

KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS FARM ANIMAL WELFARE AMONG THE AGRICULTURAL UNDERGRADUATES IN SRI LANKA

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Understanding stakeholders' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions in the animal sector is crucial for improving farm animal welfare, and agricultural undergraduates, as future industry leaders, can play a key role in promoting positive change. This study aimed to evaluate knowledge, attitudes and perceptions towards animal welfare among the agricultural undergraduates in Sri Lanka. A total of 354 agricultural undergraduates were surveyed using a pre-tested online questionnaire, with a proportionate stratified random sample representing all agricultural faculties and academic years. Respondents' knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes were evaluated using 42 statements, scoring responses on dichotomous and five-point Likert scales. The data was analyzed descriptively and using non-parametric tests. The majority of survey participants were females (61%) aged 24-26. Results revealed that the majority had low (46.3%) to medium (42.5%) self-reported knowledge and actual knowledge (26.3%) about farm animal welfare. Self-reported knowledge showed an association with the academic year, university of study, and attendance of farm animal-related educational programs ($p < 0.05$) while third-year undergraduates showed the highest actual knowledge about farm animal welfare ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, respondents' perceptions towards positive welfare differed ($p < 0.05$) with the age, academic year, and ownership of pet animals. As students' progress to higher academic years, their support for ethical concerns tends to decrease, as shown by the negative correlation ($r = -0.31$). The majority suggested establishing laws, legislation, and extension services for animal welfare, with 70% of undergraduates supporting its inclusion in the university curriculum. Notably, 34% agreed that animal welfare in Sri Lanka is at a satisfactory level. Educating agricultural undergraduates on farm animal welfare is vital to address knowledge gaps and foster ethical practices, enabling them to advance welfare standards in the local livestock industry.

Keywords: Ethical concerns, Positive welfare, Self-reported knowledge