEMENTS

The CAP Grid is designed to be a short-hand summary of the findings of the codification work undertaken with the Vet School. The Grid plots the key top-level elements that we believe should be called out as part of the work. Following on from the Grid, we expand upon the elements to provide a little more detail around our findings.

Even more depth is provided within the Hallmarks of Culture which appear later in this document.

Culture Drains *Negative aspects of the institution's culture, ones that people call out as damaging and undesirable.*	**Culture Beacons** *The positive elements of the culture at the institution that are clear attractors and valued by most people.*
Culture Blocks *Hidden issues or misses that, whilst not felt strongly as a problem, will still have a current, or future, negative bearing on the culture.*	**Culture Builds** *Opportunities to further develop positive aspects, either through more focus, more engagement or taking them to the next level.*

Discovered through active engagement with people and all management layers

Visible to people

CULTURE DRAINS

- Relationship with UoE
- Siloed working
- Specialists restricted depending on who is leading them
- Unhealthy competition
- Communication style
- The Senior Managers Group(s) operate as groups not as teams
- Little management training and development
- Unclear selection process
- Unattractive reward and remuneration
- Lack of resources to meet demand
- Wellbeing under strain
- Negative narrative around how conflict is handled
- Worry about implications of interpersonal disputes

CULTURE BEACONS

- Individual energy and excitement
- Brilliance of people
- External reputation and teaching excellence
- Significance of research
- Track record in funding and grants
- Exceptional physical environment
- COVID response good in many teams
- Opportunities for advancement
- Strong team/SME affiliation and friendships
- Professional services team have a positive team ethos
- Variety of work attractive to specialists
- Rejection of non-respectful relationships between colleagues
- Investment in infrastructure
- Diversity and inclusion
- Bold leadership

Revealed through audits, gap analysis and comparison to best practice

Below the waterline

CULTURE BLOCKS

- Legacy resistance in Roslin
- Unequal recognition given to all parts of the Vet School
- Existing structure not fit for purpose
- Resigned inertia in some areas
- Recruitment and diminishing talent attraction
- Pension value diminishing
- Job insecurity for some employees
- Vacancies not communicated consistently
- Length of tenure in senior roles unclear
- Promotion to manager is too reliant on length of service

CULTURE BUILDS

- Desire to build a strong, unifying purpose
- Collaborative working highly valued
- Evidence of acting as one identity is well received
- Permanent leadership at Roslin
- Commitment to development in Professional Services
- Improving structure and shared practices and systems
- Aligning purpose around communal goals
- Focus and experience of diversity and inclusion
- Some positive relationships with Unions

Negative/low score

Positive/high score

CAP GRID EXPANSION

BEACONS

Individual energy and excitement about work
Passionate people with a vocational drive to continue their work irrespective of the challenges.

Brilliance of people
Awareness and appreciation for being in a group of elite academics who are pushing the boundaries every day.

External reputation and teaching excellence
The Vet School has a strength in securing high levels of undergraduates who increase revenue and investment potential.

Significance of research
It is award winning, socially significant (COVID breakthroughs particularly) and demonstrates the quality of the people in the Vet School.

An excellent track record in attracting funding and grants
The resources given to achieve a high level of success in this area provides researchers with the life blood of their work: it has become something people now expect.

Exceptional environment at Easter Bush and surrounding area
Everyone spoke about the size and scale of the campus and the investment in facilities, buildings etc.

In many teams, the COVID response has been good
Cooperation has been high in teams and individuals spoke about feeling supported and encouraged by their managers.

Opportunities for advancement, depth of knowledge and experience
For many ambitious people with drive, there are no perceived barriers; people are willing to share what they know.

Strong team/SME affiliation and friendships
Within teams in different areas of the institution, loyalty is strong and positive association with peers is high. Emphasis on collegiate behaviours when people have a common interest and identity.

Professional services team (campus wide) report a positive team ethos
This team overall felt there was good cooperation around serving the needs of the entire institution equally; bridges have been built and more good work can follow.

Mix of clinical, research and teaching creates a strong attraction for specialists
The mix offers more than financial reward for those seeking a varied, stimulating career.

A strong distaste for examples of non-respectful relationships between colleagues
For example the small group who abused the anonymised chat function during meetings generated a strong reaction: irrespective of the situation, demeaning or belittling colleagues is a cultural 'no go'.

Investment in infrastructure
Facilities, equipment and new systems are well received.

Diversity and inclusion
The Athena Swan award is quoted as recognition of where inclusivity is being achieved at the Vet School.

Bold leadership
There is recognition that progress on challenging issues and driving change, has been due to a resilient and progressive Head of School and key members of the senior leadership group.

> "We had 4 different sets of COVID restrictions to implement, all staff had to work incredibly hard to make sure our service didn't suffer and no one made a word of complaint."

> "If you have the desire to advance your work, every door is open and everyone is there to help."

POSITIVE WORDS FROM GROUPS:

Passionate people
Excellence in science
World leading
Hard working
Striving
Ambitious
Collegiate
Warm and welcoming
Pride

DRAINS

Relationship with UoE
At times more directive and at others, distanced and lacking clarity of direction.

Siloed working
A 'them and us' mindset persists in some areas and hinders cooperation.

Specialists find the variety of work can be restricted depending on who is leading in their area
Leaders can negatively influence the diversity of work offered to people by virtue of their strong preferences about where the priorities lie.

Unhealthy competition
A balance needs to be struck between high achieving individuals attaining their funding and publishing success whilst supporting others or at least not undermining or devaluing them.

Communication style
People seek dialogue and interaction in smaller groups to create more meaning and connection to main messages.

The SMGs (including the Science Management Senior Leaders) operate as groups not as teams
They do not act as 'one' and lack a clear remit: there is a lack of transparent decision making and inconsistent communication.

Lack of emphasis on management training and development
The experience of being managed is governed by the available time and style of individual managers rather than any recognised standard of management behaviour.

An unclear selection process for those seeking advancement
The process of application seems clear but final decisions need more explanation.

Reward and remuneration not as attractive
The impact of this is leading some to question why they stay and speculate that, longer term, the rewards might not improve.

Workload and lack of resources to meet demand
The Vet School attracts more students but the staff numbers (especially senior expertise in clinical settings) are not increasing proportionate to the increased numbers.

Wellbeing under strain: evidence of burnout
Heightened concerns exist about disconnection from colleagues and increased workload, particularly in the hospitals: for example, part time people regularly work full time hours.

Negative narrative around how conflict is handled
The perception exists that adherence to opposing views around issues or decisions, result in people becoming rigid and even punitive. Unresolved conflicts, many of which are historical, are said to increase politics at the school and negatively impact morale and performance.

Worry about being on the wrong 'side' of any interpersonal disputes
People say they are sometimes under pressure to align with 'one view or another': failure to do so might, they believe, impact them personally or result in support being withdrawn for their team.

> "I am sometimes in the cross-fire of fractured relationships at the senior level and will avoid raising issues, important issues, that might exacerbate the tension and put me in a tight spot."

> "Workload is crippling and it's not just a Covid impact!"

NEGATIVE WORDS FROM GROUPS:

Divided
Stressful
High workload
Burnout
Politics
Low cooperation
Cliques
Low trust
Fear
Need more people

CAP GRID EXPANSION

BLOCKS

Legacy resistance to Roslin becoming part of the Vet School
For example, the nomenclature 'The Vet School' is perceived to emphasise the teaching of undergraduates and, as a consequence, implies some devaluation of research.

Perceived imbalance in attention and recognition for all parts of the Vet School
At times, research PhDs are not supported and celebrated in the same way as undergraduates.

Existing structure not fit for purpose and there is a lack of planned organisational development
This was cited as a major barrier. Separate structures exist between Roslin and the Vet School which inhibit integration across both areas. The Small Animal Hospital has grown organically and needs strategic input with some urgency.

Resigned inertia in some areas and a degree of fatalism about not being able to resolve issues
Comments such as 'it won't change' indicate that some people have lost faith in improving things and may have just given up.

Recruitment and diminishing talent attraction
Inertia in recruitment activity is a cause for concern and people question why this is not a top priority for the Vet School: there is a perception that the more recent negative press is impacting the attraction of new people.

Pension value diminishing
This was a key attractor to those joining the institution in the past but values are reducing.

Job insecurity for some employees and lack of awareness of this in some teams
Those on 3 yrs contract seek permanent status but meanwhile their future feels uncertain: those in long term employment do not see the problem or feel the impacts.

The way vacancies are communicated is felt to be disconnected
The perception exists that there is low transparency around available roles: people noted that it is unclear where roles are advertised and managers do not always signpost what is available.

Length of tenure in senior roles unclear
The normal approach is five years and then five again maximum, so it is unclear how long senior roles are retained: we also heard that three or five year terms are not a great thing - it means people don't have to live with their actions for long.

Promotion to manager roles too reliant on length of service and academic track record
People in those roles are not necessarily good at managing people, they don't enjoy it and it shows.

> "I don't like the term Vet School, it doesn't represent who we are."

> "I feel this is a good place to raise my family and I will stay for as long as that compensates for some of the negatives including a diminishing pension pot."

BUILDS

The desire to build a strong, unifying purpose
Commitment to animal welfare is interpreted differently according to where you work at the Vet School; however there is agreement that a unified purpose is essential to future success.

Collaborative working is highly valued by those who experience it
When it happens, the positive impact is felt, relationships flourish and more integrated work happens.

Evidence of acting as one identity is well received
For example, having one page on the intranet for both Roslin and the Vet School instead of two was pointed out as a good sign of cultural progress.

Permanent leadership at Roslin
Cited as a valid reason some decisions may have been deferred and viewed as a great opportunity for a fresh start.

Commitment to development and ties with local community in Professional Services
Foundation placements, apprenticeships and Investors in People Awards demonstrate initiatives that have started to build local ties.

Improving structure and shared practices and systems
Where structural changes have enabled cross-functional working, good practice is shared.

Aligning purpose around communal as well as individual goals
Universal goals that fulfil the purpose will ensure individual drive doesn't dilute the impact of the Vet School and limit its potential to do great things.

Focus and experience of diversity and inclusion
Where different voices (including underrepresented groups) are heard and all of the Vet School is consulted, engagement is increased and action follows.

Some positive relationships with Unions
This is viewed by some as an area which can be built on to ensure two-way communication is achieved.

> "I have recently collaborated with colleagues from other areas of the Vet School, personally and professionally it has been very rewarding: working together with them offers me something unique."

> "Appointing the right person to the role of Director at Roslin - someone who will not reference the past and move us forward from some old conflicts - is critical to our success."

HALLMARKS

Looking at the culture of The Vet School, we focus on three areas:

WHAT WE BELIEVE

HOW WE BEHAVE AND

WHAT WE USE

(the tools, systems, processes, structures).

Within these we have a series of Hallmarks that we use to help us understand how the culture might be experienced by one of the Vet School team members, a student or a stakeholder.

> “We operate as a loose association: more like 83 small businesses not one institution.”

WHAT WE BELIEVE

PURPOSE AND DIRECTION:

Leaders with purpose and direction
Shared story
Active values
Impact on outcomes

People at the Vet School have every reason to feel proud of the institution, it has a world class reputation and is full of passionate and committed people.

However, in the eyes of the people we spoke to, it is not viewed as a single entity with a shared purpose and direction. An all-encompassing strategy and set of values exist but awareness of them is currently low. They are yet to be ‘lifted off the page’. Lack of engagement with a strong vision, coupled with the pull of strong subcultures, is proving to be enough to disconnect people from seeking a shared story. Collaborative endeavours, reflected in the purpose and direction, happen only when there is a clear benefit for individuals and their respective teams.

Professional services, by nature of their role, stand out as being more connected and alive to what the Vet School as a whole needs to achieve. The Head of School (HOS) is seen to be driving change with conviction but the belief exists that there is an absence of meaning around his agenda and he does not have the body of leadership support around him to mobilise change effectively. The push from the top (University of Edinburgh and HOS) has, some believe, reinforced the cultural silos. Senior leaders are very protective towards their individual areas: phrases like ‘Fort Roslin’ exemplify this.

They appear to readily withdraw their support for joined up initiatives and often prefer to lobby hard for counter proposals that serve the particular interests of their function. Compromise is not something that people witness happening frequently at the top.

Pride is mainly derived from achievements that occur in local teams whether it be attracting funding for research or having a major clinical breakthrough in one of the hospitals. People referenced the ‘Dick Vet’ hoodies and the sense of pride students feel about being part of the place. The impact is that there is a drive for excellence in each separate area but little understanding or focus on seeking opportunities that would contribute to achievements benefitting the Vet School in its entirety. The language of success is focused on descriptions of external validation (rankings, awards, attracting greater numbers of students) and not in the areas of team working, collaboration or joined-up thinking to attain common goals.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

ALIGNMENT WITH PURPOSE AND DIRECTION:

Attitude to change
Sense of ownership
Levels of innovation
Above and beyond mentality

> “We need to adapt to change to remain relevant, even when we find it uncomfortable: rigid thinking and the politics it breeds is probably our biggest enemy.”

Because members of The Vet School do not generally identify with one common purpose, alignment with it is absent. Some areas are experiencing resistance to change more than others. People commented that Roslin has concerns that the University wants to turn it into ‘just another Vet School’ and by diluting the unique nature of Roslin, the funding, they believe, would be threatened. This is just one example given to explain the lack of belief that change is not always well intentioned and is not worthy of wider ownership and accountability.

To balance this, we also heard that incremental change occurs frequently and this is a given in all academic institutions. In fact, people said a rigid mindset and/or too much attachment to established ways of operating will place the Vet School at risk of falling behind.

Students and top talent want to come to an innovative institution so remaining relevant matters and we heard positive comments about teams getting behind initiatives if and when the approach is inclusive and collegiate. The barrier to adopting change behaviours more broadly is the perception that change is being ‘done to’ people and is very ‘top down’: the result is low engagement. New tools and systems are well received once their value is proven. The People and Money system, for example, generated negative comments about how the University introduced it and how it was executed but the benefits of the system are now recognised.

The high level of discretionary effort invested by people at the Vet School came across loud and clear in our sessions and interviews. Hardwork and dedication is a source of pride and evidence of vocational drive was talked about frequently. The cautionary note given is that an ‘above and beyond’ mindset has its downsides and people see signs of burnout happening as resources get stretched and resilience is depleted.

CONNECTION AND TRUST:

Free voices
Strong communication
Individuality
Personal action
Collaboration

> “You cannot be in an environment of academic excellence without being challenged hard on your thinking, but it’s how you do it that matters. We should never use that as an excuse for lack of basic human respect.”

In their teams and specialist areas people indicate that challenge is welcome and strength of opinion goes with the territory of good science.

Independent thought is held in high esteem and many people talked about academic institutions attracting personality types that thrive in competitive environments. The ethos of the Equine Vets was marked out as being a team where strong opinions are welcome and equality of opinion is encouraged at every level. Trust in immediate colleagues is, by and large, high and communication from and with managers works well for many. People spoke about some instances where remote working improves their ability to contribute more openly to team discussions. It appears to have created a level playing field where hierarchy is less important.

Communication across the Vet School has become more formal and rehearsed with limited opportunities for debate and challenge. During lockdown, opportunities to create more engaging events, where people can talk face to face, have been limited and this has impacted connection. Trust in colleagues suffered a setback as many people witnessed the abuse of the ‘chat’ function on the virtual All Hands meetings. Personal, demeaning comments aimed at presenters were condemned and the fact they were anonymous, provoked people to talk about ‘cowardly’ behaviours that they want to see stamped out.

Agency is high when debate and decisions are contained within the sphere of control that allows individuals to remain within the comfort zone of their specialist areas with colleagues they know and trust. When people extend decisions outside their area, upward into the Vet School as a whole, connection and trust weakens and in some cases breaks down entirely. Lack of collaboration across the campus may be a sign that people are wary of getting into more challenging issues because of the potential risk of disagreements. We also heard that healthy conflict is being suppressed, in some cases, by fear of being seen as ‘off side’ with powerful people: this may be holding people back from moving out of their silos and working together more.

HOW WE BEHAVE

GROWTH MINDSET:

Commercial goals
Attitude to development
Responses to mistakes/failure
Raising issues

> “Externally we are a success story but we need to be equally ambitious around our own internal achievements. A top priority for me would be to create a place where everyone gets their fair share of opportunity and reward.”

The Vet School attracts a high number of good calibre students and the numbers are growing. People feel this, along with the success in securing funding and research grants, is a key indicator of growth in commercial terms. The revenue brought in by the hospitals is also recognised as a major contributor to the money available to run the institution.

Campus facilities, including the new buildings and the high standard of equipment, indicates that the Easter Bush Campus is a significant investment for UoE and a sign of confidence. However underinvestment in some areas is noted. The Small Animal Hospital has grown organically and the footprint is seen to be too small for the demand placed upon it. It is expected that post pandemic, the plan to improve this will be back on track but this is not confirmed.

Some, we heard from, believe that anything can be achieved at the Vet School if you have drive and a mindset that enables achievement and personal growth. Peer expertise and knowledge featured as a key attribute of on-the-job learning. We heard comments such as ‘no barriers to moving up’ and ‘100% support if you are ambitious.’

People emphasised that, for many, the main motivation for being at the Vet School was the offer of a diverse career including teaching, research, and clinical practise experience.

Clinicians said when they have opportunities for research, personal growth is achieved and their contribution was acknowledged: some of the Equine vets talked about forming excellent relationships with members of Roslin.

However the route to career development is, at times, unclear. Whilst a professional path exists for professorships, for example, and is externally overseen, internal decisions by the Vet School about selection for progression are viewed as inconsistent. Perceptions exist about an unlevel playing field where some colleagues are seen to be favoured above others without any explanation. People who are impacted negatively are hesitant about how they would seek clarification or escalate their concerns. For some, the process of going via HR is not working effectively.

Asked how the Vet School responds to mistakes, the views we heard indicate that a learning culture should be a cultural norm for everyone. However, perceived failures at the Vet School do not appear to be subject to a high level of rigour and examination. We heard about a lack of openness and some decisions happening behind closed doors. The feeling is that if there was more transparency around tackling difficult issues, a culture of positive challenge would make things better for everyone.

HOW WE BEHAVE

SOCIAL AND INCLUSIVE:

Fair treatment across the organisation
New starter onboarding
Connected people
Where people have formed relationships

> “We used to do more - outdoor events and gatherings across campus - now we are beginning to return to our workplaces, we should focus on those events again and get back that feeling of belonging.”

People talk about the social climate of the Vet School being friendly, cooperative and encouraging – some describe the culture as being like a family. The new starters we spoke to, some coming from other countries, feel they were onboarded in a positive way and placed particular emphasis on the welcome they had received compared to other institutions they had joined in their careers.

People who had been at the Vet School for longer talked more about how it used to be and had very positive associations with the friendly culture they had initially joined. Long established friendships exist at Easter Bush and are talked about with affection: the prevalence of colleagues that are married was also mentioned.

The Vet School and the community around it, is seen to be a very family friendly place where team members are supportive but the positives are generally attributed to the individual subcultures of the Vet School and not to the institution as a whole. We heard a lot about ‘my area’ and ‘my team’ when asked to reflect on what is good.

The Covid impacts were also discussed in groups and whilst some people attributed issues to Covid – less chance to interact for example - others felt Covid just compounded existing issues rather than caused them.

APPROACHES TO DECISION MAKING:

Planning and prioritisation
Integrated teams
Decisions to actions

> “I want to see action, it feels like we do a lot of talking and analysis of our issues but we don’t convert the feedback into change you can see and feel.”

We did not hear any specific commentary about the Vet School failing to meet priorities or targets, but people did refer to fragmented decision making at the top having negative impacts on people and overall morale.

The demanding financial targets in the Equine Hospital, for example, were cited as an example of one area of the Vet School being impacted by decisions made without due consultation or regard for the consequences. References to 60 hour weeks being the norm, leads people to ask why the correct modelling of the resources needed to fulfil demand is not being undertaken with some urgency by HR colleagues.

This situation is exacerbated by what people see as a very slow, overly complex, recruitment process. All areas of the school emphasised the need for better workload planning to alleviate pressure and minimise the stress of competing commitments. The concern is that without doing this as a priority, the higher goals of more integration and collaborative working will be undermined as people focus on surviving.

We heard of some incidents of managers being reluctant to release team members to diversify on projects: some people attributed this to a concern by managers that being seen to have available capacity might result in delays in their recruitment needs.

Where teams are integrated and can share resources and good practise, the overall performance of functional areas and individuals is improved. Professional services cited some good examples of streamlining processes and systems wherever possible signalling what cooperation across different functional areas can achieve.

It is felt that these examples demonstrate what is possible when the right structure and plan is in place, enabling people to move into action and organise around key goals and deliverables.

WHAT WE USE

PERFORMANCE AND EXECUTION:

Meeting membership, rhythm & structure
Non-monetary benefits
Celebrating success
Retention & offboarding
Strength of management

> "We achieve incredible things at the Vet School, but we have a fairly reserved culture, so I'm not sure we would be comfortable banging the drum too much about what we do."

The perception is that groups and committees exist across the school primarily to serve specific local needs but not to provide opportunities for more cross-functional working and innovation.

The Post Doctorate Society was cited as an example of a group that provides strong advocacy for one element of the institution but naturally does not represent, or include, a wider employee group. The existence of societies is by no means seen as negative, but in the absence of a forum for all employees, the fear is they might disproportionately influence specific issues.

Retention strategies have in the past relied heavily on the excellent reputation of the Vet School, as well as the funding opportunities for research and the variety of work on offer for those in clinical roles. Great colleagues and positive team morale were also cited as major reasons for people to stay. There was a lot of emphasis about the difficulties associated with attracting vets, particularly as private practices are offering higher salaries and more attractive terms and benefits. Revenue generated by loyal clients and referrals to the Equine Hospital relies on retaining the unique specialist skills and knowledge within those teams. Keeping specialists is a major concern for those leading teams: any losses are keenly felt. Offboarding is not, from what we heard, a formal process; but people perceive loss of key staff is mainly due to low pay, long working hours and, in some cases, broken relationships.

We heard that managers have great strengths in their area of expertise and many examples were shared of how much individuals learnt from those above them. But, we also heard the criteria for promotion to senior roles - length of tenure and academic achievement - is not creating managers who have a consistent approach to leading people.

People spoke about wanting more emphasis on development and progression and to see their managers seeking out opportunities for more integration across the campus. This would counter the current experience where, in some instances, the silo mentality is a limiting factor. We heard a few examples of managers questioning the commitment of individuals who were interested in more diverse work.

There was recognition that the HR function is being stretched across too many areas and is coping with too much demand. There is general acceptance that if HR is given more resources and budget, the entire employee experience at the Vet School would improve including creating a much stronger management capability.

WHAT WE USE

STRUCTURES AND GOVERNANCE:

Development systems

Internal advancement

Effective structures

> "It is no surprise that our structures are divisive because they are historical. Until we evolve our operating model to equip us for the future, we will fail to make the Vet School's strategy a reality."

There is an absence of effective structures and this is inhibiting a unified and consistent way of working across all areas of the Vet School. Reporting lines, processes and procedures are inconsistent and managers talked about red tape and bureaucracy hampering speed and efficiency.

The recruitment process was frequently highlighted as an example of something that made managers feel disempowered.

Whilst each operating area continues to have its own legacy business model, it will continue to have it's own culture: as a result the overall influence of the University and HOS is limited and the inevitable conflicts will persist.

Internal advancement therefore could be seen to be a casualty of inefficient systems. However cultural dynamics are having a negative impact and for some, diversity is an issue that needs more focus. Incidents were shared where female and part-time staff felt particularly disadvantaged due to what was perceived as a bias favouring full-time or male colleagues. Training in unconscious bias was mentioned as a possible solution - but this would need to be integrated into a strategic approach to the ED&I agenda to have the desired outcome.

WHAT WE USE

WORK ENVIRONMENT COMPONENTS

State of core facilities
Inspirational environment
Wellbeing
Attitudes to tools

> “The buildings and facilities are really impressive and I feel proud to show new students the campus, but for staff, the lack of local pubs and restaurants means we don’t really mix with a wide range of colleagues on a social basis.”

We heard that the Easter Bush Campus is a special and unique place: the investment made in the facilities is appreciated by everyone who works and studies there. Inspiration comes from the history of the place, the beauty of the surroundings and the quality of the facilities.

The negative comments centred mainly around the lack of communal spaces within the campus which creates real boundaries between teams. The phrase ‘across the road’ was used to describe the physical relationship between the Roslin Institute and the rest of the institute and, for many, the ‘road’ was a metaphor for how separate and distinct the culture sometimes feels.

Where wellbeing is being impacted, the pressures of escalating workloads and the absence of staff are cited as the main causes, with Covid compounding the situation.

Resilience is seen to be at a low. However, we heard that the low energy and morale in some areas was evident even before the pandemic.

Mental health impacts were singled out as a cause for concern for some and when asked what support and tools people could draw upon, the responses indicate that there is an awareness of what is on offer but some reluctance to take advantage of what is available. The overall feeling is that root causes of stress need to be tackled at an organisational level in preference to offering coping strategies for individuals.

Managers are broadly seen to be supportive and there is a caring attitude towards individuals within teams. Many managers have worked with their team members for a number of years and the level of connection is strong. Interestingly, there is no indication that managers, as a cohort, feel they benefit from peer support or the opportunity to work collectively. The Senior Management Groups (SMGs) are not viewed as teams with a clear identity and remit for decision making. Regular meetings held by these groups are reported to be used as a platform for individuals to report on their specific functional areas. This lack of connection at a senior level, diminishes opportunities for knowledge sharing and innovation.

Recommendations

There are many options to choose from to improve culture and move the Vet School forward. Based on our experience and what we heard, we have selected recommendations that will make the biggest impact as well as signal that change is happening for the better.

Some are based on amplifying existing strengths and others are designed to improve the baseline of current activities and/or bring something new to life.

The first set of recommendations - 'if you do nothing else'- are drawn from the full list of recommendations. They identify immediate steps that will activate change whilst providing a catalyst for the organisation to own the cultural agenda collectively and keep moving things forward.

We see these as priority actions that should happen within a short timeframe to signal the start of the journey the Vet School is embarking upon and tap into the pride and positive momentum that exists today within the institution.

If you do nothing else - immediate steps that will make a big impact

- Share the findings of this insight project including highlighting the positives: thank people for their honesty and participation
- Publish immediate actions that will take place and commit to timescales: build a bank of 'you said' 'we did' examples and publish regularly
- Establish action groups (the original plan that was in place with the CICG) to select the recommendations they want to take forward, brainstorm ideas and take accountability for mobilising plans to progress them
- Design and stage a series of engagement sessions (Town Halls and Village Halls) to bring to life the strategy and values: join the dots between the values and the daily activities by finding real stories from each area so they are 'lifted off the page' and into daily work
- Build on the many strong relationships that exist across campus by creating a campaign around stories of pride and appreciation for colleagues: promote these stories as examples of the human factors and connections that make the Vet School a great place to be
- Ensure the many positive cultural attributes identified in the insights are embedded into recruitment activity and clearly articulated to new joiners
- Write a simple narrative that makes it clear what unites the different communities, including the pride people feel in being connected to the purpose of the Vet School. Everyone shares a common goal around having a positive impact on animal health and the planet, so a powerful narrative that articulates this will be an anchor for change, direction and conversations
- Create a series of social events that will appeal to a range of tastes. Emphasise the business need for bringing people together at Easter Bush Campus, including a chance to recognise the hard work and resilience shown by everyone equally throughout the pandemic and the success stories
- Shine a spotlight on case studies of collaboration across the Vet School and Roslin highlighting the impact of outcomes that contribute to the shared purpose: identify the relational factors that make this happen so others can adopt similar approaches
- Hire a strong head into Roslin that will have the courage and credibility to make changes to unify the communities across the whole School

Bust the myths that can dominate the current narrative by providing details and evidence to counter misperceptions:

- Educate colleagues about the external challenges faced by UoE and the parallels with similar entities. i.e. council/NHS that are complex, diverse and changing to meet evolving needs
- Be open about the length of tenure decisions and present a balanced case for working outside of the standard 5 + 5 year terms
- Address perceptions of unfair progression decisions by giving a clear outline of the process and the criteria the Vet School uses to select individuals for advancement (e.g. the route to professorship)
- Publish the data on diversity of those moving up to more senior roles and explain what plans are in place to improve in specific areas

Recommendations in full

Communications and engagement

- Share the findings of this insight project including highlighting the positives: thank people for their honesty and participation
- Publish immediate actions that will take place and commit to timescales: build a bank of 'you said' 'we did' examples and publish regularly
- Establish action groups (the original plan that was in place with the CICG) to select the recommendations you want to take forward, brainstorm ideas and take accountability for mobilising plans to progress them
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- Create dialogue based communication that allows people to get more meaning from what they hear and share their views. Make time for questions and allow more debate (with safeguards around any misuse of chat function etc.)
- Focus on storytelling and provide individuals across all levels with more opportunities to be heard at Town Halls and Village Halls
- Consider digital tools that allow for co-creation in a live setting and enable colleagues to see each other's ideas and views - Mentimeter is useful for polling and voting on issues for example
- Support managers with regular 'Talking Points' that go beyond key messages and allow them to share stories, host conversations and take questions: ensure the feedback loop is closed by getting feedback and demonstrating how it shapes communications going forward
- Celebrate and recognise the research postgraduates do and ensure they feel they get equal attention with undergraduates at the Vet School: more emphasis from HOS that this group is highly valued would create a positive impact
- Learn from and appreciate what is working in the local/micro cultures and identify where learning can be applied across the Vet School: so if a team at Roslin ran a virtual marathon during lockdown for example, they might host something similar across the school
- Support a charity and commit to a fundraising initiative that can only be achieved by cross functional teams working together. Include a strong social element in this activity so people can relate to each other outside of departments and functions
- Create a 'one Vet School' ethos not Roslin 'v' Vet School - by finding more reasons to work together: even small changes would provide a significant cultural signal that collective endeavours are a priority
- To balance the success recognised externally (rankings etc.) review the internal awards system and place the emphasis on collaboration, cross functional working and 'values moments', so that Vet School achievements are celebrated equally
- Highlight the connections with the local community (apprenticeships etc.) and publish success stories to share good news about the positive impact they have

People

Bust the myths that can dominate the current narrative by providing details and evidence to counter misperceptions:

- Address perceptions of unfair progression decisions by giving a clear outline of the process and the criteria the Vet School uses to select individuals for advancement (e.g. the route to professorship)
- Publish the data on diversity of those moving up to more senior roles and explain what plans are in place to improve in specific areas

- Review HR resources and consider the bandwidth available versus the requirements that the cultural insights have uncovered: an exercise that would focus on 'stop' 'start' and 'continue' would enable HR colleagues to prioritise activities that people and students value most
- Ensure the many positive cultural attributes identified in the insights are embedded into recruitment activity and clearly articulated to new joiners
- Dedicate more HR resources to the 'blocks' that surround recruitment by publishing a clearer strategy and action plan: where possible also address misperceptions about the speed and inefficiency of recruitment processes and systems
- Ensure all promotions/new appointments to leadership roles place equal importance on culture fit and attitude towards managing people as well as academic track record. We would recommend competency based interviews and/or use appropriate psychometrics for development
- Quantify the employee value proposition (EVP) to ensure that the benefits of working at the Vet School (intrinsic and extrinsic) are well defined and communicated clearly
- Make induction and onboarding weighted more equally toward joining the Vet School as a whole and not just specialist areas: create a buddy scheme so new joiners from different parts of the school create a connection from the start
- Provide more resources for employee interest groups that focus on where people are in life, their hobbies, not what area of the Vet School or specialist role they have: this is happening informally but needs to be an area of focus and happen more
- Consider appointing an independent third party organisation to support managers to resolve team conflicts that are causing division: the emphasis needs to be on finding solutions within a timely manner so they do not become more embedded
- Facilitate sprint teams to make specific recommendations about how to alleviate workload. These might be externally facilitated or an approach given to an internal group to run. The approach needs to ensure ownership and a focus on what teams can control and influence - not on a list of demands from others
- Assist leaders, teams and individuals to take accountability for their wellbeing and signpost clearly the support and resources that exist to enable them to do this
- Make an explicit commitment to support those experiencing stress and potential burnout in specific areas that feel the strain: reinforce and publicise clear guidance on after work emails, working during leave etc. and call out individuals who do not comply
- Invest in more regular social interactions on campus (BBQs were popular with whole families invited), including celebrating everyone's return: ensure face to face becomes a preferred means of communication as lockdown eases
- Consider how the Vet School can amalgamate various Roslin and Vet School committees and share the administrative approach to improve efficiency and encourage more integrated working
- Build on the existing good relationship with Union representatives and invest more attention and time in those that need to be improved. Review the number of employee representatives and ensure constituents across the Vet School have equal voice and adequate channels for two-way communication

Management and leadership development

- Emphasise the role of both the Senior Management Groups (SMGs) to operate as teams not groups: enable them to be focused on a unified purpose that will reduce the silo mentality and consider creating one SMT to avoid potential inconsistency or conflict
- Require the SMG(s) to take ownership of culture change and to act consistently to role model appropriate behaviours including having open discussions and taking joint ownership of strategy: focus first on their willingness to commit to the collective good of the School and accept compromises
- Refresh the SMG including a name change, a clear remit and meeting rhythm and an agenda focused on the Vet School as a whole and not individual areas. Consider rotating the chair of the meetings to allow for more ownership and engagement across the team
- Set cross functional targets for Senior Leaders so that their performance is evaluated according to collective achievements as well as individual ones
- Host drop in sessions online and face to face for members of Senior Leadership from different specialist areas to host conversations and showcase collaborative work together
- Create more awareness in HOS of his impact as a leader ensuring tough conversations can happen and leave all parties feeling valued in the process
- Create more diversity at the senior management level including cognitive diversity
- Create a reverse mentoring programme so SMG members are paired with more junior staff and/or students from different areas of the school to exchange views, share insights and find ways to innovate
- Invest in a management development programme that achieves a balance of both skills and mindset, consider for inclusion: unconscious bias, coaching, positive conflict, emotional intelligence and relationship management

Structure, systems, processes and environment

- Review existing committees to consolidate them so that they can represent broader expertise and knowledge and not just specific areas. As an example, areas working on innovation could come together and combine their learning and networks
- Gain more insight into the areas of Professional Services where integrated work has been successful and promote the learning of this team as examples of good practice
- Publish the forward plan for the Small Animal Hospital to demonstrate commitment to improvements
- Promote more awareness of systems that enable job vacancies to be visible and ensure the processes for posting jobs are consistent, clear and adhered to
- Assess effectiveness of the Workload Manager WLM system. It allows a volume of work to be entered that equates to 60-70 hours a week but does not prompt conversations or actions to correct unrealistic plans or expectations about what is achievable
- Invest in social spaces where people can come together for social reasons: lunch and learns, TED talk sessions, networking, sport etc.
- Create pop-up refreshment areas which draw people out of their individual buildings into collaborative spaces where they can mix and learn: have a 'coffee catch up' week and discount beverages to incentivise take up
- Review the structure across the entire School with the aim to create communities that can be facilitated and encouraged, through the structural changes, to work more closely together

Next steps

Insights and recommendations are being shared to ensure that all parties have the opportunity to seek clarity and ask questions.

Briefings for all Senior Managers and their direct reports will allow those in leadership positions to be aware of the insights and recommendations and begin to consider how they might engage their teams and plan for action in their specific areas.

We would advise that a series of cultural workshops are set up, led by Senior Managers, which contain mixed groups of Vet School colleagues to review the findings in such a way that different points of view can be heard and ideas shared. The outcome of the workshops will be to ensure people take as much value away as possible from what they see and hear and begin to consider what they can do in their teams and individually to own recommendations and take actions forward.

We understand that the Campus Improving Culture Group (CICG) was created to facilitate focus groups around cultural improvements and would expect that group to play a major role, in partnership with Senior Leaders, in moving from insight to action including creating specific metrics for success.

APPENDIX
INTERVIEW AND WORKSHOP DATA

Work on these insights and recommendations for the future of the Vet School culture began on March 1st 2021. After various project meetings with the Oversight, Steering and CICG groups, we undertook a programme of one-to-one interviews and two rounds of group discussion sessions which finished on June 4th 2021.

In total we conducted:

- 36 one-to-one interviews
- 10 initial group discussions in round one, and one meeting with Union Representatives
- Five subsequent group discussions as an agreed extension to the programme - these were scheduled to accommodate shift workers and those who had been unable to attend the initial groups
- We also welcomed and included feedback via email from anyone that wished to contribute outside the formal sessions

Across these interactions:

- 36 individuals including 17 senior stakeholders had one-to-ones
- 103 people across the 15 group sessions (many of whom stayed on after the official close to give more insight)
- Five Union Representatives
- 19 email contributions
- 155 people from the Vet School were engaged - not counting regular interactions with the CICG
- For transparency, we have shown the percentage breakdown by Area and Grade of all colleagues across the whole Vet School compared to those engaged in our group sessions.

REPRESENTATION IN GROUP SESSIONS

GRADE	WHOLE VET SCHOOL	ENGAGED IN SESSIONS	VARIANCE
RCB3	0.48%	1.03%	0.56%
RCB4	0.12%	0.00%	-0.12%
RCB5	0.95%	2.06%	1.11%
RCB6	0.36%	1.03%	0.67%
RCB7	0.24%	0.00%	-0.24%
UE01	0.83%	0.00%	-0.83%
UE02	0.24%	0.00%	-0.24%
UE03	9.50%	0.00%	-9.50%
UE04	5.94%	2.06%	-3.88%
UE05	16.15%	5.15%	-11.00%
UE06	8.08%	5.15%	-2.92%
UE07	25.06%	31.96%	6.90%
UE08	14.01%	23.71%	9.70%
UE09	9.62%	20.62%	11.00%
UE10	6.06%	5.15%	-0.90%
NONE/No data	2.38%	2.06%	-0.31%

AREA			
Veterinary Clinical Services	19.12%	14.74%	-4.38%
The Roslin Institute	33.37%	36.84%	3.47%
Royal Dick Veterinary Studies	32.78%	28.42%	-4.36%
Easter Bush Campus Operations and Services	6.53%	7.37%	0.84%
Global Academy Agriculture Food Security	3.44%	5.26%	1.82%
Veterinary Teaching Organisation	2.73%	7.37%	4.64%
Large Animal Research & Imaging Facility	1.19%	0.00%	-1.19%
Roslin Innovation Centre	0.83%	0.00%	-0.83%

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

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