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TEACHING AWARDS

**STEPS TOWARDS TEACHING EXCELLENCE:
INSIGHTS FROM THE TEACHING AWARDS
NOMINATIONS 2021/2022**

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Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of practices and approaches that have been highlighted as exemplary of excellent teaching by students who nominated their teachers for the 2021/2 Teaching Awards.

On top of providing students with an opportunity to reward their most outstanding teachers, the Teaching Awards also generate a substantial set of data. As a part of writing a nomination, students were requested to submit a 200-500 words free form written comment answering the question: *“Why does your nominee deserve a Teaching Award in the selected category?”* The guidelines were kept broad to allow students to express themselves and to reflect only on those aspects of teaching which they deemed important. The written submissions have been analysed in a project administered by the University of St Andrews Students’ Association. The analysis has revealed certain themes and patterns in what students described as excellent teaching and in the examples which they provided to illustrate their points.

Those practices and approaches which were most frequently noted by students as deserving special recognition have been re-formulated into a list of **practical steps**. Practical steps are intended as a guidance and a point of reflection for both teachers and student representatives who want to promote teaching excellence in their schools or departments. This paper includes a list of practical steps that have been identified and proposed in the course of analysis, with handy examples which illustrate how these steps have been implemented in teaching by different members of staff.

The material included in this paper is only a part of the larger research into the Teaching Awards nominations. The full report, titled “Defining and promoting teaching excellence: Analysis of the nominations for the Teaching Awards 2021/2”, is available through the Students’ Association.



**PROVIDING STUDENTS
WITH AN OPPORTUNITY
TO REWARD THEIR MOST
OUTSTANDING TEACHERS.**

Main Themes

Three main themes have been identified in the course of analysis of Teaching Awards nominations:

Individual care and caring attitude

Among the multitude of characteristics and actions that students saw as worthy of the Teaching Award the descriptions of acts of care and of compassionate, understanding approach were usually signified as a top priority. The nominations also clearly show how much of an impact teachers can have on not only the academic performance, but also the university experience of a student in general.

Students as collaborators and contributors

Students highlighted the cases in which they believed that their opinions were given room to be voiced and heard. Students highly evaluated the efforts that teachers put into listening, acknowledging, and fostering critical independent thinking. However, what mattered to students was not only an ability to develop a critical perspective on the material, but also a chance to discuss ideas, questions, and mistakes in a non-judgemental, respectful atmosphere.

Adaptation of materials and learning-enhancing activities

Students making the nominations for the Teaching Awards often acknowledged staff members' efforts to tailor learning materials and class activities to the objectives of the course, and the effect that this can have on the quality of the education they receive. Students acknowledge the time that it takes to create a stimulating classroom environment and an informative curriculum; and interpret it as a sign of deep involvement on behalf of the teacher.

The first theme appeared in 82% of the nominations analysed in the course of the project, the second one – in 69%, the third one – in 48%. Thus, these themes are not occasional or accidental – and indeed reflect the core values in students' perceptions of excellent teaching.

In addition, two further themes have been explored: **inclusivity and diversity and online/hybrid teaching**. These themes have been singled out as worthy of additional analysis due to their topical and timely nature. Inclusivity and diversity are the among the main core values of the University. Additionally, as the University starts the transition back to the pre-pandemic teaching, this round of Teaching Awards represented the last opportunity to explore the perceptions of excellent online/hybrid teaching that have been formed in the last three academic years.

A set of practical steps has been formulated based on the main findings of each theme.

Finally, some **additional practical steps** have been proposed. These include career advice, essay-writing advice, and clear expectations.

“**THESE THEMES ARE NOT OCCASIONAL OR ACCIDENTAL – AND INDEED REFLECT THE CORE VALUES IN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EXCELLENT TEACHING.**”

THEME I: INDIVIDUAL CARE AND CARING ATTITUDE

A substantial majority of the nominations for the Teaching Awards have mentioned care in some capacity: students either commented how their teachers were generally caring and approachable or discussed certain examples of how their teachers eased their anxieties, helped with assignments or further reading suggestions, or provided support during a difficult transition into university education.

Care is a crucial aspect in students' perceptions of excellent teaching.

Thus, the question becomes: how can a teacher make students feel cared for and foster an environment of approachability and support? There is no straightforward answer; however, students have repeatedly highlighted some practices.

- Timely responses

For teachers, a delayed response to a student can be seen as resulting in nothing more than a slight inconvenience. For students, the timeliness of a response can determine their level of anxiety and stress even if on the surface the question is rather inconsequential. Teachers who were seen as reliable in their responses to students' questions and concerns were often described as exemplary of an excellent teaching approach

"Whenever I contacted her, her replies were quick and friendly. It is obvious that she genuinely cares about the wellbeing of her students; and this is refreshing to see in a university setting."
- Nomination 232

- Encouraging Feedback

Students describe feedback as an important learning tool. At the same time, they imply that feedback can be demotivating if it solely focuses on mistakes and has no further practical applicability. **Feedback that highlights reasonable areas for improvement and motivates students to achieve their best is treated as a sign of deep care for academic development.**

"<...> the feedback is thoroughly personalised, demonstrating a level of interest in and commitment to his students that has really improved my learning experience <...>"
- Nomination 176

"He is a firm but fair marker - and never fails to communicate how we can do better. In my three years of teaching here I was yet to be taught exactly what markers expect from us - but he explained it."
- Nomination 240

- Check-ups on students in difficult circumstances: initiative and consistency

Those students who wrote about their challenging circumstances in the nominations often highlighted that they were unsure about requesting additional help. **A teacher who took initiative in reaching out to a student or in establishing a network of support was regarded as exceptional.** The nominations highlight that initiation of support does not necessarily need to be time-consuming to be impactful: sometimes a short email is enough to remind a student that they are cared for and their presence at the University is valuable.

"As a direct entry student, I found it difficult to pick up things from the lectures at the beginning. <...> When I emailed him, he offered a meeting and we talked about my academic background <...> I felt that he really does care about his student and wants to provide support."
- Nomination 16

"He has shown incredible support for my wellbeing in a time during which I needed more support. He has been very appreciative, patient, and respectful with my journey <...>"
- Nomination 166

- Addressing the class as a whole

A caring atmosphere in a class setting is positively received even by those students who did not need a deep one-on-one engagement. A teacher who is known to students as an approachable and reliable point of contact for further questions and concerns was frequently described as excellent. Students often gathered this perception from teachers who addressed the class with questions about their understanding of the materials, and with more personable enquiries about their general level of wellbeing.

"Although I personally never requested any extra sessions, she made it abundantly clear there was no shame in asking and that she would be more than happy to oblige."
- Nomination 12

THEME II: STUDENTS AS CONTRIBUTORS AND COLLABORATORS

Students highly praised a learning environment in which they were treated as valuable and insightful contributors and collaborators rather than as passive learners who are being 'spoken at'. They often pointed out how usually one might not feel comfortable to ask a question in a class or make a 'stupid' mistake in front of everyone. A teacher who managed to maintain a democratic and non-judgemental atmosphere in a class was often described as excellent.

- Clear and supportive communication

The nominations suggest that some students might be unsure of the level of engagement expected in the class at the beginning of the term. Some students have commented on their worries about when and how it would be appropriate to ask questions or seek further clarifications of the material. **If a teacher clearly explained their approach to different perspectives and potential mistakes, and dedicated time in class to student questions, students saw it as exemplary of excellent teaching.**

"With significantly greater academic knowledge than the rest of us, he nevertheless treated us as equals during our discussions. He reassured me and others that we do not need to have all the answers to have a meaningful discussion."
- Nomination 140

"She always encouraged students to reach out to chat about any issues and offered comforting and wise advice every time."
- Nomination 98

- Acknowledgment of different backgrounds

For many students, education at the University of St Andrews is a chance to venture into new disciplines. This opportunity, however, can be scary for those students who are entering a completely new field – or for students who come from a background that is underrepresented in their field of studies. Teachers who took time to get to know their students and their abilities were seen as exceptional. This way students felt valued regardless of their prior knowledge or positionality.

- Early and mid-semester feedback

For some students, being a collaborator and a contributor means being consulted on how the module is being run. Even minor changes, like additional elaboration of complex material or flexible tutorial structure, can be regarded as exemplary of excellent teaching. Moreover, **the willingness to act upon feedback makes students feel like their participation in the module is sincerely valued, rather than only expressed in words.**

- Discussions that foster peer-to-peer engagement and acknowledgment of different views

Students have most frequently commented on how they felt as contributors and collaborators vis-à-vis a teacher. However, peer-to-peer collaboration was also important, potentially more so for students in more senior levels of studies. An environment where everyone feels comfortable to speak up was seen as characteristic of excellent teaching. Such environment, according to students, would have been impossible if a teacher was acting in a patronising fashion.

'His tutorials are more student-led than most other tutorials I have been in, which makes for a better learning experience. It clearly comes across that he is genuinely interested in our opinions <...> which is conducive to a positive learning environment where students are encouraged to engage with classmates and with the source material.'
- Nomination 22

'In every tutorial, it was apparent that he takes care to ensure that everybody's voice is equally heard, helping every discussion during class to be inclusive and fruitful.'
- Nomination 203

"She includes everyone in the class whether it is your degree, or you are taking the discipline for fun. She equally cares about your improvement."
- Nomination 213

"Students have been rather confused about a section of the content. She took this situation seriously and suggested that perhaps she had not explained this concept clearly enough and made adjustments. This attitude not only makes students feel heard, but also <...> communicates her passion for education and her care for the module and the students."
- Nomination 302

THEME III: ADAPTATION OF MATERIALS AND LEARNING-ENHANCING ACTIVITIES

In their Teaching Awards nominations, students frequently recalled examples learning-enhancing activities and practices of adaptation of materials as a proof of the teaching excellence of their nominees. After being exposed to a variety of teaching instruments in the previous years, students have developed an eye for practices that make teaching diverse and insightful – and expect an approach that is tailored to the module contents and the individual strengths of their teachers.

Below are the practical steps which represent the general attitudes towards diversification and adaptation of teaching which have been highly praised by students.

- Evident module methodology and structure

The number of nominations highlighting a clear course structure as a sign of teaching excellence suggests that this is not something that students experience in all university modules. A creative mode of is regarded as excellent only as long as its practical relevance for a certain module/discipline is revealed. Students tend to evaluate university teaching in modules and **are more likely to praise a certain module if it has an evident degree of internal coherence.**

“I haven’t felt lost in her classes because the module follows a path which is very smooth and easy to understand.”
- Nomination 146

“Aside from her really structured and easily followed plan for the modules, she delivers her material in an incredible way. I’ve found it so easy to follow what she is teaching, and her use of technology has helped to cement my understanding.”
- Nomination 150

- Materials that can be revisited, activities that allow students to revisit materials

Teachers who provide their students with opportunities to revisit the contents of teaching are regarded as excellent. Easy-to-follow lecture slides, useful handouts, workshops that allow students to engage deeply with the previously covered information have been singled out. **Sometimes new/exciting information is less valuable to students than the chance to solidify what they already know, and an excellent teacher is the one who can feel this balance.**

“He always come into the lesson with good questions which helps us through the topic, with this I really think it provokes deeper thinking and leads to a better memory of the content <...>”
- Nomination 259

“Outside of lectures, he also runs workshops and Q&A sessions. I can tell that he is very passionate about the subjects he is teaching, and really cares that every student understands all of the material he is delivering.”
- Nomination 99

- Actualised knowledge

Another trend which can be observed from the nominations are concerns about the ‘real life’ or practical applicability of the module. Students seem to highly appreciate a chance to expand and test their knowledge beyond the theoretical ‘confinements’. **A teacher who can show their students how a certain module relates to real-life issues or how it connects to future career/studies is likely to be regarded as excellent.**

“She masterfully keeps the class engaged, knowing when the material is becoming a bit dry, or when to include an example so the class can better understand things.”
- Nomination 160

“The assignment of a literature review also challenged me, making me learn a new form of writing - extremely helpful for further research.”
- Nomination 316

- Consideration for feedback

Some changes to materials and activities that were discussed in the nominations were a result of acting upon student feedback. This is just another example of an overall trend observed by this paper: **students’ evaluations of teaching excellence largely depend on how central of a role they feel to occupy in the teaching process.**

“She asked for feedback at the start and in the middle of semester, and actively listened to our concerns, incorporating changes into the module as we moved along. This made the module very responsive to what we, as students, cared about.”
- Nomination 171

FOCUS AREA: INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY

Inclusivity and diversity are important values for the University of St Andrews. The nominations show that students also share concerns about implementation of EDI. They understand inclusivity and diversity as context-specific and nuanced. The solutions to the issues of support and representation are hardly generalisable; the nominations suggest that each teacher and each school/department have to acknowledge and act upon the issues of inclusivity and diversity individually, while reflecting on the constraints and the problems of certain fields of study and of the University's accommodations for individual needs.

The following practical steps offer a broad overview of the approaches that are likely to lead to practices and changes that students tend to regard as exemplary of commitment to academic inclusivity.

- Initiating contact with students who have indicated individual needs

Students with disabilities, as well as students who recently re-entered academia or have gone through traumatic life events have indicated that they often feel uncomfortable initiating contact with teachers or that they rarely see teachers approach them first. **A teacher who briefs a student on the forms of support available to them and takes a proactive approach to addressing the special needs of a student is likely to be regarded as exemplary of commitment to inclusivity.**

"I struggled to get into in-person teaching and she was very accommodating. She made it clear how much she cares about her student's access to education with helpful information on which classes would be accessible for me at my mobility level."
- Nomination 199

- Reflecting on how to include students with individual needs into the regular class activities

The nominations show that students with individual needs want to feel like a part of the group and participate in all aspects of tutorials/workshops even if it is challenging. **Teachers who in a courteous manner arranged a set-up for a class that allowed all students to feel included were described as excellent.**

"Due to extreme anxiety about public speaking following trauma I was concerned that I would be unable to complete the assessment because of my mental health. I reached out to the teacher. I was overwhelmed by the reassurance he gave me, and I was able to complete my presentation only because of his encouragement."
- Nomination 85

"One student was suffering from panic attacks when asked to read her work out loud. At the next class, the teacher quietly changed how we ran the workshop - we submitted our writing anonymously <...> Crucially though, she later tentatively returned to the normal setup. She struck a great balance here."
- Nomination 247

- Reflecting on/acknowledging biases

Judging by the nominations, **students are up to date with the current discussions about gender biases and West-centrism of the academia and positively respond to their teachers acknowledging these issues.** A teacher who reflects on possible ways of diversifying the curriculum and points out harming stereotypes is seen as exemplary of commitment to diversity. Moreover, this approach can allow students from underrepresented communities to feel like important members of the University.

"She recognises and champions the importance of EDI education as being a key part of becoming a scientist in the modern world <...>"
- Nomination 283

"Every student presented in tutorials, and this created a space for the sources from the Global South that would have been otherwise overlooked <...>The opportunity for me, as a woman of colour, to be given the freedom to research and share resources from my country of origin has been so significant."
- Nomination 10

- Attention to pronouns

The nominations suggest that students appreciate being asked about their pronouns and are likely to regard this as an excellent practice that fosters an inclusive environment. Additionally, the focus on gender-neutral language is positively regarded in language modules.

"He asked us to write our names and pronouns on cards to show the class. I think this small action in fact <...> has set the tone for the rest of the academic year which I could only describe as inclusive and accepting."
- Nomination 30

FOCUS AREA: ONLINE/ HYBRID MODES OF TEACHING

Most students who mentioned online/hybrid teaching in the nominations for the Teaching Awards believe that online teaching is hard to do right. A lot of them imply that these modes of teaching are inherently inferior to in-person teaching. Most students believe that good online teaching is a relatively rare occurrence for which the staff member deserves special recognition.

However, there are undoubtedly certain approaches that seemed to increase the overall satisfaction with the online/hybrid learning process.

- Thought-out strategy

Students express an opinion that online components are often overlooked by their teachers. Having a coherent, course-tailored plan for delivery of online teaching is seen as an example of dedication to student satisfaction. **A clear explanation of how the module is going to be run and how it is going to be adapted to be educational and enjoyable even in online context eases students' doubts.** With addition of consistency and smooth delivery it turns into a hallmark of excellent online teaching.

"<...> her teaching content is very well-structured, with quizzes and class tests to help students follow up and recall material. <...> She sends us weekly emails, reminding what is coming up in the lectures; and answers questions through email very quickly, making it very helpful for online students. Students can feel that she not only has passion for the subject but also for teaching itself."

- Nomination 110

- Utilising individual strengths in adaptation of materials

There has been no universal agreement among the students on which practices work best in the online context. Positive evaluations of teachers' enthusiasm and ability to effectively present complex material were far more prevalent factors. It is possible to suggest that best online/hybrid practices are the ones which are the most comfortable and familiar to a teacher. **Synchronous and asynchronous delivery, regular summary emails, online workshops can all be received positively if executed in a clear, engaging way and with technical competence.** Creative and unique practices, tailored specifically for the module contents, were highly praised.

"He has exceptionally well-formatted slides, extensive and detailed notes, and interesting tutorial questions. He splits his lectures up into manageable, focused short videos; and edits and prepares them very well. <...> Overall, he strikes anyone he teaches as an extremely committed and well prepared lecturer who has clearly worked very hard to adapt his lectures for an online format."

- Nomination 136

"She has very well adapted to the dual delivery mode, and she has easily transitioned between online and in-person students by using technology in a smooth way <...>."

- Nomination 76

- Special attention to online-only students

Not only did the students allude to online teaching being overlooked – the experience of being an online-only student was occasionally described as generally isolating. With this in mind, **a teacher who regularly listens to and checks up on online learners is regarded as exemplary.** A straightforward and regularly monitored line of communication (both during classes and outside of them) reminds students that they are valuable contributors and members of the University community.

"I was unwell with asthma early on in the semester and was stressed as I wasn't able to work. She reassured me that my health was much more important and even checked in on me. In an online age, I have not experienced such personal or caring relationship with a teacher."

- Nomination 84

"<...> he has created opportunities for our cohort to meet virtually. I am especially grateful for these opportunities as they help me feel part of the St Andrews community from afar."

- Nomination 285

ADDITIONAL PRACTICAL STEPS

- Career advice

The nominations show that some students become concerned about 'education for education's sake' and want to learn more about the future applicability of their knowledge. A teacher who demonstrates how a certain degree or a sphere of interest can lead to a future career is likely to be regarded as deeply committed to students' development. Students appreciated both the discussions of their teachers' experience and useful links to newly advertised internships.

"He has provided on numerous occasions advice and help regarding internships, both privately and to the module at large."

- **Nomination 167**

"The class convinced me that I want to pursue a career in marketing. When I shared this with my teacher, he was very kind in offering me mentorship and a recommendation, and some extra readings to deepen my knowledge."

- **Nomination 36**

- Essay writing/note taking

Some students have implied that in the quest to cover as much material as possible, teachers tend to side-track the transferable skills which are the most crucial in education: how to study well and how to write well. Development of such skills can be interpreted as especially significant considering the international student body of the University of St Andrews: the majority of students come from non-Scottish educational systems and are unsure of how to approach assignments at first. A teacher who found time to discuss and give advice on essay writing and notetaking, even if briefly, was

"Rather than simply teaching us about a subject, he teaches us how to research and write about the subject, too. <...> It has been enormously helpful and being in his class has taught me not just the module content but has made me a better student in my other modules."

- **Nomination 22**

"She goes above and beyond in assisting her students in the development of their writing, research, and analytical skills equipping them with not only the content but the tools to succeed."

- **Nomination 284**

- Clear expectations

Clarity of communication and clarity about the module structure have already been highlighted in this paper as the aspect of teaching that students regard as excellent. Additionally, students appreciate clarity about teachers' expectations and the grading criteria for the assignments. Students might feel uneasy about taking a new subject or studying with a new teacher as they might be unsure about the standard and the style of work expected from them. Teachers who took time to explain the grading criteria and the tutorial guidelines (in class or in office hours) were described as outstanding.

"In her course she gave us an essay expectations sheet, which in my four years I hadn't had yet, which made writing the essays for her course much more relaxing, as in this subject it can be hard to know what tutors may want from you."

- **Nomination 143**

"His expectations for collaborative work were established from the first class on - we were given very clear guidelines for engagement, and these were displayed on the board each week."

- **Nomination 247**

The project behind this paper was proposed by Alice Rickless, Academic Representation Intern 2021/22 and funded by St Andrews Enhancement Teams. The project has been administered and supervised by Chase Greenfield, Academic Representation Co-Ordinator. The data analysis and the writing up of the report were carried out by Evgeniya Pakhomova (PhD candidate, Department of Social Anthropology).

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