

The animal welfare concept among students of animal-oriented studies in Flanders

Hilde Vervaecke¹, Anke Verlent¹, Christel P.H. Moons², Marcel Eens³, Eric Van Tilburgh⁴

¹: Odisee University College, Agro- & Biotechnology, Salto Research Group, Sint-Niklaas, Belgium; hilde.vervaecke@odisee.be; ²: University of Ghent, Department of Nutrition, Genetics and Ethology, Laboratory for Ethology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Heidestraat 19, B-9820 Merelbeke, Belgium; ³: Department of Biology, University of Antwerp, Universiteitsplein 1, 2610 Wilrijk, Belgium; ⁴: Department of the Environment, Animal Welfare Unit, Koning Albert II-laan 20 bus 8, 1000 Brussels, Belgium.

Contact hilde.vervaecke@odisee.be

Research objective and methods:

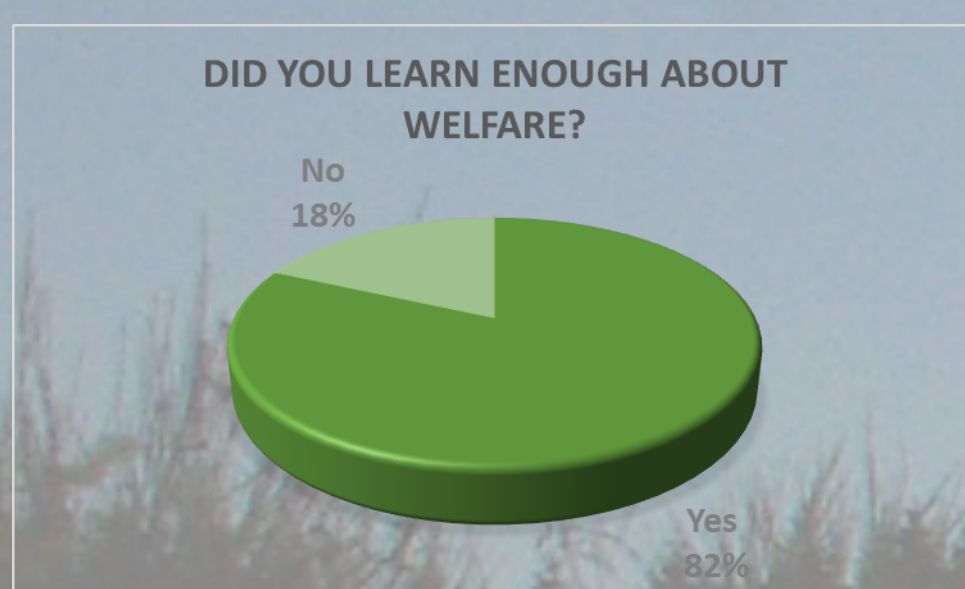
Animal welfare embraces aspects of the **biological, affective and natural functioning** of the animals.

Through an online questionnaire, we studied the interpretation of this three-fold concept among final-year Flemish students of mostly animal-oriented studies: veterinary medicine, biology and animal management studies (=agro-bio).

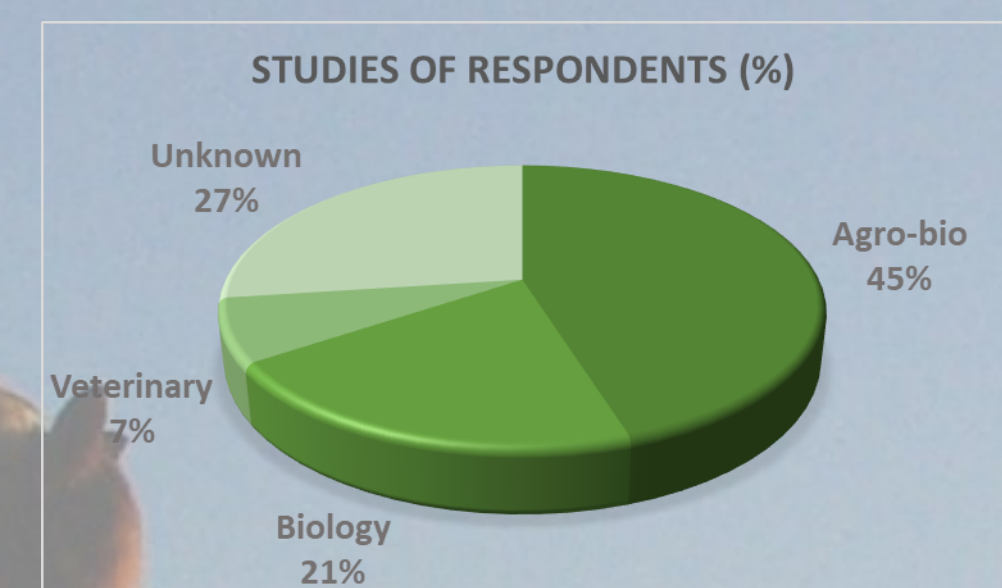
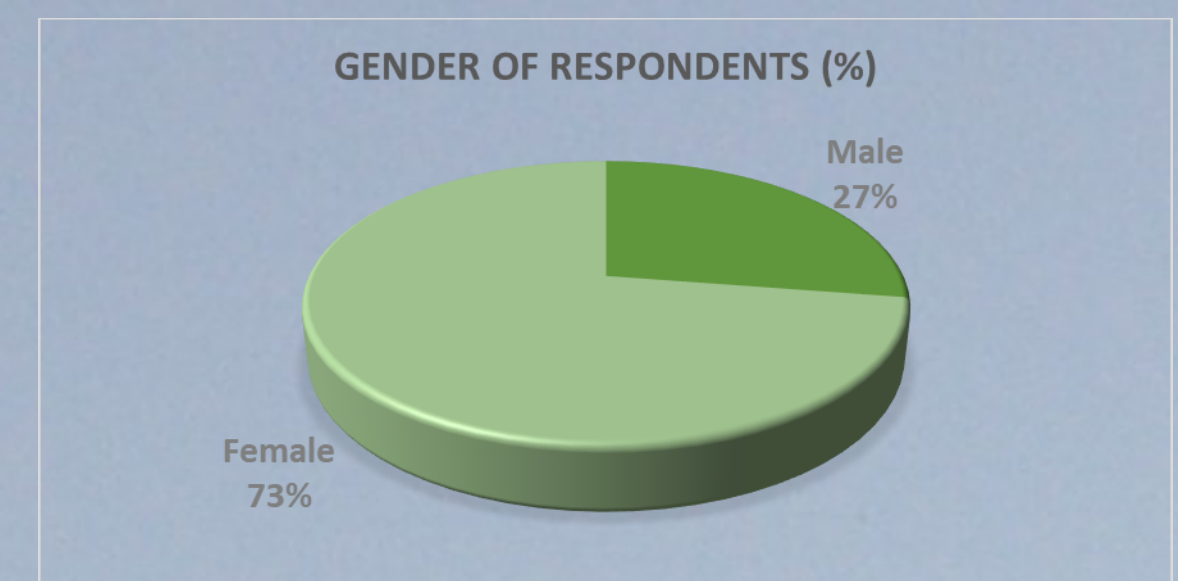
Respondents: 291 persons

- ⇒ mostly females
- ⇒ most respondents studied animal management (agro-bio), followed by biology and veterinary medicine
- ⇒ mostly young persons : 69% being between 20 and 25 years

Results:



Most respondents - 82% - thought they had learned enough about animal welfare. 33% of the biology students thought the curriculum did not contain enough welfare content, compared to 14% agro-bio students and 11% veterinary medicine students



When asked which two concepts they spontaneously associated with "animal welfare", following word cloud popped up: health, care, love, happiness, respect, natural behaviour, food, stress, ethics, Ben Weyts (Flemish minister of animal welfare), GAIA (welfare group), rights, slaughter houses,...



Ethical view "all life is equally important"? This was scored significantly higher by agro-bio students than by veterinary students (KW-test: $\chi^2=9.91$, $df=3$, $p<0.019$; post-hoc: -50.79 , $p<0.036$).

In general, the ethical viewpoint of the respondents was not strongly anthropocentric.

Can you agree with following statements; score 1 = not at all; 5= fully agree	mean	SD	range	N
In our ethical decisions about animal welfare, the needs of humans are of highest importance	2,49	1,18	2 to 5	278
In our ethical decisions about animal welfare, the needs of animals are of highest importance	3,23	1,21	4 to 5	284
In our ethical decisions about animal welfare, the needs of all lifeforms on earth are of equal importance	3,39	1,15	1 to 5	288
In our ethical decisions about animal welfare, the needs of humans and animals are of equal importance	3,5	1,15	3 to 5	286

Scores of importance in relation to animal welfare:

We examined the relationship between the relative importance the students adhered to the different components of welfare, their ethical viewpoint and the type of animal-oriented study they had undertaken. Showing species-specific natural behaviour was scored to be significantly more important for welfare by agro-bio students compared to "other" respondents (i.e. not veterinary, not biology students) (KW-test, $\chi^2=7.902$, $df=3$, $p<0.04$, Bonferroni corrected; post-hoc: 30.07 , $p<0.048$). Over all questions, biological functioning was scored to be more important by biology students than by agro-bio students (KW-test, $\chi^2=11.09$, $df=3$, $p<0.011$; post-hoc: 36.72 , $p<0.018$).

Scores of importance in relation to animal welfare:

In order of increasing importance, the respondents scored the basic needs highest such as no hunger and thirst, no pain, good treatment, space, resting comfort, natural behaviour, thermic comfort, biological functioning, emotional wellbeing, play and exploration, non-harmful social interactions.



The following scores on statements show that mere absence of a negative condition was perceived as insufficient welfare; emotional well-being was scored higher.

Can you agree with following statements; score 1 = not at all; 5= fully agree; all ranges: 1 to 5; n= 284-290	mean	SD
Absence of a negative condition such as sickness or abnormal behaviour indicates sufficient welfare	2,32	1,10
A cow with subclinical mastitis, no pain and normal appetite and behaviour, has good welfare	2,93	1,03
From ethical perspective a good quality longer life is better than a good quality shorter life	2,98	0,97
Feeling emotionally well is more important than being healthy	3,06	0,96
Being killed painlessly entails no welfare problem for the animal	3,11	1,24
Non-domesticated animals such as bonobos live better in the wild than in animal parks	3,48	1,10
Stereotypical behaviour is a normal reaction to an abnormal environment	3,66	1,11
Humans and other mammals experience similar emotions	3,92	0,89
A lab mouse that sees another individual being hurt can experience stress itself	4	1,03
A horse that can choose to enter a stall or not has a better welfare than if humans decide for the horse	4,1	0,90
It is ethically required that all animals should experience positive experiences such as play and exploration	4,16	0,86
A one-eyed dog without pain can experience full welfare	4,65	0,601