

Reward and Recognition: Student Led Teaching Awards Report
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We would also like to thank Oliver Williams, NUS, Student Led Teaching Awards Project Officer for his generous help and support. Our study has also been informed by the work of the HEA and NUS Scotland Student Led Teaching Awards.

In utilising the text mining software Leximancer for our research, we were able to build on research expertise and work undertaken by the Academic Enhancement Unit at Liverpool John Moores University where Leximancer has been used to analyse institutional and NSS qualitative survey data and to investigate the second year experience as part of a National Teaching Fellowship Project.

I. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from an analysis of student nominations for teaching and learning excellence awards based on data from Students' Unions participating in the 2011-12 round of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and National Union of Students (NUS) Student Led Teaching Awards (SLTA) Project.

The primary focus of the investigation was to identify attributes and characteristics of excellent teaching and support for learning from a student perspective.

The report's commentary on findings is located in the wider context of Student Led Teaching Awards developments and research literature on teaching excellence.

Some suggestions are made for how findings might be used to inform ongoing institutional and Student Union learning and teaching enhancement initiatives.

I.1. Data set and methodology

The study drew on nomination data made available by 10 of the 20 participating Students' Unions (8 from England, 2 from Wales) and covered a range of university mission groups. The data set comprised 759,572 words and a range of award categories and criteria. Text mining software Leximancer was used because of its efficiency in aiding analysis of large volumes of data. The software identifies concepts from the text and represents them as a concept map, thus assisting the researcher with the exploration of key themes and the connections between them. The report includes a detailed description of the main themes generated by the analysis, illustrated by quotes from the students' nominations.

I.2. Summary of findings

I.2.1. Teaching

Students in their nominations were most likely to comment on two attributes of excellent teaching, the unique **teaching style** or **teaching approach** of their nominees, with **interesting**, **engaging** and **innovative** being the most frequently mentioned adjectives. **Teaching** is often mentioned together with **learning**, reflecting the impact of these teaching approaches on student learning (how individual or group learning was facilitated by the nominees). The nominations demonstrated that personal qualities of teachers, such as generosity with time, enthusiasm and willingness to help, and their ability to manage complex interactions, are as important to students as the ability to deliver excellent teaching

Students make direct links between the excellent teacher's passion and enthusiasm for the discipline, their extensive subject knowledge and active engagement in research – emphasising their appreciation of staff being involved in advancing knowledge and sharing it first hand with students.

The richness of the students' nominations made it clear that great teaching is not just about being popular, funny or entertaining. Students did talk about personal qualities as being as important as teaching skills but they also appreciated how great teachers promote active learning, how they engage, challenge and inspire students to learn.

It was striking, though, that the focus of students' responses was mainly on how great **lecturing** promotes their learning, rather than on other approaches. This may simply be because students were being asked to nominate great teachers and they associated great teaching with excellent lecture delivery that actively

engaged them and promoted their learning. It is interesting to speculate how the responses may have been different if the emphasis had been on asking students what promotes excellent learning.

The potential, and perhaps the challenge, would be for Students' Unions to use the data on what students are saying about **great teaching** as a basis for further dialogue and debate about pedagogies that promote **great learning**.

1.2.2. Personal Tutoring

Student accounts of great teaching showed the importance of the integration of the elements of academic practice, an engaging teaching style and dedicated student support (both academic and personal). The nominations provided powerful narratives of the importance of personal tutor support throughout students' time at university, emphasizing the importance of personal tutors in motivational support and encouragement. Students highlighted the critical role of a personal tutor in student retention, successful progression and in helping to foster a sense of belonging. There was a strong emphasis in personal tutor nominations on how great tutors made students feel (good, empowered, secure) with helpful, supportive and understanding being the characteristics of personal tutors that students most often cited. It was apparent that personal tutors play an important role in helping students to make sense of and direct their learning.

Students describe the impact of personal tutors on their personal and academic well-being as 'life changing', referring to them as role models who also play an important role in students' career orientation and employability. Personal tutor support throughout the whole student life cycle seems to have the most profound impact, enabling the development of a better understanding of the learner's needs and personality and providing effective support at different stages of their learning.

1.2.3. Assessment and Feedback

Only two of the Students' Union nominations that were the subject of this study had 'Assessment' in their title, so **assessment** has not been picked up as a strong theme. Assessment was most often mentioned in the context of feedback – e.g. excellent feedback that helped students to get better marks in the next assessment or feedback on assessment.

Students described assessments that are *well structured, fair; assessments that helped to improve* etc. It was striking that students did not give examples of interesting, innovative assessment in this category – these were most likely to be found in generic teaching nominations.

When describing feedback provided by excellent teachers, students put an emphasis on the feedback that helps to improve further work. Students see useful and detailed feedback as an indication that the teacher wants them to achieve their full potential –thus enhancing their intrinsic motivation to improve. The feedback provided by great teachers, either written or face-to-face, ensures that students understand and are able to make effective use of the feedback

Feedback that is '*given in time*' to influence or improve their ongoing work was also a strong theme in the student nominations. Students see promptness as an important factor, but only when they have an opportunity to use the feedback in their next assignment.

Many student nominations emphasised the importance of feedback as an 'indication of progress'. Our analysis highlighted the beneficial impact of useful and timely feedback on the emotional context of student learning, on students' confidence as learners and even on their area of specialisation and future career. Another discovery was that excellent feedback delivered as part of one module has a profound impact on student course performance as a whole.

1.2.4. Professional Services (administrative and support staff)

Professional services staff are seen as providing academic and life skills support and a source of invaluable practitioner and experiential knowledge. Students also see staff in learner support roles as having excellent teaching and support skills. Our findings highlighted the importance of the contributions of professional services staff in supporting learning and promoting a sense of belonging. Administrative staff act as intermediaries between students and academics and as ‘departmental glue.’ It is striking that they are often considered by students like friends or family, providing not only study related but also emotional support, life related advice and practical help.

1.3. Recommendations

The nominations data provides a rich data source on student perceptions of great teaching. There is potential to use the data to:

- inform ongoing development of SLTA schemes;
- support dialogue between students and staff on learning and teaching;
- promote further partnership and enhancement activity.

1.3.1. Building an evidence base

One of the challenges is ensuring that student led teaching awards are not just perceived by students and staff as a popularity contest. Analysis of nomination data can help Students’ Unions to:

- build up an evidence base on students’ perceptions of the characteristics and qualities of excellent teaching and learner support;
- identify gaps or themes that Students’ Unions might want to work on;
- broaden the reach of student engagement in the awards – for example, across disciplines, of distance and part-time learners, mature students and international students;
- look at the demographics of staff being nominated- new or experienced staff, subject areas represented, professional services and support staff;
- develop the nomination and selection process, award categories and criteria.

1.3.2. Disseminating outcomes

There are already many examples of how Students’ Unions have developed and are using their awards to work with their universities to further promote excellence in teaching and learning, for example:

- supporting staff development and enhancement activity by sharing data with academic departments, learning and teaching enhancement units and professional service and support teams;
- using data to produce cases studies to further disseminate excellent practice;
- using findings to support strategic priority developments;
- triangulating nomination data with other data on the student experience, eg. NSS, International Student Barometer, Course Experience Questionnaires.

1.3.3. Potential for partnership

There is great potential for SLTAs to be used as a vehicle for developing work in partnership with staff and students, for example by:

- engaging in dialogue on learning and teaching between students and staff, not just on what promotes **great teaching** but also on what **promotes great learning**;

- considering how awards and their recipients can be used to support curriculum development work in partnership, working with **teaching teams**, not just recognising individual staff;
- thinking about the ways that awards could contribute to delivering the expectations of the new QAA Quality Code Chapters on Teaching and Learning and Student Engagement and the objectives of the NUS's new Manifesto for Partnership.

1.3.4. Addressing ethical issues

Students' Unions will need to consider how they are going to analyse the data when developing their SLTA scheme and determining the award categories, criteria, length of nominations etc. The nominations we analysed ranged from short statements of one or two paragraphs to 2 page mini essays. Generally speaking, where students were provided with tight criteria their responses were very focused, while just giving students a heading under which to comment did result in much richer open responses.

As well as deciding who is going to analyse the data and how, there are ethical issues to consider around quoting students' actual words in any report written. We suggest providing a statement on nomination forms to let students know the awards will be used to research students' perceptions of great teaching in order to enhance the student experience and provide an opportunity for students to opt out if they do not wish their nominations to be used in the research. Students' anonymity needs to be guaranteed when using their responses. We found that many of the nominations were very personal and emotive and in our report we have not used quotes where an individual could be identified

1.4. Summary

As the HEA and NUS continue to support the expansion and further development of Student Led Teaching Awards we hope that the findings in this report might prove useful in helping to identify potential for further and ongoing research.

There is potential to develop synergies and links between the SLTAs and, for example, other aspects of the HEA's Reward and Recognition work, the retention and student success 'What works' programme and other Student Engagement, Students as Partners and Surveys for Enhancement activity.

2. Introduction

Teaching excellence awards have a long history and there is an established literature on recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching (for example, Ramsden et al, 1995; Warren and Plumb, 1999; Gibbs & Habeshaw, 2002) and much critical debate on what constitutes excellence in teaching (Elton, 1998; Kreber, 2002; Skelton, 2005; 2009).

It is now some 15 years since the Dearing report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997) placed a particular emphasis on raising the profile of teaching and learning within the sector. This created the impetus, which was to lead to the introduction of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in 2000 to reward individual excellence and a growth of institutional schemes to reward and recognise excellent teaching (Skelton, 2005).

Most recently, changes to student fees and funding following the Browne Review (2010) and the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011) have brought the quality of teaching and the student learning experience into even sharper focus.

When reviewing the literature on teaching excellence, Little et al (2007), however, found that there was little in the research literature on student perceptions of teaching excellence and what might constitute an excellent student experience.

Student evaluations of teaching have a long history and a growing emphasis on student satisfaction and the importance of the student voice led to the introduction of the National Student Survey on student satisfaction in 2005. Research into student evaluations of teaching (for example, Shevlin et al 2000; Zabaleta, 2007; Schuck, Gordon and Buchan 2008) has, however, shown that a range of factors unrelated to the quality of teaching influences student satisfaction responses.

Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on promoting student engagement as partners in their learning; (see for example Trowler & Trowler, 2010 and HEA work on student engagement <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/student-engagement> and student engagement now forms part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2012).

One aspect of this increased emphasis on student engagement has been the development of award schemes run by Students' Unions to recognise and celebrate excellence in teaching and the support of learning. The first schemes were those of the Students' Association of Edinburgh University and the Students' Union of Heriot-Watt University in 2008. It is estimated that around 62% of multi faculty Higher Education Institutions were involved in SLTA activities in 2011-2012.¹

Student Led Awards and the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme are National Teaching Awards supported by the Higher Education Academy as a key strand in its strategic work on the Reward and Recognition of excellence. The Student Led Teaching Awards (SLTA) Project <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/student-led-awards> is a collaborative partnership between the Higher Education Academy and the National Union of Students. Initiated in Scotland in 2009-10, the first year of SLTAs involved 8 Scottish Higher Education Institutions. A successful first year saw expansion of the scheme for a second round and in 2010-11 some 11,000 students from 13 institutions, the majority of Scottish HEIs, participated in SLTAs. <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/scotland/ourwork/students/studentledteaching> Our research has been informed by the SLTA scheme in Scotland (Davies et al, 2012).

¹ NUS research cited in report of student led teaching awards in Scotland, (Davies et al, 2012, p.5)

In 2011-12 the scheme was further extended to build on the successful Scottish initiative and it is data from this stage that is the subject of our study. The intended focus of the overall project was to benchmark current practice, support the development of existing schemes and help more Students' Unions create and develop their own teaching award schemes. Interested Students' Unions were invited to apply to the HEA for funding by the end of October 2011 and in November the HEA announced support for 21 Students' Unions to establish student led teaching awards (one SU subsequently withdrew). The funded projects represented a range of institutions and geographical spread, with 16 from England, 4 from Wales and 1 in Scotland. A NUS Project Officer was appointed to coordinate and support the awards. Each Students' Union received £1500 in funding. Targeted events were held throughout the year to support participating Students' Unions in the creation of their awards and to enable them to share issues and experiences and learn from existing schemes. SLTA developments were disseminated at a NUS/HEA national conference on Student Engagement in May 2012. The project has a dedicated website www.studentledteachingawards.org.uk which evolved over the year with the addition of briefings, articles and case studies. A resource guide, *A Guide to Recognising Your Teaching: Creating and Developing your Student-Led Teaching Awards*, was produced in booklet form and also made available online. The NUS Project Officer also undertook an impact analysis of participants' experience of the awards (via online survey and focus groups at the final meeting in July)².

In researching student led teaching awards we are not aware of any published accounts as yet of studies of student-led teaching awards, apart from conference presentations and SLTA project dissemination events. The Project Reports for the Scottish and wider UK SLTA project provide a range of examples of how Students Unions are using the data from their own awards within institutions. SLTAs have grown exponentially in recent years and there are also Students Unions running SLTA schemes that are not involved in the HEA/NUS SLTA initiative. We looked at existing studies on student perceptions of teaching excellence and there were strong parallels with our own findings. Three examples of recent studies on student nominated (not student-led) teaching awards that we looked at were those of Russell and Barefoot (in Cunnane, 2010), Williamson (2011) and Bradley (2012)³.

3. Data set, research aims and methodology

This study is based on an analysis of nomination data made available by 10 of the 20 participating Students' Unions (8 from England, 2 from Wales), covering a range of different mission groups, namely Russell, Million+, Alliance and Cathedral groups of universities.

While participating Students' Unions agreement was gained at the outset of the project to share nomination data, there was no prior agreed format for how this data would be presented. Given that the awards were student-led, Students' Unions were free to determine their own award categories, award criteria and length of nominations. Nominations ranged from short statements of one or two paragraphs to 2 pages. In developing their awards, around half of the Students' Unions in the 2011-12 project used categories and criteria that had already been developed in Scotland, with the rest developing categories and criteria based on their own priorities and experiences.⁴ This presented some practical issues for data preparation. The total data set for analysis comprised 759,572 words.

3.1. Automated semantic analysis

Given the large amount of textual data generated by the nominations an automated semantic analysis tool Leximancer (<http://www.leximancer.com>) was utilised for the analysis. The software enables the instant

² Project Officer's end of project report for the HEA was made available to help inform this study

³ Sally Bradley et al also presented findings from Sheffield Hallam University 's Student Nominated Inspirational Teaching Awards at the 2012 HEA Conference

⁴ Project Officer's report

interaction with large volumes of data to reveal semantic characteristics of the text and patterns in the data. It automatically identifies concepts, themes (groups of concepts), and connections between them by data mining the text, and visually represents findings as a concept map (Smith & Humphreys, 2006) (Figure 1). Based on the assumption that a concept is characterised by words that tend to appear in conjunction with it, the software measures how relevant one word is to a set of other words (with indication of relevance presented in a separate table). The strongest relevance based connections are represented by direct links between the concepts. The process of concept generation is transparent: by clicking on a concept the researcher gets access to all instances (direct quotes) that contributed to its creation. Figure 2 gives an example of the quotes related to the concept **'clear'**, as presented by the software. It is also possible to explore relationships between concepts that are not directly connected, but may be of interest to the researcher. For example, by running a relationship query for the concepts **'engaging'** and **'style'** the researcher is given access to all quotes where these two words were mentioned together (Figure 3). In order to make sense of a concept (e.g. identifying all meanings that this concept encompasses) a manual exploration/analysis of all quotes is required.

For instance, the concept **'tutorial'** is most likely to represent a single meaning in student nominations. At the same time, the concept **'experience'** might have multiple meanings, such as experience of learning a particular subject (*her interdisciplinary approach to teaching, together with her wonderful sense of humour have... greatly enriched my experience of studying linguistics*), overall university experience (*she understands that our personalities, our perspectives and our individual well-being all play a vital role in the quality of [the university] experience*) or experience of a particular lecturer/tutor (*his opinions ... are informed by experience*). To fine-tune the analysis, more specific queries should be run to better understand all connotations related to the concept (e.g. 'academic'+ 'experience', 'learning' + 'experience').

Figure 2. Example of quotes that contributed to creation of the concept 'clear'

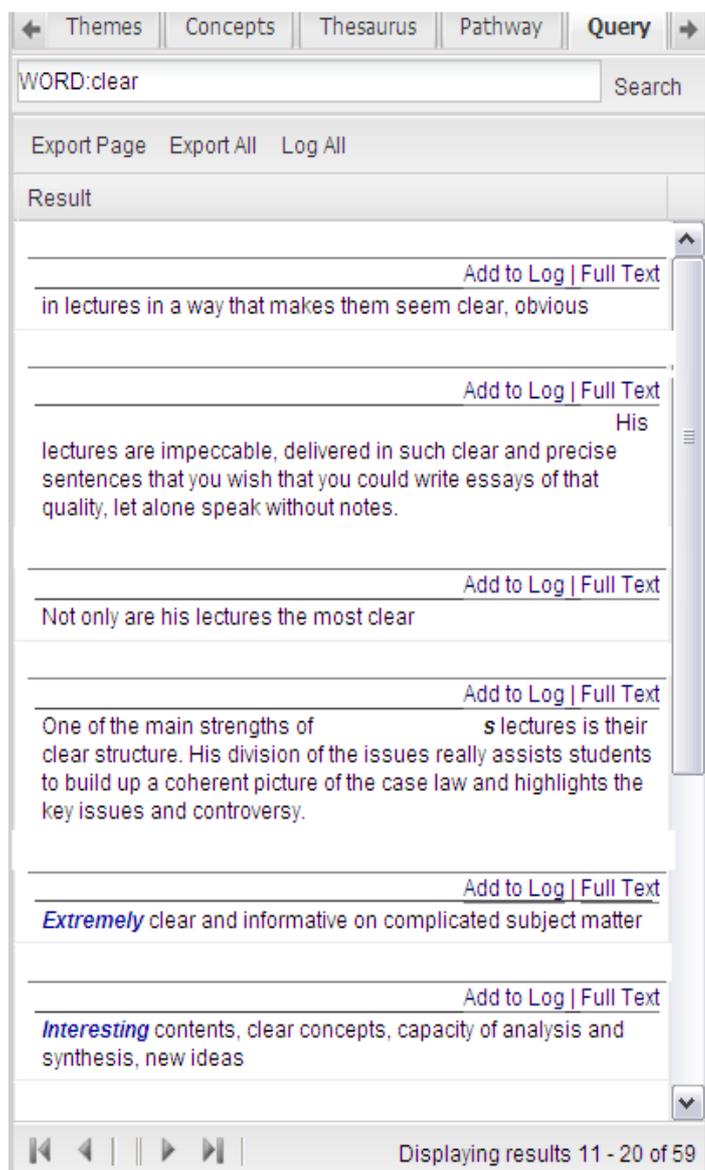
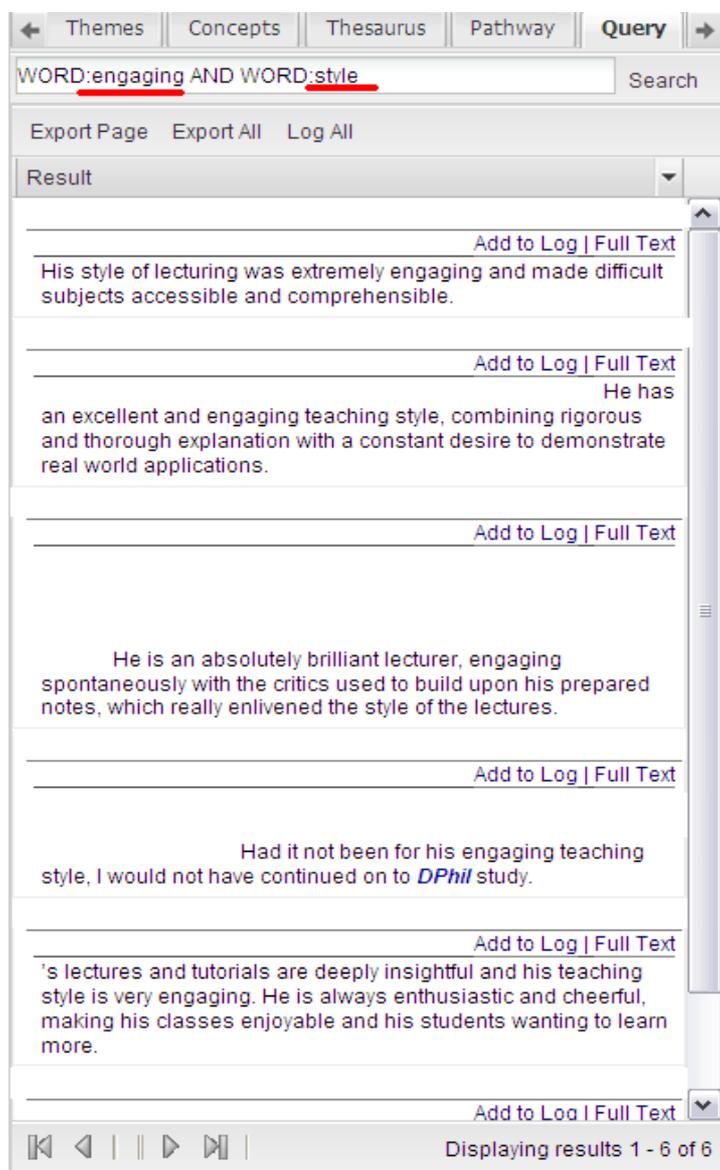


Figure 3. Example of quotes including 'engaging' and 'style' concepts



One of the advantages of this form of analysis is that it is highly inclusive and objective, with every sentence contributing to overall understanding. The concept map that emerges from this analysis captures 'the wisdom of crowds' and is in essence a text-driven, not researcher-driven representation (Dodgson et al, 2008). The researcher is able to interrogate the concept map and perform a more focused or tailored analysis, if needed, for example by adding less common concepts from the thesaurus (the process is called 'seeding'), merging or removing non-relevant concepts. For example, if the word 'formative' has not generated a concept, despite having been mentioned in student nominations many times, due to its not having reached a relevance weight threshold, the researcher is still able to add it to the concept map 'manually' and explore its positioning, meaning and relationship with other concepts. The merging can be undertaken to improve clarity of the map, for example, by combining concepts such as 'placement' and 'placements' into one. This should only be done after preliminary exploration of the quotes related to the concepts, since contextual background and meanings assigned to singular and plural forms of the same word might be different.

The software also has the potential to identify sentiments associated with a concept. The sentiments are identified automatically by linking sentiment orientation, if available (e.g. certain adjectives, nouns or verbs indicative of positive or negative sentiment), to the concepts in the process of analysis and calculating the statistical probability of the concept being mentioned in a favourable or unfavourable context. For example analysis of a large textual data set where both positive and negative attitudes to the same phenomenon are expressed (as in open text survey comments) might benefit from an indication of sentiment direction. The sentiment lenses were not applied in this analysis for obvious reasons.

Research demonstrates that Leximancer provides an unbiased and objective method of reviewing complex textual data sets and a clear process of justifying decisions about text selection, thereby increasing reliability and facilitating reproducibility of the findings (e.g. Penn-Edwards, 2010).

More details about how to interpret a concept map can be found in the Interpreting the Concept Maps section.

3.2. The purpose of the analysis

The nominations were analysed in order to identify common attributes and characteristics of excellent teaching from a student perspective. The study also included analysis of nominations related to excellence in personal tutoring, assessment and feedback and non-academic support provided by professional services staff. In doing this it was hoped that it would be possible to generate some suggestions for how the findings might be used to further disseminate teaching excellence and to inform the enhancement of the student learning experience.

Specific aims, defined by the research tool, were to:

- identify the conceptual structure of student nominations for each category (most relevant concepts and themes (concept clusters) that describe teaching excellence and excellence in student support, and their topology (e.g. where they are located and how they are associated with each other);
- elicit key messages contained within core concepts and themes;
- explore any other concepts that might offer new or different perspectives on student perceptions of excellent teaching and student support.

3.3. Data preparation

The nominations were grouped into four categories for analysis:

a. Teaching (this included nominations for):

Most Outstanding Lecturer

Most Outstanding Module

Best Lecturer (3)

Teaching

Inspiration

Module team

Motivation

Innovation

New Teacher
 Student Experience Award (academic nominations)
 Teaching - Extra Innovative Use of Technologies
 Teaching - Extra Employment Oriented Teaching
 Teaching - Extra Creative and Engaging Teaching
 Exceptional Module Award
 Innovative Teaching Award
 Inspirational Teaching Award
 Excellence in Distance Learning Award
 Innovative Teaching Style Award)

b. Personal Tutoring

Personal/ Placement Tutor who goes the Extra Mile
 Pastoral support (2)
 Personal Tutor of the Year Award (2)
 Award for Outstanding Student Support
 Support
 The Staff Mentor/Placement Supervisor Award
 The Student Experience Impact Award
 Positive Impact Award

c. Assessment and Feedback

Teaching - Extra Quality Feedback
 Feedback of the Year Award
 Assessment and Feedback
 Best Feedback Award (2)
 The Assessment and Feedback Award

d. Support and Administrative staff

Award for Exceptional Support beyond Teaching
 Students Services
 Pastoral support (2)
 Support Staff member who goes the Extra Mile
 Outstanding Admin and Support Award
 Award for Outstanding Student Support
 Support
 Inclusiveness Award (support staff)
 Positive Impact Award
 The Non-Academic Staff Award
 Support Staff

In total the nominations generated the following data sets for analysis:

Teaching nominations	612 720 words
Personal tutor nominations	74 022 words
Assessment and feedback	44 313 words
Administrative and support staff	28 517 words

Data preparation for analysis also included:

- A manual sort of some nominations (for example those schemes that allowed students to nominate both academic and support staff in the same category);
- Correction of major or consistent spelling/typographical mistakes so that all contributions were included in the automated concept analysis;
- Nominations that did not attract many entries such as Green award (3 nominations), Welsh medium teaching award (also 3 nominations) and a small number of postgraduate and employability only nominations were excluded from the analysis.

3.4. Leximancer settings

To ensure reproducibility and consistency of the analysis, interventions into the primary thesaurus (list of concepts generated) were minimised. No concept merging or seeding took place. The only researcher driven modifications were minor changes aimed at improving clarity of the concept map to allow more focused exploration. After a test run initial concept maps were examined and the following interventions, perceived beneficial for the analysis, were made:

- Semantically insignificant concepts such as ‘thought’, ‘sure’ and words that formed the concepts due to requirements of the nominations (e.g. ‘award’, ‘deserves’) were removed from the vocabulary;
- Concept ‘students’ – a very commonly used word that dominated concept map, but was not central for the analysis – was also removed.

Specific details of vocabulary changes for each category are explained in the corresponding sections.

After these changes were made, the automated analysis was repeated. The resulting concept maps were then used.

3.5. Interpreting the concept maps

The following are important for understanding and interpreting the concept maps:

- Concepts in Leximancer are collections of words that generally travel together throughout the text. They are weighted (not a simple frequency count) so the presence of each word in a sentence provides an appropriate contribution to the accumulated evidence. A sentence (or group of sentences) is only tagged as containing a concept if the accumulated evidence (the sum of the weights of the keywords found) is above a set threshold (Leximancer White Paper, 2011). The software automatically sets the threshold. The researcher can control the generality of the concept via software settings. Raising this value will increase the fuzziness and generality of each concept (Leximancer Manual, 2001);
- Frequency of co-occurrence between concepts is used to generate the concept map;
- The size of the concept denotes its strength (relevance based on frequency of co-occurrence): the largest concepts are most relevant, the smallest least relevant. The relevance is also presented in a separate table to allow easier comparison;
- Concepts that appear together frequently in the text will settle close together on the map. Those with a direct link are most likely to be mentioned together as a set phrase/expression, those without a direct link but situated in close proximity are likely to be mentioned together in a given text block (e.g. individual nomination);

- The coloured circles on the map are themes. They aid interpretation by grouping the clusters of concepts. The themes can be explored using the different level of thematic connectivity. 100% view indicates the most connected theme(s), lower levels show smaller concept clusters;
- Words in **bold** font are indicative of a concept in this report;
- Since Leximancer is dealing with a statistical probability, in the description of the findings we use phrases like ‘more or less likely’;
- When a thematic analysis of quotes that formed a concept was undertaken, only the strongest/dominant themes, present in all universities’ nominations, were reported. In some cases, absence of themes was also highlighted.

4. Findings

In presenting the findings, institutions have not been named and direct quotes have only been used where comments are generic enough not to be able to identify individuals⁵. Many nominations were very personal and highly emotive. It is also important to note that the study did not attempt to compare different awards or criteria.

In presenting the findings for each category of nomination, Teaching, Personal Tutor, Assessment and Feedback and Professional Services (administrative and support staff) we have followed the same format:

- A summary of the main findings;
- Representing the results of the findings in a concept map and concept relevance table;
- A detailed exploration of the themes generated by the concept maps, illustrated by quotes from the students’ nominations.

Further commentary is provided in Section 5, locating the findings in a wider context .

4.1. Teaching nominations

In preparing the data, concepts removed from the vocabulary were **award, thought, university names, year, sure, during** and **students**. **Year**, as a concept, had multiple meanings, referring to past and present years and length/time of interaction with a nominee. **Students** was the most frequently mentioned and used in a variety of contexts – so distracting from the main purpose of the analysis. The concept **student** remained intact (in this and all other nominations) - to be able to locate student related discourse on the concept map (connections of **student** with other concepts in particular).

4.1.1. Main findings in brief

- When students described an excellent teacher they are most likely to talk about the unique, distinctive teaching style/approach of their nominees and how this teaching style facilitates their learning or understanding;
- Teaching excellence is most likely to be associated with interesting and engaging lecture delivery that facilitates active modes of learning and to a lesser extent with other approaches such as tutorials, practicals or lab sessions;
- Students see a direct link between passion and enthusiasm for the discipline, the extensive subject knowledge of their nominees and their active engagement in research;

⁵ It is our understanding that Students Unions agreed to include in their award publicity a note to the effect that nominations may be used for research purposes, but we cannot be certain that this was indeed the case.

- Personal qualities of the nominees, especially their generosity with time and willingness to help, are considered as important as the ability to deliver excellent teaching. These qualities were often incorporated in the narratives of academic and personal support provided to students;
- Excellent feedback is most likely to be associated with academic support rather than teaching and often seen as a manifestation of nominees' personal qualities;
- Excellent teaching is seen by the majority of students as the ability to find a balance between three elements of academic practice – an engaging teaching/lecturing style, dedicated student support (on both an academic and personal level) and a passion for the subject that is closely associated with research;
- Humour was found to having multiple roles in the facilitation of student learning: as a way of making things memorable, in helping to maintain focus, as an aid to understanding difficult concepts and a means of building rapport;
- 'University' was more likely to be mentioned by students in the context of academic and personal support provided by their nominees, suggesting a link between feeling supported and valued and students' sense of belonging;
- Very few nominations made reference to on-line teaching (especially full distant mode). Rare examples that were given by students did, however, present very powerful narratives that would be worthy of further attention;
- The overwhelming majority of nominations see excellent teaching through the lens of a student-centred approach, mainly focused on the ability of staff to engage students in an active learning process, spark interest for the subject and encourage the best academic performance. Only a few nominations took it further, reflecting on the broader purpose of HE such as developing critical thinking and equipping the learner with the ability to challenge prevailing assumptions and structures.

4.1.2. Results

The concept map generated (Figure 4) and associated relevance table (Table I) indicate that the most relevant concepts in student nominations were **teaching**, **lectures** and **time**. These concepts constitute 'hubs' for other groups of concepts and have been used to structure the interpretation and description of the findings.

Figure 4. Concept map of the teaching nominations

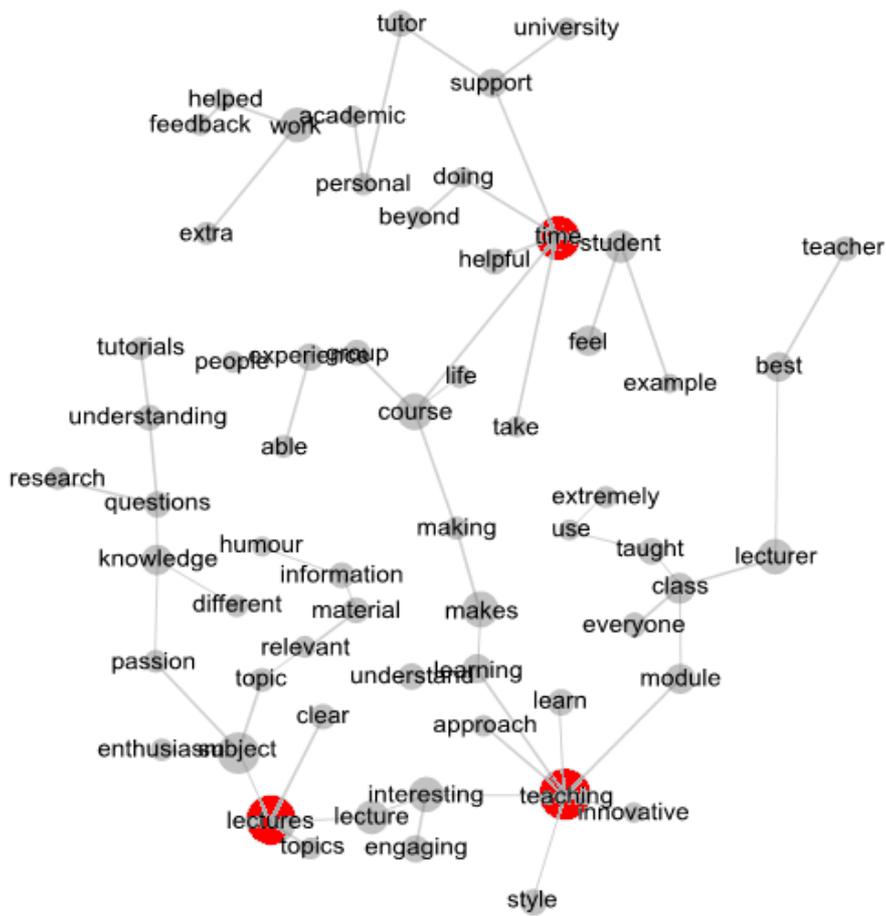


Table I. Teaching nominations: concept relevance table

Ranked Concepts			Exp
Word-Like	Count	Relevance	
teaching	641	100%	
lectures	591	92%	
time	487	76%	
subject	379	59%	
lecturer	372	58%	
work	354	55%	
course	344	54%	
lecture	300	47%	
student	298	46%	
makes	292	46%	
interesting	270	42%	
best	258	40%	
class	249	39%	
module	242	38%	
knowledge	224	35%	
feel	223	35%	
support	219	34%	
teacher	209	33%	
learning	196	31%	
tutor	188	29%	
experience	163	25%	
helpful	161	25%	
taught	160	25%	
understand	154	24%	
learn	153	24%	
questions	151	24%	
engaging	150	23%	
style	147	23%	
group	147	23%	
university	146	23%	
understanding	141	22%	
research	140	22%	
extra	138	22%	
helped	137	21%	
tutorials	129	20%	
clear	128	20%	
feedback	126	20%	
information	124	19%	
material	123	19%	
able	123	19%	
topic	120	19%	
different	119	19%	
passion	117	18%	
enthusiasm	116	18%	
everyone	115	18%	
making	114	18%	
beyond	111	17%	
topics	110	17%	
life	109	17%	
personal	105	16%	
academic	105	16%	
extremely	103	16%	
approach	103	16%	
people	97	15%	
take	88	14%	
doing	87	14%	
relevant	83	13%	
use	83	13%	
innovative	78	12%	
humour	69	11%	
example	69	11%	

Teaching

'I am nominating Dr. X for a teaching award as he really stands for what good teaching should be all about: encouragement of critical thinking, an impressive lecturing style that is well-structured, interactive and grounded in a sound research base, the ability to motivate students for their research and encourage them in their projects, a genuine interest for his students' ideas and compassion for their problems'.

'Ability to facilitate the process of learning... This takes great skill, patience, passion, leadership and unequivocal belief in the student's abilities.

Since all nominations included in the analysis were concerned with excellent teaching in its different manifestations (e.g. innovative, best impact, inspirational etc), **teaching** was understandably the most frequently mentioned word and the concept with the highest relevance. Exploration of the neighbouring concepts of **teaching** revealed that students were most likely to be commenting on two attributes of excellent teaching. The first is the unique **teaching style** or **teaching approach** of their nominees, with **interesting**, **engaging** and **innovative** being the most frequently mentioned adjectives. The second was captured by a direct link of the **teaching** and **learn/learning** concepts (the latter connected to **understand**), reflecting the impact of these teaching approaches on student learning (how individual or group learning was facilitated by the nominees). These two themes are explored in more detail below.

Teaching style and approach and how it facilitates learning

When teaching style or teaching approach related comments were interrogated, the following characteristics of excellent teaching style were present/mentioned in the majority of the nominations:

Ability to engage/involve everybody in the learning process

She always thinks of creative ways to involve all of the students...

His outstanding teaching style... He makes sure that every individual in the class is completely involved in the learning process. He always gives chance to everyone in class to express himself/herself by engaging us in the group activities

The main strategies for engagement mentioned by students included: creating an atmosphere when students want to ask questions; asking for students' input and encouraging them to express their ideas *without fear of feeling inadequate*; *understanding the point of students' questions and giving a meaningful answer that genuinely clears up the difficulties encountered*:

He enjoys answering questions and gives very thoughtful responses to students. His classroom is at once a 'safe space' for us...undergraduates to explore [the subject area], and a playing field for the intellectual sparring and risk taking that he fires us up to engage in.

Often students made a direct link between active engagement in class and confidence building:

This approach made everyone feel that they had something valuable to contribute, which boosted individual's confidence and increased student's motivation to learn beyond the scope of the examined course.

She encouraged us to speak aloud our thoughts, no matter how unsure we were, encouraging us to develop points and arguments.

The majority of examples given in the nominations were concerned with lecture delivery (lectures being the second relevant concept). Only a few nominations mentioned the interesting or engaging nature of the assignment, as in the quote below (referring to a distance learning module):

Each week there is a "task" that we need to complete, but feels like the furthest thing from work. Due to the interesting and engaging nature of the assignments I actually found myself looking forward to the tasks each

week and also found myself spending much more time on them than the task required because, well, it was fun.

Creating a sense of discovery, knowledge gain or ‘eye opening teaching’ were other frequently mentioned characteristics:

His students come out of class amazed, having discovered several new layers of wisdom ...

You leave his lectures feel knowledgeable and it's so refreshing to see a completely new learning experience. ... He invigorates everyone's zest for learning.

Inspiring students to excel, to get the best performance out of everybody:

He consistently challenges his students to work hard and stretch the scope of their individual learning... He inspires me to do better and also makes me feel appreciated.

Her method of teaching ...helps me exceed myself in ways I didn't know I was capable of.

Inspirational teaching is often linked in students' narratives with self-discovery or personal development:

Her friendly lectures have taught me a lot about myself. She makes you feel like you can accomplish any challenge set in front of you ...

I burst out with such interesting thoughts that surprise even myself because I'm challenged like no way ever before.

She's really made me realize that my almost crippling fear of failure is unfounded, she encourages us to reach to our full potential and never stops trying to help us reach that goal.

Encouraging students to explore the subject in more depth, to learn more:

Her teaching style ... makes me want to continue the reading once I leave the lecture.

He really inspired me to want to study the subject further.

These lectures got me very interested in [subject], and ...always wanting to learn more and explore the subject deeper, more so than any other lectures.

Being able to communicate complex or intricate concepts in an understandable way:

She has the special ability and passion for teaching that enables her to communicate complex...concepts in a way that makes them intuitive and vibrant for the modern world

She used some brilliantly inspired teaching techniques to make new concepts very approachable and build students' confidence in [subject area] in general

Understanding was a frequently mentioned concept in nominations of international students, suggesting that clarity of language and teaching material is very important for the successful learning of this group:

His teaching is impeccable and all my colleagues that are international students can understand him very well and also understand the module he is teaching.

Addressing the learning needs/styles of every student and taking into account their personalities

Very sensitive teaching, appreciating the individual sensibilities and style of each student: where the strengths lie and how to harness these.

He always makes sure that everyone in the tutorial understands the material without putting any unnecessary pressure on them. I feel this is very important because he understands that every student learns at different paces.

Believing in student abilities and potential:

She never supposes that a terrible essay is reflective of our ability, but instead encourages us to try again and write to our full potential. She has an unshakeable belief in us that is at times surprising, but constantly inspires us to try harder

The vast majority of nominations were concerned with a student-centred approach: the ability to engage individual students or the whole class in an active learning process, sparking interest for the subject and encouraging the best academic performance. Fewer mentioned the impact of excellent teachers on the emancipation and liberation of learners (Shor and Freire, 1987), developing intellectual freedom and ability to challenge prevailing assumptions (Skelton, 2009). Those nominations that did came mainly from Arts and Humanities students:

The way he approached the teaching, as well as his style of questioning, involved raising an idea and encouraging everyone to form and refine their own opinions... This conveyed to us a real thrill of truly learning for the joy of the subject and of the debate, and there was never once a sense of 'you need to do this to pass ...

He presented us with the range of opinions and attitudes in all parts of the field... While he did offer us his own well thought-out opinions, he also encouraged us to form and articulate our own views, and to ensure that we still understood and considered contrary ones too...

Other modes of delivery, outside of lecturing, for example using different teaching techniques, were mentioned rarely:

He moved as deftly between different technologies and methods of presentation as he did between different scripts and periods.

He uses different teaching techniques, like encouraging self-learning, online blogs, and traditional methods to allow me to be more 'creative'...and think differently.

Voices of distance learners were very powerful, albeit scarce in the nominations:

It was the way he seamlessly integrated all of these various technologies to make for an outstanding technological student experience. Most professors struggle to use one of these technologies but to use them all and execute (consistently) in such a rewarding and fulfilling nature for distance learners I found exceptional.

Learning partnership

When quotes related to **learning** were explored, there were occasional references to students feeling they were part of a learning partnership:

...he really makes you feel like you're having a conversation with him, and not that you are being lectured/told. He ...also learns from you!

...Her collaborative approach in teaching, where learning is mutual and knowledge and ideas are exchanged laterally. It feels like you're learning with a peer...

Lectures

The second most relevant concept - **lectures** – is closely positioned to **teaching**, and directly connected to it via **interesting**, with **engaging** being in close proximity. It suggests that excellent teaching is most likely to be seen by students through the lens of classroom delivery. The discourse in the nominations associated with **engaging teaching** is mainly concerned with student engagement during lecture time:

I was hooked, ... [his] lectures became one of the highlights of my week, and the captivation he inspired has revealed a whole new world to me.

Students often mentioned in their nominations that academic lectures can alienate them (*'in other lectures I can easily lose concentration'*) while lecture delivery of their nominees is *far from boring, engaging and thought-provoking* :

The lecture theatre has almost 200 students but it feels like she manages to engage with each and every one of us.

Amazing lecturer and very inspiring. Everyone attends his lectures and you can listen all throughout without falling asleep...

Many students mentioned that they look forward to their nominee's lectures, expecting an interesting and inspirational experience that they would like to share:

I often look forward to his lectures... as I know they will be energetic and ... enjoyable.

His are the best lectures this year. Instead of dreading my 9am on a Wednesday, I look forward to it.

He is one of the reasons my Thursdays are better. He is inspirational, he challenges his students to think and come up with creative ideas... His lectures have a taste of originality, professionalism, modern and effervescence

One of the few lectures I would leave and want to tell my friends what we'd been discussing.

Students often commented on the clarity of what is delivered – this is reflected in the concept **clear** having a direct link with **lectures**:

No other lecturer manages the combination of crystal clear delivery and a mass of primary and contextual readings and linkages...

His lectures are highly interactive, and he always ensures that concepts/topics are clear and that learning has been embedded by asking us and reiterating what is unclear.

Subject

The fourth relevant concept, directly linked to **lectures**, is **subject**. Student nominations often mentioned subject in the context of mastering subject knowledge or of how the subject ‘comes to life’ during lecture time:

He has a dry wit and subjects that could seem bland and uninteresting taught by some instead come to life when he teaches.

Passion and enthusiasm

The concept map also revealed that **passion and enthusiasm** for the **subject** are frequently mentioned attributes of excellent teachers:

I have never been taught by a lecturer who has such interest and passion about her subject and who has the determination to help everybody understand the lecture material.

Not only is she good at her subject but she is so enthusiastic that it makes the rest of us enthusiastic too. I can see the joy on his face as he teaches... His passion for the subject is contagious and his fresh outlook inspires much original thought.

Interestingly, **passion for subject** is connected to **research** via **knowledge**, suggesting that students see a direct link between these.

The way that excellent teachers make a ‘dynamic’ connection to the subject via research, their ability to create knowledge and to passionately communicate it to students was frequently mentioned in the nominations. **Passion** related comments alluded to enthusiasm, commitment and lack of references to ‘boring topics’. The enthusiasm and passion of excellent teachers is often seen as contagious, inspiring students to excel in modules that they never imagined would hold their interest and to choose them as areas of their specialism.

Research

Analysis of **research** related quotes demonstrated that students link ‘being research active’, ‘being aware of the latest developments in the disciplinary area’ and ‘being involved in generating knowledge’:

The kind of knowledge he had, the kind of research he did is just awe inspiring...

Her book which the module is based on, is very interesting and she has done her own research so it shows she has real knowledge rather than using other peoples.

Research informed teaching (e.g. promoting scholarly inquiry, raising awareness of current research and facilitating research skills of students) was frequently mentioned as a characteristic of excellent teachers in general teaching as well as research-focused nominations:

Her research assignments led us to so many areas in which we will need to do further research...

He complements our theoretical knowledge by introducing us to interesting and relevant research articles which relate to the topics we're studying. It brings the subject to life and puts what we learn into context, inspiring us to delve deeper into the subject ourselves.

Humour

Interestingly, another concept closely positioned to **knowledge** and directly linked to **material** and **information** was **humour**. Analysis of the humour related quotes demonstrated that humour has several roles in promoting/facilitating students' learning:

Making things memorable:

She used humour effectively whilst teaching often difficult subjects which made us feel more at ease with the subjects learnt and also made information stay with us.

Helping to maintain focus:

He uses innovative ways of teaching us complex theories and he keeps everyone focused with his sense of humour...

Helping with understanding a concept:

He makes us all laugh on a number of occasions and uses brilliant (sometimes hilarious) analogies to ensure that we understand concepts.

Creating a happy and relaxed atmosphere:

His erudition and humorous teaching style make me feel learning is something easy, relaxed and happy.

Building rapport:

He is ...a lecturer who can understand and share the same humour as students!

Time (to listen, to help, to advise, to explain)

Although I have voted her for the Inspirational Teaching award, her influence does not stop at the end of the lecture. She is happy to help students outside of lecture time and her office door is always open if you need guidance or support.

Time is a hub-level concept that connects **academic** and **personal support** related concepts.

Interestingly, this is the context where *university* was mentioned most frequently.

While **teaching** embraces more cognitively oriented concepts (such as **learning**, **understand**), **time** which is linked to **feel** via **student**, represents an affective domain. Student talked about staff having *time to listen*, *time to encourage and support* and *time to nurture* every one of them.

Generosity with time and willingness to help (*to go above and beyond teaching commitments*) is a strong theme in all student nominations. *Beyond* and *doing* are picked up as concepts and are directly linked to *time*. 'Always has time for students' was one of the mostly frequently mentioned phrases in students' nominations.

He is always willing to go above and beyond his teaching commitments, devoting much surplus time to help explain concepts in more detail, long after the tutorial should have ended or by email contact

Online support was often mentioned, especially when in nominations by distant learning students:

My favourite lecturer by far who always has time to hear any problems or queries, whether it be by extending his office hours or rapidly responding to emails...

She has been available virtually 24 hours a day for the entire period, providing articulate and interesting modules online, constant individual and group feedback, extra exercises, skype and phone tutorials, and has answered every query immediately and with close consideration.

Time is also mentioned in the context of excellent teaching that makes time spent by students in the classroom or at university worthwhile:

She definitely made my time worthwhile at the University

She will go the extra mile to ensure our time at [the university] is a success...

Personal qualities of the nominees were often emphasised in the context of support provided. *Faith in people's abilities, taking genuine interest in students, being approachable* – these qualities were most often mentioned in student nominations:

He is ... a great lecturer, and a very approachable person - he encourages us to come and talk to him informally, removing the embarrassment of asking a 'stupid question', as well as offering support in matters of welfare.

Feedback

Feedback is visibly separated from the 'teaching delivery' area and closely positioned to **time** related concepts and academic support in particular. Feedback provided by excellent teachers has several functions:

Feedback as inspiration

...his talent(is) to give you comprehensive feedback on your work without making you feel bad. On the contrary, you always leave the meetings inspired to work into the direction that he has suggested.

Feedback as confidence building

She puts as much time into giving positive feedback as she does into constructive criticism, always working to build us up rather than knock us down.

Feedback as a way of developing knowledge

I find that even at the times when my week's work is a disaster he still manages to find what is good in it and uses what I do understand as a base to build upon and help me grasp the larger ideas.

Useful and detailed feedback is seen by students as an indication that the teacher wants them to achieve their full potential:

He wants us to achieve our full potential and therefore provides us with constructive feedback telling us exactly where we are going wrong.

Just a handful of nominations mentioned taking student feedback into account:

He is very reasonable with his expectations, and always asks for (and acts upon) our feedback, so as to bring us the greatest benefit.

She is always interested in our feedback and how she can help us grow in and out of class.

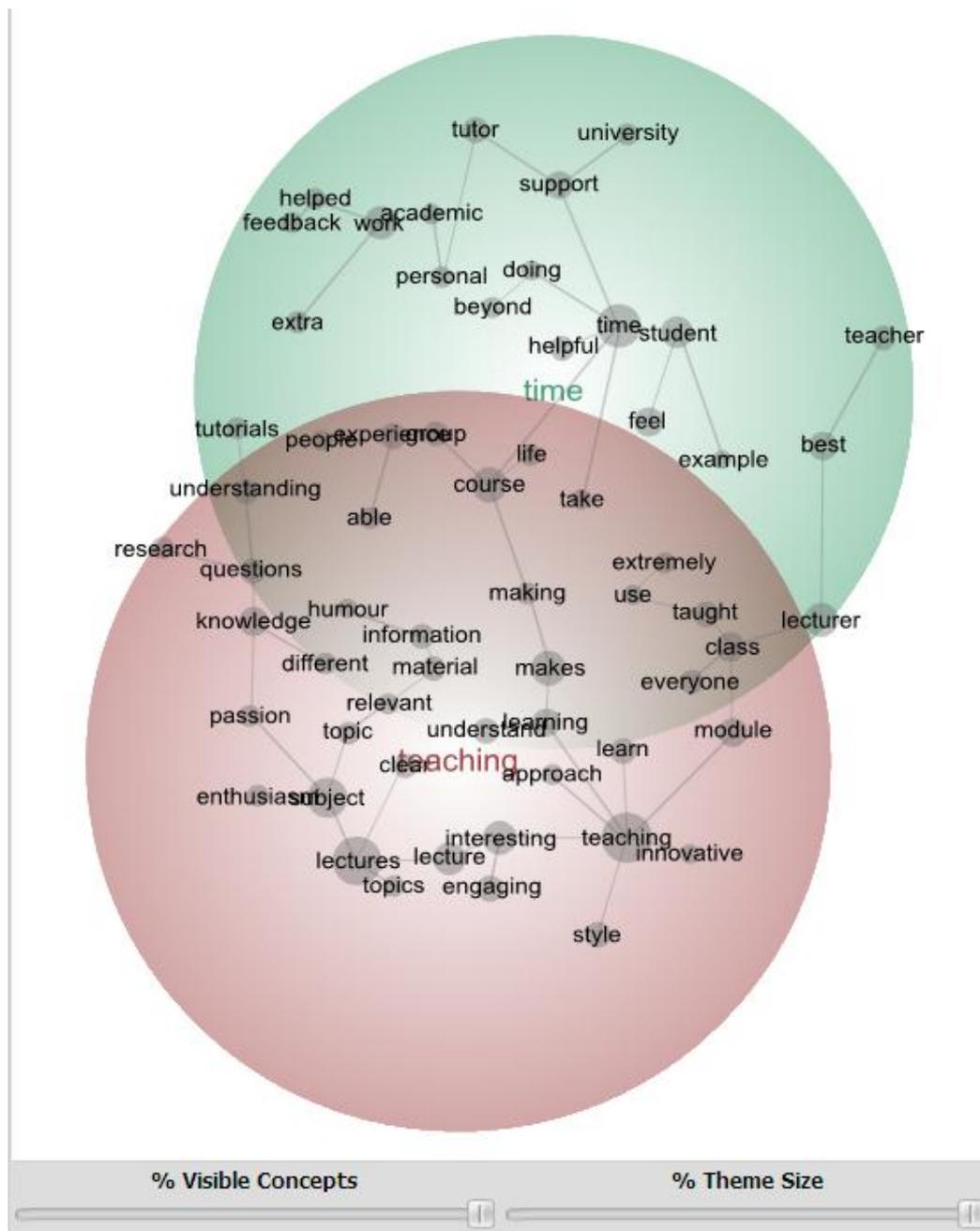
Quick turnaround time, while being mentioned on many occasions, seems generally perceived less important than feedback that is '*given in time*' to influence or improve ongoing work. Appreciation of time invested in giving detailed and helpful feedback is another strong theme throughout all nominations (see also section 4.3 on Assessment and Feedback nominations)

More details about student perceptions of the characteristics of excellent feedback are provided in the separate analysis of the Feedback nominations.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis with 100% resolution shows that **teaching** (classroom delivery) and **time** (dedicated to support) are the themes with the highest level of connectivity (Fig.2).

Figure 5. Thematic analysis at 100%



Thematic analysis with 80% resolution (Fig.3) suggests that excellent teaching is seen by students as the ability to find a perfect balance between teaching, student support and scholarly academic practice. This was implicitly or explicitly reflected in nominations such as this:

He makes teaching look easy. Many lecturers occasionally look as if they are struggling to find the correct balance between discipline, subject matter, and time for students...

She is at once a brilliant lecturer, a challenging tutor....and a welfare adviser

Interestingly **able** is a common concept located in the intersection of all three themes, suggesting the ability of nominees to excel in all areas of their activity.

Concepts removed from the vocabulary: **day, awards, students** (see the data preparation comments in the previous section)

4.2.1. Main findings in brief

- The most powerful narratives related to examples where student were supported by personal tutors throughout their time at university, emphasising the importance of continuity of support;
- While support encompassed both academic (e.g. help with studies, course related advice) and personal support, students placed more emphasis on motivational support and encouragement in their nominations;
- Nominations highlighted the critical role of a personal tutor in student retention, successful progression and in helping to foster a sense of belonging;
- The impact that outstanding personal tutors make on a student's personal and academic wellbeing was often referred to as *life –changing*;
- Understanding (adj) is a distinctive concept present in many personal tutor nominations, reflecting the ability of an excellent tutor to understand problems and issues experienced by students and provide the support needed;
- Students often describe the personal tutors they nominated as inspirational role models;
- Some nominations indicated that 'official' designated personal tutors are not always the best people to help;
- Thematic analysis revealed the important role that many personal tutors and/or placement tutors play in students' career orientation and employability.

4.2.2. Results

Personal Tutors are meant to be like mentors, helping students...helping them take the reins of their future. Therefore, the reason why I am nominating my Personal Tutor is because I truly appreciate all the genuine support and guidance she has given me....

Analysis of personal tutor nominations produced a concept map and relevance table that revealed the most relevant concepts as: **support, time** and **work**, followed by **personal** and **tutor** (Figure 7, Table 2).

Figure 7. Concept map of the personal tutor nominations

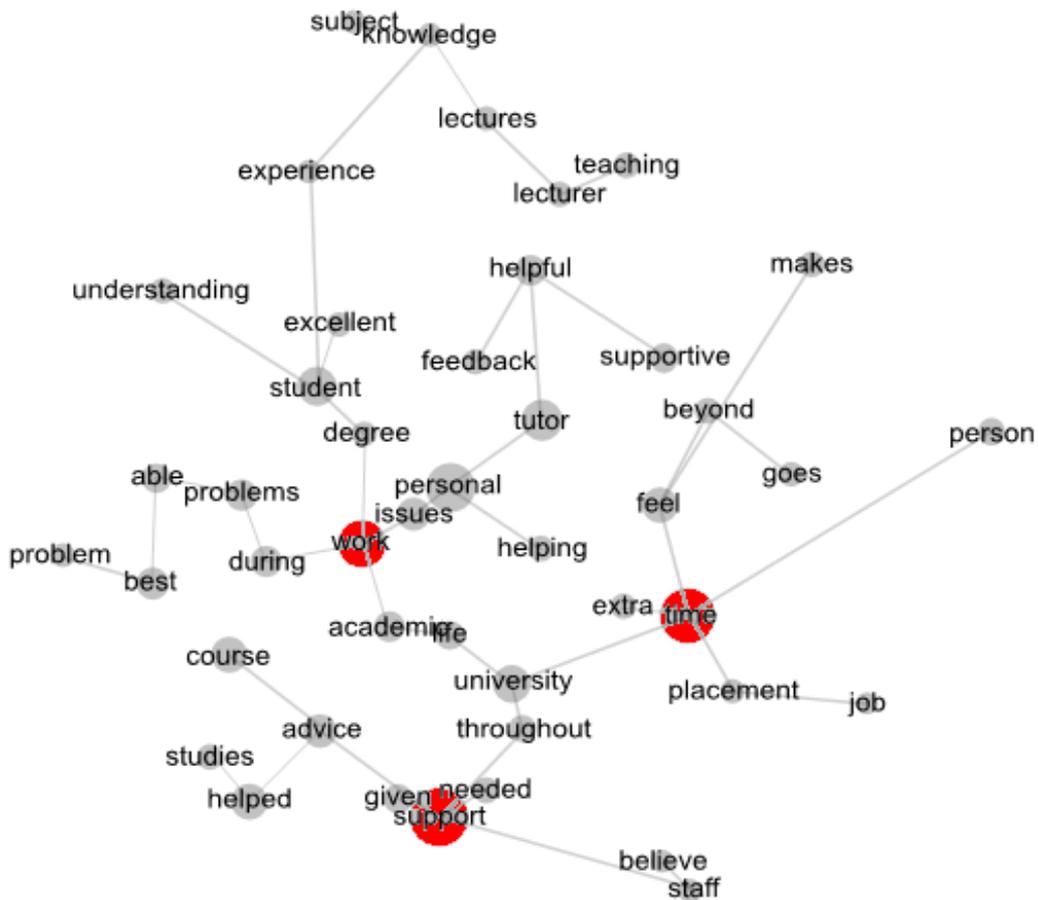


Table 2. Personal tutor nominations: concept relevance table

Word-Like	Count	Relevance
support	247	100%
time	226	91%
work	152	62%
personal	118	48%
tutor	116	47%
student	110	45%
helped	108	44%
course	102	41%
feel	98	40%
university	96	39%
advice	83	34%
best	82	33%
person	74	30%
helpful	67	27%
supportive	64	26%
during	60	24%
problems	59	24%
able	58	23%
issues	57	23%
teaching	54	22%
makes	52	21%
academic	51	21%
throughout	49	20%
studies	49	20%
understanding	49	20%
given	47	19%
needed	46	19%
lectures	45	18%
life	44	18%
beyond	44	18%
lecturer	43	17%
staff	43	17%
placement	41	17%
problem	41	17%
helping	40	16%
feedback	40	16%
subject	40	16%
extra	39	16%
degree	39	16%
knowledge	38	15%
excellent	37	15%
experience	35	14%
believe	35	14%
goes	34	14%
job	30	12%

Support

Unsurprisingly excellent **support** provided by personal tutors was a central theme of the student nominations. For many students this support was available throughout their time at university (this is also clearly reflected in the concept map), highlighting the important role of the personal tutor at different stages of the student life cycle:

(She) has been very helpful throughout my entire time at university especially through tough times in my final year and I will always remember everything she has done for me, I wouldn't have finished my degree if it wasn't for her helpful one to one talks.

(She) has been my personal tutor throughout four years of university and she has always been very supportive with any difficulties (there have been many) I have had. This included support and advice about non academic situations...

Analysis of support related comments revealed that the concept encompassed both academic (e.g. help with **studies**, **course** related **advice**) and personal factors, with motivational support and encouragement being highly valued by students:

(She) was a tower of support through all of this. She made me realise my strengths and signposted me to various places to get me support through all of the many difficulties that I faced...

...due to the motivational support of x I have managed to pull myself through...

Many students acknowledged the role the personal tutor played in their successful progression/retention on the course:

...struggling with the topic..., I have really appreciated her patience, support and approachability and would probably have been on track to fail without her continued efforts to help me.

It is certain that without x's support and guidance I definitely would not have made it to the end of freshers week, much less have achieved the things I have in the last two years.

Life

Life is a concept linked to **support** via **university**, reflecting the impact that a personal tutor made on students' personal and academic lives and well being. Students talk about tutors who *helped through a difficult time in life, made positive impact on life, made life at the university easier and more meaningful*. Many said their personal tutor's support was *life –changing*:

Dr x has changed my life ..., thanks to his never ending support, guidance and help he has given me the confidence to be able to move forward and tackle anything that comes my way both academically and personally...

I strongly feel without his guidance and support my academic life would have suffered greatly therefore I owe a lot to him.

Time

The concept of **time** was linked to **support** via **university**. As well as referring to the generosity of staff with their time (as in the teaching nominations), reflected in *extra* and *goes beyond* concepts, students also saw the availability of tutors in terms of their approachability:

He is a kind and generous man who is constantly ready to give up his time

Whenever I have had a problem this year, particularly personal problems..., (he) has strived to make time for a personal appointment to help me organise my thoughts and academic work. If I have had a problem with understanding a certain area of a module, he has made time to explain it thoroughly, resulting in me achieving higher grades this year than any other year at university.

(She) is always there for not just me, but all of her students. It doesn't matter what time of year, month, week, or day, if you really need her guidance she is right there for you...

Although some students spoke about staff always being there for them, this was less about an expectation of 24/7 availability, but more related to an appreciation of the trouble that staff went to make time for them. Students also recognised that staff are busy with many pressures on their time:

He always takes time to listen and help out even though he's got a busy schedule.

I like that I can pretty much see him any time and he will always be there to see me...

She is easily contactable and reachable any time of day or night. She will always reply rapidly and concisely.

Another connotation of the concept was where students acknowledged a personal tutor's help in difficult times and throughout their time at university:

... my personal tutor... was one of the first points of contact throughout this difficult time.

(She) has helped me so much with keeping on top of things. I've had a really difficult time but with her support I have managed to keep going.

Feel

Students frequently commented on how personal tutors made them **feel** –valuing staff who make them feel good, empowered, secure and who see a concern for their students' well being as being as important as their academic progress:

I've been diagnosed with dyslexia. (x) has supported me in decision making, with regards to changes in myself and more recently change in placement, without ...making me feel inadequate or dictated to, (x) has made me feel more empowered than previously.

...always responds to telephone calls and emails promptly, making you feel supported and heard.

...am now feeling so much more positive about my work load and how to go about tackling it and feel as though I am on the right lines thanks to his guidance and time. I know that all of my peers feel the same

Person

In describing a personal tutor's helpfulness and generosity with time, students often referred to the personalities of their nominees. *Flexible, friendly, welcoming person, easy to talk to, compassionate, caring and inspiring* are some of the characteristics students ascribed to their personal tutors. Students also described staff they nominated as inspirational role models:

I truly admire (x) and hope I can be half the person she is one day

A lovely and truly inspirational person!

She is the person you tend to go to regarding whatever problem you have, simply because of her kindness, dedication and sincere wish to help people

Helpful, supportive and understanding are the three characteristics of personal tutors that students most often cited.

Understanding

As a concept **understanding** has a different connotation in the personal tutoring nominations. Here it reflects the ability of the tutor to empathise, to understand problems experienced by students:

During my various periods of illnesses ... she was very understanding, supportive and encouraging.

She treats us all the same, whilst understanding how our needs are very different...

But more important he has a compassionate understanding of people...

Teaching

Personal tutors' nominations also acknowledged their excellence as teachers –reflected in the concepts such as **teaching, lecture and lecturer**:

He has always made time to listen and offer support, and he has been a brilliant tutor, and a very inspirational professional.

When I have observed his teaching, his students are engaged and motivated, he is able to get the best out of even the most reluctant of students.

She has a unique teaching style which allows students to feel competent during her classes, as she rallies up informative and interactive lectures, rather than just spoon feeding or 'talking at' students.

Believing

Excellent personal tutors were perceived by students as those who believe in students and their abilities and who help to instil this belief in students:

I feel that he really wants us all to reach our full potential and succeed in our studies. Lack of confidence in my own abilities is a huge issue for me, but he has really begun to instil in me the belief that I can actually do this and do it well.

She made you feel that she truly believed in your abilities and gave you the self confidence to believe in yourself and perform your best.

It was also apparent from some of the nominations that 'official personal tutors' are not always the best people to help and proactive students seek help from other members of staff:

I did not feel I clicked with my tutor so went to her instead and have been grateful for her assistance ever since.

Subject knowledge

There was a strong link in student nominations between good tutorial support and the knowledgeability of staff:

His knowledge of his subject is immense and he is always enthusiastic about his subject.

I wish she will carry on to spread knowledge, support and help to all students to make their educational experience as joyful and valuable as she made mine...

Feedback

Students nominating staff for their excellent tutorial support frequently referred to their ability to give helpful and constructive feedback, spurring them to improvement and greater achievement:

...As my personal tutor and lecturer... x has consistently striven for his students to achieve high results, offered invaluable constructive feedback and has always found time to address any questions or concerns his students have.

She has taken time to get to know us all personally and supporting us with our studies as well as providing excellent feedback and advice which shows she knows and understands individual traits and situations.

...she has always given me great feedback and enabled my work to progress to a better standard

Just a handful of student nominations mentioned how excellent personal tutors involve the students and value their input/opinions/feedback:

Whilst ensuring that all students on the course have more than enough direction, he is always happy to take on board any feedback with an open mind...

Placement

Placement tutors were praised for their help and dedication in helping students find the right placement and supporting them throughout their 'out of class' learning experience:

After a meeting with x I knew what I want out of my placement year and the best way to apply. He not only gave me the tools to get the best placement but the courage and confidence, without his support I would not have been able to secure the opportunity I have.

The most help she has given to me will have to be when finding my placement. She offered me advice on how to secure a placement and because of her help and encouragement, I have been offered a place [abroad].

Thematic analysis

Support and **person** were the themes with the highest level of connectivity (Figure 8). **Support** embraced the key concepts that characterised the types of the support given and its impact. **Person** included time related concepts, personal qualities of nominees and their teaching related attributes.

Figure 8. Thematic analysis at 100%

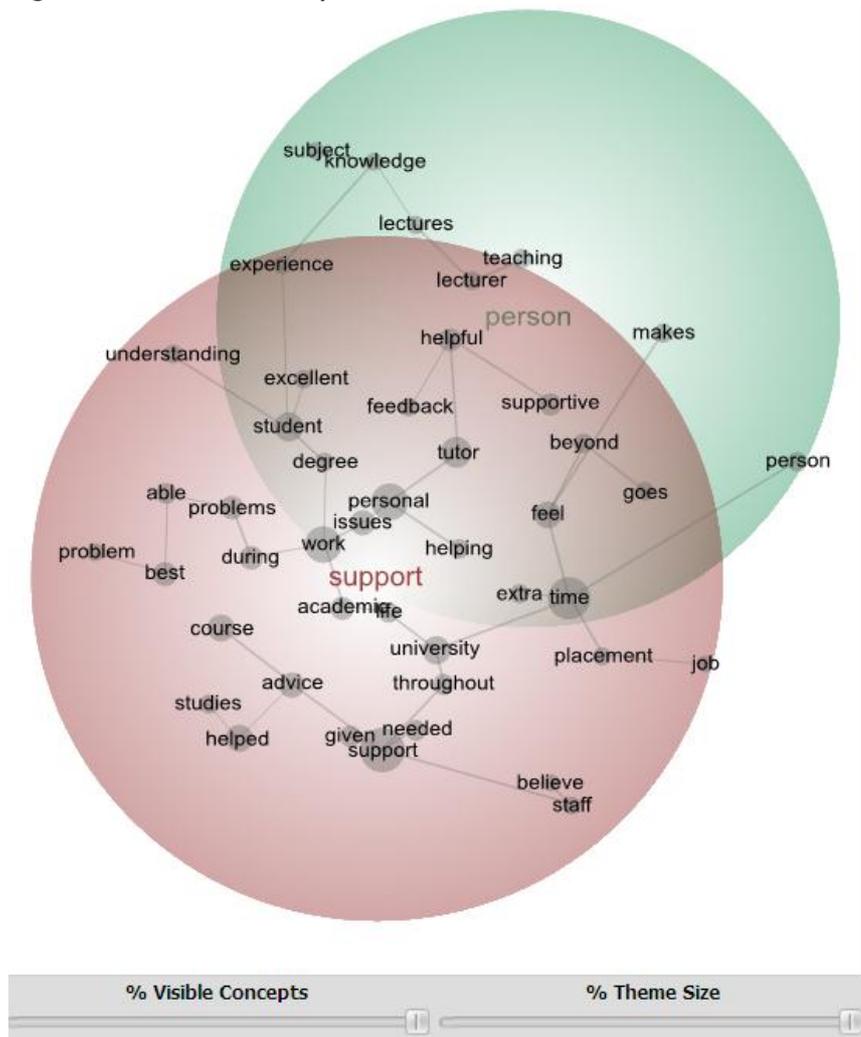
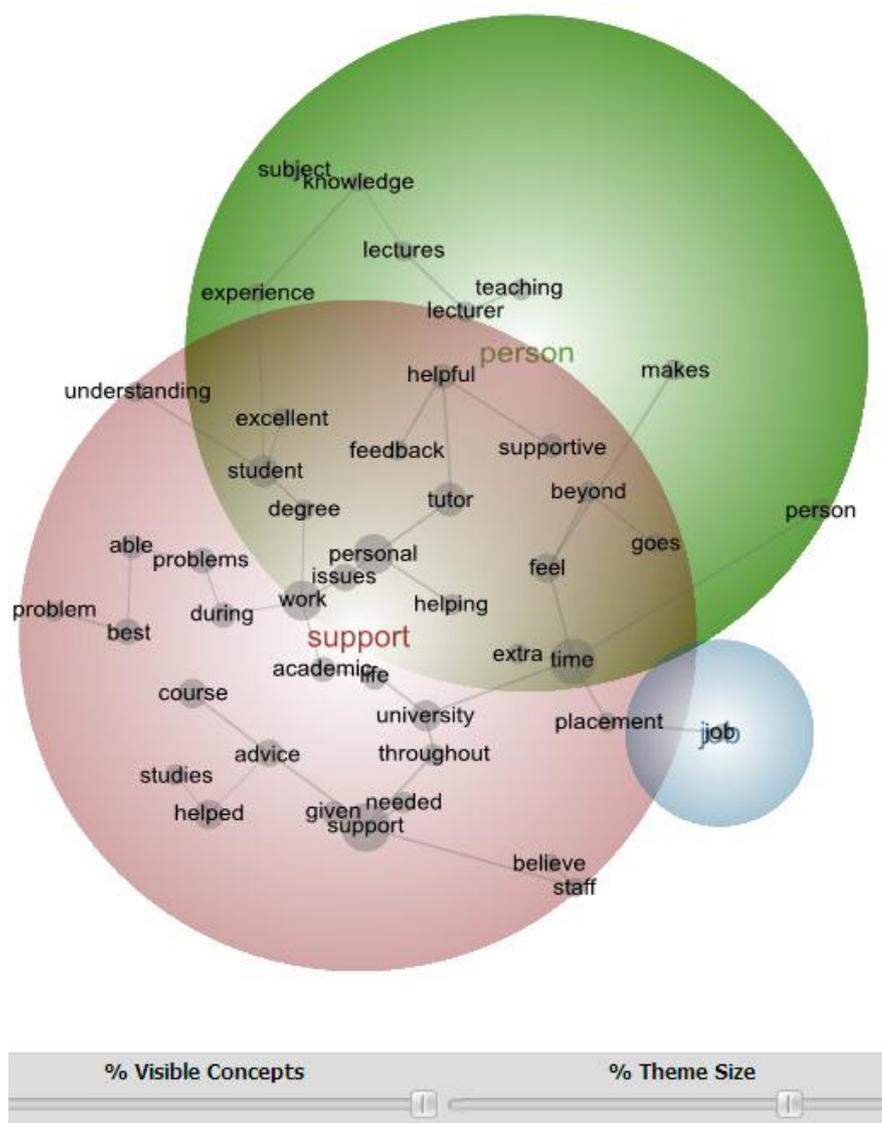


Figure 9. Thematic analysis at 80%



At 80 % resolution the main themes were **support**, **person** and **job** (Figure 9).

A closer look at **job** (as a concept and a theme) revealed that it has two meanings. Firstly, students praised the outstanding effort of their nominees and characterised them as being ‘good at her job’, ‘dedicated to her job’, ‘gone above and beyond her job description’. The second connotation was related to the role that personal tutors and/or placement tutors play in students’ career orientation and employability in general:

His support will have a huge effect on my motivation for final year and my focus on getting a graduate job I am interested in and suited to.

She encouraged me to do work experience which then led on to me getting a paid job ...

He has gone out of his way to ensure that I am successful in both my studies and my career. He has helped me to secure 2 jobs by using his own time to help with applications even though it is not technically his job...

4.3. Assessment and Feedback

Of the nominations analysed, half of the institutions had nominations that were specifically dedicated to excellence in assessment and feedback. Although there were at least two awards including Assessment in the title, the majority of examples given by students related to feedback. 44313 words were analysed in this category. (See also Section 4.1 for references to feedback in the context of the teaching nominations.)

Data preparation and concept seeds editing

Concepts removed from the vocabulary: **year**, **deserves** and **students** (see comments on data preparation in the previous sections)

4.3.1. Main findings

- There was a particular emphasis on the individual nature of excellent feedback. Students especially appreciate it when a member of staff takes time to give them detailed and useful feedback, either face to face or written; it is perceived as investment in student learning and achievement;
- Role of encouraging feedback in informing decisions about area of specialism and future career is a strong theme throughout the nominations;
- When talking about excellent feedback, students often use the word *feel*, reflecting the importance of the feedback in the emotional context of learning;
- Nominations put a strong emphasis on 'timely' feedback that enables students to take feedback on board to improve future work;
- Two main forms of the feedback (written and face to face) are dominant in student nominations, with only a handful of nominations mentioning other modes of feedback delivery;
- Thematic analysis suggests that excellent feedback provided by the nominees had an impact not necessarily on just one module, but on the whole course performance (e.g. making the course more enjoyable, helping to achieve a better coursework across all modules etc).

4.3.2. Results

His feedback, good or bad, is incredibly constructive and encouraging. Consequently, you are encouraged to improve and it seems achievable, logical and realistic.

As indicated by the concept map (Figure 10) and associated relevance table (Table 3), **feedback**, **work** and **time** are the most relevant concepts in student nominations.

Feedback

Feedback is directly linked to **improve** (work), **detailed**, **extra**, **gives (everything, best)** and **advice** - these concepts represent key characteristics students are likely to ascribe to outstanding feedback.

The role of feedback in **improving work**, helping to better prepare for future assignments was most frequently mentioned in student nominations:

During my first year I was struggling with my work but after having thorough feedback ... my grades have gone up 15-20%.

Students often characterised excellent feedback as being **balanced** (paying equal attention to weaknesses as well as strengths of student work), encouraging and as having a focus on helping them achieve their maximum potential:

I would say his feedback was actually an extensive elaboration of the weaknesses and strengths that my work carried, after all his feedback has helped me a lot in knowing where I lack academic competency and what should I be doing in order to improve the flaws in work.

Her feedback on coursework is both directional and encouraging as she always wants all her students to achieve the best results.

Detailed was another frequently used adjective in student nominations:

She provides the most detailed feedback I have ever received at university, without spoon feeding

The detailed feedback and her willingness to discuss each point of feedback, along with the ability to connect with students, make her the best choice for this award.

After each submission of coursework and class tests, he made time for each member on the course and gave face to face detailed feedback on what to improve and what went well. He put a lot of effort in for feedback and showed he really cared

Everything

A noteworthy concept which is connected to **feedback** through **gives** is **everything**. Student comments suggest that feedback they often receive can be ambiguous or lacking details ('either too general or insufficient - such as a line or two on the overall quality of the work with no specific recommendations or comments to be addressed whatsoever'), but their nominees 'stand out' in their approach to feedback, especially in attention to detail:

*She ensures that **everything** is explained in a way that we understand and doesn't over complicate things.*

*He always gives me great and useful feedback for **everything** I ask him to*

*He ensured that all key aspects for improvement were mentioned and dedicated a lot of time to my work and made sure I really understood **everything** he was saying.*

Feedback is often mentioned in conjunction with **advice** – suggesting a less formal discourse or a broader context of providing feedback, that might include advice on other aspects of student learning:

Whenever I have had trouble with assignments he has been happy to take time to talk through the work and offer his advice. The comments and feedback on assignments are thorough and helpful, but if you don't understand them he allows students to talk the comments through with him.

Every time I have needed some advice she has responded quickly and in a helpful manner. She gives proper feedback on how you can improve certain aspects and is always willing to help a student to further their understanding and improve their work through her advice.

Excellent feedback is also seen as personalised, taking into account specific needs of individual students:

She... takes the time to find out more about her students and uses that to give precise and above all helpful advice and direction on work to be done.

Work is a generic concept, mainly related to various learning activities that students undertake at University and their outcomes, and used to emphasise the impact of feedback on this work:

She has really helped me to get the best out of myself inspiring me to do better in my work

He gives sharp and straight to the point feedback if our work is rubbish then he will tell you, even though I personally felt at times a bit down about it however I feel its the best way to improving our work.

Understand is connected to **feedback** via **work**. Analysis of comments showed that this relates to feedback that is 'easy to understand or 'help to understand':

He goes through the work and explains, in detail, what was good about it, what didn't really work, and how you could improve. His feedback method means it is useful, easy to understand ...

Future is a distinctive concept in the feedback nominations that does not appear in any other categories analysed. Helpful feedback as an investment in students' future learning is a strong theme throughout many nominations. Interestingly, some students also mentioned the role of encouraging feedback in making decisions about their future (e.g. area of specialisation or future career):

He has done a great job providing feedback that put things in perspective and points out my strengths. This was very motivating and helps me think about all the facets of my future career...

She has really given me the ...inspiration and I am now considering it as a future career...

When talking about feedback on their work, student often use the word **feel** - reflecting importance of the feedback (especially face to face) for the positive emotional context of learning:

She will do anything for anyone ... ensuring that they feel supported, confident and positive. She will go out of her way to set up one to one's to ensure her students understand what is required, she will give constructive feedback and put everyone back on the right track.

Perhaps the best thing about seeing her for feedback is that I genuinely feel like she listens to my concerns, and isn't looking at her watch or the person who is peering through the glass waiting to get in! She makes and takes time!

Time

In feedback nominations as in the teaching and personal tutoring nominations, **time** is connected to **helpful** and **supportive** concepts, suggesting that this is most likely being referred to in the context of the nominee's personal qualities. Students appreciate when a member of staff takes time to give detailed and useful feedback rather than a quick, generic comment:

After each submission of coursework and class tests, he made time for each member on the course and gave face to face detailed feedback on what to improve and what went well. He put a lot of effort in for feedback and showed he really cared.

She always makes time to help/advise you on how you can get the best mark possible

Just generally really helpful, gives so much help and time for students and really pays off!

Final year and postgraduates students in particular, where these were easily identified, valued time spent by tutors on helping students improve their work:

He thoroughly looked through my first draft and gave me lots of written and verbal feedback ... which was given in about 6 days of me handing in my work. He ensured that all key aspects for improvement was mentioned and dedicated a lot of time to my work and made sure I really understood everything he was saying.

Time in relation to prompt turnaround was also mentioned, but the main emphasis was on 'timeliness' in the context of taking feedback on board to improve future work:

His feedback was on time and detailed showing where the student did well and which areas needs improving.

Most feedback you usually receive a month after the assessment but this lecturer provides it usually within a week, this helps myself and other students adapt to the feedback given and improve for future assessments not just in that module either but all of them.

The presence of concepts such as **teaching**, **lecturer**, **tutor**, **class** indicates that students are more likely to mention excellent feedback alongside other characteristics of their nominees:

He is always very enthusiastic about the subject that he teaches and combines an informative and detailed approach with a laid back personality to make teaching sessions relevant and interesting as well as enjoyable. More specifically he provides very detailed feedback on work and goes the extra mile to support students in their studies...

Confidence is positioned in close proximity to **teacher** and **lectures** concepts, suggesting that confidence relates to a discourse that is wider than just being feedback specific:

I... started... his lessons feeling very nervous with a massive lack of confidence but this lecturer has really turned this around, its been a bumpy ride but wow the feedback he gives is outstanding it really enables students to get in-depth with what they are doing wrong on assessments and improve this.

For providing quick, outstanding and constructive feedback on my assignments. ...she has been the most helpful and efficient when I have had an issue with a piece of work. Additionally, she has conducted extremely interesting lectures and seminars and... finally, this member of staff has provided me with absolute confidence in my own ability ...

He has been very supportive and encouraging when giving me good sound advice, suggestions and feedback on my performance which has really boosted my confidence.

Two main forms of feedback (written and face to face) are dominant in student nominations, with only a handful of nominations mentioning other modes of the feedback delivery:

His feedback is not like any other lecturer... His feedback is recorded as an audio file. He goes through the work and explains, in detail, what was good about it, what didn't really work, and how you could improve. It is

also more personal rather than reading some written comments ... It is like a string of thought as he went through the work page by page...

Assessment

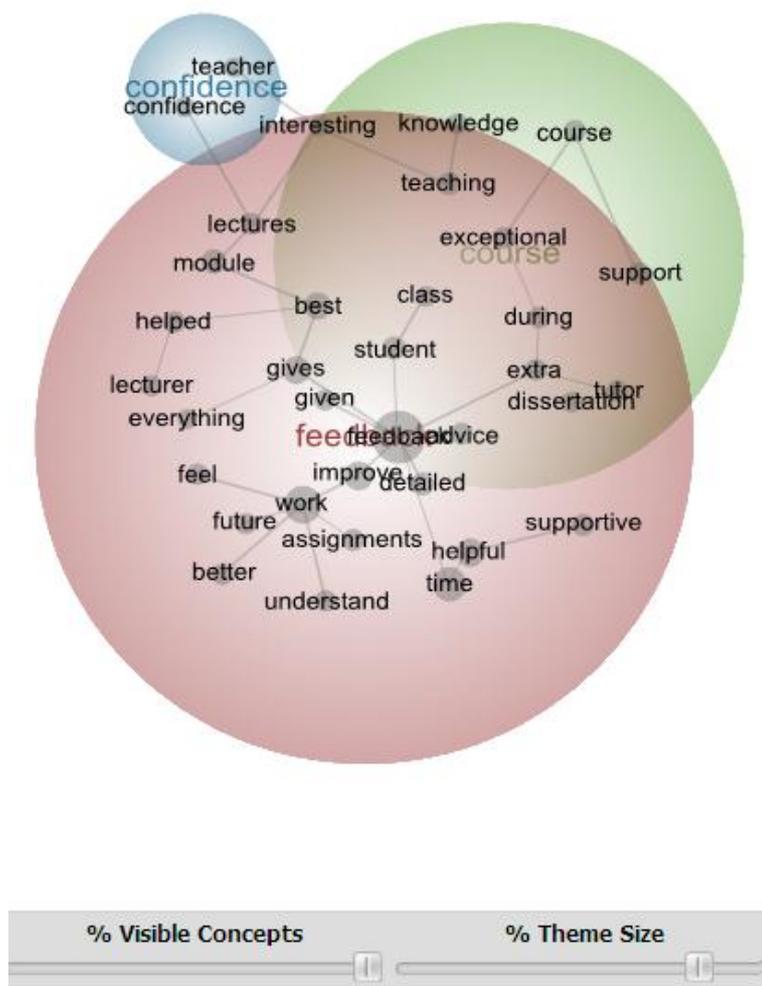
As mentioned earlier only two of Students' Union nominations that were the subject of this study had 'Assessment' in their title, so **assessment** has not been picked up as a strong concept. Most often assessment was mentioned in the context of feedback – e.g. excellent feedback that helped students to get better marks in the next assessment or feedback on assessment.

Students described assessments that are *well structured, fair; assessments that helped to improve* etc. It was striking that students did not give examples of interesting, innovative assessment in this category – these were most likely to be found in generic teaching nominations.

Thematic analysis

At 100% resolution **feedback** was the only theme with the highest connectivity. At 80% three main themes were identified: **feedback**, **course** and **confidence** (Figure 11). **Course** reflects impact of the feedback provided by their nominees not necessarily on one module, but on the whole course performance (e.g. making the course more enjoyable or helping to achieve better coursework results across all modules).

Figure 11. Thematic analysis at 80%



4.4. Professional Services (administrative and support staff) nominations

Some Students Unions developed award categories specifically for support staff, while others allowed nominations of both – academics and professional services- in one category. A broad range of administrative staff and representatives of various professional services were nominated, including study skills support staff, counselling service staff, lab technicians, printing facilities technicians, administrators (School and/or Faculty level), disability advisors, career centres/employability advisors. In total there were 28517 words dedicated to support staff in nominations.

Concepts removed from the vocabulary: **award**, **deserves**, **students** and **print** (the latter being picked up as a concept due to a high number of institutional nominations related to one member of staff).

4.4.1. Main findings

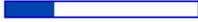
- Excellent administrative and support staff play an important role in promoting a sense of belonging and creating a student-centred environment through establishing and building a long-term relationship with students;
- Although the vast majority of nominations emphasised continuous support provided throughout the time at university, some mentioned one-off sessions that had a profound impact on student success;
- Nominations highlighted the significant role of support and admin staff in student retention - by enabling students to take ownership of their studies and make informed decisions;
- Students value academic (e.g. study skills) as well as non –academic skills (life skills) they gained from support staff;
- Lab/technical support staff are perceived as a source of invaluable ‘practitioner’ and ‘experiential’ knowledge;
- Students valued the input of staff in learning support roles to their learning, often perceiving them as having excellent teaching as well as support skills;
- The role played by administrative staff as intermediaries between students and academics was prominent in many nominations; they were also perceived as ‘departmental glue’;
- Excellent administrators are often considered as friends/family; they provide not only study related support, but also emotional support, life related advice and practical help.

4.4.2. Results

I am nominating her for this award as I feel that the job she does is crucial to people like me, who struggle with time management, grammar and structure, but also because she as a person has helped and supported me and kept me going and been my friend ...

...She always tries to make your academic road a bit less bumpy...

Table 4. Professional services relevance table

Word-Like	Count	Relevance	
support	48	100%	
helpful	48	100%	
time	45	94%	
work	43	90%	
student	40	83%	
advice	27	56%	
helped	22	46%	
staff	21	44%	
course	20	42%	
university	20	42%	
friendly	20	42%	
goes	18	38%	
feel	18	38%	
year	17	35%	
department	16	33%	
beyond	15	31%	
supportive	15	31%	
extra	14	29%	
helping	14	29%	
able	13	27%	
willing	13	27%	
smile	13	27%	
people	12	25%	
problems	12	25%	
member	12	25%	
school	12	25%	
making	12	25%	
needed	12	25%	
study	12	25%	
best	12	25%	
things	12	25%	
doing	11	23%	
skills	11	23%	
question	7	15%	

Support

Students mentioned various types of support they received from their nominees, including advice on wellbeing, administrative support, placement and career related support, disability support, and technical support in laboratories and printing facilities. Direct links between **support** and **able** indicate that support provided by their nominees enabled and empowered students:

I have been able to gain valuable information...

Being able to access services to students for 11 hours on a typical term time day it enables any student no matter how they are studying to get help and support from them.

Another connotation of **able** was related to impact of the support on student retention and progression – ability to continue study and to complete the course:

I wouldn't have been able to do this course without his guidance

She has helped me through the most stressful and painful times and I would not have finished my masters without her support.

Many students emphasised that support provided was ‘life changing’ and made a real difference to their learning and achievements by helping them to reach their maximum potential:

...Taking in all that she has taught me regarding essay writing and study skills..., she has in fact helped me to transform my grade point average from “good to fantastic”.

She has supported me in developing my skills and taught me how to reach my full potential in all areas.

She has changed my life and future for which I will always be grateful

The vast majority of nominations referred to ongoing support and multiple encounters with nominees throughout their time at university:

She has been a reliable source of information and support for the duration of my degree...

She has been a huge support to me since I started going for regular support sessions with her in my 1st year

Continued support, help and advice over the 3 years...

But there were also some accounts of one-off events/sessions that had a profound impact on student performance or wellbeing, as illustrated by the following quote:

She gave a fantastic final year project lecture on the importance of writing style, consistency, presentation, layout, referencing, and plagiarism. [Those who attended it] learnt some of the most crucially important details in raising the level of their work in such subtle, yet incredibly impactful ways...

University is directly linked to **support**, showing that student support services are closely associated with the university experience as a whole and university reputation:

She is one of the main reasons I now recommend the university to friends and family who are looking to further their education...

He has been the highlight of ... university experience, he has given us more one on one time than any of our tutors and is always caring and enthusiastic.

While the analysis of nominations revealed many similarities in the ways that support staff impact on students' lives, there were also particular role specific examples:

Administrative staff

Analysis of administrative staff nominations identified several roles that excellent administrators play, specifically:

Acting as intermediaries between students and academics, representing interests of students and helping them to navigate a complex bureaucratic system that is seen as impediments to student success:

She has been extremely helpful when I had difficulties with essay deadlines, module choosing difficulties and general enquiries regarding my time at university. She was very reassuring, contacted members of staff to assist me in any essay extension requests and was always available to speak to me whenever I arrived at the administration office at various multiple times.

Acting as the ‘departmental glue’ by providing an effective, seamless link between all elements and participants in the teaching and learning process:

... She seems to do every job in the department from handling essay submissions to organising pastoral care, e-mailing about all the department and associated society lectures, as well as pretty much knowing where all lectures are and what times they run off the top of her head. Overall she handles every task big or small and organises many of the lecturers ... and without her the department would surely fall apart.

Being the 'first port of call' or 'back up' in case of any problems/difficulties/questions that students had:

Many members of the cohort agree that she is their first port of call should they have a question related to the course, and she is always kind and helpful.

When lecturers have been unable to advise on administration issues, you can always count on her to guide you or return with answers.

Providing help and advice beyond immediate study related issues:

They are (members of admin team)... not only keeping us safe and secure on site in halls, but also when it come to jump-starting cars and giving valuable fashion advice!!

Career/employability support staff

The distinctive input of career/employability support staff was in the following:

Motivating students by putting things into the perspective of their 'future' by supporting their employability awareness and skills:

She has been excellent at helping me to secure my placements as well as giving me really good advice and preparing me in the best way possible. She is a positive and motivating person to be around and has given me some really invaluable careers advice which has really enabled me to keep myself motivated. ...

She has been an influential part of making students more employable and increasing their job opportunities with a range of events that she has solely run. These [events] have been invaluable to students participating, focused on areas that are important to succeeding in life, business and career ...

Helping students with building professional/business networks:

She will go above and beyond merely "offering advice" on what to do, she will openly pass on her network to students who would benefit from it and will always recommend people to contact who could potentially be the key mentor/aid to a student run business.

Technical/lab support staff

Being praised for their 'practitioner' knowledge, technical staff are valued as much as teaching/academic staff for contributing to student success:

Anytime I have a technical difficulty he helps me out, and wouldn't have been able to do this course without his guidance; and I know everyone else in my class would agree!

She can be more helpful than tutors themselves when it comes to your work.

He is always busy, but he still manages to find time to help you, even if he has a hundred other things he needs to do.. Most students rely on him to not just be a technician, but to also be a teacher...

Feel

Feel as a concept has a large presence in the professional services' nominations. Students commented on their nominees making them *feel welcomed, reassured or motivated*:

She constantly encourages and reassures making you feel so much better about the course as a whole.

She has a very friendly nature and always makes me feel welcome when I enter her room.

By building close relationships with students support and administrative staff make important contributions to the creation of a student-centred environment and to engendering students' sense of belonging :

You really feel that student are put first and that the department is for us...

She knows my name and I am not just a student number to her.

There is always a friendly atmosphere in the [admin office], which really helps the students to feel like we are more than just ... a banner ID number, but a valued part of a brilliant department.

Many students consider their nominees as friends, reflecting the emotional links students develop with support and administrative staff:

...She as a person has helped and supported me and kept me going and been my friend. And I want to thank her for the time, effort and energy she has given me so willingly...

She's hilarious and more like a great friend rather than a technician!

Hasn't got a bad word to say about anyone, he just gets on with his job and never complains. Really caring, more like a best friend than a member of staff

She always tries to make your academic road a bit less bumpy. She even helped me get a shower-curtain rod re-sized down to a 2-foot closet rod on one occasion!

And their absence is noticeable:

When he was ill in my second year, everything fell apart and I think this is a good opportunity to show what a big impact he has on so many students' lives ...

She is always a ray of sunshine when I walk in the door, and I miss her when she's not there...

Skills

Nominations showed that students value academic (e.g. study skills) as well as non –academic skills they gained from support staff:

X has helped me overcome some of my fears ..., and as a non-academic has taught me essentials skills for life...

She was very supportive, and not only gave me the practical skills but also the confidence in myself to achieve what I'd originally come to uni to do.

X has supported me in developing my skills and taught me how to reach my full potential in all areas.

Helpful

Being **helpful** was the most frequently mentioned word in the professional services nominations (after support) with other personal qualities such as friendly, supportive and willing constituting highly relevant concepts:

On the reception desk ... she always provided a friendly face for all students to go to, to find out information about the course and help and support.

Interestingly, **smile** is viewed by students as manifestation of staff friendliness and willingness to help:

The best thing about him is that he does it all with a smile which brightens even the hardest days.

Good listener and always got a smile on their face

Most of all he always has a smile on his face, which is what we need after a long day in classes

Being fair and treating everyone with the same respect was another frequently mentioned quality of excellent support/admin staff:

She is a very nice lady who works in a pressurised role, often coming into contact with hundreds of students in a day. She expertly controls and calms panicking students, fielding queries expertly and with minimum fuss ... – everyone is treated with the same respect.

Time continues to be a strong theme throughout all nomination categories, reflecting appreciation of the time support staff dedicate to helping and advising students:

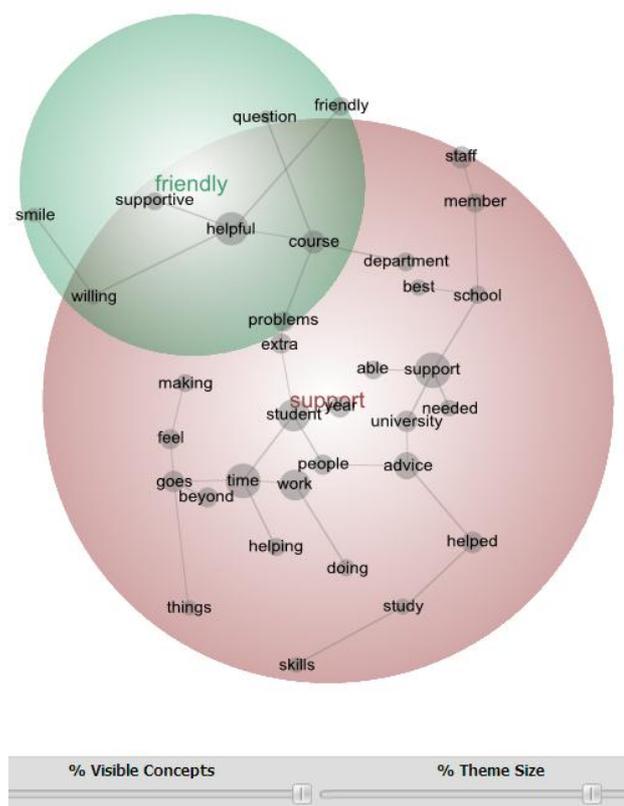
He will always make time for you and keep his promises!

Easily contactable, and always finds the time to deal with any problem in a courteous and efficient manner.

Thematic analysis

Support is an all-encompassing theme at 100% view. At 80% resolution two main themes are found with the highest level of connectivity: **support** and **friendly** (Figure 13). **Support** includes characteristics of the help and assistance provided, their outcomes and impact. In comparison **friendly** embraces personal qualities (supportive, willing, friendly, helpful) and includes **smile** which is seen as a manifestation of friendliness in many student nominations.

Figure 13. Thematic analysis at 80%



5. Commentary

In their award nominations students provided compelling and often moving accounts of their perceptions of great teaching and learning support. What can be learnt from this rich data source and how might it be used?

5.1. Teaching

Students describe great teachers as having distinctive, interesting and engaging pedagogic approaches that facilitate their active learning and understanding. This corresponds with the findings of other studies we looked at. Burden, Bond & Hall (2006), for example, in a small scale study in which both staff and students identified dimensions of excellent teaching, found that the top four characteristics of excellent teaching identified by students were: the range of strategies and techniques employed, followed by enthusiasm and ability to inspire, teaching for 'learning that lasts' and knowing how people learn/how teaching works. Revell and Wainwright (2009) in a study examining perceptions of geography academics and students as to what makes lectures 'unmissable' found that attendance rates were influenced by three key factors: a high degree of participation and interactivity (active learning), a clear structure which enables integrative links to be more easily made and a passionate and enthusiastic lecturer who can bring the subject to life. The NUS Student Experience research for the QAA (NUS, 2012) reported that 90% of the students surveyed thought that

teaching skills were the most important feature of a good quality learning experience, followed by interactive classes, more individual tutorial support, contact time with a personal tutor and inspirational teaching as a motivator to do well in their studies.

It was striking that student perceptions of great teaching were mainly described in terms of excellent lecture or tutorial delivery (the latter reflecting the tutorial based teaching of one particular university), rather than other approaches such as practicals or laboratory sessions or assessment techniques. This may simply be because students were being asked to nominate great teachers and they associated great teaching with excellent lecture delivery that actively engaged them and promoted their learning. It is interesting to speculate how the responses may have been different if the emphasis had been on asking what promotes **excellent learning**.

The nominations demonstrated that personal qualities of teachers, such as generosity with time, enthusiasm and willingness to help, and their ability to manage complex interactions, are as important to students as the ability to deliver excellent teaching, echoing the findings from other studies such as those of Vielba and Hillier (2002) cited in Skelton, 2005; Moore and Kuol (2007); Russell and Barefoot in Cunnane (2010), Williamson (2011) and Bradley (2012). While these 'softer' qualities are highly valued by students, they have not traditionally been seen as the 'readily quantifiable and measurable indicators of performance required by the quality assurance and enhancement movements' (Skelton, 2005, quoted in Little et al, 2007, p.31).

Excellent teaching is scholarly based. Students make direct links between the excellent teacher's passion and enthusiasm for the discipline, their extensive subject knowledge and active engagement in research – emphasising their appreciation of staff being involved in advancing knowledge and sharing it first hand with students.

If the nominations are examined in the context of a categorisation model of conceptions of teaching (from teaching and content centred to student and learning centred) such as that of Kember's (1997), we could conclude that students in their nominations refer to all of them, if not to the same extent. They talk about the ability of excellent teachers to efficiently impart information and transfer knowledge and to facilitate student understanding by using engaging and interactive approaches. Fewer comments were made about conceptual change or developing intellectual freedom. Interestingly, when quotes relating to learning were explored there were only occasional references to students feeling they were part of a learning partnership.

The overwhelming majority of nominations see excellent teaching through the lens of a student centred approach. Students speak of inclusive and involving teaching which challenges and inspires them. Some of the factors highlighted by students in their nominations relate to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) 'Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education'. Extensive studies have shown that where these principles are acted on, student outcomes are improved (Gibbs, 2010; 2012).

Students referred to how 'influential' teachers were in 'inspiring' their learning. As Elton (1998, p3) says, *'the purpose of teaching is to engender learning...looked at from the learner's point of view, only such teaching as can produce excellent learning can lay claim to excellence.'*

The potential, and perhaps the challenge, would be for Students' Unions to use the data on what students are saying about **great teaching** as a basis for further dialogue and debate about pedagogies that promote **great learning**, what Barnet (2007) refers to as a 'pedagogy of inspiration.'

The majority of the teaching nominations focused on recognising individual teachers and supporters of learning. In his latest report *Implications of 'Dimensions of Quality' in a Market Environment*, Gibbs (2012) suggests that in applying the dimensions of quality identified in his 2010 report, the priority for the HE

community should not necessarily be to reward the best teachers, but to make the baseline level of expectation much higher, arguing that awards and public acknowledgement of special achievements should be reoriented towards recognition of outstanding programmes and learning environments (p.21). This is something that Students' Unions may wish to consider when develop their teaching award schemes.

5.2. Personal Tutor Support

Student accounts of great teaching showed the importance of the integration of the elements of academic practice, an engaging teaching style and dedicated student support (both academic and personal). The nominations provided powerful narratives of the importance of personal tutor support throughout students' time at university, emphasizing the importance of personal tutors in motivational support and encouragement. Students highlighted the critical role of a personal tutor in retention, successful progression and in helping to foster a sense of belonging.

Both the teaching and support nominations (personal tutor and professional services) demonstrate the importance of a sense of belonging in supporting students' learning and development. A key message of the final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme (Thomas, 2012) is that *'the findings of this programme present a compelling case that in higher education, belonging is critical to student retention and success'* (p10). The What Works? Model puts student engagement and belonging at the heart of improving student retention and success with engagement in the academic sphere being seen as of primary importance to ensure all students benefit. This was certainly echoed in our findings.

There was a strong emphasis in personal tutor nominations on how great tutors made students feel (good, empowered, secure) with helpful, supportive and understanding being the characteristic of personal tutors that students most often cited. It was apparent that personal tutors play an important role in 'enabling students to deal with ...contested knowledge bases and the complexities inherent in uncertain situations' (Little at al, 2007, p. 48) in helping students to make sense of and direct their learning.

Students describe the impact of personal tutors on their personal and academic well -being as 'life changing', referring to them as role models who also play an important role in students' career orientation and employability. Personal tutor support throughout the whole student life cycle seems to have the most profound impact, enabling the development of a better understanding of the learner's needs and personality and providing effective support at different stages of their learning journey.

5.3. Professional Services (administrative and support) Staff

Professional services staff are seen as providing academic and life skills support and a source of invaluable practitioner and experiential knowledge. Students also see staff in learner support roles as having excellent teaching and support skills. The blurring of the boundaries between the professional and academic spheres has been highlighted as an important 'Third Space' (Whitchurch, 2008) in Higher Education. This linking of the professional and academic spheres can be seen in the recent work of the HEA in student engagement and success. The key findings from the *'What works: Student retention and success'* project show the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in HE which is the result of engagement and that this is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities (Thomas, 2012). The What Works research showed that students do not always know about or use professional services support, but that when they do access professional services support they are effusive about it. Our findings highlighted the importance of the contributions of professional services staff in supporting learning and promoting a sense of belonging.

Administrative staff act as intermediaries between students and academics and as ‘departmental glue.’ It is striking that they are often considered by students like friends or family, providing not only study related but also emotional support, life related advice and practical help.

5.4. Feedback

Analysis of the feedback nominations confirmed findings coming out of the National Student Survey (NSS) research. In the NSS students have been notably less positive about assessment and feedback on their assignments than about other aspects of their course experience (Williams & Kane, 2008). The lowest scores within the feedback sections are attracted by statement 7 ‘Feedback on my work has been prompt’ and statement 9 ‘Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand’, with usefulness of feedback being ranked more highly in importance than promptness of feedback (Williams & Kane, 2008, p.18).

When describing feedback provided by excellent teachers, students put an emphasis on the feedback that helps to improve further work. Students see useful and detailed feedback as an indication that the teacher wants them to achieve their full potential –thus enhancing intrinsic motivation to improve. This supports the findings of Gibbs and Simpson (2004) that feedback to the students on their assignments is the single most powerful influence on student achievement. The feedback provided by great teachers, either written or face-to-face, ensures that students understand and are able to make effective use of it.

In referring to the wide ranging differences between institutions in the number of times that student work contributing to their degree classification is marked (citing Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009) Gibbs (2012) argues that frequent formative-only assessment with quick feedback and no marks can be cheaper and much more pedagogically effective. Feedback that is ‘*given in time*’ to influence or improve their ongoing work is a strong theme in the student nominations. Students see promptness as an important factor, but only when they do have an opportunity to use this feedback in their next assignment.

Many student nominations emphasised the importance of feedback as an ‘indication of progress’ (Williams and Kane, 2008). Our analysis highlighted the beneficial impact of useful and timely feedback on the emotional context of student learning, on students’ confidence as learners and even on their area of specialisation and future career. Another discovery was that excellent feedback delivered as part of one module has a profound impact on student course performance as a whole.

The absence of strong assessment focused nominations and a lack of examples of excellent/innovative/inspirational assignments also corresponds with the findings of Williams and Kane (2008) that ‘*there is little concern about the type of assessment used and there is no indication from students that they are aware that some forms of assessment are designed ‘to encourage learning or measure failure’*’ (p.64). There are also parallels in our findings with Russell and Barefoot’s analysis of student nominations for an annual Tutor of the Year award (reported in Cunnane, 2010), where assessment and feedback was given the lowest score (4.2%) in terms of what was seen as most important to student.

The *What Works?* Report argues for further research into the role of assessment and feedback in contributing to student engagement, belonging, retention and success (Thomas 2012, p.38)

Again the student nominations provide Students’ Unions with a data source from students’ perceptions on feedback on which to base further developments, working in partnership with staff and students. Nicol and Macfarlane Dick (2006) see the role of feedback as being to enable students to become self-regulated and lifelong learners. This requires not only active student interaction with teacher feedback but also opportunities for students to generate their own feedback through self assessment and to develop skills in

evaluating and providing feedback on the work of others. Areas that might be considered for development could be a focus on promoting peer feedback and the importance of dialogue between staff and students on assessment (see David Nicol's work on Re-engineering Assessment Practices, www.reap.ac.uk).

4. Recommendations/Suggestions

Using the data

Students' Unions have a rich source of data here that could help make an important contribution to teaching and learning enhancement activity and work on student engagement and belonging.

This raises some ethical issues. In analysing data from 10 Students' Unions we had the advantage of research expertise in using the Leximancer data mining software in our own work, but there was a good deal of work involved in preparing the data for analysis and interpreting the results. In analysing their data there are a number of issues for Students' Unions to consider, for example:

- Thinking about how they are going to analyse the data when developing their SLTA scheme and determining the award categories, criteria, length of nominations etc. The nominations we analysed ranged from short statements of one or two paragraphs to 2 page mini essays. Generally speaking, where students were provided with tight criteria their responses were very focused, while just giving students a heading under which to comment did result in much richer open responses;
- Deciding who is going to analyse the data and how (SUs may want support with this and there is potential for working in partnership with the university here);
- Thinking about ethical issues around quoting students' actual words in any report written. We would advise providing a statement on nomination forms to let students know that the Students' Union wishes to use the awards to research students' perceptions of great teaching in order to enhance the student experience. Students can then be provided with an opportunity for them to opt out if they do not wish their nominations to be used in the research;
- Guaranteeing students' anonymity when using their responses. We found that many of the nominations were very personal and emotive and in our report we have not used quotes where an individual could be identified.

How findings might be used

The teaching award nominations provide Students' Unions with a data source that can be used to take forward their strategic work on enhancement of the student learning experience and, in particular, **student engagement** and **students as partners** activity.

At a time of considerable change in higher education in which teaching excellence is becoming increasingly important for universities to demonstrate, the discourse of teaching excellence can become dominated by the language of the marketplace which casts students in the role of consumer. The findings of this study have highlighted the importance of the relationships between students and the staff that teach them and support their learning. As Su and Wood (2012) argue, teaching is complex and multifaceted and a richer conceptualisation of teaching than 'effective delivery' is needed, building deeper understandings through engaging students in meaningful dialogue about pedagogy.

As well as continuing the celebration and recognition of excellent teaching, some suggestions for how Students' Unions might take this work forward would be to use findings to:

Dispel the 'It's just a popularity contest' myth

One of the challenges for Students' Unions is ensuring that students and staff do not just perceive student led teaching awards as a popularity contest. Analysis of nomination data could help to:

- build up an evidence base on students' perceptions of the characteristics and qualities of excellent teaching and learner support;
- identify gaps, the things that are not there or themes that SUs might want to work on;
- broaden the reach of student engagement in the awards – for example, across disciplines, of distance and part-time learners, mature students and international students;
- provide data on the demographics of staff being nominated- new or experienced staff, subject areas represented, professional services and support staff;
- inform the development of the award categories and criteria and of the nomination and selection process to ensure awards do what SUs want them to.

Inform and contribute to learning and teaching enhancement activity

There are already many examples of how SUs have developed and are using their awards to work with their universities to further promote excellence in teaching and learning, for example:

- supporting staff development and enhancement activity by sharing data with academic departments, learning and teaching enhancement units and professional service and support teams;
- using data to produce cases studies to further disseminate excellent practice;
- using findings to support strategic priority developments;
- producing a resource showing how outcomes from awards are being/can be used strategically to enhance Learning and Teaching in a range of ways;
- triangulating nomination data with other data on the student experience, eg. NSS, International Student Barometer, Course Experience Questionnaires and internal institutional surveys.

Potential for partnership...

There is huge potential to use SLTAs as a vehicle for developing work in partnership with staff and students for example by:

- engaging in dialogue on learning and teaching between students and staff, not just on what promotes **great teaching** but also on what **promotes great learning, linking to models and frameworks of effective pedagogical practice**;

- considering how awards and their recipients can be used to support curriculum development work in partnership , working with **programme teams**, not just recognising individual staff;
- thinking about the ways that SLTA could contribute to delivering the expectations of the new QAA Quality Code Chapters on Teaching and Learning and Student Engagement and the objectives of the NUS's new Manifesto for Partnership (NUS, 2012).

5. Looking forward

As the NUS and HEA continue to support the expansion and further development of Student Led Teaching Awards we hope that the findings in this report might prove useful in helping to identify potential for further and ongoing research. Discussions with the NUS SLTA Project Officer and initial piloting of materials based on this report in NUS SLTA workshops have indicated that there would be value in using the findings as a basis for HEA working in partnership with the NUS to develop a toolkit of resources that would be useful for both Students' Unions and Academic and Professional Services Departments.

There is potential to develop synergies and links between the SLTAs and, for example, other aspects of the HEA's Reward and Recognition work, the retention and student success 'What works' programme and other Student Engagement, Students as Partners and Surveys for Enhancement activity.

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