A scaffolded approach to developing university students' appreciation of animal ethics issues

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Students in the biological sciences should graduate with not only a deep understanding of their discipline but also the ability to make ethical judgments in a professional setting. This is of particular relevance for those teaching in the animal sciences. Section 6.1.3 of The Animal Ethics Code of Practice states that "*Students should be given the opportunity to discuss the ethical, social and scientific use of animals for scientific purposes, including teaching.*"

In the School of Zoology at the University of Tasmania we have designed a vertically integrated approach to developing our students' appreciation of animal ethics across the three years of the undergraduate course. Relevant assessment tasks are embedded in our learning curriculum. This begins in 1st year, when students are introduced to the ethical framework that guides the use of animals in teaching and research. In 2nd year students are given their first opportunity to work with vertebrates and cephalopod molluscs in the field and the laboratory. Their roles and responsibilities under The Code are discussed in class and each student signs the student declaration. In 3rd year, students must take a greater personal responsibility for the care and use of animals. We have, therefore, designed specific learning tasks through which students develop a professional level of awareness of the processes of gaining animal ethics approval for scientific research.

To assess the effectiveness and improve delivery of our current strategies for engaging students in debate on animal ethics issues, we have surveyed University of Tasmania undergraduate students enrolled in Zoology units at 1st, 2nd and 3rd year levels. The survey asked students whether they had previously been in a class in which animals or animal tissues had been used; whether they had been given any information about animal ethics at that time and whether they had consciously thought about animal ethics issues relating to the use of animals in teaching and learning.

The results show that 90% of students in 1st yr had previously used animals in the classroom. However, only 57% reported receiving information about animal ethics at the time the animals were used. By 2nd year, this had increased to 80%. There was little change in the responses of the 3rd yr students to this question (82%). While we might have expected an increase, the 3rd yr class contains a significant proportion of Study Abroad students. In all year cohorts, there was a high level of awareness of animal ethics issues, with 80% of our 1st years reporting that they had consciously thought about animal ethics issues. This increased to 96% and 92% in the 2nd and 3rd year cohorts, respectively. We believe that these results demonstrate the effectiveness of our approach towards ensuring that we meet Section 6.3.1 of The Code, and that our students graduate with a high level of awareness of the responsibilities of scientists working with animals.

This study way approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (H0010485).