

Careers

Developing myself as a woman in academia

Veterinary academic **Charlotte Dawson** has kept an eye on the professional development of many a vet student – now she’s using the Royal Veterinary College’s Aurora programme to grow her own career.

I KNEW I wanted to specialise in ophthalmology ever since I was an undergraduate at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC). It’s a comparative discipline, which means ophthalmologists can treat the eye of any species, so I don’t have to choose between dedicating my career to large or small animals. After two years in general practice postgraduation, it made sense to return to the RVC to specialise.

Since I’ve been back, I’ve accumulated more and more responsibility for someone of my age. Not only am I a lecturer in veterinary ophthalmology, I’m also head of the ophthalmology service, chair of the clinical governance committee and deputy leader for our fourth year vet students.

I appreciate how lucky I’ve been – these positions partly came about through being in the right place at the right time, but equally I work incredibly hard and care deeply

about my students and my team. It’s rewarding knowing I’ve been able to give people the confidence and strength they need to be the very best they can be and excel in what they do.

I’m mostly based at the RVC’s Queen Mother Hospital for Animals (QMHA) in Hertfordshire, although I do get to work on farms, at equine establishments and in zoos. I also get to see some unusual patients – I have done cataract surgery on lemurs at QMHA and examined frogs, penguins and Californian sea lions off-site.

A typical working day begins at 8 am and involves supervising residents and their in-patients, working in the clinic on consultations, doing surgery, and teaching undergraduates. I’m lucky if everything is done by 7.30 pm, and two nights a week I’m on-call. However, I wouldn’t change a thing – I love my work.



role. Together, we develop our leadership aspirations to work on the skills we need to secure senior positions in academia.

While the veterinary profession is heavily female, it’s a different dynamic at a managerial level where the majority of professorial roles are filled by male candidates.

I think it’s a confidence issue – women don’t often put themselves forward for promotion without encouragement, whereas men see it as a natural progression of their career path. I’m glad to be able to be part of an initiative that aims to kick-start a change here.

Having the opportunity to have structured days set aside to work on this really attracted me to the programme. After all, having a demanding job means I don’t often get time to sit down and think about where I want my career to go next.

The advice and support of my mentor has been invaluable – it’s a bit like having a therapist, she mainly sits and listens and then helps me to come up with my own solutions. Having her take the time to listen to me think aloud and express my thoughts about my career, any anxieties I have and successes I wish to celebrate, has been so helpful.

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The Aurora programme helps women in academia develop their leadership skills

MY CV

2009: Graduated from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC)

2009 to 2010: General practice

2010 to 2011: Internship in private practice

2011 to 2015: Internship and residency at the RVC

2016: Diplomate of the European College of Veterinary Ophthalmology

2016: Lecturer in veterinary ophthalmology at the RVC

2016: Head of the RVC’s ophthalmology service

2018: Chair of the clinical governance committee and deputy leader for BVetMed undergraduates

Leadership development for women

I’ve recently become involved in the Aurora Leadership Development Programme. The programme is run by Advance HE in partnership with educational institutions to help women in academia develop their leadership skills. The RVC has funded eight places on the scheme this year and I was delighted to be chosen to be one of the participants.

Everyone taking part in the programme is matched with a mentor – mine is Joanne Webster, professor of parasitic diseases, pathobiology and population at the RVC.

Our mentors guide us along our career path, and we also attend regular workshops that focus on working successfully in a managerial

Note to self

The best advice I can give myself is to accept that things don't always go to plan and accept that this is okay – it's part of life.

I used to get disappointed and disheartened if I didn't reach the goals I'd set for myself – I'd get really cross if I wasn't able to finish something. Now I accept it's the way things are and just go with it, because the next day another opportunity will present itself and it's quite possible that I'll end up doing something else instead.

Achieving work-life balance

Despite my hectic working life, it's still important to achieve a good

work-life balance. Several things help me achieve this. I like to join some of my hospital colleagues at the on-site gym to do circuits before work.

I also get to see my husband when I'm at work too, he's an orthopaedic surgeon here – I think that's why our relationship works so well.

And I always find the time to walk and play with my dog. Frank is a rescued dog that we got through Dog's Trust. He came into the hospital for treatment and we just had to adopt him.

My career is very satisfying too. Being able to work with students while I train and develop myself as a woman in veterinary academia

is a blessing, and I love the time I spend in surgery too.

One of the best bits of my job is helping my clients make decisions that are right for them and their pets. It's a gift to be able to go home knowing you've helped someone.

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