



# THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

## FACULTY OF VETERINARY SCIENCE

### POLICY ON CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IN TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

1. The Faculty 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.
2. The Faculty will endeavour to make reasonable accommodations to meet such beliefs where it is possible to do so. Students should recognise however, that while every effort will be made, it may not be possible to do so in every instance.
3. In considering such cases, the Faculty 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, although it may, nor does the staff member have to accept its underlying reasoning. The issue of no advantage 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.

4. 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 Faculty 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 raise the matter early, so there is time to assess it and, if possible, make alternate arrangements. Wherever possible, students with a conscientious objection in a unit should raise their difficulties with the Unit of Study 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 program, the student should discuss this with the Associate Dean Teaching as early as possible. It is the responsibility of these staff to assess whether the claim constitutes a conscientious objection and what, if any, arrangements can be made to accommodate it. The staff member may have to ask for more information from the student and, where appropriate, from relevant

religious, cultural or other certifying bodies in order to establish whether or not the student has a conscientious belief.

5. A 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. These factors include:
  - 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 Faculty breaching its equal opportunity obligations
  - whether other students would be disadvantaged in the quality of their education
  - cost
  - the Faculty 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 will not simply be excused from that activity, but instead be will given, if possible, an alternative that is equally testing. 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 of Study Coordinator who has considered a student case of conscientious objection should advise the Dean of Veterinary Science of this, giving details of the nature of the conscientious belief and the alternative arrangements made, if any. The Dean should maintain records of such cases for future reference.
8. The Faculty Handbook shall include a statement informing students that the Faculty has a Policy on Conscientious Objection in Teaching and Assessment.