Course and Subject Procedure - Conscientious Objections

Section 1 - Purpose

(1) This procedure applies to situations where students have a conscientious objection to a learning activity in a subject or course involving the use of animals. It provides detailed guidance on handling students' conscientious objections to the use of live animals, animal tissue or animal products in learning activities at the University.

(2) This procedure does not require changes to learning activities where a student has a conscientious objection. The learning activity may be essential to subject and course learning outcomes. In such cases the onus is on students and prospective students to consider their career and study choices.

(3) This procedure meets the requirement of section 2.1.5(iv) of the Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes 8th Edition 2013 (Updated 2021) (the Code) that the University will have policy provisions on how it will handle conscientious objections to a use of animals in teaching.

Scope

(4) This procedure has the same scope as the Course and Subject Policy.

Section 2 - Policy

(5) This procedure supports:

a. the Course and Subject Policy, which governs delivery and management of courses and subjects, and
b. the Research Policy, which governs University research and teaching activities involving animals.

Section 3 - Procedure

Information about learning activities

(6) Students will make themselves aware of course and subject requirements as stated in the University Handbook and other information and identify any learning activity involving animals to which they have a conscientious objection. Students should note that a learning activity to which they have an objection may be essential to the learning outcomes of some subjects and courses.

Where learning activities involve using animals

(7) The Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes 8th Edition 2013 (Updated 2021) requires the University to seek alternatives to animal use for teaching and assessment, applying the principles of replacement, reduction and refinement to achieve humane experimental techniques. Alternatives include computer simulations, supervised clinical experience, ethically sourced tissue, surgical and anatomical models and mannequins.

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(8) Academic staff will include information about animal use for learning activities in the relevant University systems for providing curriculum information, as set out in the Course and Subject Procedure – Information and Representation.

Conscientious beliefs as a basis for conscientious objection

(9) For a school to consider making alternative arrangements for a learning activity, to accommodate a student's conscientious objection, the objection must be based on a conscientious belief held by the student.

(10) Australian courts have defined a conscientious belief as a belief founded on a serious and deeply held moral conviction, whether or not part of a religious doctrine or creed. The University accepts that a conscientious belief may have the following elements:

a. It represents an individual's genuine and sustained inward conviction of what is morally or religiously right or wrong, uninfluenced by any consideration of personal advantage or disadvantage either to the student themself or others.
b. The belief must be a genuinely held belief and not simply an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available.
c. The belief must attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance. It need not qualify as rational in the eyes of others and can be based on a religious beliefs, belief in the sanctity of life, environmental concerns, or other reasons that the student deems central to their belief system.
d. To live in accordance with the belief, the person who holds it may be willing to incur personal discomfort, suffering or material loss.
e. A conscientious belief will have a durable, though not unchangeable, quality.

Not every conviction, genuine though it may be, will constitute a sufficient reason for claiming a conscientious objection to a particular activity.

Raising a conscientious objection

(11) A student who has a concern about, or conscientious objection to, a learning activity in a course or subject in which they are enrolled must raise the matter with the relevant staff member at the earliest opportunity. They should raise it with:

a. the Subject Coordinator of the relevant subject, if it relates to a learning activity or assessment in one subject
b. the Course Director of the relevant course, if it relates to a learning activity or assessment in more than one subject for a course, or the student is uncomfortable raising the matter with the Subject Coordinator, or
c. the head of the teaching school, if the student is uncomfortable raising the matter with the Course Director.

(12) The staff member to whom the student expresses the concern or objection will respond respectfully and handle the matter with sensitivity.

(13) When a student raises a concern but cannot articulate ethical, religious or cultural reasons for it, they may be offered support such as referral to counselling or other support services or resources, to help them clarify their concern and whether it is a conscientious objection.

(14) A student's conscientious objection will not be accommodated if they raise it after they have undertaken the activity. However, students who have concerns about activities that arise during or after the activity should raise their concerns with the Subject Coordinator or Head of School.

(15) The staff member who receives the concern will determine whether it meets the conscientious objection criteria at clause 10. They may require the student to provide a written statement or supporting documentation, and may consult with others if necessary to help them decide.

(16) The student can ask for an alternative learning activity or assessment task but cannot demand that an alternative be provided or that the alternative take a particular form.

Assessing a conscientious objection

(17) As soon as possible after the student has raised the concern or objection, the staff member assessing it will contact the student to clarify:

a. what activity the student is objecting to
b. which aspects they are objecting to (for example, where the objection is to use of animals, the species being used, the type of procedure/interaction)
c. whether something can be done to satisfy the objection (for example, where the objection is to the use of animals, by using a different species, using anaesthetic), and
d. whether the objection(s) is based on a conscientious belief or a belief which does not meet the requisite standard of a conscientious belief, such as a belief based on an opinion or viewpoint or simply a feeling of discomfort.

(18) The staff member will consult the Course Director and Head of School or delegate (as relevant) as to whether an alternative arrangement is possible.

(19) Factors to be considered when deciding whether alternative arrangements are possible include:

a. professional accreditation and registration requirements and the need to certify that graduates have particular professional competencies
b. legal requirements including equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation
c. whether the subject is core or elective (if an elective, it may be possible for the student to substitute a different subject)
d. whether the alternative arrangement can meet the subject learning outcomes and maintain the same quality of learning and teaching
e. whether the academic integrity of the course or subject can be maintained in providing the alternative arrangement
f. whether the alternative arrangement can be made soon enough
g. the practicality of the alternative arrangement, including the workload of providing and assessing it
h. whether the alternative arrangement would cause unreasonable hardship to the student
i. the effect of the alternative arrangement on other students, and
j. whether the alternative arrangement would disadvantage other students.

(20) Alternative learning activities or assessment tasks will not be provided if they involve a substantial added workload for teaching staff.

Alternative arrangements

(21) Where an alternative arrangement is made to accommodate a student's conscientious objection, it will apply only to the individual student in question, not to other students enrolled in the course or subject.

Conscientious objections that cannot be accommodated

(22) The University is not obliged to accommodate a conscientious objection.

(23) The University will not act in any way that violates the law and the University is not obliged to accommodate a conscientious belief which puts it at risk of violating any law to which it is subject.

(24) For some activities, it may not be possible to make alternative arrangements to accommodate a conscientious objection.

(25) Students with a conscientious objection that cannot be accommodated may consult the Course Director about other enrolment options prior to week 2 of the teaching period. Students who remain enrolled in subjects past the census date are bound by applicable financial liabilities, grades and special consideration policy requirements.

(26) If the student's conscientious objection cannot be accommodated and they choose to remain enrolled in the relevant subject or course, they must participate in the activity or assessment to which they hold the objection to meet the relevant subject or course requirements.

Outcome

(27) The staff member who has assessed the concern or objection will:

a. inform the student in writing of the outcome of their conscientious objection
b. if they are not the Course Director, copy the communication to the Course Director, and
c. where the objection is to the use of animals, the Course Director will forward this communication to the University's Animal Welfare Officer, who will inform the Animal Ethics Committee of the objection and its outcome.

Complaints

(28) A student who has raised a conscientious objection, and believes it was not handled in accordance with this procedure, can make a complaint by the process stated in the Complaints Management Procedure.

Section 4 - Guidelines

(29) Nil.

Section 5 - Glossary

(30) This procedure uses terms defined in the Course and Subject Policy as well as the following:

a. Animals – as defined in the Code – a non-human vertebrate or cephalopod.
b. Conscientious belief – as defined in clause 10 of this procedure.

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