# Social fabric of the program

The students and staff of the AI program make the program, quite literally, come alive. We are happy we have such a diverse population of both students and staff and find it extremely important they form a welcoming community together. In other words, as program we intend to stimulate a dense “social fabric” between students and staff, where everyone feels safe and supported by others. In this assignment and the accompanying meeting, we consider your experience of the social fabric and how to foster positive contact.



Below, we first consider primarily student-staff contact, as students can find that hard. Next we consider the social norms and go into one way of fostering connection: showing vulnerability.

### Your earlier experiences

The perspective with which you start at this university of course depends on what your earlier experiences are. There can be large differences in culture, both at the institutional level (this university vs. your previous school) and the national level. On the one hand, the culture of an institution influences the actions of the associated students and staff. On the other hand, your previous experience will shape your expectations and perceptions of what happens in our program and at our university.

What were you used to at your previous school (and in your previous country)? How was the contact between teachers and fellow students? What was rewarded and what was looked down upon? How do you view the teachers? How did you view yourself?

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| Teachers were for the most part nothing more than teachers, with very rare exceptions. It wasn’t super strict, but it was formal. For me by the time high school had started my priorities were far from school, so my only goal was to minimize the time lost in school dealing with teachers and I just focused on the social aspect of it. |

Now consider how you experienced your first few weeks at Radboud University. Many things are probably different, including probably being the most senior in your school to now being the most junior. Other differences might be cultural, either institutional (programs and universities do differ), regional within the Netherlands or international (see [cultural country comparison](https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/) for a tool to compare your culture to for example the Dutch culture).

What are the most important differences you experienced? What do you think about those differences? How do they make you feel?

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| Despite the large population difference in culture between the Netherlands and Bulgaria with Bulgaria having much higher levels of pettiness, directness, coldness. Compared to my specific environment it feels somewhat similar with the remaining differences being summarized with a shift political to left in the Netherlands. |

How well-connected do you now feel to your fellow students? Do you feel you are already building a social fabric, for example with the mentor group of your introduction or your peer coach group? How do you feel about this?

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| No. I generally dislike most conversations topics and I recognize that the kind of conversation I want is very difficult to achieve and as a prerequisite usually requires conversations I do not want. |

And how do you feel about your contact with teachers so far?

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| I no strong feeling about my contact with them. They were as friendly and accommodating as I expected. |

## Student-staff contact

### Asking questions & giving feedback to staff

As AI program, we find it important our staff is accessible for students, as that helps students and staff learn and builds the fabric.

How hard to you find it to ask a question to a staff member in-class? And after class? Would you give feedback to a teacher? When and why (not)?

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| No I have no issues asking questions or giving feedback. |

To maybe lower the barrier a bit, a short instruction on asking questions and giving feedback:

* First try yourself to find the answer to the question and, if you ask a question, use the communication channels as indicated by the teachers
* Assume the teacher does their best to support you and all students. Hence, do not assume bad intentions and take into account the perspective of the staff, including the load on university staff. Similarly, staff can be expected to also take your perspective and assume your best intentions.
* Clearly indicate what course the communication is about, what your student number is and, if relevant, in which group you are. This makes it easier for the staff member to handle your question or remark.
* Make sure the goal is clear. If it is to give feedback (which is great, do give us feedback!), give it politely. If it is a question, make sure to phrase it as a question, do not “request”, as that can come across as demanding and impolite.

In addition, do not hesitate to ask staff how they are doing and what they did over the weekend, for sure if they also ask you. Most staff will appreciate that, as it moves beyond the mere functional and shows interest in the person behind the teacher.

### How to approach staff

Still, it can be hard to know how to approach a staff member and also not all staff members have the same preferences. Hereby a small guide.

First, even though we are not very hierarchical at AI, it can help to understand how university ranks work. Firstly, there is a distinction between junior and senior staff. Junior staff include for example Student or Teaching Assistants (SA or TA), like your peer coaches. They are older-year students and often prefer a first name basis, unless they tell you differently. Sometimes they instead are PhD-students, and they might expect you to refer to them in a more formal manner, sometimes also depending on cultural background.

Secondly, in academia a 'philosophiae doctor' (PhD) is held in high regard. To get the title (PhD behind your name, or Dr., meaning Doctor, in front of the name), you need to do independent research for an extended period: your PhD-project. So any time a staff member says: “My PhD was about…” they are talking about this extended research project which earned them the title PhD or Dr.. Most of your teachers have such a title. The ones who do not have the title, are often either currently working on their PhD or do not perform research at the university, but for example specialize in teaching or support tasks.

Thirdly, a title you sometimes encounter is Professor (Prof. for short). In the Netherlands, this title is reserved for Full Professors (in Dutch: “Hoogleraar”), of which there are only a few in the AI department. Next to that, there are also Assistant and Associate Professors, but they are not addressed with the title Prof. in the Netherlands. Actually, in official documents full professors are even referred to by prof. dr. \*first name\* \*last name\*, hence showing both their titles.

Do you have any idea what the titles are of some of your current teachers? Check the Course Guides and for example the lecturer list of Introduction AI to see what their titles are. Does their title change your view of them in any way?

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| I do for one of my teachers, and no it doesn’t change my views of them. |

So, what does this mean for how you approach senior staff? As not all staff have the same preference and not all indicate it clearly, it is best to err on the side of caution. In other words, if you approach them, digitally or live, use their last name, with either

* Dr. in front (if you saw they have a title on Brightspace or the course guide) or in some rare cases professor.
* Or refer to them based on gender (Mr, Ms, Mx), if you know their preferred pronoun.

In most cases, the staff will respond by either:

* Explicitly indicating how you can best approach them.
* Or, if not, you can often assume that if they sign off with their first name, you can also approach them as such. This is however no guarantee.

Also do not hesitate to explicitly ask what a staff member prefers if you are unsure. That is in all cases better than to insult a staff member by accident.

On this topic, we also want to point out potential biases that might be at play. On average, female staff is more likely to be approached in an inappropriate way, for example by using a “lower” pronoun than appropriate for their standing. However, you cannot see from the outside, based on gender, ethnicity and age, what rank someone is. Again, when in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and approach all staff members by Dr., followed by their last name. No AI full professors will be insulted by the usage of Dr., and no one minds to be called Dr. if they are not. You will quickly learn who prefers to be called by their first name and who prefers to be approached by their title. This way, we can build a respectful and inclusive environment for all staff.

How would you typically approach a staff member? Please be specific; how would you for example open an e-mail to a teacher of one of your current courses. Do you feel that would align with what was described above? Why (not)?

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| Hi, Mr/Ms (insert name). My name is Erik Paskalev I’m currently in your course (insert course) and I have a question I’d like to ask you. |

## Social norms: Code of conduct

We now spend quite some time on how to approach staff, as this often raises questions in students early in the program and sometimes can lead to regretful situations. However, communication is bidirectional and students and staff together make the program. Hence, the expectations are mutual: staff should at all times also be respectful and professional to you. If you feel that is not the case, do indicate that to a staff member, the DPC or a [confidential advisor](https://www.ru.nl/en/students/services/guidance-advice-and-complaints/counsellors/confidential-advisers-students).

To make this explicit, we adhere to particular code of conduct at our AI program, based on the [Radboud Code of Conduct](https://www.ru.nl/en/regulations/radboud-university-code-of-conduct). This code of conduct will be described in most course manuals. Below a more extensive version.

At the AI Program, both teachers, students and staff members are **expected** to:

* Communicate openly and inclusively.
* Respect the stated pronouns of other people.
* Exercise consideration and respect in speech and actions.
* Comment on ideas, not individuals, when offering criticism.
* Refrain from demeaning, discriminatory, or harassing behavior and speech.
* Be mindful of the surroundings and the highly variable backgrounds and experiences of all those studying or working at our program and university.

As a consequence, behaviors we consider to be **unacceptable** are for example

* Sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist or otherwise discriminatory jokes and language.
* Personal insults, particularly those related to gender, sexual orientation, race, body size, age, religion (or lack thereof), ethnicity, class, language, national origin, physical appearance, or disability.
* Violent language or behavior directed against another person.
* Inappropriate photography or recording.
* Inappropriate or unwanted physical contact, sexual advances and/or touching.
* Deliberate intimidation or stalking (online or in person).
* Posting or threatening to post other people’s personally identifying information ("doxing").
* Sustained disruption of formal or informal meetings.
* Advocating for, or encouraging, any of the above behavior.

If you feel violated or witnessed any of the mentioned unacceptable behaviors, please **reach out**. If you do not feel comfortable addressing the issue directly with the violator(s), you can always contact your teacher, the [student advisor](https://www.ru.nl/fsw/stip/ondersteuning-faciliteiten/ondersteuning/studieadviseurs/fsw-studieadviseurs/student-advisors-artificial-intelligence/) or the [confidential advisor](https://www.ru.nl/en/students/services/guidance-advice-and-complaints/counsellors/confidential-advisers-students) for help.

We of course hope this code of conduct in practice is not needed. However, experiences over the past years has shown it sometimes regrettable is needed. Note that the code of conduct also covers online channels, even if they are loosely affiliated with the university. If you feel the code of conduct is violated, please speak up for your fellow students (or staff) and/or reach out. Only together we can build the inclusive program we want to be.

So far in the program, do you feel safe in your year group of students and in the contact with staff? Why (not)? Would you speak up or reach out if it proves needed?

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| Yes |

## Opening up to build connections

Research shows society becomes increasingly individualized, especially among the younger generations in the Western world, greatly reducing the social fabric (Putman, 2015; Humphrey & Bliuc, 2021). In other words: people seem to develop fewer and less deep social connections and have less social support. This seems to be caused by multiple factors. One of which is an increasing emphasis on keeping up appearances and only showing what you can do and do know, not showing what you genuinely feel or think, let alone ask for help (Larson et al, 2015). This tendency for keeping appearances can in turn leads to increased stress and decreased well-being. There is however an alternative: showing vulnerabilities, which can increase both social support/fabric and individual well-being (Brown, 2015).

### What does it mean to show vulnerabilities?

Vulnerabilities can take many shapes and forms. It can be small, for example not daring to:

* ask a question.
* say you do not know something.
* propose a new idea.
* take the lead.
* voice your opinion.

Or can be bigger, for example not sharing:

* your feelings of stress and uncertainty.
* your continuous worries about friends or family.
* an illness you have.
* a traumatic experience you encountered.

And anywhere in-between. Some people seem to always speak their mind, not having a vulnerability “filter”, while others close off completely, and anywhere in-between. And in most cases, you just don’t know what someone is *not* sharing, as it all happens inside their head.

Consider the list above: how much vulnerability do you typically show? Which vulnerabilities do you show, which not?

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| For the most part I follow the discussion others are having and generally keep the level of vulnerability of a conversation at its current level if someone tries to change it I don’t influence that. On rare occasions I have slipped up and inadvertently raised the level of intimacy of a conversation too much. |

With the continuous presence of social media, the safety to show vulnerabilities might have become even smaller than it used to be, for two reasons. Firstly, people tend to show their most positive version on social media, creating a non-representative impression of how their life really is, fueling unrealistic expectations in others. Second, social media can be extremely harsh when someone does show vulnerabilities. Both can have a negative impact on self-image and the tendency to share vulnerabilities.

How do you think social media influences your tendency to share vulnerabilities? How do you feel about this?

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| More likely than not it has influenced my general levels of self-criticism and perfectionism. |

Two well-known large vulnerabilities that come from both social and internal pressure are the imposter syndrome and perfectionism. The **imposter syndrome** is the feeling that you are an imposter: you are not good enough, but others just haven’t found out yet. One day they will catch you and mark you as an imposter. Many people (including us as authors of this text) have the imposter syndrome, if not in general then for specific domains. Watch [this](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQUxL4Jm1Lo) video to get a deeper understanding, also on how to remedy it. Because if all of us feel like an imposter, why then not just come clean together? **Perfectionism**, in turn, refers to a continuous drive to do everything perfectly, which is practically impossible and mentally draining. It often stems from a high uncertainty and a fear of making mistakes; of showing vulnerability.

Do you think the imposter syndrome and perfectionism apply to you? Why (not)? How do you feel about that?

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| Yes, they do in specific contexts. For the most part I think I have a relatively decent understanding of how and why they affect me and I’m not sure if and how I want to change that. |

### Why would you show vulnerabilities?

Research shows that showing vulnerability is related to many positive traits, including higher well-being, more social connection and increased creativity. The strongest social ties are often with people who do know your inner doubts and demons. To reflect on this, please watch this famous [TED video by Brené Brown](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability). If you already know this video, or otherwise would like to learn more, consider another video by the same author (e.g. [this](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame)), her [podcast](https://brenebrown.com/podcast-show/unlocking-us/), or another podcast like [The Imperfects](https://theresilienceproject.com.au/at-home/podcasts/) about the same topic.

How do you feel about showing vulnerability after seeing the video? Do you agree with what is said?

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| Being vulnerable/intimate with someone is one of the most profoundly valuable things in existence. |

The sources all point to the same message: if each of us individually would dare to show more vulnerability, both the individual and the collective would prosper. Just imagine what happens if someone shares a personal story with you. Most likely you feel connection with that person, increasing the likelihood that you will also share. This creates a positive spiral of increased connection, building a social fabric. Both closing off can generate an opposite spiral.

Would you want to show more vulnerabilities yourself? If so: Do you think you could? What would you need to be able to do so? If not, why not?

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| I would definitely like for the environment to support the showing of vulnerability. I |

### Do you allow others to show their vulnerabilities?

One crucial reason why it is so hard to show vulnerabilities is the fear for responses of others. For example:

* Laughing when you say or ask something “stupid”.
* Making remarks or jokes about your actions and habits.
* Demeaning you for your (cultural) background.
* Questioning your skills when you make a mistake.

Do you recognize this for yourself? Does this also happen in the AI program, with students or staff (either in person or online)?

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| At the current moment one of the it’s for me to suffer the same fate as a close friend. |

But in many cases, we are actually “the other”. That is, we are the ones laughing, making jokes, demeaning and questioning someone.

Do you recognize this in yourself? Do you allow others to show their vulnerabilities? How do you feel about this?

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| Id like to think that I communicate my intentions with body language and facial expression well, but if I had to guess I don’t. |

Luckily, research has shown that at large the responses to sharing vulnerabilities are not as negative as one expects. Rather the opposite: responses tend to be positive (Bruk et al, 2018)!

The study asked participants to imagine they would have to share vulnerabilities, like admitting they did not know something or admitting romantic feelings. Just imagine that yourself, what do you feel about yourself?

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| The facial expression of someone saying “get me the fuck away from this person”. |

Next, the participants had to imagine *others* admitting the same things. Again, try to imagine. How do you now feel about the other person?

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| Depends on what they are sharing in some cases nothing in others sadness. |

If you are like the participants in the study, you feel bad about yourself, but feel that the other person is strong. Hence, we have huge double standards for ourselves versus others. This however also means that the response of others to you showing vulnerability will in most cases be kinder than you expect beforehand, which is a blessing in itself.

We will probably (shortly) return to the topic of vulnerability in the meetings and/or assignments on perfectionism, procrastination and stress, as vulnerability is such a core underlying factor influencing these aspects. In the coming meeting, we will talk about and work on the social fabric of our peer coach group and on our relation with showing vulnerabilities.

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