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Student perceptions of teaching excellence

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Student perceptions of teaching excellence: An analysis of student-led teaching award nomination data

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Student perceptions of teaching excellence: An analysis of student-led teaching award nomination data

This research explores student voice and student perceptions of teaching excellence in higher education, and authors suggest implications for student engagement and student/staff partnerships in teaching and learning. Edinburgh University Students' Association facilitates the longest-running student-led teaching awards in the UK, receiving 2,000 - 3,000 open-ended student nominations annually which raise the profile of teaching and reward strong teachers. These extensive qualitative data were analysed using aspects of a grounded theory approach to investigate student perceptions of teaching excellence. This research identified four key themes of teaching excellence: 1) concerted, visible effort; 2) commitment to engaging students; 3) breaking down student-teacher barriers; 4) stability of support. This paper explores these themes with respect to theoretical work by Skelton (2007), MacFarlane (2007) and Kreber (2007) and suggests that students' perceptions of teaching excellence advance notions of 'critical excellence' and 'moral excellence'.

Keywords: teaching excellence; teaching awards; higher education; student voice; student engagement

Introduction

With the UK Government's introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the concept of teaching excellence, its assumptions and approaches to its evaluation have been increasingly debated (Greatbatch & Holland, 2016). Student perceptions of teaching quality, as measured through the proxy of the National Student Survey, are core metrics used in the TEF, although there is a lack of research on student perceptions of teaching excellence with exceptions including work by Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga (2015) and Jensen, Adams, and Strickland (2014). By contrast, there is a wide body of literature on academics' conceptions of teaching excellence and academic quality in higher education (Astin, 1984a, 1993; Barnett, 1992; Kreber, 2007; Kuh, 2008, 2010; MacFarlane, 2007; Percy & Salter, 1976; Skelton, 2007). However, teaching excellence is a contested concept (Bradley et al., 2015; Madriaga & Morley, 2016) with various definitions and conceptualisations. For instance, Barnett (1992) explores different perspectives on high quality academic experiences and Kuh (2008) highlights indicators of high-impact educational practices.

Furthermore, Skelton (2007; cited in MacFarlane, 2007) conceptualises four perceptions of teaching excellence: traditional excellence emphasises mastery of knowledge and logic within a disciplinary area, performative excellence highlights individuals' abilities to excel in employment, psychologised excellence focuses on students' development of deep learning skills, and critical excellence aims to empower students to participate as critical thinkers who question knowledge. Some scholars such as Kreber (2007) and MacFarlane (2007) suggest that the dominant discourses of teaching excellence view the purpose of higher education as a means of benefiting the government or the economy; however, they suggest that the discourse of teaching excellence should shift to emphasise critical excellence and a fifth form – moral excellence – to place our focus rightly on students who are at the

3

heart of the higher education sector. Kreber (2007, p. 237) describes moral excellence in teaching as the authentic motivation of teachers 'to do what is good' and, first and foremost, 'to do what is in the best interest of learners'. This paper analyses qualitative data of student perceptions of teaching excellence by drawing on theoretical work by Skelton (2007), MacFarlane (2007) and Kreber (2007) in *International Perspectives on Teaching Excellence in Higher Education*.

This research is different from other, albeit rare, instances of research analysing student conceptions of teaching excellence. Other studies have been conducted either solely by academics and academic developers (Jelfs, Richardson, & Price, 2009; Jensen et al., 2014; Murphy, Shelley, White, & Baumann, 2011) or have been led by academic staff members with the participation of a student researcher (Bradley et al., 2015; Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Rytkönen, 2011). By contrast, this research has been conducted by one PhD student and one Masters student working with a Students' Association, and they have identified some instances where students and staff may interpret data differently (for example, see pages 20-21). This paper offers a review and a critique of other literature on teaching excellence and teaching awards, followed by empirical results from the analysis of student perceptions of teaching excellence collected during one year of the Edinburgh University Students' Association teaching awards.

Teaching excellence and teaching awards

Edinburgh University Students' Association places the experience of students and learners at the forefront of its work, although Skelton (2007) points out that some 'common sense' assumptions about teaching excellence can be problematic. We make the assumptions that: teaching excellence is a 'good thing' which promotes excellent learning; different forms of teaching excellence can coexist and benefit different students; and all teachers have the

capacity to work towards teaching excellence given the appropriate support. Whilst it can be difficult to know exactly what factors in higher education prove to be transformational for students compared to other experiences outwith university that could also do the same (Astin, 1993; Percy & Salter, 1976), asking students their perspectives can help us to learn what – in their view – helps them learn, improve their abilities, and excel in higher education and beyond (Bron, Bovill, & Veugelers, 2016; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Gannon-Leary, Dordoy, McGlinn, Baldam, & Charlton, 2011).

Student-led teaching awards were first promoted in an initiative led by the National Union of Students (Bradley et al., 2015; Madriaga & Morley, 2016), with Edinburgh University Students' Association as the first to implement them in the UK (2016). There are various types of teaching awards including staff-nominated awards as part of formal reward and recognition processes (Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015) and student comments in existing student surveys and evaluations that are reused for award shortlisting (Bradley et al., 2015; Madriaga & Morley, 2016). Although Madriaga and Morley (2016, p. 169) suggest that using student comments in an institutional survey can be harvested by staff as nominations for teaching awards which 'connotes being "student-led"', the authors of this paper believe this cannot be student-led if students are not designing (or at least co-creating) the award scheme or shortlisting award nominees themselves. Therefore, this paper uses the term 'student-led teaching awards' to indicate award schemes run by students' associations or unions in which students do in fact lead in shaping and implementing the awards.

Many students' associations now run student-led teaching awards through formal nomination processes to celebrate and thank excellent teachers. Although Madriaga and Morley (2016) and others question the validity and purpose of some teaching awards, it is worth noting that they are run differently in institutions; therefore, contrary to some

assertions, many teaching awards are not popularity contests since they are evidence-led and give awards based on the quality of teaching as indicated in students' nomination comments (not the quantity of nominations). Teaching awards recognise and reward excellent teaching through processes which are distinct from the National Student Survey (Bradley et al., 2015). Student-led teaching awards enhance strong partnerships between students' associations and universities by reinforcing and recognising the positive work of teachers, especially if student representation processes highlight aspects of teaching and student support that, in students' eyes, need improvement.

Students and staff clearly have roles, expertise, responsibilities and status that are necessarily different (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Although some staff question students' abilities to perceive and identify teaching excellence (Madriaga & Morley, 2016), the authors of this paper and the growing field of higher education research on student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching refutes this by valuing students as partners (Bovill, 2013; C. Bovill, 2014; C. Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; C. Bovill, Morss, & Bulley, 2009; Bron et al., 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2016, 2018; sparqs, 2015). The Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code for Higher Education chapter B5 further demonstrates the value of student engagement and the role that students play in discerning and enhancing the quality of teaching in higher education (QAA, 2016). Therefore, student-led teaching award schemes can be seen as valuable, albeit underused, resources for understanding student perceptions of teaching excellence in UK higher education institutions. This paper explores the findings resulting from a systematic, qualitative analysis of Edinburgh University Students' Association's student-led teaching award nomination data at the University of Edinburgh.

Methodology

This research focused on one large, research-intensive university with approximately 35,000 students and Edinburgh University Students' Association's highly successful student-led teaching award scheme. Each year from November to March (across both semesters of the academic year) and again throughout August (to allow postgraduate students and those taking summer courses), the Students' Association leads a nomination process which normally receives 2,000 - 3,000 student nominations annually. This is promoted via all-student emails, newsletters, posters, flyers, and social media to students across disciplines at all levels of study. To make the process easy for students, they submit a short online form stating the name of the nominee, their subject area, and as much detail as possible in open-ended nomination comments about why they are nominating an individual or course for a student-led teaching award.

It is made clear to students that their nomination comments will be anonymised and that, unless students opt out, submitting a nomination will give permission for the data to be used by the students' association and the university to identify and share best practices in teaching and student support. Therefore, this non-intervention research was deemed to have Level 2 ethical approval with the consent of the participants. Level 2 ethical approval may include, for example, analysis of archived data, classroom observation, or questionnaires on topics that are not generally considered 'sensitive' It is also emphasised that a judging panel – consisting solely of students and ensuring they come from diverse backgrounds, subject areas, and levels of study – assesses the quality of the teaching as evidenced by the nomination comment. Therefore, students are encouraged to provide as much detail as possible about the excellent teacher since it is not judged on the number of nominations received for individuals.

This in-depth research investigated student perceptions of teaching excellence by systematically analysing student perceptions of best practices in teaching as highlighted in their nomination comments. During the 2014-15 academic year, 2,024 individuals submitted 2,926 teaching award nominations to Edinburgh University Students' Association for awards focused on eight categories of teachers, tutors, support staff, research supervisors, peer leaders, courses, and learning communities. Student nominations were received from all subject areas at this university in the social sciences, humanities, arts, sciences, engineering, and medicine (see Appendix 1). The most popular award category was the Best Overall Teacher category with 1,192 nominations. With funding provided by the University of Edinburgh Principal's Teaching Award Scheme, an Edinburgh University Students' Association member of staff who is also a part-time PhD student hired a Masters student research assistant through a competitive, selective process to assist with this project.

To examine the themes and trends emerging from students' Teaching Awards nomination comments, coding was undertaken using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software as well as Excel to quantify theme-specific data. Aspects of a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) were used to analyse the data. Constructivist grounded theory is beneficial because it is an 'inductive, iterative, interactive, and comparative method geared towards theory construction' (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012, p. 41). This approach helped the researchers to identify grounded, core concepts that support new findings about participants' conceptualisations of teaching excellence, and what teachers can do to further promote student engagement and student success in higher education. Unlike classic grounded theory which advocates an exploration of the data before reading any related literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the more flexible constructivist grounded theory approach of conducting a literature review first was appropriate for minimalising trivial findings or repeating others' findings (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their classic grounded

theory model suggest using iterative, purposeful sampling to further explore initial themes with additional samples of participants; however, that was not feasible within the scope and timeframe of this research project which drew on an existing dataset of teaching award nominations.

All 2,926 nominations for the eight award categories were coded into thematic nodes before being aggregated into categories (see Appendix 2). These categories evidenced emerging themes of excellent teaching which students reward in their nomination comments. These themes and other related topics were thoroughly reviewed in an attempt to validate the practical comments against the coding. For instance, Best Overall Teacher Award nominations had stronger coverage in lecturing-related nodes relative to the Best Personal Tutor Award where support and communication nodes were predominant. The themes from nominations directly related to teaching (i.e., from awards for Best Overall Teacher, Course, Feedback and Learning Community) are presented in the results below.

Results

Student nomination comments feature a wide range of student opinions and vary from lengthy discussions of fantastic courses (up to the maximum of 2,000 characters permitted through the online nomination form) to two or three words of gratitude or praise. Whether it is how quickly a tutor replies to email, the amount of face-to-face feedback from lecturers or the responsibilities of support staff, there is a clear variety of student expectations across the data analysed. This data shows that student expectations vary considerably between comments, with past experience in other courses being a key reference point. These nominations are often based on the perception that staff exceed their expectations by going above and beyond their typical duties. For example, when teachers create a strong personal connection, students often write at length about their positive academic experience and how

the teacher excels in supporting them as an individual. Personal struggles and educational perseverance (which is significantly aided by a tutor, teacher or member of support staff) make up a large number of nominations across award categories. Furthermore, when the teacher facilitates the development of a vibrant learning community, students remark that this fosters a strong professional relationship between staff and students. Four key themes are identified in the nomination comments: 1) concerted, visible effort; 2) commitment to engaging students; 3) breaking down student-teacher barriers; 4) stability of support (Figure 1). These four themes were evident in nominations across all award categories and especially the Best Overall Teacher category. Each is presented below.
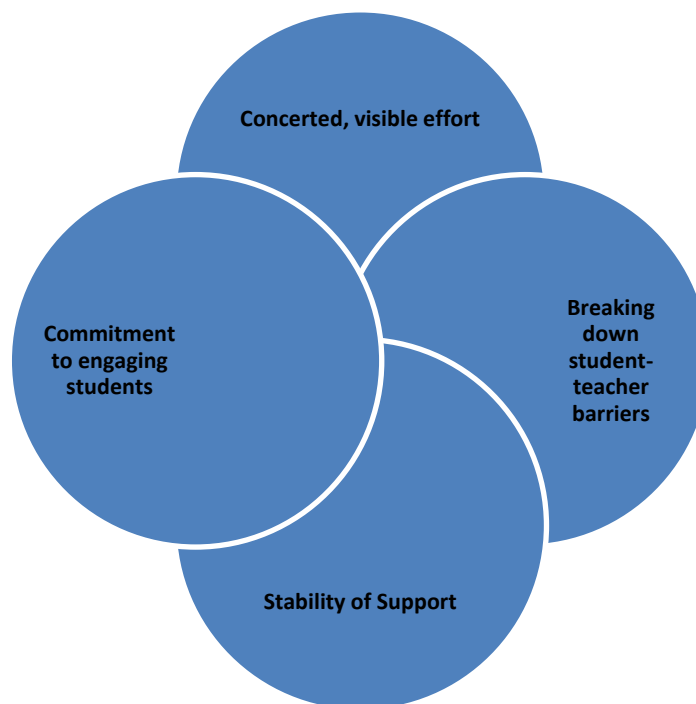
Figure 1: Four key themes of student conceptualisations of teaching excellence

Concerted, visible effort

Students submit many nominations recognising teachers' visible, concerted effort inside and outside of the classroom that contributes to students' perceptions of their excellence in teaching. The theme of effort underpins and has significant overlaps with every other theme,

and over one-fifth of references emphasise the theme of approachability. Students nominate teachers who clearly take time to engage directly with their students while also planning well structured, clear lectures that help students learn. For instance, students highlight teachers who are not only well organised and prepared for all lectures but also who communicate clear, transparent aims for each class and plans that demonstrate how each lecture or seminar fits into a holistic view of the wider course and programme curricula.

Furthermore, students consistently reward visible staff effort in areas such as improving the curriculum, including the course material, delivery, student engagement processes and assessment. Frequent examples include replying to all queries promptly with adequate attention and effort to resolve issues, providing supplementary readings or links to additional online content, and offering additional review sessions before exams. When students struggle with understanding difficult concepts, nominated teachers are able to simplify explanations of complex problems and also provide additional learning materials in the virtual learning environment that are accessible and helpful for students with different learning needs. When not having a response to an issue or question, recognised teachers take the time to find the appropriate information for the student and demonstrate that they also learn from their students (and their students' difficult questions).

In addition, it is evident from the nomination comments that students appreciate instances where staff act on student feedback to improve the curriculum or the general learning environment. Where there is effort on the part of the teacher to develop innovative assessments in particular, students praise these successes as well as staff effort. For example, one student states:

> He prepared practice exam questions (on top of past exams) and told us to submit the
> answers for feedback… He will always try to provide us tricks on how to approach
> complicated concepts from an intuitive perspective… He has a mid-semester course

survey so we can provide anonymous feedback on how the course is going… He would always include a little puzzle related to what we were learning!

This quotation shows the effort that the staff member exerts to support student learning by providing practice exams, learning strategies and engaging ways for students to provide feedback to improve the course.

Student comments also demonstrate an understanding that lecturers are extremely busy, which often justifies their appreciation of staff effort. This is especially prominent with feedback on assessments – students highlight both the quantity and quality of feedback they receive from their nominated lecturers, and they are particularly appreciative of personalised feedback that is returned promptly and with an eye for detail. This type of feedback evidently requires a large time commitment, and students greatly appreciate teachers' efforts to prioritise students, as well as teaching and learning. For example, one student nomination comment states:

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

Therefore, students nominate teachers who demonstrate concerted, visible effort in various aspects of teaching and especially through promptly delivering feedback whilst maintaining a focus on both quality and quantity. In particular, students recognise beneficial opportunities including 'feedforward' with supplementary mock practice tests and review sessions before examinations or feedback on drafts of essays before they are submitted. Offering face-to-face feedback sessions also helps to make the lecturer more approachable to students, which is a prominent aspect of the next theme.

Commitment to engaging students

The second key theme identified in this research is that students perceive excellent teachers as demonstrating commitment to engaging students, including having charisma and personality that facilitate engaging teaching which is student-centred. A key, regularly cited factor for this theme is the passion and enthusiasm that teachers bring to teaching. Demonstrating that teaching is not a requirement or chore, excellent lecturers facilitate engaging discussions with their students both inside and outside of class. Across disciplines, students recognise teachers who build on course content to incorporate academic expertise, such as including examples from their research or perspectives on exciting developments in the field. One student writes:

> He was keen to participate in a revision session organised by the Class Reps and was always willing to give us the broader picture – not just how to do a question but what it implies in real life. I personally consider that as an engineer it is very important to see the bigger picture in order to understand and prevent failures, and this is something I learned from him.'

Like in this nomination, students often share that staff who embed both new, innovative information as well as practical, real life implications into course materials help build student interest and connection to the topic.

Student nomination comments clearly demonstrate that teachers' enthusiasm and energy for an academic subject is often translated into positive experiences and enjoyment of learning. Many examples from students' nomination comments highlight how teachers have incorporated humor and fun into lectures, such as the following:

> [The teacher] brings an exceptional level of enthusiasm with him to every lecture I've attended and always provides an interesting and fun class… From all the lecturers I've had [here, he] has shown the most passion towards his subject and you can tell he really wants future generations to be inspired by his field. He also always has little quirks in his

lecture slides such as running jokes and projects he's worked on that always makes his lectures interesting and engaging.

This student suggests that a key aspect of teaching excellence in this case is the teacher's commitment to his subject and to engaging his students in interesting ways which help students learn and feel inspired.

Student nomination comments often emphasise that excellent teachers successfully develop students' deeper interest in a topic and inspire them to go further. Examples include: providing 'feedforward' on how students can improve their work in the future, motivating a student to change their subject area and inspiring a student to consider further academic or professional avenues related to a particular academic subject. For example, one student nomination states:

> The exercises she had us do in class were fresh and thought provoking. I really enjoyed how she makes a point to talk to the students and to encourage further learning. Her welcoming personality made me feel comfortable in class… It's very obvious that she's very invested in teaching and cares a lot about her students.

This theme of demonstrating commitment and care for students is also apparent when students nominate staff who are able to engage students even during classes at substandard times, such as very early on a Monday or late on a Friday. Similarly, students often nominate teachers who surpass their expectations by managing to stimulate students' interest and improve their understanding for a topic they previously thought as dull or too challenging.

Breaking down student-teacher barriers

Within this theme of breaking down student-teacher barriers, students highlight examples of excellent teachers who facilitate a strong academic community with opportunities for student engagement, who create a personalised experience tailored to student interests or needs and

who work in partnership with students. First, student nominations demonstrate the vital role that teachers play in fostering a learning community in which all members' contributions are valued and respected. Nomination comments single out teachers as well as student leaders and student-led groups who work to bring together students and staff whilst sharing an interest in the subject area and learning from each other to improve their understanding. One student recognises in his/her nomination the variety of engaging teaching activities that helped the class come together as a collaborative learning community:

> I loved how every week was different and you never quite knew what was going to happen… For example we were asked to act as policy makers in a nuclear war simulation and write a 'last order' to be locked on a nuclear submarine… For the feedback session we could give anonymous feedback on the course and [the teacher] wrote an informative weekly blog entry in which he reflected abut each week's class.

Furthermore, examples from other students highlight staff who organise informal extracurricular events such as afternoon discussions over coffee or field trips to experience the subject in a new light and help individuals get to know each other. Therefore, students identify an important aspect of teaching excellence as teachers' ability to create a safe, strong and inclusive learning community.

In their nomination comments, students appreciate how teachers foster students' comfort within a safe learning environment characterised by strong classroom interactions. This theme has strong overlap with the previous theme of commitment to engaging students since students often cite teachers' personable attitude, approachability and respect shown to all students as having a positive impact on fostering this learning community. This theme also has strong overlap with the theme of concerted, visible effort in teaching since student nomination comments also recognise effort of staff who design learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom that help motivate students to contribute as active members of the learning community.

Teachers who are able to create a strong personal connection with their students are often written about at length in nomination comments. Where teachers show an understanding of the strain and stress of student life (including both academic and personal stressors) and make an effort to know each student individually (including their names early in the term), they are regularly discussed at length in nominations. These excellent teachers also identify students requiring additional help and proactively reach out to them. Another aspect of personalisation that is valued by students is when staff provide helpful, detailed feedback on student assessments that provides positive encouragement. Even when teachers are seen as experts who give feedback to learners, students highlight examples of face-to-face feedback sessions and audio-recorded feedback that can break down barriers between teachers and students by helping students feel more supported. For example, one student reflects:

> Her feedback is specific, helpful and constructive. She is especially good at telling you how you can take your work to the next level… she sent her students an approximately three minute audio file with verbal feedback to expand on her written comments. In all my years being graded I have never encountered such a unique form of getting feedback!

When teachers ensure that feedback contains encouragement, students often share that they feel these teachers show confidence in their work, which allows for a more positive dialogue about ways that students can improve their academic work in the future.

This positive dialogue and partnership between students and staff is another component of this theme of student perceptions of teaching excellence. In the nominations, it is evident that students are greatly appreciative of learning environments where they feel they are given the high level attention and respect they feel they deserve. Student comments show that they value staff who receive, value and act on student feedback on teaching practices and course structure to enhance the overall learning experience. In students' views, this fosters a

learning community with shared responsibility for all members' learning and success. Examples of this include staff who work actively with student representatives, hold frequent staff-student liaison committee meetings, receive and act on student feedback, include student-led seminar sessions to help promote discussion, frequently include student presentations in the course, allow students to decide on their own assessment topics and facilitate student/staff partnerships in co-creating the curriculum. One student says:

> …in studio study, he absorbs our visions and ideas and directs in our projects with personal, tailored guidance and retention of our different hopes and aspirations meaning we are constantly building on our work with a mentor who understands it just as much as we do. His wide-reaching expertise but also an openness to new and exciting technologies mean that the fashion course is constantly evolving and crucially at the cutting edge: receiving industry and institution-wide praise, spearheaded by a programme director who is also completely tuned to each one of his students' work, development and wellbeing.

Where an attempt is made to work in collaboration as partners who are supporting both students' and staff members' learning and innovation in the classroom, students show their appreciation for these opportunities for partnership which, in their eyes, leads to their deeper engagement.

Stability of support

A large number of nominations highlight how teachers helped students overcome personal struggles and persevere with their studies. Students frequently discuss in nominations the proactive and positive attitude of staff who help students both inside and outside the classroom. Numerous students describe how they would not have finished their degree or project without the support from the nominated tutor or lecturer. In this way, it appears that students are eager to nominate and praise excellent staff members who play a central role in student welfare and support.

The trends in comments also highlight the importance of consistency, predictability and stability of support from staff. The most frequent word used throughout all nominations is 'always'. Therefore, in many students' eyes the best teachers are dependable, predictable and regularly exceeding students' expectations through the academic and pastoral support. For individuals, examples include demonstrating approachability by being organised, having an open door policy, clearly stating their office hours, being proactive in communications, providing supplementary material or information about subject-related events, being prepared for all planned meetings and following up on discussions that take place. For example, one student writes in a nomination for her personal tutor:

> She has taken the time to understand me and how she can best support my education and experience here at Edinburgh. …To be honest, I'd probably be in a bad place without her… It's incredible to feel like someone has your back here at university and I know that she will always do her absolute best to help whatever situation I find myself in!

In this way, this student recognises the effort that goes into supporting students through varied pastoral and academic challenges that will arise during their student journey.

Furthermore, for courses and programmes, students also give examples of excellent teaching that consists of well-organised lectures with content that builds and helps students understand wider aims. For assessment and feedback, consistency is another sub-theme that emerged since students note in their nominations that excellent teachers regularly assess their work in a fair and constructive manner. Examples here include providing clear, transparent and consistent grading criteria and discussing common themes of feedback with the whole class for complete understanding.

In nomination comments, students also highlight staff who are proactive and communicate well with students. In courses, this aligns with effectively communicating transparent and digestible expectations for student work and assessments. Nominated

lecturers follow up quickly on issues that students take the initiative to raise, or they are knowledgeable about and signpost students to relevant university services and support. For example, one nomination comment states:

> [This member of staff] has been a constant companion throughout my university journey. She has helped me work through very difficult times, sometimes arising from my own health obstacles as a disabled student… She has also been there to celebrate achievements!

For students seeking support with their coursework, the intensity of academic life is buttressed by the comfort they take in having reliable, dependable encouragement and assistance from teaching staff. Through answering emails quickly and being willing to meet when needed, these staff play a key role in student success at university.

Discussion

The results of this study focus on student perceptions of teaching excellence, including the characteristics of excellence in teaching and of teachers in higher education that students recognise. Whilst student learning and also, in some cases, student transformation are noted by students, they more frequently emphasise in their nominations the key aspects relating to teaching because the teaching award scheme focuses on recognising teachers rather than learners. Since the teaching awards are used as a proxy for teaching excellence in this study, student comments tend to focus on the quality of teaching and student support rather than on the quality of the learning. In many cases, nominations seemed to have an underlying assumption of significant learning and deep engagement with the academic subject. Student learning and satisfaction with their higher education experience are indeed extremely important aspects of higher education, but because of students' emphasis on teaching rather

than learning, we emphasise in our analysis the key themes which emerge in relation to teaching.

As seen in Appendix 2, 'lecturing' is the node which appears most often in the data, followed by 'engaging teaching and engagement', 'approachability and availability', 'student growth and development', and 'feedback. Even though students note lecturing most often compared to other teaching methods, it does not mean that students prefer lecturing over other forms of teaching since it may simply be the case that lecturing is simply the predominant mode of teaching in their university. It is notable that other research led by staff on student opinions of good teaching notes that 25% of student data highlights lecturing as a teaching method with an example quotation as '[A good teaching situation is a] good lecture about an interesting subject' (Parpala et al., 2011, p. 554). However, we focus our analysis on students' conceptualisations of what makes teaching excellent – something that we consider to be the interesting subject matter rather than the lecturing method.

The first theme from the results focuses on teachers' concerted, visible effort in teaching, which students are aware of and appreciate. Of course there are many other, less visible aspects of teaching, research and administrative work of lecturers that students do not often see and it is not surprising that they do not mention this in their nominations. However, it is notable that some students do note how busy teaching staff are, with many different demands on their time, and these students suggest that prioritising effort towards teaching should be recognised as one key aspect of teaching excellence. Student nominations tend to highlight a conceptualisation of the higher education curriculum that Lattuca and Stark (2009) call an 'academic plan' with both internal and external influences that affect the clear purposes, content, sequence, instructional processes and resources, and regular evaluation of

all elements of the plan which is scaffolded by building student capacity across their course and degree programme.

However, through their nominations, students demonstrate that they do not focus solely on content and structure of a course or degree programme but, instead, emphasise that excellent curricula are relevant to students' lives and wider subject interests whilst also being flexible and incorporating student feedback. Therefore, this points to what Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) call a process-focused, student-centred view of the curriculum relating to students' own practical learning experiences or staff and students' collaborative, dynamic, and sometimes emancipatory experiences of teaching and learning. Although teaching awards should not mistakenly promote a poor work/life balance for teaching staff who go above and beyond by working outside of what is expected for their job, student nominators do recognise the time and effort that excellent teachers devote.

The second theme of commitment to engaging students highlights various examples of teaching methods that students find to be interesting and stimulating, as well as how teachers engage with students to demonstrate that staff value their students' views and their learning. In previous presentations of research findings, we described this theme as 'charisma, personality and engaging teaching'. However, staff members often disliked the terminology used since they felt that it stresses innate, personal characteristics that are unlikely to change; as such, they did not focus on the most important aspect of this theme of valuing and committing to engaging students and they did not perceive the nuances within this theme. As stated in the introduction, the authors believe that there can be different forms of teaching excellence that will benefit different students so there is not one personality of engaging students, and we think that all teachers have the capacity to improve their teaching given the appropriate support. Teachers' various forms of charisma and personality will

engage students in different ways, and demonstrating their personal academic passion and enthusiasm for both their subject and for teaching their students is a key aspect of teaching excellence.

Through excellent teachers' facilitation of opportunities for student engagement, students perceive that classes are more authentic and relevant to their lives which are important aspects of teaching emphasised by Barnett and Coate (2004) and Kreber (2014). Students can feel that a lecturer is more approachable, relevant, and authentic by using humour in their teaching which creates an air of comfort for students. Although the use of humour in lectures may be seen by some as a superficial form of engagement, students state that they not only feel they are engaging more with the lecturer but also with the course content when they are enjoying classes, especially those held at substandard times of the day. In other educational contexts, it has also been found that educational enjoyment is correlated with student success and willingness to challenge themselves (McGeown, Putwain, St. Clair-Thompson, & Clough, 2017; McGeown, St.Clair-Thompson, & Putwain, 2016; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Humour can be seen as one way that lecturers bring their personality and energy into their teaching methods so that classes are more accessible and enjoyable for students whilst not being dull. This is not surprising and similar findings of student perceptions of teaching excellence indicate that it is essential that classes are not perceived as boring, uninteresting or irrelevant (McGeown et al., 2017; Percy & Salter, 1976).

Student nominations often appear to applaud teachers who transfer their enthusiasm and knowledge through highly engaging, exciting and energetic academic experiences because students often share that these teachers care for them and are inspiring. The third and fourth themes of teaching excellence presented here – breaking down student-teacher barriers and providing stable support – are also linked to the theme of commitment to engaging

students through the concept of care. As in the work of Noddings (2005), students here perceive in their nomination comments that excellent teachers not only care for students as individuals but also develop students' capacity to care – for other members of their learning community and for their academic subject. In this way, inspiring teaching can be seen here and in the work of Jensen et al. (2014) as going beyond teaching excellence through having a transformational, sustained, positive impact on students.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, student perceptions of teaching excellence emphasise staff working in an authentic, moral manner to priortise both students' short-term and long-term interests as learners who enjoy learning. These teachers are approachable individuals who care about their students' development, and who work to facilitate their future successes within and beyond higher education. Although sometimes in the literature authors place the onus of student engagement on the students themselves (Astin, 1984b; Shernoff, 2013), others place a shared responsibility on both staff and students to facilitate effective student engagement (Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010). For example, Kuh defines student engagement as '…the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college [or university] and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities' (2009, p. 683). This shared responsibility for student engagement is also reflected in findings presented here through the effort, commitment, and support that staff provide to help students take responsibility for their learning and succeed in higher education.

Returning to the theoretical work of Skelton (2007), MacFarlane (2007) and Kreber (2007), their five conceptualisations of teaching excellence focus on teaching that promotes students' development of knowledge and logic ('traditional excellence'), employability skills ('performative excellence'), deep learning skills ('psychologised excellence'), empowerment and critical thinking skills ('critical excellence') as well as teachers' authentic motivation to

work in students' best interests ('moral excellence'). The findings presented here suggest that students recognise the work of teachers who promote traditional excellence, performative excellence and psychologised excellence. However, just as Barnett (2004) suggests that students' development of a sense of critical 'being' is as important – if not more so – than developing knowledge and skills in higher education, student participants in this research recognise much more critically what teaching excellence is. This sense of critical 'being' helps students learn and prepare for an 'unknown future' since '…supercomplexity is precisely that paradoxical condition in which our descriptions of the world are always contestable and in which we know that to be the case' (Barnett, 2004, p. 250). Students here focus at length on characterisations of teachers' moral excellence to work with their students to develop learners' own senses of both moral and critical excellence; this empowers students whilst helping them to develop critical 'being' to both deal with supercomplexity and to succeed beyond higher education.

Findings presented here focus on the qualities of excellent teachers that highlight their authentic, intrinsic motivation to provide high quality teaching and student support. Similarly, intrinsic motivation is apparent in the work of Bradley et al. (2015) that highlights three main themes of student perceptions of inspirational and transformative teaching as: student engagement, rapport with students, and 'vocation' or professionalism. As in our similar findings, each of these themes is time-intensive and would not be considered efficient dimensions of teaching. However, students' prioritisation of critical and moral excellence has implications which suggest the important role that student-staff partnerships can play in enhancing learning and teaching whilst embedding the values of 'respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 1). Although partnerships in co-creating the curriculum are not without their challenges (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018), they can facilitate critical and moral teaching excellence that may help both students and teachers become

empowered to be their best selves and enhance the impact of higher education on individuals and their communities.

Conclusion

While this research found that student expectations vary considerably, the themes that emerge across students' nomination comments are notably in line with higher education scholarship and notions of teaching excellence that focus on teachers' effort, their commitment to engaging students, how they break down student-teacher barriers, and how they provide stable support for students. This is well within what universities should expect students to reward and recognise in higher education teaching. Whilst the government and funding bodies may prioritise other conceptualisations of teaching excellence which further their interests in society's productivity, critical and moral conceptualisations of teaching excellence are clearly seen here to be in students' best interests. Students' memorable educational experiences highlight their conceptualisations of excellent teachers who create a student-focused, engaging and supportive learning communities.

There are limitations of this research, including the use of student-led teaching awards as proxies for understanding teaching quality. Whilst the research focuses on data from one large, research-intensive, Russell Group university in Scotland during a limited timeframe, we feel that findings may be highly relevant to other higher education institutions. We have recognised the complex dimensions of the high workload for teaching staff, but the data provided by students does not tend to reflect these complexities since often the research and administrative tasks carried out by teaching staff are not visible to students. Self-selecting students nominate a subset of staff for teaching awards, and little data exists about their demographics, background, academic discipline, expectations, or views on the purpose of higher education. Further research could explore how these areas may influence student

perceptions of teaching quality. It would also be helpful to explore further the extent to which excellent teaching helps students advance their aims at university whilst putting students' interests at the heart of teaching.

This research addresses critical areas in higher education including student voice and student engagement, which have strong implications for the growing practices of student/staff partnership and co-creation of the curriculum. As Greatbatch and Holland (2016) have shown, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is currently placing a strong emphasis on teaching quality in higher education and more research is needed to understand various indicators and proxies of teaching excellence. This research helps to show the legitimacy of student views on their learning and teaching experiences.

Although changes such as advancements in technology and the TEF will invariably lead to important developments in higher education, student voices are valuable contributions to discussions of teaching excellence. We hope that the research findings will resonate in other contexts where students are likely to continue to recognise and reward student-centred, engaging teaching. It is felt that passionate, engaging and inspiring lecturers will always be valued by the students they teach. Similarly, those who show care for their students whilst working in partnership on a personal level to provide high-quality teaching and student support will always be respected and admired by their students.

Appendix 1: Number of teaching award nominations received across the University of Edinburgh

School	Total Nominations
College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	
Business School	124
Edinburgh College of Art	136
Moray House School of Education	189
School of Divinity	86
School of Economics	70
School of Health in Social Science	51
School of History, Classics and Archaeology	206
School of Law	157
School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures	348
School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences	197
School of Social and Political Science	281
College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine	
Deanery of Biomedical Sciences	80
Deanery of Clinical Sciences	42
Deanery of Molecular, Genetic and Population Health Sciences	18
Edinburgh Medical School	58
Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies	109
College of Science and Engineering	
School of Biological Sciences	91
School of Chemistry	85
School of Engineering	150
School of Geosciences	129
School of Informatics	103
School of Mathematics	98
School of Physics and Astronomy	98

Appendix 2: Initial coding nodes aggregated into themes

Node Name	Total Nodes	Main Theme
Lecturing**	605	Charisma, personality and engaging teaching
Engaging teaching and engagement	511	Charisma, personality and engaging teaching
Approachability and availability	508	Breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement and Consistency, predictability and stability of support
Student growth and development	476	Breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement
Feedback**	459	Concerted, visible effort
Clear effort	452	Concerted, visible effort
Support**	384	Consistency, predictability and stability of support
Stimulating interest or further work	356	Charisma, personality and engaging teaching
Caring	258	Breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement
Passion*	226	Charisma, personality and engaging teaching
Simplifying	182	Concerted, visible effort
Comfort	175	Breaking down student-teacher barriers and fostering student engagement
Supplemental Content*	169	Concerted, visible effort
Fun factor	167	Charisma, personality and engaging teaching
Exceeding expectations	167	Concerted, visible effort

** = aggregated nodes

* = part of aggregated lecturing node

Note that the them of 'Consistency, predictability and stability of support' included a large number of the smaller nodes and aggregates though it may appear underrepresented on this list.

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