

Building Rapport with Students

“Rapport is...the sense of a harmonious, personal connection between two or more people that is characterized by trust, open communication, and mutual respect.” (Flanigan et al, 2023)

This resource offers research-informed tips for building and maintaining rapport with students in different teaching scenarios. The rapport we have with students has a significant impact on their university experience and outcomes. It also affects our satisfaction and wellbeing as university lecturers. It feels good to be one of the reasons that students show up to study.

Flanigan et al (2023) document how lecturers build rapport with students through “connecting, common grounding, and information sharing behaviours” and maintain rapport through “personalized instruction and tactful responses to delicate situations”. Quinlan explains the positive effect that lecturer attentiveness, excitement, and enjoyment has on student performance (2016) and how student interest is triggered when they perceive lecturers as enthusiastic, friendly, and approachable (2019). Ultimately, students and lecturers benefit from the feelings of mutual support and closeness that rapport brings.

How do you cultivate rapport?

The closeness and trust of rapport comes from being real with students, showing the genuine passion you have for your subject, sharing the expertise and experiences you have with them, and your interest in learning more with them. Rapport relies on students and lecturers feeling a sense of connection, belonging and comfort, with each other, the subject and the space they are in. Aim to cultivate this consciously; even if your approaches are discreet, do it intentionally, knowing that good rapport will support other efforts you make to facilitate learning.

According to Maslow’s [Hierarchy of Needs](#) (McLeod, 2023), none of us can achieve higher states of growth and transformation unless our basic human needs are met. In a university context, basic needs and our lives beyond the classroom are sometimes ignored. One key aspect of cultivating rapport with students is to value our shared humanity and express compassion and empathy in our interactions. Doing so will help you connect with students and help them to feel comfortable and calm in your presence. For example:

1. **Be friendly:** Smiling and making eye contact are two simple ways to connect non-verbally with students from the beginning, especially in larger group settings. At the start of a class, instead of standing behind your computer, desk or lectern, stand or sit before students. Recognise their presence by literally seeing them, smiling at them as they enter, and chatting with them before and after class. Don’t take it

personally or be put off if some students do not respond; be encouraged by those that do. During class, walk around the room to be physically closer to students. Think of speaking *with* or *to* students as individual people, not talking *at* them as a mass. They will feel the difference. Where possible, use materials on tables with students, instead of working on boards with your back to them, and use a chair with wheels (especially helpful in computer lab settings) to stay near students and converse with them at the same physical height.

2. **Be familiar:** It can be challenging in large lectures, but in other settings try to learn student names and practice saying them, showing [sensitivity](#) when pronouncing students' names in public. Select [name learning activities or strategies](#) that suit your own style and allow you to learn something memorable about each student, offering insights and points of connection. Help them remember your name and tell them something about yourself to break the lecturer-student barrier. Suggest ways for students to contribute (e.g., "Write down your answer first and then put your hand up". "No question is a silly question").
3. **Be available:** Let students know how they can contact you and meet with you. When approached, use language that expresses your interest in supporting them. For example, if a student asks to see you when you have a busy schedule, instead of saying "I could see you, but I have a full schedule" say, "I have a full schedule, but I WANT to see you." The subtle switch in this sentence and overt statement of wanting to see them can send a more positive message of interest and availability and convey that the student matters.
4. **Be affirming:** Research shows that students believe lecturers to be effective when they show "compassion, empathy, or level of caring for students" (Quinlan, 2016). You can do this by using the language of [micro-affirmations](#) for students to know "that they are welcome, visible, and capable of performing well" (Powell et al, 2013). Avoid the language and non-verbal cues of [microaggressions](#) in the classroom (Ogunyemi et al, 2020) and follow guidance for [Communicating with Clarity and Compassion](#) for email, Moodle and other online communications (University of Kent, 2023).
5. **Be human:** Some students revere academics and find it hard to express themselves or ask questions as they fear shame. Other students lack trust in the expertise of academics and think they have nothing to learn from them. One effective way of

showing both humility and expertise to students is to learn with them or in front of them. If you set the students a challenging task, do it first yourself to model ways to approach a challenge and trouble shoot problems. Another way is to use personal stories in your teaching that illustrate the content. Use relevant examples from your own personal experience, those that reference your pets, family members, hobbies, or friends illustrate real world applications of content while also showing students that you, too, are a human being with a life outside the classroom.

You can start practicing these behaviours from the moment you first meet students and consistently through their journey, mindful of the positive impact lecturer attentiveness has on student experience and outcomes.

Further resources

Find further guidance on enhancing your practice in 1-1 advising on the [Student Success Team's Academic Advising Moodle page](#)

Find more strategies on learning and pronouncing student names in the [Acknowledge Repository \[https://www.acknowledge.org.uk/acknowledge2023/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/appendix33_ntu_saymynameoptentips.pdf\]\(https://www.acknowledge.org.uk/acknowledge2023/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/appendix33_ntu_saymynameoptentips.pdf\)](#)

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University of Kent (2023) '[Communicating with Clarity and Compassion](#)'.

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