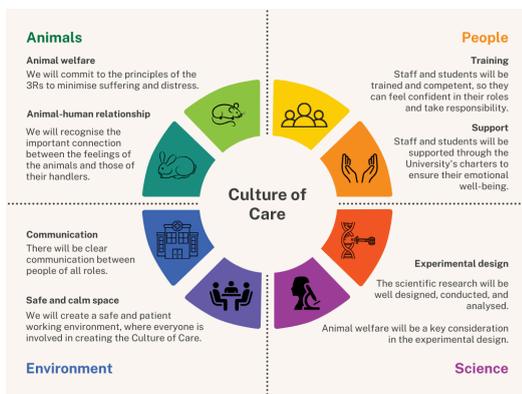


Fostering a Culture of Care: Understanding the Animal-Human Relationship

On 8 September 2025, the University of Southampton's Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB) hosted a workshop exploring the animal-human relationship. This event was a direct follow-up to a previous workshop on 20 July 2023, and was designed to further define the [University's Culture of Care](#).



The animal-human relationship is shaped by regular and close interactions, the animals' dependence on humans for their welfare, and the recognition of individual animal personalities. This relationship also carries ethical responsibilities and can lead to '[emotional labour](#)' for those working within the laboratory setting. This applies whether the animal-human relationship is one-way (where animals do not reciprocate) or two-way, involving mutual recognition and positive interactions.

Recognising, and supporting, animal-human relationships leads to a range of outcomes:

- **For animals:** reduced stress and anxiety, improved ability to cope with procedures (including a decrease in cumulative severity), positive experiences, and opportunities for rehoming in some cases.
- **For staff:** wellbeing from positive interactions, enhanced job satisfaction, and a sense of purpose (although close bonds can also contribute to emotional labour).
- **For science:** better animal welfare supports more reliable and reproducible scientific outcomes.
- **For the University:** a need to recognise and value animal-human relationships, while also ensuring appropriate care and support for staff.

At the beginning of the session participants were asked to contribute three words to create a word cloud, representing terms they associate with the animal-human relationship.



Reflections from group discussions

In the first group discussion, participants reflected on their own experiences of the animal-human relationship. This relationship is well recognised across the University's culture, but how this relationship is expressed can differ between roles and research groups.

A misconception that repeatedly surfaced was that researchers are emotionally detached and don't care about the animals as much as people in other roles. This perception was strongly challenged by participants who shared stories of a profound sense of care and respect for the animals, a sentiment that often goes unacknowledged by those outside their field. It was also highlighted that researchers may have limited opportunities to openly share their feelings, leading to this misunderstanding.

Researchers' roles, often centered on data, compliance, and achieving specific results, can create a professional environment where personal emotions, even those of deep care for the animals, are not as readily expressed or seen. This doesn't mean the care is absent; rather, it may be channelled differently, perhaps as a rigorous commitment to ethical practices and the animals' well-being, even if it is not discussed in emotional terms.

In general, animal technologists felt more able to describe their connections with the animals as strong and emotionally present, noting that these bonds were often recognised and even valued within their facilities. This might be because their daily responsibilities involve direct, hands-on interaction and care, fostering a more intimate relationship which has become increasingly normalised.

Acknowledgement of the animal - human relationship

One key theme that emerged was the need for managers to adopt more empathetic language and approaches. Participants felt that the language used in labs often focuses solely on protocols and outcomes, leaving little room for a more compassionate dialogue about the animals. By using more empathetic language, managers could help validate the emotional labour involved in working with animals and foster a culture where expressing care is seen as a professional asset and a strength. Everyone should feel able to talk about empathy and care, including researchers, animal technologists, named persons, students and AWERB members.

Support and training needs

Participants identified the need for more structured support, particularly during experimental work early in their careers. These suggestions are a direct reflection of the emotional weight of forming and managing an animal-human bond in a professional context. Unlike the long-lasting relationship with a companion animal, this bond is temporary and exists for a specific purpose. This creates a unique form of emotional labour that the University needs to address as part of its Culture of Care.



Future directions

Participants identified ways in which the University can better recognise, support and promote the animal-human relationship within research and teaching. Key suggestions included:

- **Induction materials:** Incorporate information on animal-human relationships into staff and student induction, covering welfare, ethical considerations, and the psychological and social dimensions of working with animals. Training should cover the emotional impact of animal work as well as technical skills.
- **A buddy or mentorship system:** Experienced colleagues can help to support others and validate their feelings - noting that the mental health of the buddies or mentors will also need to be considered.
- **A discussion group:** Establish a dedicated forum for researchers, students, animal technologists and other staff to share experiences and challenges, helping to normalise conversations about the human aspects of animal work. There could be regular drop-in sessions, or monthly check-ins, for wellbeing.
- **Species- and strain-specific information:** Ensure there is accessible information for all on species- and strain-specific behaviour, to enable empathy and improve animal welfare.
- **Recognition of emotional labour:** Formally acknowledge the emotional demands of working closely with animals across all roles, integrating this into training, wellbeing programmes and targeted staff support. This could include a tangible space, or focus, to enable people to

reflect on their bonds with animals (below).

- **Mental health support:** Enable equal access to suitable, independent support systems. Mental health first aiders were seen as valuable sources of assistance, along with the resources provided by the Institute of Animal Technology (iat.org.uk/equality).
- **Open communication and validation:** Promote more open internal communication that explicitly recognises the human-animal bond within research.

Conclusion

The workshop found that the animal-human relationship in a research setting can be emotionally challenging. There is a need to formally recognise the emotional labour experienced by many people who are directly, and indirectly, involved with animal use, and to provide support. The ways forward identified in the workshop should help to develop an environment that sees positive animal-human relationships as a vital element of a good Culture of Care, with benefits for animals, staff, science and the University.



Photo: 'Tributes for animals and the dedicated people entrusted with their care: a practical how-to guide' (doi.org/10.1038/labam.1346)