Edinburgh University Students' Association

TEACHING AWARDS

WHAT DOES GOOD TEACHING LOOK LIKE TO STUDENTS?

An analysis of Teaching Awards nomination data

FOREWORD BY THE VICE-PRESIDENT ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

The Edinburgh University Students' Association Teaching Awards have been running since 2008, providing annual highlights of the contributions that academics, supervisors, student tutors and support staff make to the student experience. Students are encouraged to nominate staff in a variety of categories, ranging from 'Best Overall Teacher' to 'Best Feedback' to 'Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor'. The sheer number of student nominations received for the 2014-15 academic year — nearly 3,000 nominations! — is a testament to how much students value the teaching and support that staff provide, and emphasises that the delivery of a course should be prioritised just as much as the content.

This research highlights four overarching themes to students' responses. Students valued the positive contributions of staff on account of concerted, visible effort; charisma, personality, and engaging teaching; breaking down student-teacher barriers and encouraging student engagement; and the consistency and stability of support provided by staff. Although students clearly recognise the demands placed upon academic staff in terms of their research commitments, the thousands of responses collected from the Teaching Awards reflect the significant weight which students place on learning and teaching. The responses point to the need for Schools to communicate their expectations clearly to both staff and students, ensuring the former are not overworked and the latter are clear about what academic and pastoral support is available to enhance their learning experience. The contribution of postgraduate tutors in students' pre-Honours learning experience is also clearly acknowledged, and appreciated, by students.

The Teaching Awards highlight the imperative to ensure that the University's academic community is one which rewards the positive contributions from staff, and one which recognises that students must be given space to share their own views about pedagogy and to provide constructive feedback to enhance the learning experience. The value that students place on teaching quality in many cases amounts to the degree to which students feel that academics understand and can successfully address the challenges that students face in their learning experiences.

The Students' Association hopes that both staff and students will take from these findings that teaching quality cannot be measured arbitrarily by student satisfaction. Students clearly assess teaching quality through broad parameters, all of which relate to individual staff members' efforts in personally supporting students. These results recognise the positive contributions of individual staff members who improve students' academic experiences, and how much students value personal, direct and mutual engagement in the pedagogical process. The Students' Association welcomes the opportunity to work with both students and staff from across the University to improve students' learning experiences.

Patrick Garratt

VICE-PRESIDENT ACADEMIC AFFAIRS 2016-17
Edinburgh University Students' Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Edinburgh University Students' Association has undertaken research analysing extensive qualitative data from the 2014-15 Teaching Awards nominations.

The Teaching Awards highlight excellence in teaching and student support across the University of Edinburgh. With eight award categories ranging from support roles to student tutors, there were nearly 3,000 total nominations. Students were free to share their perspectives in an open-ended question about why they were choosing to nominate their teachers and support staff. These qualitative comments provided the Students' Association with a wealth of information from which to glean key data from students about their perceptions of teaching excellence throughout their educational experience. The University of Edinburgh's Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS) has generously funded this research with a small grant. The Students' Association recruited a Research Assistant who took forward this research.

Qualitative analysis of the Teaching Awards nomination data was undertaken using NVivo software to code and thematically examine student expectations, experiences and perceptions of excellent teaching and student support.

The research aimed to identify why students were nominating their teachers as well as whether student expectations were being met by their teachers, tutors and support staff. The nominations for all award categories were analysed and coded by subject matter using the NVivo software, using elements of a grounded theory approach to understand the themes arising from the data. Each comment was reviewed to examine and elucidate key thematic trends in the nomination data to find what students consider best practice in teaching. NVivo queries were used to further examine which words students used the most in their comments; these included: 'always', 'feedback', 'time', 'work', 'personal', 'helpful', 'interesting', and 'engaging'. The specific coded results and related queries were then meticulously analysed and reviewed to further draw out conclusions from the nomination comments and prepare the formal report of findings.

Four key themes were identified in the nomination comments: 1) concerted, visible effort; 2) charisma, personality and engaging teaching; 3) breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement; 4) consistency, predictability and stability of support.

These four themes were evident in all award categories and especially the Best Overall Teacher category. The themes encompass numerous coded references and represent groupings of key trends in excellent teachers' attributes and the teaching methods they use. In their nominations, students rewarded what would be expected — charismatic and engaging lecturers as well as helpful and proactive personal tutors, supervisors and support staff who went above and beyond students' expectations.
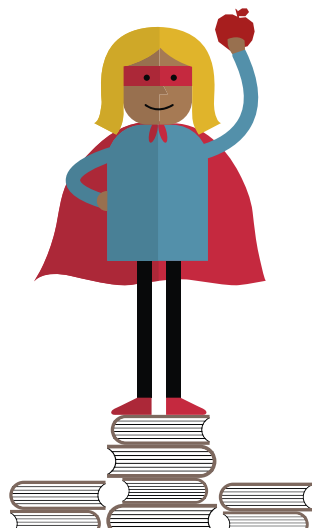
The sub-themes of effort and approachability underpin and significantly overlap with each of the four key themes highlighted above.

Nearly all instances of recognised effort were related to or coded to another key theme, with over a fifth of references overlapping with the sub-theme of approachability. For example, students consistently rewarded visible effort in areas such as improving the course material, student engagement or the teacher's own professional development. It was evident that students appreciated instances where staff acted on student feedback in an attempt to improve the teaching and/or learning environment. Student nominations also highlighted staff who were approachable because they visibly demonstrated their availability to support all their students.

Where tutors or supervisors shared their passion about an academic subject, students had a positive and exciting experience while feeling encouraged to explore the subject further or develop relevant skills.

Students nominated charismatic lecturers who display both their expertise and their passion for teaching in that subject. The importance of stimulating further interest — whether it led to another degree, new research project or job offer in that field — was a focus of many nominations. Transferring their enthusiasm and knowledge through engaging lectures and discussions was an ability applauded in many nominations for the best teachers and student tutors.

The implications for tutors, teachers and support staff reflected in the research findings from this report are vital for decisions regarding quality student contact, workload allocations and the development of an engaging academic community that inspires and empowers students at the University of Edinburgh.

The nomination comments of many students showed a desire for academic staff to be respectful and supportive, and to put energy into creating positive environments and relationships. Furthermore, student comments highlight the need for staff to work more in partnership with students, showing they listen to feedback, respect student views and work collaboratively to enhance the student experience. This report expands on the findings of the research project and highlights practical examples of best practice in teaching and student support to help staff improve their work. Staff should be aware of each student's personal strengths and weaknesses, and staff should work towards creating an engaging, positive experience for students both inside and outside the classroom at the University of Edinburgh.

When teachers were able to create a strong personal connection, students often wrote at length about their positive academic experience and how the teacher excelled in supporting them as an individual.

Students highlighted teachers or staff members who made a positive impact on their educational experience due to their approachability and the respect shown to all students. When the teacher facilitated the development of a vibrant learning community, it was evident that students were greatly appreciative of the academic environment in which they were given the attention and respect they felt they deserved. Teachers who were able to successfully foster such a strong professional relationship with their students were regularly nominated.

Personal struggles and educational perseverance (which was significantly aided by a tutor, teacher or member of support staff) made up a large number of nominations across award categories.

The best teachers and support staff, in students' eyes, are dependable, predictable and regularly exceeding expectations in their roles. It is significant that the most frequently used word throughout all nomination comments was 'always'. For stability and support, the intensity of academic life was buttressed by the comfort students took in reliable, dependable encouragement and assistance. Through answering emails promptly, a willingness to meet when needed and being proactive in their support, staff and tutors play a key role in the students' university experiences and successes.
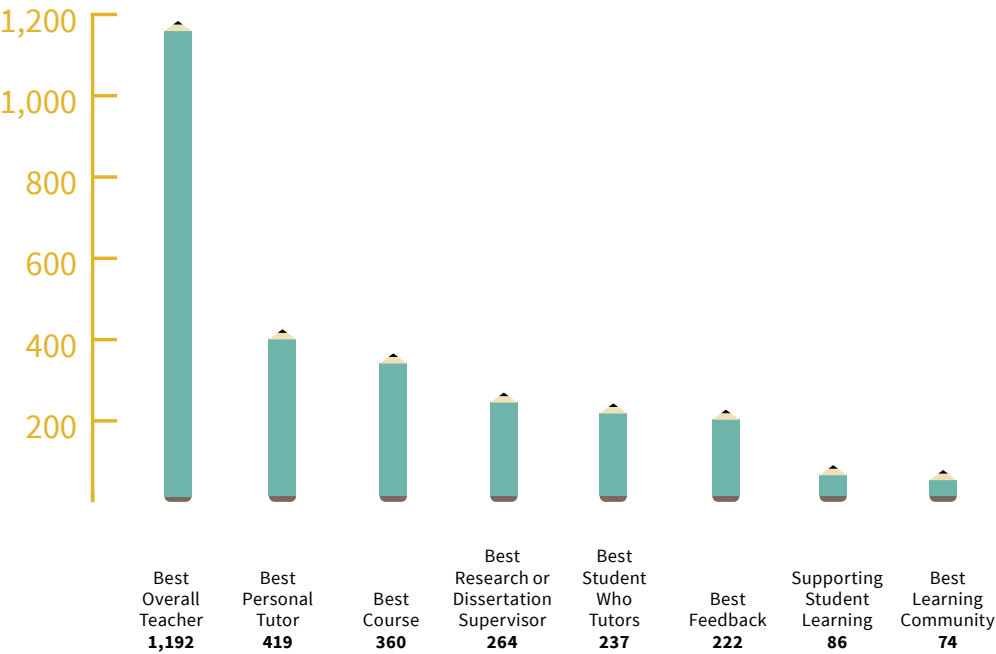
INTRODUCTION

In 2014-15, thousands of students nominated teachers, tutors, support staff, research supervisors and peer leaders for the Edinburgh University Students' Association Teaching Awards. Across eight award categories, nominations highlighted the positive impact of individuals on student learning and development. From engaging lectures to successful discussions and collaboration, students greatly appreciated and applauded the work of outstanding academic and support staff across the University of Edinburgh.
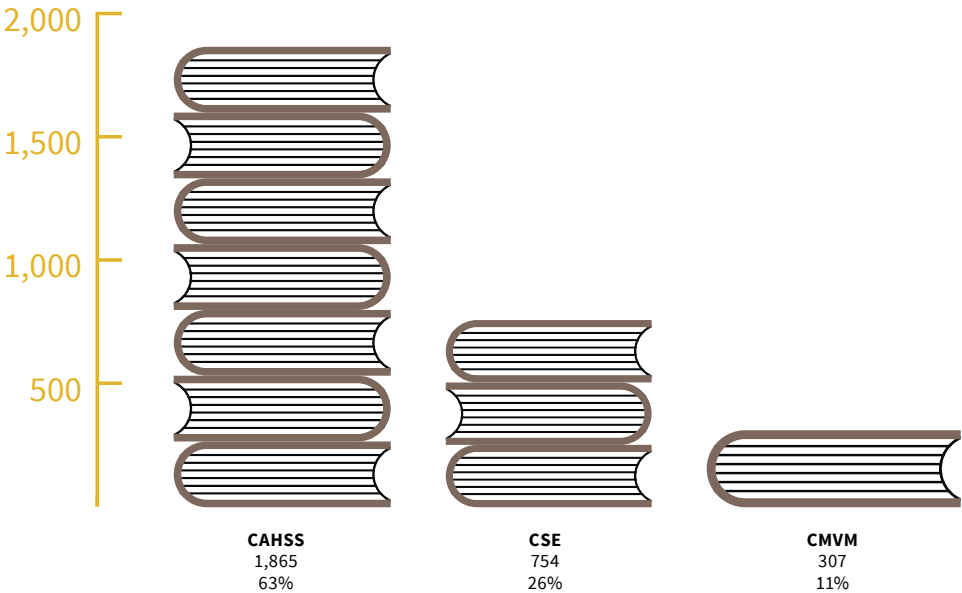
A total of **2,926 nominations** were submitted, distributed across all twenty University Schools. Between Colleges, the nominations reflected the spread of the student population with the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science receiving roughly 60% of total nominations. The School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures had the greatest number of total nominations, while the School of Divinity had the highest ratio of nominations per student population: one in five Divinity students nominated a staff member! The most popular award category was Best Overall Teacher with **1,192 nominations**. The total breakdown of awards for the 2014-15 Teaching Awards can be seen below and the breakdown of award nominations by College can be seen on the next page. It is worth noting here that the Best Overall Teacher category is split into the following four awards:

1. The Kendell Award for Teaching in Medicine
2. The Award for Teaching in Veterinary Sciences
3. The Van Heyningen Award for Teaching in Science and Engineering
4. The Ian Campbell Award for Teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Total Nominations by Awards

Best Overall Teacher	Best Personal Tutor	Best Course	Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor	Best Student Who Tutors	Best Feedback	Supporting Student Learning	Best Learning Community
1,192	**419**	**360**	**264**	**237**	**222**	**86**	**74**

Awards by College

CAHSS	CSE	CMVM
1,865	754	307
63%	26%	11%

This in-depth research project aimed to investigate student perceptions of teaching excellence by examining what they highlight in their Teaching Awards nomination comments. The Students' Association reports the nomination data to Schools annually by providing lists of all nomination comments and the details of nominees, but this is the first time that this research has been undertaken to systematically analyse and understand student expectations. The primary goal was to identify what students consider best practice in teaching at the University of Edinburgh. Nomination comments ranged from lengthy discussions of fantastic courses to a few words of gratitude or praise. However, it is interesting to note that the most frequently used words throughout all nominations were: 'always', 'time', 'feedback', 'lecturing' and 'help'.

Overall, in their nominations, students primarily rewarded what should be expected — charismatic and engaging lecturers, helpful and active personal tutors, and thoughtful supervisors and support staff who went above and beyond expectations in their roles. Student expectations varied considerably between comments, with past experience in other courses being a key reference point for students making their nomination comments. Students heavily cited personal aspects of their academic life and rewarded staff who made strong connections with their students. Student comments featured strong admiration for the work of teaching staff and the impact they had on creating a positive learning environment at the University of Edinburgh.

The University of Edinburgh's Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS) has generously funded this research with a small grant. The Students' Association recruited a Research Assistant, Kieran Bunting, a Postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh who took forward this research, supported by the Vice President Academic Affairs and the Academic Engagement Coordinator. The following sections discuss the research findings in depth, and each includes practical examples of activities that students highlighted as being beneficial to their educational experience. There are also quotations throughout the report highlighting shortlisted nominees and giving examples in students' own words.

RESEARCH APPROACH

To examine the themes and trends emerging from students' Teaching Awards nomination comments, coding was undertaken using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software as well as Excel to quantify theme-specific and School-specific data. Using aspects of a grounded theory approach, the nominations for the eight award categories were coded into thematic nodes before being aggregated into categories. Percentages for the total number of students who submitted nominations were calculated to find the best performing Schools as well as the breakdown of award nominations by School. These can be found in the appendix.

Key trends and themes were analysed following coding of every nomination from the 2014-15 Teaching Awards to determine the key factors that students were rewarding in their nomination comments. These were broken down into four themes that will be discussed later in the report. These themes and other related topics were thoroughly reviewed in an attempt to validate the practical comments against the coding breakdowns for the award categories. For instance, Best Overall Teacher Award nominations had stronger coverage in lecturing-related nodes relative to the Best Personal Tutor Award where support and communication nodes were more predominant.

The nomination comments featured a very wide range of student opinions. Whether it was how quickly a tutor replied to an email, the amount of face-to-face feedback from lecturers or the responsibilities of support staff, there was a clear variety of student expectations. Valuable experiences of specific lecturing styles and positive, personalised feedback were important factors in the respective award categories. Nominations were based around exceeding expectations and, where students felt teachers had gone beyond their typical duties, they were greatly rewarded in nominations across all award categories. Celebrating the importance and successes of many University of Edinburgh staff, these nominations commend staff who have made significant and vital contributions to the University community.

DISCUSSION OF GENDER BREAKDOWN OF NOMINATIONS

For the first time, the decision was made to also undertake a small analysis of the gender breakdown of staff who were nominated for, shortlisted for, and won Teaching Awards in both the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years. This was based on a significant body of research which suggests that, due to implicit bias, women staff members are less likely to be recognised and rewarded for their work compared to men in similar roles.

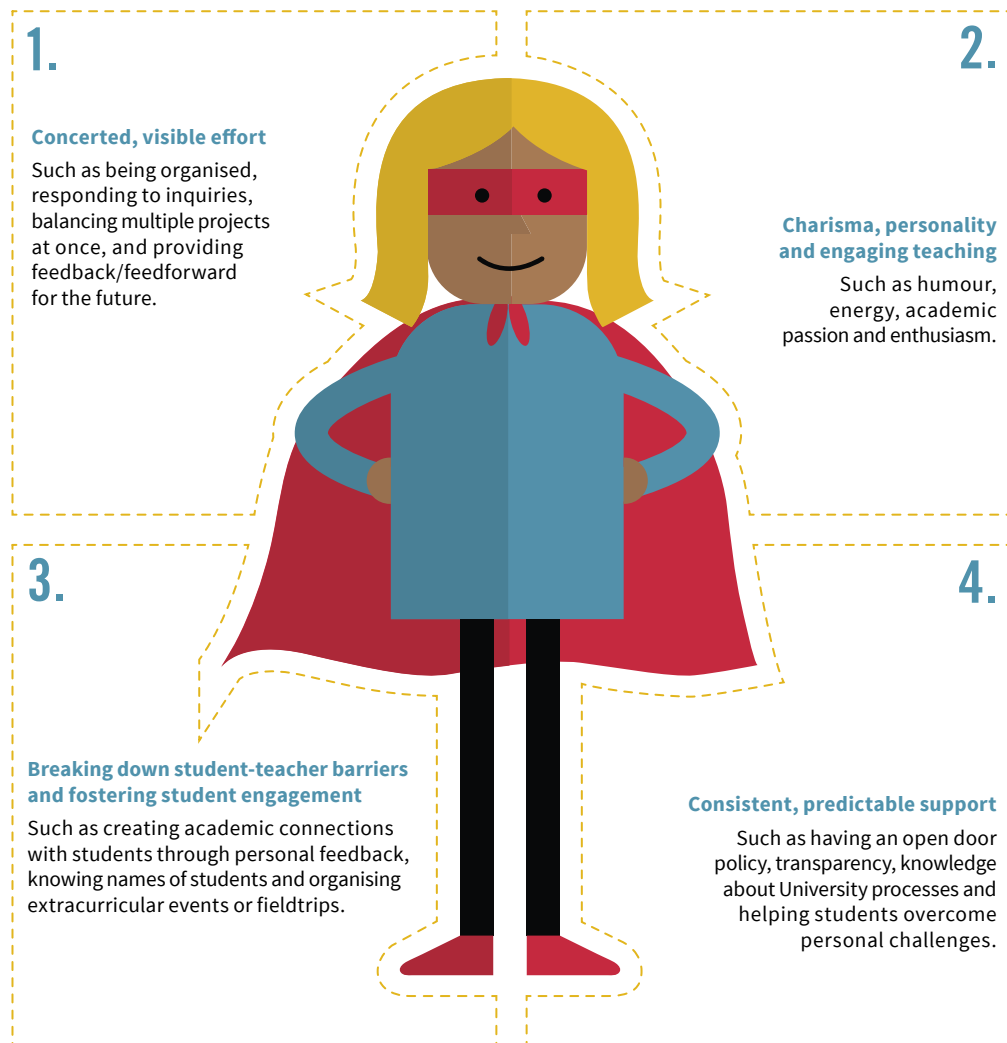| TOTAL NOMINATIONS			SHORTLISTED		WINNERS		
Men	**Women**	**Unknown**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	
1,588 64%	905 36%	6 <1%	9 43%	12 57%	6 55%	5 45%	**2014-15**
1,162 59%	790 40%	23 1%	15 52%	10 48%	7 54%	6 46%	**2015-16**

The results of this analysis (above) were not an immediate cause for concern although they did highlight areas for improvement. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that in 2014-15, **53.8%** of staff in UK Higher Education institutions were female, although it is worth noting that there is significant variation between types and levels of staff (for example, **18.5%** of professors were women, compared to **44.9%** of academic staff and **81.5%** of administrative and support staff).

Total Nominations Recieved Segmented by Gender (2014-15)

64% Men
36% Women
<1% Unknown

Shortlisted Staff Segmented by Gender (2014-15)

57% Women
43% Men

Winning Staff Segmented by Gender (2014-15)

55% Men
45% Women

As the table above shows, in 2014-15 **40%** of individuals nominated were women compared to **36%** in 2015-16. Although this suggests that men are more likely to be nominated than women, we do know that teaching staff are far more likely to be nominated than non-academic staff, meaning the disparity is not as great as it initially appears. In 2014-15, **48%** of those shortlisted for and **46%** of those who won a Teaching Award were women, compared to **57%** of those shortlisted and **45%** of those who won in 2015-16. With relatively small numbers being shortlisted and winning Awards, it is hard to identify any meaningful trend from the data but it is heartening that the ratio of men to women is relatively even.

DISCUSSION OF TEACHING PRACTICE

The award categories directly related to teaching practice have been grouped together for succinct examination in the discussion below. These are the nominations for the Best Overall Teacher, Course, Feedback and Learning Community Awards. The comments have been further broken down into four overall themes of what students rewarded in their nomination comments:

1.

Concerted, visible effort
Such as being organised, responding to inquiries, balancing multiple projects at once, and providing feedback/feedforward for the future.

2.

Charisma, personality and engaging teaching
Such as humour, energy, academic passion and enthusiasm.

3.

Breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement
Such as creating academic connections with students through personal feedback, knowing names of students and organising extracurricular events or fieldtrips.

4.

Consistent, predictable support
Such as having an open door policy, transparency, knowledge about University processes and helping students overcome personal challenges.

The related findings are summarised by theme below. Each of these themes is evident in student nominations across all award categories, and it must be stressed that they are not ranked by importance and were strongly interconnected.

1. Concerted, visible effort

Many teachers received nominations due to their visible, concerted effort inside and outside of the classroom. The theme of effort underpinned and had significant overlaps with every other theme, with over a fifth of references overlapping with approachability. Students nominated teachers who clearly took time to engage directly with their students while also managing and organising well structured, clear lectures that improved learning outcomes.

Students consistently rewarded visible staff effort in areas such as improving the course material, student engagement or the teacher's self-improvement. Frequent examples included providing supplementary readings or links to online content, offering review sessions or providing prompt responses to queries and comments. Furthermore, these nominated staff learnt from their students and their students' difficult questions.

Student comments also demonstrate an understanding that lecturers are very busy, which justified their appreciation of staff effort. This was especially prominent with feedback — students focused on both the quantity and quality of feedback they received from their lecturers, and were particularly appreciative of personal feedback that was returned promptly and with an eye for detail. This type of feedback evidently requires a large commitment of time and effort, and students greatly appreciate teachers' efforts to prioritise students, learning and teaching.

It was evident that students appreciated instances where staff acted on student feedback to improve the learning environment. Where there was effort on the part of the teacher to innovate or adapt assessments, students praised these successes as well as staff effort.
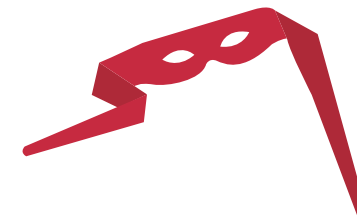
Below are examples of related good practice for teachers:

▶ Replying to all queries promptly with adequate attention and effort to resolve issues

▶ Being organised and prepared for all lectures with transparent goals and plans

▶ Showing students how the lecture fits into a holistic view of the course as a whole

▶ When not having a response to an issue or question, taking the time to find the appropriate information for the student

▶ Simplifying explanations of complex problems, including adding accessible, helpful material and links to LEARN if possible with an understanding for the different learning needs of different students

▶ Providing opportunities for 'feedforward' with supplementary mock practice tests and review sessions before examinations, or feedback on drafts of essays before they are submitted

▶ Promptly delivering feedback while maintaining a focus on both quality and quantity; in particular, students appreciate the opportunity for face-to-face feedback sessions

▶ Demonstrating an ability to balance multiple projects at once while maintaining time for student issues and queries

"She routinely gives over a page long of feedback, explaining strengths, weaknesses, and ways of improving. She gives students additional opportunities for feedback with formative assessments… Her feedback has helped me achieve the highest grades I've ever received and helped me get the most out of this course."

Student nomination comment for Lynne Copson, winner of the 2014-15 Best Feedback Award

2. Charisma, personality and engaging teaching

The importance of stimulating further interest, whether it leads to a secondary degree or new research project, was a focus of many nominations. When tutors effectively shared their passion and knowledge about topics, students had a positive and exciting experience while feeling encouraged to explore the subject further or develop relevant skills. This theme was also apparent when students were excited about a class at substandard times, such as very early on a Monday or late on a Friday. Similarly, for a topic previously thought as dull or too challenging, students rewarded teachers who managed to stimulate interest and improve their understanding. These teachers went above and beyond student expectations and deserve credit for their ability to engage students.

A key, regularly cited factor for this theme was the passion and enthusiasm that teachers brought to lecturing or teaching. Demonstrating that teaching was not a requirement or chore, energetic lecturers facilitated eager and engaged discussion both in and outside of class. Transferring their enthusiasm and knowledge through engaging lectures and discussions was an ability applauded in many teaching nominations. Through highly engaging, exciting and energetic academic experiences, students regularly discussed how a lecturer had successfully developed students' deeper interest in a topic. This ranged from a course motivating a student to change their subject area or a teacher inspiring a student to consider further academic or professional avenues related to a particular academic subject.

Another important aspect of this theme is humour. Numerous nominations discussed how students appreciated their lecturer's sense of humour and ability to joke because it created an air of comfort and added to students' enjoyment of the class. Humour can be seen as one way lecturers were able to bring their charisma and energy into their teaching methods. Student comments clearly demonstrate that enthusiasm and energy for a topic was translated into positive experiences and enjoyment of a course.

Below are examples of related good practice for teachers:

- ▶ **Bringing energy and passion to every lecture, no matter the time or class size**

- ▶ **Including the teacher's academic expertise (such as examples from their research or perspectives on exciting developments in the field) within course material to demonstrate research-led, up-to-date teaching**

- ▶ **Embedding new, innovative information as well as practical and real life examples into course material to maintain student interest and connection to the topic**

- ▶ **Showing students they enthusiastically care about the topic they teach and creating an engaging lecture method and style to facilitate student engagement**

- ▶ **Delivering unique, innovative methods of assessment and feedback to reinforce positive student experiences**
  Examples are facilitating a podcast as a method of assessment or creating an audio file for feedback since students found literally hearing positive encouragement empowering and motivating

- ▶ **Demonstrating care for students and an interest in them as individuals**

> **"Her feedback is specific, helpful and constructive. She is especially good at telling you how you can take your work to the next level... she sent her students an approximately three minute audio file with verbal feedback to expand on her written comments. In all my years being graded I have never encountered such a unique form of getting feedback!"**
>
> Student nomination comment for Amy Burge, runner-up for the 2014-15 Best Feedback Award

> **"The exercises she had us do in class were fresh and thought provoking. I really enjoyed how she makes a point to talk to the students and to encourage further learning. Her welcoming personality made me feel comfortable in class... It's very obvious that she's very invested in teaching and cares a lot about her students."**
>
> Student nomination comment for Amy Chandler, runner up for the 2014-15 Kendall Award for Teaching in Medicine

3. Breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement

Student nominations demonstrated the vital role educational professionals play in showing care for students as individuals, providing platforms for their input into pedagogical practices and ultimately listening to students' ideas. Teachers who were able to create a strong personal connection with their students were often written about at length in nomination comments. Students appreciated the positive classroom experience when teachers fostered students' comfort within a safe learning environment characterised by strong classroom interactions. Where teachers showed an understanding of the strain and stress of student life (both academically and personally) and made an effort to individually know each student, they were regularly discussed at length in nominations. Students often attributed the lecturer's personable attitude, approachability and respect shown to all students as having a positive impact on their educational experience.

Teachers who clearly and evidently thought of their teaching as not only a job requirement but an enjoyable, engaging activity were singled out in nominations. It was evident that students were greatly appreciative of learning environments where they were given the high level attention and respect they felt they deserved. Where an attempt was made to give students a say in part of the course development and discussions, students often cited their appreciation for this involvement and deeper engagement.

Creation of a strong learning community was highlighted by its individual award category where individual teachers, student leaders and student-led groups were acknowledged for their ability to bring together students, teachers and staff. Such groups were acknowledged for their ability to bring together peers over similar subjects and improve their understanding, interest and overall comfort at the university. This improved students' access to different approaches and methods for their individual learning style.

Students also took note of tutors and teachers who ensured everyone understood material, aiding those who required additional attention and providing supplementary information when necessary. This relied on getting to know students personally and understanding individual strengths and weaknesses as well as their opinions of ongoing coursework. Teachers who successfully fostered such a relationship and learning environment were nominated.

By showing care for student development and creating professional, personal connections with their students, lecturers engaged with students on a grounded level showcasing that teaching their students is a priority. The creation of a positive, stimulating learning environment was evidently important to students as well as having an understanding, personable lecturer who respects students.
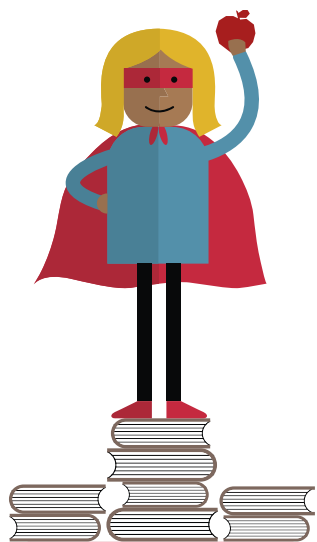
Below are examples of related good practice for teachers:

▶ **Knowing the names of their students early in the term**

▶ **Creating a strong academic connection with students through passionate, engaging lectures and personalised feedback that demonstrates a genuine concern for both the quality of the course and the outcomes for students**

Ensuring feedback on assessments contains encouragement, showing confidence in the student and allowing for a more positive dialogue about ways they can improve their academic work

▶ **Organising informal extracurricular events such as afternoon discussions over coffee or field trips to get to know students**

▶ **Taking care to understand the strains and stress of student life**

▶ **Identifying students requiring additional help and reaching out to them**

▶ **Receiving and acting on student feedback on teaching practices and course structure to enhance the overall learning experience**

Examples include working actively with student representatives, holding frequent staff-student liaison committee meetings, having individual meetings with students or receiving anonymous comments — one lecturer created an email account through which students could send in their comments anonymously to him

▶ **Treating all student ideas and comments with validity and respect, ensuring they feel comfortable engaging and discussing issues in the classroom**

Stimulating such an environment could be through student-led seminar sessions to get initial discussion flowing or frequently including student presentations in the course

Allowing students to decide on their own assessment topics

Facilitating student/staff partnerships in co-creating the curriculum through academic discussions

> **"She shows an unprecedented level of excitement for the topics she lectures on. She has constructed videos for us as a means of review and is very friendly to talk to and approachable with any questions the student may have. She encourages respect and gives clinical examples in class that contribute to employability in the future."**
>
> Student nomination comment for Gurå Bergkvist, winner of the 2014-15 Award for Teaching in Veterinary Medicine

> **"I loved how every week was different and you never quite knew what was going to happen... For example we were asked to act as policy makers in a nuclear war simulation and write a 'last order' to be locked on a nuclear submarine... For the feedback session we could give anonymous feedback on the course and Malcolm wrote an informative weekly blog entry in which he reflected abut each week's class."**
>
> Student nomination comment for Malcolm Craig's course The Nuclear Cold War in Policy and in Public (1945-1989), winner of the 2014-15 Best Course Award

4. Consistency, predictability and stability of support

A large number of nominations highlighted how teachers helped students overcome personal struggles and persevere with their studies. Students frequently discussed the proactive and positive attitude of staff who helped students both inside and outside the classroom. Numerous students said they would not have finished their degree or project without the support from the nominated tutor, support staff member or supervisor. These staff members deserve considerable praise since they play a central role in student welfare with their consistent support.

The trends in comments also highlighted the importance of predictability and stability of support from staff; the most frequent word used throughout all nominations was "always". Clearly in students' eyes the best teachers and support staff are dependable, predictable and regularly exceed expectations in their roles. For lectures and feedback, consistency was important since students felt that their work should be regularly assessed in a just and constructive manner. Staff should clearly strive to be consistent in their teaching practice, maintaining a high standard in their course content, assessment, feedback and support for students.

In nomination comments, students also highlighted staff who were proactive and communicated well with students. In courses this also aligned with effectively communicating transparent and digestible expectations for student work and assessments. Nominated lecturers followed up quickly on issues that students took the initiative to raise. For students seeking support with their coursework, the intensity of academic life was buttressed by the comfort they took in having reliable, dependable encouragement and assistance from staff. Through answering emails quickly and being willing to meet when needed, staff played a key role in student success.
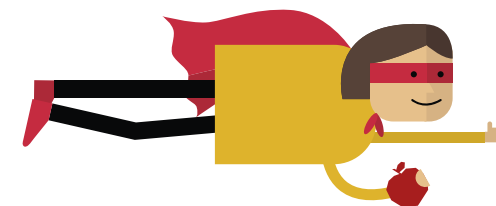
Below are examples of related good practice for teachers:

- **Being flexible about meeting students, having an open door policy and/or clearly stating office hours for student meetings to show approachability**
- **Being proactive in communicating with students to provide supplementary material and information about events**
- **Being prepared for planned meetings**
- **Following up on discussions after they take place**
- **Organising lectures that follow a clear theme so content builds and does not jump around too much**
- **Regularly posting necessary readings and course materials onto LEARN to ensure that it is available when students need it**

  Maintaining an organised LEARN area that is easy for students to navigate
- **Being knowledgeable about administrative processes and signposting students to relevant University services when appropriate**

  Using all available resources to enhance student learning and support through online and in person avenues

  Having up-to-date information about university services and resources
- **Ensuring transparency and consistency so students have a full understanding of the grading criteria and marking scheme**
- **Delivering quality feedback consistently and promptly**
- **Discussing common themes of feedback with the whole class for complete understanding**

> "He prepared practice exam questions (on top of past exams) and told us to submit the answers for feedback… He will always try to provide us tricks on how to approach complicated concepts from an intuitive perspective… He has a mid-semester course survey so we can provide anonymous feedback on how the course is going… He would always include a little puzzle related to what we were learning!"
>
> Iain Murray, winner of the 2014-15 Van Heyningen Award for Teaching in Science and Engineering

> "Yvonne has been a constant companion throughout my university journey. She has helped me work through very difficult times, sometimes arising from my own health obstacles as a disabled student… She has also been there to celebrate achievements!"
>
> Student nomination comment for Yvonne Hodgson, winner of the 2014-15 Supporting Students' Learning Award

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF NON-TEACHING SPECIFIC AWARDS

Best Personal Tutor

In the Best Personal Tutor Award category, there were 419 nominations for the 2014-15 Teaching Awards. For students, the best personal tutors were those who demonstrated consistent support with a caring, compassionate attitude. Regularly tutors were cited as the only person that a student felt comfortable going to with their issues, both personal and academic. Multiple students felt that they had overcome personal and academic struggles (including but not limited to mental health and administrative issues) that would have led to them leaving the university if it were not for the support of their personal tutor.

An open and approachable demeanour was the primary theme throughout these nominations, with frequently used words including 'time' and 'always'. Students want a personal tutor who they are comfortable reaching out to as a stable, reliable source of support. Sacrificing time away from other duties, these personal tutors showed students they could have an active role in supporting students' pastoral and academic life. The connection students felt with their personal tutor was often the sole reason they were being nominated.

The ability of these personal tutors to create a bond, show concern and personally relate to the struggles of their students was impressive. Students rewarded personal tutors who provided support that allowed students to focus on their own work and persevere. Top tutors used their understanding of each individual student to take note of issues and personalise their advice to students. An understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses as well as their individual goals and ambitions leads to a successful relationship where students feel comfortable and supported, yet also feel challenged and encouraged academically.

Nominated personal tutors were usually those who had gone above and beyond in their duties to provide incredible support to struggling students. These personal tutors improved the learning community of the university and deserve applause. They empowered students and helped them tackle large, unexpected issues through providing support and a helpful attitude.

Practical examples have been combined with those for the Best Research or Dissertation Supervisors below since there was significant overlap between the two categories.

> "She has taken the time to understand me and how she can best support my education and experience here at Edinburgh. She is very supportive when I have problems… Alison has confidence in me and it's motivating me to study hard for exams. To be honest, I'd probably be in a bad place without her… It's incredible to feel like someone has your back here at university and I know that she will always do her absolute best to help whatever situation I find myself in!"
>
> Student nomination comment for Alison Koslowski, winner of the 2014-15 Best Personal Tutor Award

Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor

This category had 264 total nominations spread across numerous schools. The themes were similar in many respects to those from the Best Personal Tutor category. The key distinction in the supervisor category was the focus on building an excellent working relationship which underpinned a student's strong research or dissertation project. Where personal tutors were heavily relied on for personal support ranging from mental health to administrative issues, supervisors were nominated for their specific, positive impact on student research as well as professional and academic development.

When supervisors actively engaged and fostered students' self-improvement and advancement of their research, they were often nominated for helping students develop confidence in themselves. Students highlighted the importance of a supervisor being passionate and interested in the student's research project, communicating effectively, preparing well for supervision meetings and providing numerous suggestions or related research ideas. Nominated supervisors made extra effort to demonstrate knowledge about the student's field of interest and to identify the importance of the student's work within the field. Students highlighted a blend of traits including supervisors being capable of encouraging research while maintaining critical feedback and pushing the student to explore new avenues of development and further work.

Nominated supervisors were aware of their students' interests and were often cited as suggesting events, speaking engagements or publication opportunities that a student should follow up. With such opportunities, which students often claimed they would not have found independently, top supervisors played an active role in the enhancement of students' research skills and professional development. The importance of communication was especially true for PhD students who have longer working relationships with their supervisors. Examples here include holding a skype meeting when a supervisor was away or providing a quick response to an email with comments for a draft of work.

Having successful and industrious face-to-face meetings was also cited and many PhD supervisors were lauded for meeting at short notice or having saved a project when the student was in a time of need. These successful working relationships formed the basis of supervisor nominations when they provided excellent academic support and encouragement that pushed students to great success.

Below are examples of related good practice for both Personal Tutor and Supervisor roles:

▶ **Taking time early in the semester to meet with students to get to know them, learning names and backgrounds as an important first step to making them feel comfortable**

Mentoring and encouraging the development of transferrable or ancillary skills as early as possible to ensure the best learning experience and development

▶ **Facilitating connections with other academic and pastoral staff where the student will benefit from further support or academic development through such interactions**

Seeking out answers proactively when lacking an answer or solution for a student

Scheduling regular meetings to build on their working relationship

▶ **Providing career and practical advice to push student development beyond the academic setting**

Suggesting ideas for publishing, presentations and conferences as well as professional connections

▶ **Responding rapidly to queries and issues with a distinct, obvious eagerness to have face-to-face interactions and discussions when possible**

Adjusting to communication needs by meeting via skype or phone when necessary

> **"Dr. Adams is an exceptional dissertation supervisor for several reasons. First, he reads my work with a sharp critical eye, offering incisive suggestions that help me understand what it will take to produce truly great scholarship. He combines this with the ability to provide meaningful and specific encouragement… I am immensely proud to be associated with Dr. Adams."**
>
> Student nomination comment for Nicolas Adams, winner of the 2014-15 Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor Award

Supporting Students' Learning

In 2014-15 this was, rather unfortunately, the second smallest award category with only 86 total nominations. During the 2015-16 nomination period, the name of this award category was changed to the Best Support Staff Award and received 246 nominations which is extremely positive. The nominations analysed in this category are incredibly diverse, covering a wide range of positions for what students considered to be a supporting role in their educational experience. This is worth noting on its own — almost every type of University staff was mentioned throughout these nominations in regards to having a positive impact in supporting student life, from careers service staff to lab managers to course secretaries.

Similarly to nominations for personal tutors and supervisors, these nominations focused on the help and time given to students to support them in overcoming both academic issues as well as personal issues affecting their studies. These support staff were readily available and always caring towards students. Whether it was professional advice, CV editing or the additional effort to ensure distance learners felt supported, these nominees showed they were committed and dedicated to fostering an enjoyable educational experience at the University. A reoccurring theme was how support staff accommodated specific student issues and supported students with a wide variety of issues and queries even if they weren't the staff member's speciality.

The themes for the Supporting Students' Learning Award also included similar information to the section on consistency, predictability, and stability of support (pages 13-14). The nominations also highlighted specific roles and areas where support was essential to students' general success at the University. This was particularly apparent for international students as well as those with disabilities. Also focused upon was the aforementioned ability of staff to understand the specific situation for each and every student and adapt their support to allow students to focus on their studies while feeling comfortable at the University and in the city. Being knowledgeable of other support outlets and looking to help their students at every turn, these support staff play an essential role in the student experience.

Below are examples of good practice for support staff:

▶ **Helping students prioritise both academic and personal issues to ensure student wellbeing and a positive educational experience where they do not become overwhelmed**

▶ **Employing a regular schedule of check-ins and meetings to ensure stable and consistent support and being proactive when there had been an undesirably long gap in such communication**

▶ **Creating extracurricular opportunities including career events, organising speakers or discussions, and fostering informal social connections to create a sense of comfort and community**

▶ **Facilitating the provision of effective student peer learning and support groups**

▶ **Understanding the complexities of unique student needs and accommodating them as necessary**

▶ **Having clear explanations and communication to efficiently and effectively support students especially when they may not have a good grasp on the University's administrative or academic procedures**

▶ **Encouraging students and being positive while creating a healthy, safe and supportive learning environment to benefit all students and especially struggling students**

> **"Claire Haggett is basically single-handedly responsible for getting me through my degree in one piece. In periods of uncertainty, stress, anxiety, elation, frustration and bewilderment, Claire has been a constant and reliable support, and her office has been a haven of biscuits and warmth. Even in periods in which she was not my lecturer, Claire supported me and encouraged me."**
>
> Student nomination comment for Claire Haggett, runner up for the 2014-15 Supporting Students' Learning Award

Best Student Who Tutors

This award category had 237 nominations coming from a wide range of Schools. Nomination comments made it clear that students who tutor (including postgraduate tutors and demonstrators as well as undergraduate peer support leaders) go above and beyond to simplify, condense, explain and foster discussion about course material. Nominees were engaging and showed thorough concern for each and every student's full comprehension. They showed patience and care towards students, and often students who were nominating these tutors felt their academic development and positive results could be attributed to these tutors rather than lecturers.

Nominated tutors made time for their students, were approachable in person and also communicated effectively via email. A good tutor is available for their students outside the classroom and brings a sense of enthusiasm to tutorials, labs or peer support sessions. Students took note of and nominated tutors who were consistently prepared with well-structured material. These tutors had a good grasp on both the content and academic expectations, communicating effectively to students and leaving them with a deeper understanding of material.

Similar to the Best Overall Teacher Award category, students rewarded tutors who were able to excite and engage them on topics that were previously boring or difficult. These tutors also demonstrated the ability to do so while improving the overall course experience and development. Their ability to synthesise material for students and explain complex issues was typically lauded as being digestible without sacrificing quality or depth. This was the key strength of tutors that was highlighted: they were able to focus on specific issues and help guide students to stronger comprehension of difficult topics or tasks. Whether it was through supplementary material or a new view of the topic, students were able to improve their academic approach through the exemplary use of tutors' learning resources.

Student tutors who were nominated were also regularly willing to go out of their way to provide additional time and support for students who asked for it. The extra effort of these tutors preparing for and following up after tutorials was regularly remarked upon in nominations. Those nominated had connected with students and shown them a high level of respect in all concerns and queries raised. Increasing students' understanding and knowledge, these student tutors were approachable and engaging.

Below are examples of good practice for student tutors:

▶ **Creating additional course materials that improve engagement with a specific, difficult topic as well as students' overall understanding of course content**

▶ **Holding revision sessions before examinations or assignment submission deadlines to allow students to communicate concerns**

▶ **Proactively addressing areas of difficulty within courses**

▶ **Working with struggling students to clarify specific issues**

▶ **Maintaining a clear and consistent structure of sessions relative to course material that both pushes students' learning further while reinforcing main messages in lectures**

▶ **Taking the time to find related, real life and practical examples beyond what has been offered in the course to enhance student engagement**

> **"He took so much time to write guides on how to approach the tutorial questions and teach us the best practice, emailed us these and was always willing to reply to any further queries. He was keen to participate in a revision session organised by the Class Reps and was always willing to give us the broader picture — not just how to do a question but what it implies in real life. I personally consider that as an engineer it is very important to see the bigger picture in order to understand and prevent failures, and this is something I learned from him."**
>
> Student nomination comment for Ahmad Al-Remas, winner of the 2014-15 Best Student Who Tutors Award

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings described above, Edinburgh University Students' Association would like to suggest the following recommendations to the University to continue to improve teaching and student support:

A. Continue to work to develop a strong sense of academic community within each subject area that inspires and empowers all members, both students and staff, to actively contribute to the community. Communications from staff to students should be improved regarding what they should reasonably expect from teaching and support staff.

B. Include students more actively in pedagogical discussions to increase transparency, accessibility and inclusion by showing students that they are partners in learning and teaching. Listen actively to student feedback by improving teaching and support practices based on student suggestions and explaining why certain elements of student feedback cannot be addressed.

C. Make time for students within working hours. The workload allocation model must account for students meeting with lecturers, tutors and support staff in particular. A healthy working culture should be promoted across the University, even though students do recognise and appreciate staff who responded quickly to emails outside of normal working hours.

D. Engage with the University's Athena SWAN Institutional and School Self-Assessment Teams to identify ways to integrate the Teaching Awards into wider discussions around recognition and reward for women staff. The University should also consider how the Teaching Awards data may be used in the future to look at the extent of racial equality in the institution.

E. Place greater emphasis on the Best Support Staff to increase nominations and recognition of the University's professional and support staff, and especially women staff members.

F. Continue to support postgrad tutors and work to ensure consistency of roles across each College, and pay tutors for the time they spend preparing for tutorials and meeting students outside of tutorials to support them.

G. Continue to provide regular training and support to personal tutors and research supervisors, particularly relating to supporting students with mental health issues.
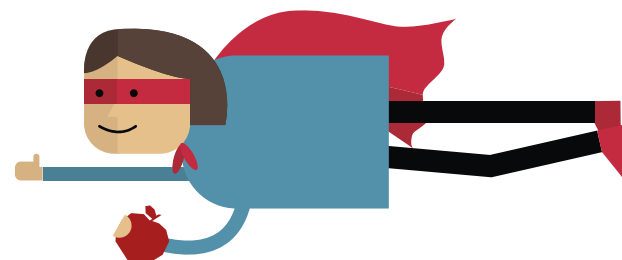
CONCLUSION AND MOVING FORWARD

The 2014-15 Students' Association Teaching Awards celebrated staff across all Schools of the University of Edinburgh and showcased the talent of academic, professional and support staff. While student expectations varied considerably, what students discussed in their nomination comments was notably enthusiastic and well within what the University should be expecting students to reward. Students reflected on how staff furthered their learning and professional development, both in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. Engaging and memorable educational experiences of many students were noted to show how staff inspired them. The success of staff to create such an educational community and environment deserves much celebrating.

Additionally, there are areas related to the Teaching Awards, beyond the scope of this report, that deserve further investigation. One such example is the use of technology in the classroom. Innovative and successful examples of online voting mechanisms, Top Hat, lecture recording and even LEARN were discussed in numerous comments. Nomination comments featuring engaging technology appeared to occur with greater frequency in the 2015-16 Teaching Awards, and it is likely that this will only increase as these technologies proliferate across the university. The use of these classroom technologies enhanced students' learning experiences and, while not often the sole reason for a student nomination, played a role in many comments by increasing student engagement. Another area which could warrant further investigation includes looking more closely at the work of specific teachers who are consistently nominated for multiple Teaching Award categories, especially when they are nominated year after year. Therefore, it would be interesting to learn more about their specific teaching practices which regularly garner such admiration from students. Other research examining questions of gender and how it affects and is reflected in Teaching Awards nominations could be a further area to explore. There will also be important developments in how classes are run, how personal tutors engage with students increasingly using technology and how staff can engage students in research-led teaching and co-creation of the curriculum. The Students' Association Teaching Awards will change with these new trends and future years are likely to reflect different themes.

It is unlikely, however, that the basic, core themes discussed throughout this report will change significantly. During the 2016-17 Teaching Awards, the Students' Association will not only ask students to submit open-ended, qualitative nomination comments but will also give students a chance to choose up to three key themes (as identified through this research) relating to their nomination. This will help the Students' Association to gather more quantitative data relating to the nature of teaching excellence, as perceived by students. It is felt that charismatic and engaging lecturers will always be valued by the students they teach. Appreciation will not wane for support staff and teachers who put in extra effort to provide as much information, assistance and feedback as possible. Those who attempt to engage students in the classroom while knowing each one individually on a personal level will always be respected and admired by their students. Finally, staff who can consistently showcase such attributes and practices form the backbone of strong educational practice across the institution, providing stable support and predictable, high-quality teaching. There are outstanding individuals who make the University of Edinburgh a fantastic educational community and experience, and the Students' Association will continue to celebrate their work through the Teaching Awards.

APPENDIX

SCHOOL	NUMBER	% OF TOTAL NOMINATIONS
Literatures, Languages and Cultures	348	12%
Social and Political Science	281	10%
History, Classics and Archaeology	206	7%
Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences	197	7%
Education (Moray House)	189	6%
Law	157	5%
Engineering	150	5%
Edinburgh College of Art	136	5%
Geosciences	129	4%
Business School	124	4%
Veterinary Studies	109	4%
Informatics	103	4%
Physics and Astronomy	98	3%
Mathematics	98	3%
Biological Sciences	91	3%
Divinity	86	3%
Chemistry	85	3%
Biomedical Sciences	80	3%
Economics	70	2%
MBChB	58	2%
Health in Social Science	51	2%
Clinical Sciences	42	1%
Other	20	1%
Molecular, Genetic and Population Health	18	1%
Total	**2,926**	

SCHOOL	% OF STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL WHO NOMINATED
CAHSS	
School of Divinity	18%
School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures	14%
School of Social and Political Science	13%
School of History, Classics and Archaeology	12%
School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences	11%
School of Law	9%
Business School	8%
Moray House School of Education	7%
School of Economics	7%
School of Health in Social Science	7%
Edinburgh College of Art	5%
CMVM	
Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies	8%
Deanery of Biomedical Sciences	7%
Edinburgh Medical School	5%
Deanery of Molecular, Genetic and Population Health Sciences	4%
Deanery of Clinical Sciences	3%
CSE	
School of Mathematics	14%
School of Physics and Astronomy	11%
School of Chemistry	10%
School of Geosciences	8%
School of Informatics	8%
School of Biological Sciences	7%
School of Engineering	7%

Theme 1 – Concerted, Visible Effort

NAME	REFERENCES	COVERAGE	TOTAL NOMINATIONS
Best Overall Teacher	360	12.50%	1,192
Best Feedback	117	33.72%	222
Best Course	113	16.46%	360
Best Personal Tutor	113	16.42%	419
Best Student Who Tutors	90	21.74%	237
Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor	73	12.95%	264
Supporting Student Learning	52	30.27%	86
Undefined Awards	26	5.66%	72
Best Learning Community	15	8.14%	74
Total	**959**		
Total Ratio	**33%**		

Theme 2 – Charisma, Personality and Engaging Teaching

NAME	REFERENCES	COVERAGE	TOTAL NOMINATIONS
Best Overall Teacher	687	31.03%	1,192
Best Course	161	27.56%	360
Best Student Who Tutors	113	29.07%	237
Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor	43	8.29%	264
Best Personal Tutor	42	7.51%	419
Best Feedback	24	6.83%	222
Undefined Awards	13	3.45%	72
Supporting Student Learning	8	4.30%	86
Best Learning Community	4	0.99%	74
Total	**1,095**		
Total Ratio	**37%**		

Theme 3 – Breaking Down Student-Teacher Barriers and Fostering Student Engagement

NAME	REFERENCES	NVIVO COVERAGE	TOTAL NOMINATIONS
Best Overall Teacher	369	13.37%	1192
Best Personal Tutor	203	33.47%	419
Best Student Who Tutors	90	22.21%	237
Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor	87	16.15%	264
Best Course	62	9.25%	360
Supporting Student Learning	34	23.21%	86
Best Feedback	31	6.41%	222
Best Learning Community	29	17.27%	74
Undefined Awards	28	5.94%	72

Total **933**
Total Ratio **32%**

Theme 4 – Consistent, Predictable Support

NAME	REFERENCES	COVERAGE	TOTAL NOMINATIONS
Best Overall Teacher	302	10.64%	1192
Best Personal Tutor	246	39.92%	419
Best Research or Dissertation Supervisor	109	21.74%	264
Best Student Who Tutors	71	17.17%	237
Best Feedback	67	16.95%	222
Best Course	49	7.60%	360
Best Learning Community	40	25.38%	74
Supporting Student Learning	38	26.81%	86
Undefined Awards	30	7.20%	72

Total **952**
Total Ratio **33%**

Top 15 Nodes

NODE NAME	TOTAL NODES	MAIN THEME
Lecturing**	605	3
Engaging Engagement	511	3
Approachability Availability	508	1 and 4
Student Growth and Development	476	3
Feedback**	459	2
Clear Effort	452	2
Support**	384	4
Stimulating Interest & Further Work	356	3
Caring	258	1
Passion*	226	3
Simplifying	182	2
Comfort	175	1
Supplemental Content*	169	2
Fun Factor	167	3
Exceeding Expectations	167	2

* = part of aggregated lecturing node

** = aggregated nodes

It should be noted that theme 4 included a large number of the smaller nodes and aggregates though it may appear underrepresented on this list