

Student-Led Teaching Awards

What are they?

Student-Led Teaching Awards are a fantastic method for celebrating good practice in teaching, as well as to create opportunities for learners to get more involved with teaching and learning processes.

The awards are designed to put learners at the heart of the decision-making process – they are the ones who nominate, and sit on the judging panels to decide the winners.

This has widespread benefits to not only the learners and staff being celebrated, but to the institution as a whole.

Why SLTAs?

Teaching Awards are an excellent way to engage with a range of stakeholders, and provide benefits to each of them.

Students

- Give a voice to learners to highlight what makes excellent teaching practice
- Empower learners to get involved with improving learning and teaching methods
- Provide opportunities for learners to develop skills in event management
- Student satisfaction rates can be improved using information from nominations

Staff

- Staff efforts are celebrated and promoted
- Nominations can be used to help staff development
- Staff are made aware of what learners in their subject value when it comes to learning and teaching

Institution

- Nominations provide qualitative evidence of whether strategies employed are successful
- Good teaching practices can be identified and used to improve professional standards
- Student Survey results can be improved based on nominations

Where to start

Taking on SLTAs works best when implemented in partnership between learners and institutions – both groups should be involved in deciding what the awards should look like, and both should want to support the project. You will need financial support from institutional staff in particular, so getting them on board is essential. It is worth noting, however, that there are ways to implement SLTAs whatever your budget. More tips on this can be found below.

Once you have a network of keen individuals, it's time to start putting together ideas for the awards themselves.

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Categories and criteria

The categories of awards you set are very important for encouraging your learners to nominate. **Think about what will engage them, what they care about, and why they would want to nominate teaching staff.** It may be beneficial to get learners involved at this stage, to input into these ideas.

In some institutions, it may be appropriate to only have one category, or very few. In others, there may be scope for a larger range of categories to help celebrate a greater diversity of teaching methods. Either way, it is important the categories are very clear, to avoid putting learners off in the initial stage. If they do not understand what the award represents, they will not be able to nominate staff for it.

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Once you have established the categories, it is sensible to ensure you set out very clear and defined criteria that encapsulate what it is each award represents. Without them, the judging process can prove difficult. Once again, it would be advisable to ask learners on their opinions at this stage, especially as they will form part of the judging panel.

You can adopt several different styles of category, from specific themes to broader topics. For example, Edinburgh Napier use two categories – 'I love my Tutor' and 'I love my PDT' – which are very simple and easy to understand. This was important to engage learners, while the criteria set out were specific enough to ensure a smooth judging process. Other institutions (EUSA, UWS, UHI to name a few) base their categories on specific themes based on feedback from learners, or in conjunction with their own learning and teaching priorities. These regularly include themes such as feedback, innovation, employability, inspiration and organisation.

It is worth considering whether you want to have awards for non-teaching staff as well. At Cardiff University, they have changed their awards slightly to include categories for a range of support staff. Theirs have been renamed 'Enriching Student Life Awards'.

The number of awards you have is also important to consider – **you do not need to have a lot to make them worthwhile.** Think about what is currently relevant to your institution, and what is relevant to the student body. This is something you can change and develop over the years, adding to if necessary.

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Nominations

Timing of the nominations period is extremely important. Try to avoid clashing them with other periods of voting (eg elections of course reps) to minimise confusion. Brighton Students' Union launched theirs as part of a larger Engagement Week campaign, which proved successful. If nominations are low in your first year, try moving the time of nominations to see if it improves engagement. The length of the nomination period also needs to be long enough to encourage thoughtful submissions, but not so long that learners lose interest.

The method of nomination is also something to consider. While some institutions find using hard paper copies useful, others will use online forums. It all depends on the nature of your institution and your awards.

Paper submissions allow for a more hands-on approach to promotion, potentially allowing for a greater number of nominations. If you have lots of awards, however, paper could prove ineffective, overwhelming and environmentally problematic.

Online forms give learners an opportunity to sit and think about their answers, providing a more thoughtful response. They have their own issues, though, as learners are often bombarded with requests to fill out surveys, so you must be careful to avoid 'feedback fatigue'.

Whichever you find suits you, try to ensure you use open questions in your forms. Providing space for comments offers a more in-depth picture of why the individual has been nominated, and can make the shortlisting process easier. This valuable information can also be used to inform other projects within your institution in the future.

It is also advisable to include information on the nomination form about what happens next, so that learners fully understand the shortlisting and award procedures. **Transparency improves the trust in both the process and the results.**

Some institutions incentivise nominating with prizes, however it would be worth trying to establish whether your learners would want that to be the driving force

behind nominating, rather than because the teaching staff were truly inspirational.

Time your nominations to avoid clashing with other periods of voting.

Promotion

Your awards need to have an identity that ties in with your institution and your learners. This can mean something as simple as using appropriate branding, or you could go as far as Marjon Students' Union and use mascots to create a 'buzz'.

Once you have established what your awards will be called, you need to think about exactly how you will promote the nominations. Here are some ideas:

- Send out all-student emails
- Use social media
- Create and display posters
- Ask volunteers to help promote
 - Hand out posters/nomination papers
 - Promote with freebies (eg tea in the library)
 - Give them branded t-shirts to wear
- Create branded freebies with details of how to nominate – badges/lanyards/pens
- Promote through the website using news articles or posters
- Include information in any internal newsletters
- Ask course representatives to help promote
 - Word-of-mouth
 - Lecture shout-outs
- Send out all-staff emails

CSM at UAL asked their students to create the physical awards themselves. It was an excellent way to engage with students and promote their work alongside that of the staff.

Promotion does not stop once nominations close.

Promotion does not stop once nominations have closed, however. At your award ceremony, make sure you take the opportunity to collect photos and video clips which can be used to help promote the event for future years. Asking your media learners to collaborate on this would be a great way to bring them back into the project, as well as save money. Their involvement will help to spread the word about the event through learner audiences, hopefully meaning greater engagement in following years.

Live streaming the event, or sharing live highlights from it, is also an excellent way to engage with people who could not attend. This would be particularly beneficial for distance or part-time learners.

Judging and shortlisting

Once your nominations are in, you need to put together a panel to shortlist and decide a winner. It is crucial that learners sit on the judging panel, but it will be worth thinking about what sort of learners might want to be involved, such as reps. It might be that you have learners jumping at the chance to be involved, especially if you highlight how impressive it would look on a CV.

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Make sure your panel is large enough to represent a diverse student body, whilst small enough to allow everyone to meet and decide together.

If you have strong and clear criteria, the judging process should be easy. It might still be worth discussing your exact method and strategy for shortlisting, such as a scoring system, to make the process transparent. It is also worth keeping in mind that the quality of the nomination, rather than the quantity, is important. If one staff member has received more nominations than another, it does not necessarily mean they are more deserving.

When you have your shortlist and winners, it is worth deciding how you want to let the rest of the nominees know they have been mentioned. Being nominated should be an achievement in itself, so it is important to highlight this.

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Award ceremony

Next, you need to think about how you want to present your awards. Some institutions chose to have a large, formal celebration with a meal, while others will host smaller and more casual events. Many choose to hold them in union settings or alongside learner voice events, to emphasise learners being at the heart of the project, while others simply added the awards to pre-existing events (eg learner voice awards or learner voice conference) to save on organisation time and money. If you adopt this latter approach, consider whether the event is relevant and ensure it does not dilute the importance of the awards.

This is a perfect opportunity to put the emphasis back onto the learners. It works successfully in Sunderland Students' Union, where their 'Events Management' students deliver the project as part of their second year studies. Support is offered through the Course Leader, but ultimately the students plan and execute the project as a whole, including the ceremony at the end.

Where you hold your event will then help decide who you should invite. More casual events are most appropriate for the staff who have been nominated and the learners who nominated them, whereas if you are hosting a formal event, you may want to consider inviting some VIPs. Guests invited to other institutions include the QAA, local politicians, NUS and HEA. If your attendance includes VIPs it will help to raise the profile of the event.

The awards themselves can usually take the form of a simple trophy or certificate, rather than any kind of cash prize. These can be sustainable, if they are kept for a year, returned and simply engraved with a new name annually. If appropriate, they could even be kept in public trophy cabinets to further promote the awards and their winners.

Evaluation and next steps

A key part of SLTAs is evaluating the results. This can be time consuming, but can also deliver incredibly valuable information for your institution.

Ensure as wide a group of learners have been involved as possible, as well as engaging with all teaching staff. Look over your nominations and evaluate whether any of these groups have been missed, and what you can do to improve this in following years.

Use the information contained within nominations as a basis for your strategy for coming years. Identify key areas that are popular with learners (eg passion, generosity of time, humour) and incorporate them into schemes of work. They can be used to guide teaching strategies, course design, and even staff development. With this, standards at your institution can improve, as well as NSS scores or other student satisfaction surveys. STLAs are a valuable source of learner feedback, if analysed properly.

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If you are going to use the nominations to train your teaching staff, it is important to note that you should use the information to make them aware of what learners value, rather than telling them how to teach.

Your awards might change over time, depending on what is relevant to your learners. As nominations increase, you could add more awards to celebrate a greater diversity of teaching practice.

After analysing your results, **you need to share them**. Some institutions create booklets which summarise the outcomes of the awards. This can inform learners and staff of the good practices that have been rewarded, as well as the process as a whole.

Using this information in representative training can give your learners an idea of which practices were valued by their peers, and can empower them to create a 'bottom up' pressure for change.

Nominations can be put into a bank of quotes regarding learning and teaching which can be used in speeches, training and reports. Quantitative data can be used for statistics, to reinforce arguments you are making in campaigns.

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Summary

There is a lot to think about if you are planning on implementing STLAs, but the end result can be extremely rewarding for everyone involved. Start small, and develop plans on a yearly basis to make it easier. This is a partnership practice that everyone can appreciate, as any opportunity to celebrate the hard work of staff or students should be welcomed.