



Anti Vivisection WA (Inc)

ABN 17 235 544 910

“Working to end experiments on animals!”

Conscientiously Objecting to Harmful Animal Usage *in Teaching or Assessment*

1.1.1 A Guide for Murdoch Students

The lab class is about to begin. Rats are to be killed and their still living intestinal tracts dissected out and experimented on. Yet humane alternatives exist. What will you do? Whilst some students remain happy to participate in such classes, others have sincerely held ethical, moral or religious objections to participating in learning activities involving unnecessary suffering or loss of life.

Up until 1998 students who refused to participate in assessable teaching activities to which they conscientiously objected lost marks. In November 1998, however, Murdoch took the groundbreaking step of formally allowing conscientious objection by students to teaching or assessment activities, becoming, to our knowledge, the first Australian university to do so.

The “Guidelines on Conscientious Objection in Teaching and Assessment” approved by Academic

Council list the steps that conscientiously objecting students and their academic staff should follow. Attention is drawn in particular to the need for students to request acceptable alternatives from their Unit Coordinators as early as possible, preferably before the commencement of the unit, and wherever possible by the end of Week 3 of semester. Unit Coordinators have the right to assess students to determine whether their claims constitute genuine conscientious objections as specified in the Guidelines but should NOT seek to cross examine students unduly nor seek to alter their beliefs. Students dissatisfied with the alternative arrangements provided to them may appeal through the Student Appeals Committee. Further information on conscientious objection and support for students going through the process is available from your Student Guild or from former conscientious objector **Andrew Knight**.

1.1.2 Guidelines on Conscientious Objection in Teaching and Assessment

as approved by Academic Council on 11/11/98

1. The University recognises that some students may have a conscientious belief which is in conflict with teaching and/or assessment practices in one or more units in which they enrol. The University shall endeavour to make reasonable accommodations to meet such beliefs.
2. In considering such cases, the University accepts that conscientious belief is:
 - an individual’s inward conviction of what is morally right or morally wrong;
 - is genuinely held after some process of thinking about the subject; and
 - is uninfluenced by any consideration of personal advantage or disadvantage either to oneself or others, and perhaps when put to the test should be ordinarily combined with a willingness to act according to the particular conviction reached although this may involve personal discomfort or suffering or material loss.

A conscientious belief is more than just a strongly held belief or feeling, or a reaction to something which is distressful to the student. It does not have to have a religious basis, nor does the staff member have to accept its underlying reasoning. The no-advantage clause does not mean that the student must accept a disadvantage or personal cost in order to prove a conscientious belief. Rather, it is used to establish that the belief is not designed to obtain an advantage or preferential treatment, and that the depth of the belief is such that the person is willing to act in accordance with the conviction even though this may be at a personal cost.

3. The onus is on the student to take the initiative in identifying a conscientious difficulty with a teaching or assessment practice and to draw this to the attention of the University before undertaking such practice. [A student cannot appeal against a practice which he or she has already

undertaken.] It is preferable for students with a conscientious objection to be identified early, so there is time to assess it and to make any necessary arrangements. Wherever possible, students with a conscientious objection in a unit should raise their difficulties with the Unit Coordinator prior to the start of the unit or in the first three weeks of semester. If the difficulty is with units in future semesters or is systemic to units offered in the programme, the student should discuss this with the Programme Chair as early as possible. It is for these staff to assess whether the claim constitutes a conscientious objection and what arrangements can be made to accommodate it. The staff member has the discretion to ask for more information from the student in order to establish whether or not the student has a conscientious belief.

4. In cases where Unit Coordinators can foresee students having problems of belief in their unit, the unit study guide should mention these and advise any students with problems about this to see the Unit Coordinator.
5. The student can request that there be a suitable alternative, but has no right to demand that the alternative take a particular form. There are also countervailing factors to be taken into account in deciding whether and (if so) how to meet the student's concerns, including:
 - professional requirements: those of external registration bodies, and staff concerns to be able to certify that graduates have the basic professional competencies. This requires a careful consideration of whether or not the teaching or assessment practice at issue is essential for the training of practitioners in that profession.
 - whether it is a required or an elective unit (the case for expensive alternative arrangements in an elective unit is much weaker)
 - whether there is time to put alternative arrangements in place
 - whether it would result in the University breaching its equal opportunity obligations
 - whether other students would be disadvantaged in the quality of their education
 - cost
 - the University is not obliged to accommodate a conscientious belief which violates a law (e.g. a belief based on racism)
6. Students with a conscientious objection to a particular teaching or assessment practice should not simply be excused from an activity, but instead be given an alternative that is equally difficult. Alternatives made available to students with a conscientious objection do not have to be made available to all other students in the unit.
7. A Unit Coordinator who has considered a student case of conscientious objection should advise the Divisional Executive Officer of this, giving details of the nature of the conscientious belief and of any alternative arrangements made. The Divisional Executive Officer should maintain records of such cases for future reference.
8. A student who is dissatisfied with the decision of the Unit Coordinator or Programme Chair can appeal to the Student Appeals Committee. If the Committee determines that alternative arrangements shall be made by the Division and the arrangements then made (or not made) are still unsatisfactory to the student, the student may appeal about this to the Student Appeals Committee. If on the other hand the Division is not prepared to implement the Committee's decision on the grounds of cost, the issue should be referred to the Vice Chancellor for resolution.

For further information please contact:

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