



## SOP 6.09 Handling horses

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### Purpose

- (1) The objective of this standard operating procedure is to provide guidance to the Charles Sturt University staff on:
  - a. ethologically appropriate safe handling of horses that aims not to compromise horse welfare or human safety.
  - b. use of this SOP will enable Charles Sturt University staff who are handling horses to model appropriate handling skills for students.

### Scope

- (2) Any user of horses whether conducting teaching or research, or for commercial purposes.
- (3) All researchers and teaching staff using animals for scientific purposes must be competent. For definition of competency refer to Charles Sturt University's Policy on 'Animal Care Competency Training and Assessment'

**Recommended staff to student ratio:** this varies as tabled below.

<b>STAFF* STUDENT HORSE ACTIVITY RATIOS</b>		<b>*Academic staff only included in these ratios</b>
<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>STUDENTS PER HORSE (MAXIMUM)</b>	<b>*STAFF: STUDENT RATIO</b>
Observational or demonstration practical (e.g., weaning observations, horse riding demonstrations, ultrasound demonstrations, gait assessment)	N/A	1: ALL
Horse handling / Horse assessment / health checks – likely to be restrained and/or separated	3-4 students/adult horse	1:12 if <6 horses
	3-4 students /adult horse	1:8 if 6+ horses
Foal handling	2-3 students/mare and foal	1: ALL (only 2 students directly in contact with the foal at a given time)
Weanling handling (including health checks)	4 students/weanling (only 1-2 handling a weanling at a time)	1:8
General practicals (conformation, angles, handling, saddle / equipment fitting, bandaging)	3-4 students /adult horse	1:12
Mare work (restrained in crush)	3-4 students/mare	1:12
Mare teasing/scanning/AI/routine breeding-related procedures	3-4 students/mare	1:12 if 3 mares
		1:8 if >3 mares
Handling newborn foals	3-4 students/mare and foal	1:8 if up to 2 mares-foals
		1:6 if >2 mares-foals
Handling stallions	No students to handle stallion	1: ALL
Treadmill practicals	3/trained horse	1: ALL (students work in groups of up to 6 per horse but only 3 directly in contact with horse at any time; 2 staff - 1 academic and 1 technical)
<a href="http://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/79160/SW08262-Code-of-Practice-Managing-risks-when-new-or-inexperienced-riders-or-handlers-interact-with-horses-in-the-workplace.pdf">http://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/79160/SW08262-Code-of-Practice-Managing-risks-when-new-or-inexperienced-riders-or-handlers-interact-with-horses-in-the-workplace.pdf</a>		
<p><i>Recommendations 1 staff):6 inexperienced horse people - students would be the safest proposed baseline. The horse: student: staff ratios are critical when working with inexperienced students and/or young horses.</i></p> <p><i>Student: horse ratios are for a given period (e.g., during a single practical class) or procedure and are not indicative of the number of students each horse will be exposed to over the course of a session or year.</i></p> <p><i>*Staff: student ratios may <b>exceptionally</b> be adjusted at the discretion of the academic.</i></p>		



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### Details of procedure:

#### Prior to work

- (4) Carry out a visual inspection of the environment in which the horse is going to be worked. Remove any items that are un-necessary and likely to be problematic for example empty feed buckets, items on the ground or items causing an obstruction or likely to cause a distraction.
- (5) Before commencing work, the handler should find out as much as possible about the individual horse to be handled from available personnel.
- (6) Before catching and working with the horse, carry out a visual assessment of the equipment that is to be used on the horse. Check for broken stitching, sharp edges, frayed material/cracked leather, malfunctioning clips and buckles, and other anomalies. Any equipment deemed not suitable should be replaced before fitting to the horse.
- (7) If you are carrying a mobile phone on your person, and directly handling the horse, make sure that it is on mute.

#### On commencing work

- (8) Make sure that the environment in which work is being undertaken is secure, for example by closing gates.
- (9) Approach the horse (usually from the left side) in a confident manner, holding any equipment safely (e.g., lead ropes not dangling on the ground/around the handlers/horses legs/feet) and in a non-threatening manner (held to the handler's side).
- (10) Approach the horse quietly at the shoulder, talking to the horse ensuring that the horse is aware of your presence.  
**X NEVER** approach a horse from behind.
- (11) Keep an eye on other horses that are nearby, in case they direct behaviour towards you or the horse you are handling which can distract them and you from the task in hand. If possible, have a helper watch the other horses and handle gates when catching a horse and moving them from one location to another.
- (12) When approaching the horse and making contact with the horse, do not touch any part of the body behind the shoulder – this could make horses flinch, startle/jump or act defensively for example kicking out or biting.
- (13) When fitting equipment to the horse, be quiet but confident.
- (14) Once close to the horse, stroke the horse gently on the neck or shoulder (not on the front of the face) and then place the lead rope around the horse's neck. It is recommended that the lead rope is passed under the horse's neck and then brought up over the back of the neck to the side of the handler. This will result in crossing of the lead rope and provides an easy grab point should the horse go to move forwards or away from the handler.
- (15) Place the headpiece of the head collar around the horse's head, taking care to avoid catching the horse's ears, from the right side over the top to the left side, place the noseband of the head collar over the horse's nose and fasten the strap behind the horse's ears.



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- (16) Be careful not to inadvertently 'flick' the horse with parts of the equipment (such as when passing the head collar head strap over the horse's head or doing up the side buckle/knot near the horse's eye).
- (17) Remove the lead rope from the horse's neck and hold it in your left hand.
- (18) When leading a horse, lead from their left side at the horse's shoulder holding the lead rope about 20-30 cm from the horse's head with your right hand. The lead rope should not be so short that it restricts the horse's movement and potentially causes the horse to panic and pull against you. (On occasions it may be necessary to lead a horse from the right-hand side – in this case the same rules apply reversing the hands.)
- (19) Always make sure that your feet are clear of the horse's feet and check that the horse's attention is on you, the handler.
  - X NEVER** walk immediately in front of the horse.
  - X DO NOT** hold onto the head collar directly.
  - X NEVER** hold onto the clip of the lead rope.
  - X DO NOT** hold the horse right under the chin.
- (20) Hold the main length of the lead rope in your right hand and the remainder of it in your left hand to ensuring that there are no loops around your hand and that it is not dragging on the ground.
- (21) If using a long lead rope, do not allow it to pass behind your body between your left and right hands. Keep it in front of you at all times.
  - X NEVER** hold the lead rope right at its end.
  - X NEVER** tie a knot in the lead rope.
  - X NEVER** wrap the lead rope around any part of your body.
- (22) When turning the horse whilst leading, it is recommended to always turn the horse AWAY from you the handler (rather than towards you where you are at greater risk of being stood on).
- (23) When around horses, always ensure that they are aware of your presence, if possible, by keeping your hand on their body and speaking quietly at all times. (It is safer to be close to the horse than a short distance away.)
- (24) Move around horses quietly and confidently avoiding making sudden movements or noises.
- (25) When working with someone else, stand on the SAME side of the horse that is being handled/treated by them. (If there are problems the horse's head should be turned towards the handler, so that the rear end is moved away.)
- (26) When handling the legs of a horse, keep your body close to the horse, focus on the task in hand, watch the horse for signs of agitation and the environment for potential disturbances.
- (27) When handling the feet of a horse, run your hands along the side of the horse and down the leg that is to be picked up to ensure that the horse knows where the handler is. Stand close to the horse to minimise the chance of being kicked.
- (28) When tying a horse up, always tie the lead rope to baling twine, or to a quick release device, rather than directly to a solid object (to allow escape in an emergency).



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**X NEVER** tie horses up by reins attached to a bit.

### Drugs, chemicals, or biological agents

(29) Not applicable.

### Impact of procedure on wellbeing of animals

- (30) Horses thrive on predictable and controllable environments (McGreevy and McLean, 2009). Adherence to the procedures outlined above will ensure that horses are handled in accordance with their ethological requirements (namely as a large prey species that responds well to clear application of signals, the timely release of pressure and consistent handling by different people (McGreevy and McLean, 2007). The procedures outlined above rest upon the globally agreed and utilised principles of training advocated by the premier international equine welfare organisation, the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES, 2024).
- (31) Furthermore, focus on assessing horse behaviour throughout handling procedures will allow continuous assessment of animal (individual horse)-based indicators of welfare (Randle and Waran, 2017; Waran and Randle, 2017). Use of the horse-centred procedures outlined in this Standard Operating Procedure will help to safeguard the health and welfare of both the horse and human involved in handling (Hawson et al., 2010). Compliance with this SOP will ensure that there is minimal negative impact on the wellbeing of the horses being handled, and potentially a positive impact in the longer term due to consistency of handling practices using procedures that reduce stress and excessive arousal due to taking into account the horse's ethology and learning and cognitive abilities (ISES, 2024).

### Animal care

- (32) The use of horses will be governed by the relevant AEC approval/s. Once the horse has undertaken the activity/ies for which he/she is being handled, the horse will be returned to the home environment (paddock/yard/stable as appropriate) and be managed and cared for according to normal procedures (these may be covered by other AEC approved SOPs). If the horse is being handled as a part of clinical procedures, post-handling the horse will be managed according to veterinary advice and any treatment related requirements.

### Pain relief

- (33) Not applicable – not specific to the handling procedure *per se*.

### Reuse and repeated use

- (34) Horses are handled as part of almost every horse-human interaction. Therefore, reuse and repeated use is normal. Handling horses in accordance with this SOP will help to mitigate against risks associated with confusing horses (for example through the use of varying, or aversive, handling methods and the addition of novel stimuli into their environment). The handling of horses for handling-related training is managed through AEC approved teaching



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or research protocols and the frequency of horse-use is managed locally by those responsible for the care and management of the horses (e.g. CSU Equine Centre technicians, horse owner or proprietor, or delegate, of external sites where research is being conducted).

### Qualifications, experience or training necessary to perform this procedure

- (35) Anyone can find themselves in the situation of being required to handle a horse. This SOP provides the information required for a novice to handle a horse in a safe a manner as possible.

### Record requirements

- (36) Routine monitoring sheet recording. In addition, details of all equine use including procedures should be reported to the technical staff for documenting on Ardex software.

### Associated documentation (including pictures if available)

- (37) Not required

### Glossary

- (38) Not required

### References and relevant links

- (39) Hall, C., Randle, H., Pearson, G., Preshaw, L., Waran, N. 2018. Assessing equine emotional state. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. 205: 183-193.
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- (41) ISES 2024. Principles of learning theory in equitation. [www.equitationsscience.com/equitation/principles-of-learning-theory-in-equitation](http://www.equitationsscience.com/equitation/principles-of-learning-theory-in-equitation). (Accessed 01.02.24).
- (42) McGreevy, P.D. and McLean, A. 2009. Punishment in horse-training and the concept of ethical equitation. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Application and Research* 4:193-197.
- (43) McGreevy, P.D. and McLean, A.N. 2007. Roles of learning theory and ethology in equitation. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Application and Research*. 2:108118. Randle, H. and
- (44) Waran, N. 2017. Breaking down barriers and dispelling myths: The need for a scientific approach to Equitation. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. 190:14.
- (45) Safework NSW. 2017. Code of practice: managing risks when new or inexperienced riders or handlers interact with horses in the workplace. Government NSW.
- (46) Waran, N., Randle, H. 2017. What we can measure, we can manage: The importance of developing robust welfare indicators for use in Equitation. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. 190:74-81.