

POLICY STATEMENT ON THE USE OF LABORATORY ANIMALS IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

(approved by the Board of Governors on 13 January 2017)

POLICY STATEMENT

1. Ghent University's motto is 'Dare to think'; dare to focus on creating an institution of knowledge which not only anticipates the future, but also questions itself and firmly opts for authenticity. In research, scientific curiosity, innovation and academic freedom are therefore core values for our organization. We encourage our researchers to be innovative pioneers in their own research fields, to pursue new opportunities, and we provide a platform for dissenting voices. In education, this motto is reflected in the educational concept of Creative Knowledge Development, which incorporates elements such as a critical attitude, facing challenges, and strong communication. This attitude will often result in successful projects which generate high-quality research and education. Pioneering work, however, also requires a focus on values such as integrity and ethics, since innovative research and education often raise ethical questions and challenges. Ghent University aims to conduct all research and provide all education within a rigorous ethical context. This particularly applies to the use of laboratory animals.
2. Ghent University has a long tradition of ground-breaking research with an impact on the health, treatment and behaviour of humans and animals, both in life sciences and behavioural sciences. Research in life sciences is an integrated combination of different approaches: (bio)informatics and computational biology, biochemical research, research on cell cultures, research on samples from (laboratory) animals, animal testing, research on human samples and research on healthy and diseased humans and animals. Each of these subfields has its own unique strengths and limitations, and valuable results can only be obtained by an integrated approach. Ghent University is convinced of the particularly large and indispensable added value animal research has on the development of (concrete) knowledge at the benefit of humans and animals. After all, in those cases where animal research remains necessary, it often provides a better understanding into specific disease processes and it enables trying out new and/or better methods for prevention and treatment of diseases. However, this belief does not prevent the need for researchers to find ways to, as much as possible, reduce the number of laboratory animals and the suffering and/or distress these animals experience, and eventually, as far as possible, to aim for a research setting without laboratory animals

(see below, item 4). If research allows this, other experimental research methods are applied (first), and animal research is limited to a complementary, albeit very crucial, research method (*working with alternatives*).

In order to proactively seek non-animal alternatives and to stimulate the development and use of these alternatives (*working on alternatives*), the university also makes use of its available expertise in various disciplines which are relevant from the perspective of ethics and wellbeing of (laboratory) animals, always in consultation with its researchers. The university particularly desires that the work on laboratory animals is performed in a context of multiple perspectives, with a dialogue between ethicists and life scientists.

3. At our university, we train the experts of tomorrow with progressive educational methods. In this context, it is important to familiarize students as much as possible with the reality of the field and to provide them with opportunities to maximally develop their skills. Therefore, they are intimately involved in the treatment of patients (humans and animals), yet always under close supervision. Through a strong interaction between education and research, there is a process of sharing and combining as much as possible in the context of laboratory animal use. For example, laboratory animals used for research, or derivative material of these animals, also serve a purpose for veterinary education. The bearing strength and wellbeing of the animal are always of primary concern. Simultaneously, efforts are made to combine actions as much as possible, thus realizing an added value for both research and education in a single manipulation without additional burden for the animal.
4. Ghent University fully supports the principle of the three Rs, which aims at finding alternatives for using animals in experiments (Replacement), reducing the number of animals without compromising scientific results (Reduction), and surrounding laboratory animals with all necessary care in order to meet their wellbeing and prevent stress, pain and other distress, as much as possible (Refinement). This approach particularly focuses on animal wellbeing. Because of the importance attached to an animal's life, animals must be kept in the best possible circumstances of care and wellbeing. All employees who work with laboratory animals at our institution, whether for scientific or educational purposes, must proactively make a commitment to the wellbeing of the animals under their care.
5. It is obvious that all animal research conducted at Ghent University should be done at least in accordance with the relevant legislation and all interpretative documents ensuing from this legislation, including policy documents and/or codes, as drafted by the different authorized entities.

If Ghent University researchers are directly involved in setting up and/or carrying out animal experiments outside our institution, e.g. in partnership with a foreign university, they must comply with the relevant legislation of that country as far as it is more strict than the Belgian legislation. If it is less strict, the Belgian legislation counts as minimal guiding framework.

Since the proper reporting of research and research results is essential to the value and usefulness of animal testing, Ghent University expects its researchers, when possible, to use the ARRIVE Guidelines, or similar successive guidelines.

Besides monitoring legislative and/or executive documents, researchers must also proactively pursue the realization of a so-called 'culture of care'. Such a setting aims at

the maximum optimization of care for the laboratory animals and their wellbeing.

6. Ghent University acknowledges the importance of properly monitoring legal compliance and expects its researchers to be fully cooperative and transparent to the legal supervisory bodies. As far as these supervisory bodies are situated within the institution, the university commits to providing a proper institutional embedding of these actors with the necessary visibility and sufficient support for a transparent, high-quality and critical provision of services. In addition to the legally required monitoring mechanisms, Ghent University also establishes an internal complaint unit, which will be embedded in the policy on scientific integrity and ethics.
7. Researchers and other people involved in animal research must be given the necessary support and guidance to be able to meet the highest ethical standards and develop into progressive partners in the fields of ethics and the wellbeing of laboratory animals. This implies an intensive interaction between the research community and the institution, and is embodied in a proactive commitment of both partners to go beyond the legal provisions (e.g. by developing specialized training opportunities; increasing awareness and stimulating critical reflection by organizing events and debates; incorporating research actions specifically aimed at animal wellbeing; etc.).
8. As an institution, Ghent University is not only committed to the laboratory animals, but also fulfils a proactive role in stimulating the involvement of both the general public and other relevant actors, in order to create broad support for its activities and the consequences thereof. This includes, but is not limited to, the development of an animal-friendly trajectory after conducting animal research, e.g. by providing opportunities for adoption of laboratory animals. The institution also fulfils an active role in shaping the future of an animal policy, with particular attention to the optimization of legal requirements, in order to effectively improve animal wellbeing.
9. The provisions of this policy statement apply to all research conducted at Ghent University and/or all researchers connected to Ghent University, regardless of their status or funding. In those partnerships in which Ghent University is a stakeholder (but research is not conducted at the institution itself), the university fully engages itself to communicate its policy principles with regard to animal research and, as much as possible, to apply these in practice.