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## Supporting Students in Practice Part 1: The Role of the Clinical Supervisor

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# Supporting Students in Practice Part 1: The Role of the Clinical Supervisor

## Abstract

The clinical learning environment is a complex socio-cultural landscape that can be a challenging place to manage to support the appropriate professional development of student veterinary nurses (SVNs). One of the most influential factors in determining student satisfaction in this environment is the role played by the clinical supervisor. Clinical supervisors who are pro-active in their role can provide a sense of belonging in the induction phase, function as positive professional role models and support timely progress through regularly planned training and tutorials. There are benefits for the clinical supervisor, such as an increased sense of job satisfaction and maintaining up to date clinical knowledge.

## Introduction

Previous research relating to student veterinary nurse (SVN) support in practice has been published in the Journal of Veterinary Medical Education (Holt et al., 2022, 2021). The aim of this two-part article is to disseminate the key information from this previously published work and draw on the combined experience of the current authors relating to the role of the clinical supervisor and the training practice team in the clinical learning environment (CLE).

## Student experience

The experiences a student has in the CLE are critical in preparing student human nurses (SHNs) for their career, allowing opportunities to put theory into practice, develop clinical skills, and build professional identity and confidence (Arkan et al.,

2018; O'Mara et al., 2014; Parvan et al., 2018; Ramsbotham et al., 2019). Whilst no such research for SVN's could be identified by the authors, the two professions' practical training can be considered comparable. This is evidenced by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Standards Framework for Veterinary Nurse Education and Training, which adopted the structure and format of the Nursing and Midwifery Council Standards of Proficiency for Registered Nurses (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2021). Therefore, the veterinary nursing profession can currently look to the literature available in SHN experiences of the CLE to help signpost key advice for clinical supervisors.

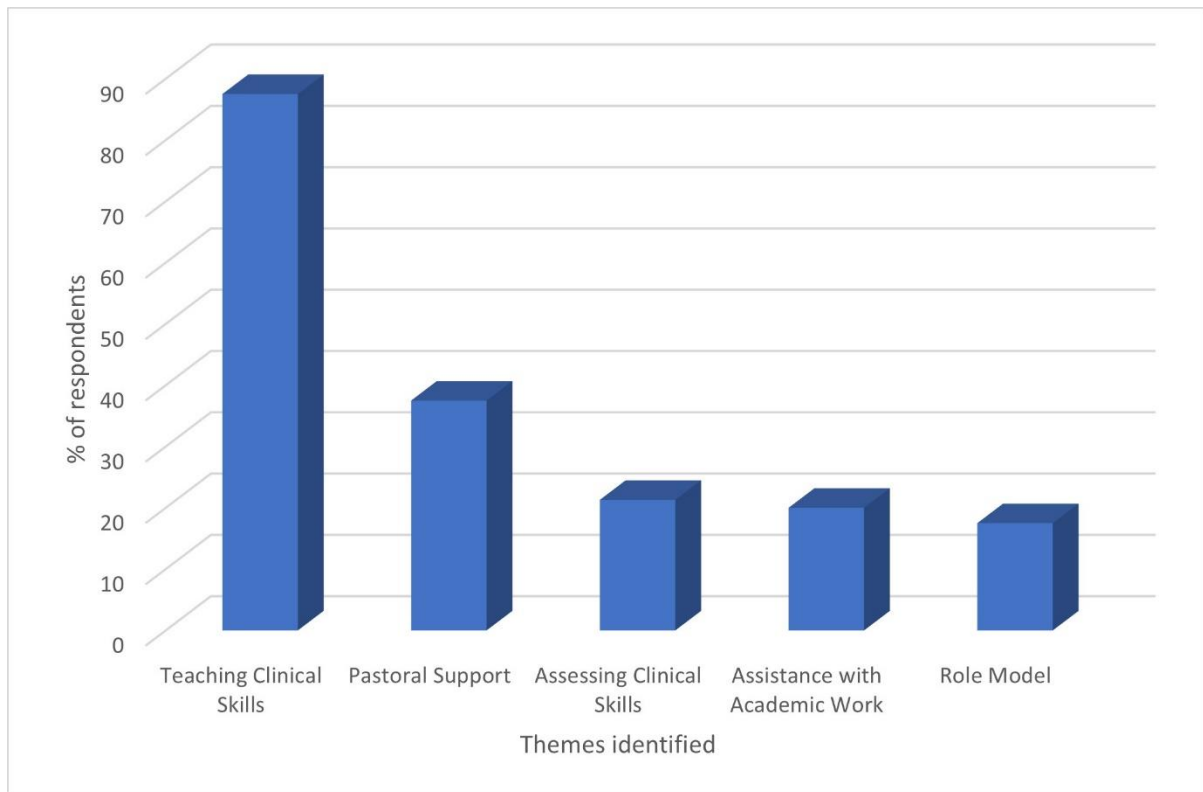
The supervisory relationship SHNs have in the CLE has been cited as the most influential factor in determining student satisfaction levels (O'Mara et al., 2014; Papastavrou et al., 2016; Parvan et al., 2018). There is evidence in SHN research which demonstrates there can be poor supervisor practise, including lack of feedback and appropriate communication, poor teaching skills with no structure, leading to either reduced learning opportunities, or throwing students in at the deep end (Arkan et al., 2018; Gray and Smith, 2000; Kalyani et al., 2019). Poor clinical supervisor practise can cause confusion in student expectations and professional identity, especially when the clinical supervisor is an inappropriate role model and expresses negative attitudes towards their own career (Kalyani et al., 2019).



**Image 1:** A clinical supervisor providing student support (Image courtesy of University of Bristol, Veterinary School)

### **Clinical supervisor role and attributes**

Research available in other comparable professions and countries has examined the ideal qualities for a clinical supervisor to demonstrate, based on clinical supervisor and student **opinions**; within this research there was strong agreement identifying clinical competence and reasoning, enthusiasm, positive interpersonal skills and support of the learning environment as key skills and attributes which are vital to the clinical supervisor role, Image 1, (Chitsabesan et al., 2006; Faithfull-Byrne et al., 2017; Fluit et al., 2010; Foster et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2016; Perram et al., 2016; Sutkin et al., 2008). It is evident that some of the skills and attributes identified as desirable go beyond the clinical competences expected of qualified veterinary professionals. When clinical supervisors in UK veterinary practices were asked to describe in their own words, the associated role responsibilities, the themes identified are detailed in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Themes identified of the role by clinical supervisors (Holt et al., 2021).

These findings are positive, in that most of the SVN clinical supervisors have identified teaching clinical skills as an important aspect of the role. However, appropriate interpersonal skills, enthusiasm and adequate training for the role are also important to achieve the desired practise for student support (Chitsabesan et al., 2006; Faithfull-Byrne et al., 2017; Fluit et al., 2010; Foster et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2016; Perram et al., 2016; Sutkin et al., 2008).

### **Clinical supervisor training**

When reviewing the opinions of clinical supervisors in human nursing, a high level of importance was consistently placed on the need for education and the further development required for an individual to be successful in the role (Maxwell et al., 2015; Nyoni and Barnard, 2016; Oprescu et al., 2017; Ryan and McAllister, 2019, 2017). This is echoed in the opinions of veterinary nursing clinical supervisors with

47.5% of those surveyed stating they did not feel well prepared for the role after the training (Holt et al., 2021). In addition, three themes were identified by an open question asking for recommendations for future training as detailed below (Holt et al., 2021).

**Theme 1:** **Clinical Supervisor Course Content** was identified by 55% (n=44). There was a large call for more content on supporting students learning and how to encourage struggling students.

*“Personal support for the students as some need encouragement at different times, I don't feel this is prepared for in training...”* (Respondent 29)

There was also a call for more training and information about using the online logs for recording clinical skill achievements and how these can be completed. More guidance on what cases can be used for specific skills was also called for.

**Theme 2:** Clinical Supervisor Course and CPD Design was identified by 23.7% (n=19). Generally, there was a call for longer initial training with support from experienced clinical supervisors. Some suggested the training should lead to attaining a formal qualification. Targeted CPD with support and discussions with other clinical supervisors was also deemed valuable.

*“I find sessions with other clinical coaches so important to speak to others CC's who you can pass on your experiences or gain ideas from...”*  
(Respondent 2).

*“I feel there should be a more detailed course to become a clinical coach. Perhaps even a certificate.”* (Respondent 33)

**Theme 3:** Institute Communication was identified by 13.7% (n=11). Some respondents called for more support from the institute the student was attending.

*“Better communication between clinical coach and training centre”*

(Respondent 52)

*“Have more visible support for coaches especially to those who don't have internal support”* (Respondent 23).

There is currently no nationally standardised curriculum for clinical supervisor education and development in the veterinary nursing profession. It is up to the individual Accredited Education Institutes (AEIs) to interpret the RCVS guidance on the requirements for an individual to become a clinical supervisor (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2021). This includes the requirements that they;

*“receive relevant induction, ongoing support, education and training which includes training in equality and diversity”.*

Plus the requirement that;

*“All clinical supervisors must complete clinical supervisor training and be issued with certificates of attendance. Subsequent clinical supervisor standardisation should be completed a minimum of every 12 months with further training and support for those identified as higher risk.”*

It has been assumed that much of the teaching for SVNs in the CLE is performed by staff who have no formal training on the principles of education (Williams, 2016a). Veterinary nursing students are considered to present similar challenges as those discussed for students in other healthcare disciplines (Cottrell, 2013; Sibson, 2011a, 2011b). This will require the veterinary nursing clinical supervisor to demonstrate the



non-clinical skills highlighted by other clinical professions such as excellent communication, enthusiasm, providing clear feedback and building rapport (Sibson, 2011b, 2011a; Williams, 2016a, 2016b).

Given the importance of the clinical supervisor role to the future of the profession, reducing student attrition rates, increasing student satisfaction, developing professional identity and confidence, careful consideration should be given when practices select individuals for this role. Those who feel pushed or less keen to undertake this role can have reduced self-reported confidence, (Batt-Williams and Yon, 2022) which could have negative consequences for student training and professional development. In addition, AEIs should ensure clinical supervisor training, continued professional development and ongoing support is provided that comprehensively incorporates all the requirements and challenges of the role.

## **Guidance for clinical supervisors**

### **Educational Institution Assessment of Day One Skills**

Although Day One Skills (DOS) are defined by the RCVS, as the regulatory body, the approach to tracking them is not standardised, with each AEI taking a different approach; the RCVS Nursing Progress Log tool is optional for AEIs to adopt, (Guthrie, Arlo, 2016) and there are other formats in use including the Clinical Skills Log. In the authors' experience, a clinical supervisor could be working with more than one AEI, depending on where students are attending, which can create challenges when interpreting guidance and advice.

Clear communication between the clinical supervisor and each student's AEI is essential. Familiarity with the on-line tool used to log practical competency of DOS

(e.g., Nursing Progress Log or Clinical Skills Log) and an overview of each student's curriculum is also important because **AEIs** will differ in their requirements.

AEIs have a significant role in providing clinical supervisors with support, setting targets and the advice provided will differ between institutions, hence the AEI should be the first point of contact for clinical supervisors with course and support queries. **All clinical supervisors are required to attend a standardisation event at least annually, as per the RCVS guidance (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2021).** Standardisation events are provided by AEIs, with the expectation that training standards are maintained, and the latest guidance is being followed by all clinical supervisors and training practices.

### **Student induction and setting expectations**

Clinical supervisors are an integral part of SVN training, mentoring them through their clinical skills and developing professional identity. They uniquely ensure the nascent **veterinary** nurse develops practical competency, in addition to supporting the **application of their academic knowledge.** **First experiences within a CLE are likely to be a daunting prospect for most SVNs and have been reported to create anticipatory fear in student human nurses (Gray and Smith, 2000; Rajeswaran, 2016).** The clinical supervisor can alleviate this fear by ensuring that the first few weeks are structured to include practice orientation, staff introductions, health and safety inductions and general practice protocols and routines. **The clinical supervisor can advise the team there is a new SVN starting so they can be mindful and welcoming.** Assigning a "buddy" in this stage, a more experienced student or newly qualified RVN, for example, can support a sense of belonging. Remember the responsibilities towards the SVN

regarding equality, diversity and inclusivity and ensure tailored training to support each individual student's requirements.

Once the student has begun training in earnest, it is important to gain an understanding of how they are settling in and performing. Gather feedback in this regard from the team and look to identify specific examples where the student has performed well or where improvements can be made. These points can then be discussed and documented with the student. Set up regular meetings with your student and look to gain further support through signposting where necessary to the associated AEI. Structure goal-orientated discussions, where the SVN identifies what they would like to achieve, facilitated by the clinical supervisor. Use the GROW model for coaching as well as setting SMART targets that are easily achievable to start building motivation, Figure 2.

The GROW model below, allows a consistent, structured approach to plan each conversation in advance.

1. **Goals**, write them down and find out what the student wants from the session
2. **Reality**, encourage self-reflection, ask open questions, try not to give answers (What is happening? What effect does it have? What skills do you need to develop?)
3. **Options**, allow the student time to consider their preferred approach and plan
4. **Wrap up**, identify steps and objectives, write an action plan i.e., a tutorial record

# SMART Targets



**Figure 2:** Smart targets defined (Image courtesy of Susan Holt, University of Bristol)

A collaborative practice approach should also be taken to supporting students, with more experienced clinical supervisors mentoring newly trained clinical supervisors. The second article in the series will provide more detail on how the practice team can also be involved with student support.

## Models of Learning

There are several models that can be used to explain the stages in which students learn and develop new skills.

Decisions of competence are made by clinical supervisors relating to the practical skill performance of SVNs. Levels of competence in clinical skills can be defined using the concept that has been accredited to multiple authors and is known as the “Conscious Competence Model” (Keeley, 2021).

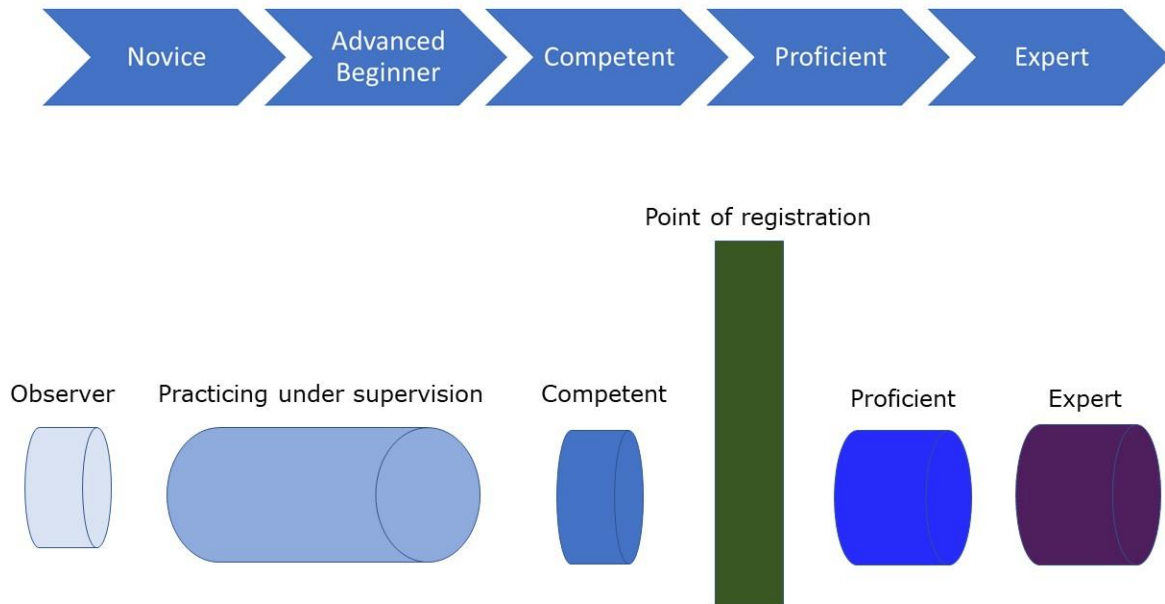
- Level 1 – Unconscious incompetence

- Student is unable to evaluate their own skill level (Caution required)
- Level 2 – Conscious incompetence
  - Student is aware of their lack of ability in relation to the desired level
  - Students can either become motivated to learn or stagnate here if not supported appropriately
- Level 3 – Conscious competence
  - Student is ready to be confirmed competent in the skill, but it still requires concentration and attentiveness when they perform it
- Level 4 – Unconscious competence
  - This would relate to an advance qualified professional post registration
  - Skills become innate or second nature

Clinical supervisors need to assess fairly the acquisition of skills, within the CLE. On-line tools, such as the NPL have been created for the process of documenting the journey to becoming competent at the DOS required. The AEI is responsible for standardising this process and ensuring consistency between the individual training practices.

The Dreyfus Model of skill acquisition has been applied to nursing theory and documents a progressive transition in skill based on experience (Benner, 2004; Dreyfus, 2004). Figure 3. The novice or nascent student starts with little or no experience and can only observe or follow instructions given. Competence develops after having considerable experience during the “advanced beginner’s” stage of the Dreyfus model, which is documented as experiential learning on the SVN online log. Post qualification the newly registered veterinary nurse will progress to proficient, with the final stage to become expert in the field.

**Figure 3:** Dreyfus model of skill development and relation to the student veterinary nurse journey (Image courtesy of Susan Holt and Susan Hooper, University of Bristol)



However, it should be recognised that a 'day one competent' person is the standard set by the RCVS as the minimum for a newly qualified nurse to practice a skill safely and autonomously under the direction of a veterinary surgeon, Image 2. Newly qualified nurses will not be as proficient or expert as an experienced professional.

Previous research in human nursing has identified a 'failing to fail' phenomenon (Davenport et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2016). This relates to the supervisor giving the student the "benefit of the doubt" when conducting assessments and can be related to personal or professional reasons (Docherty and Dieckmann, 2015). However, it has been recognised that the issues appear generic and therefore equally applicable to veterinary nursing students (Sibson, 2011a). Clinical supervisors should have the confidence to demonstrate skills, appropriately assess them, declining competency

when necessary, or referring SVNs back to the AEI, as required as an essential safety net for the profession (Batt-Williams and Yon, 2022).



Image 2: Supporting clinical skill acquisition (Image courtesy of University of Bristol, Veterinary School)

### **Supporting the struggling student**

Regular documented meetings will identify the individual level of support required and will help the clinical supervisor and student develop an appropriate relationship. This is particularly important as it will help identify any pastoral needs alongside progress and performance concerns. A student who is experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing will find it more difficult to learn at the appropriate pace, so identifying factors affecting their progress early on is vital (Davenport et al., 2018). Whilst clinical supervisors are not required to be counsellors, there is a responsibility to prioritise the



wellbeing of students within the RCVS Framework Standard 1.2 (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2021). You can also refer to your practice human resource policies and protocols and or the AEI, if appropriate to the students' employee status.

Ascertain gaps in clinical competency rather than clinical knowledge, consult with the AEI, as they can provide support to clinical supervisors in establishing a plan for appropriate teaching strategies that will nurture self-confidence. Clinical simulations for example, allow students to apply learning in a controlled clinical environment, facilitate immediate feedback, peer modelling and opportunities to practice skills. Ensure all feedback is documented and signed by both parties, to enable tracking of progress and performance, and provide evidence of support and guidance. This can be used to refer back to with the student to reflect on progress, or repeated concerns. It is also highly advisable to upload these documents onto online learning logs to allow access by the AEI.

Clinical reflective journaling by the student can be an effective way to facilitate learning for nursing students (Hwang et al., 2018). This can help students cope with stressful clinical cases and can facilitate coping strategies (Nelms Edwards et al., 2019). Reflective models such as Gibbs can be used to guide and improve the students' critical reflective thinking when considering their case involvement (Ardian et al., 2019).

## **Benefits of becoming a clinical supervisor**

Understanding the benefits of undertaking a job role can help contribute to the levels of empowerment and job satisfaction an employee can experience by increasing engagement with that role (Kanter, 2008). Kanter's 1977 empowerment structures of an organisation are still relevant today and can be linked to an individual's need for



opportunity and power to succeed; opportunity for development and power to access the tools to achieve this in an effective manner (Spence Laschinger et al., 2010). Currently the role of clinical supervisor can be carried out by either RVNs or veterinary surgeons and with many RVNs stating that they do not feel fully utilized by management, delegating the role of clinical supervisor to RVNs could therefore help to create a more satisfactory working environment (Batt-Williams and Yon, 2022; Vivian et al., 2022). The RVN must be aware that the clinical supervisor has additional workload responsibilities, such as mentoring, teaching and coaching, however, research suggests that the role allows for the development of a nurturing, open and positive working environment for all those involved and therefore can be beneficial to the professional development of an individual (Batt-Williams and Yon, 2022; Morrison and Brennaman, 2016). At the same time delegating this role to RVNs could relieve workload pressure from veterinary surgeons (Davidson, 2017).

RVN utilization, whether it is for Schedule 3 delegation or role development, should be considered on an individual basis of competence, experience, and confidence (RCVS, 2022). Veterinary Professionals, the clinical supervisor and management personnel, must therefore always be mindful that it is carried out correctly and not just to fill a void of satisfaction (Vivian et al., 2022).

Considering current concerns around RVN retention in practice, (Johnson, 2021; Vivian et al., 2022), it is important to maintain a sufficient number of experienced RVNs to ensure a bank of nurses who can pass on their knowledge and expertise to new generations (Coates, 2015; Imrie, 2021; Vivian et al., 2022). Undertaking the role of the clinical supervisor enables individuals to develop and promote professionalism through being an active role model in the practice (Morrison and Brennaman, 2016).

As discussed above, being on hand to demonstrate best practice of clinical skills and assisting with academic work are key functions of this role which can help to increase perceptions of professional identity of the individuals involved (Page-Jones and Abbey, 2015). Clinical supervisors can demonstrate professional communication between colleagues and with clients, provide pastoral support for students who are just beginning to learn their way around the practice and **help** alleviate concerns that may develop during the learning journey (Davies et al., 2011). Time since graduation should not be overlooked when selecting individuals to become a clinical supervisor. New graduates are often able to provide a more empathetic outlook which is linked to the recent achievement of the **similar** educational journey, whilst those with longer lengths of service **are more likely to** cope with problems that arise within the workplace (Morrison and Brennaman, 2016; Sygit, 2009). Overall, the enjoyment of teaching allows a clinical supervisor to learn from and build on a student's knowledge, develop critical reflection skills and create an atmosphere where all contributions are valued (Davies et al., 2011; Morrison and Brennaman, 2016).

**The lead author approached two current clinical supervisors for their comments on the benefits of undertaking the role. Their responses, which can be seen below, demonstrate the positive benefits they have personally identified.**

Georgina Haddrell RVN stated:

*“Empowers me as I am supporting and passing on my knowledge and skills as well as helping someone grow in their development and training. Professionally I think people respect you for helping and supporting others through training. I am also passionate about developing veterinary nurses’ skills and helping keep them in the profession.”*

Amy Homer MScVAA RVN PGCertPain GradDipVN NCertACC PGCAP stated:

*“For me, I find the benefits of being a clinical supervisor is that I get to actually see nurses progress and that I can support them through not only the theoretical but also the practical elements. This is a part of my role that I gain a lot of professional and personal satisfaction from – I have always had the attitude that we all were training once, and that our students should have a friendly and non-judgemental environment to learn in, that allows mistakes (as they make us learn!) but in a supportive way.”*

## **Conclusion**

To develop the clinical skills and professional behaviours appropriate to the veterinary nursing profession, student veterinary nurses require appropriate support to navigate the complex clinical learning environment. The clinical supervisor plays a key role in providing this support alongside the practice team and AEI. A structured, measured and individualised approach should be devised for each student, in line with the requirements of their programme. It is important to consult with the associated AEI regularly, to ensure appropriate goal setting and flag any pastoral, progress or performance concerns early to facilitate timely support. Whilst the clinical supervisor role can be challenging, there are rewards too, such as increased job satisfaction and sense of professional identity.

## **Could you support a student?**

If you feel your practice could support student veterinary nurse training, please contact a training provider, which can be found using the following links:

<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/list-of-rcvs-accredited-further-education-qualifications-in/>

<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/list-of-rcvs-accredited-higher-education-qualifications-in/>



If you would be interested in supporting a University of Bristol student nurse with their clinical placement requirement, please contact Susan Hooper

[ivsph@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ivsph@bristol.ac.uk)

## **Future Research Support**

The University of Bristol is planning further research of the clinical learning environment. We are looking for support from other RCVS approved educational institutes. If you would be interested in supporting future research, please contact Susan Holt [susan.holt@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:susan.holt@bristol.ac.uk)

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## **Key Points**

- Supporting student veterinary nurses in the clinical environment can be challenging and must be managed carefully, considering the individual needs of the student.
- A supportive and professional clinical supervisor is vital for the professional development of student veterinary nurses.
- With careful planning and preparation, the clinical supervisor can support the learning environment to create a safe space for students to develop confidence and skill acquisition.
- The role of the clinical supervisor does pose challenges but can also be extremely rewarding both personally and professionally.

## **Key Words**

Clinical Supervisor, Student Veterinary Nurse, Clinical Learning Environment

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