

Enhancing the Student Led Teaching Awards Process

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Summary Page

Nominations & Awards (Summary)

Most Students' Associations have an established student-led Teaching Awards process. The nominations cycle can be run as normal, including a disclaimer about data use and in future years, reflecting changes recommended from the previous analysis process.

Researcher Onboarding (Summary)

Cover the initial year via grant funding (e.g. Enhancement Themes) to support the hiring of a student researcher, or small team of researchers. This development opportunity is especially suited to postgraduate students or qualitative researchers and training in NVivo or similar software should be provided.

Setting the Project & Coding (Summary)

Establish the scope of the project, defining key questions and aims. Carry out an initial review of a sample of the nominations and followed by an in-depth and broad NVivo coding of all relevant nominations.

Analysis & Theme Setting (Summary)

Utilizing the aims of the project, the next stage is to group, interpret, and translate the relevant codes into broad themes and sub-themes. Reflect on whether the themes adequately reflect the data.

Report Writing (Summary)

Organise the themes and sub-theme structure into a detailed report. Explain and define each theme and provide examples from the student nominations. Consider audience and length (creating a summary report as necessary).

Enhancing Teaching (Summary)

Present findings to students (e.g. Course Representatives) and to staff members (e.g. University Learning & Teaching Committee). Empower Reps to use data to advocate for enhancements. Encourage staff to review Practical Considerations. Build findings into Rep Training and potentially, a staff development course.

Step One: Nominations and Awards (Detail)

Many Students' Associations in Scotland have an established student-led Teaching Awards process. Student-led Teaching Awards usually include:

- Establishing Award Categories and Criteria
- Collecting student nominations
- Ranking and scoring nominations
- Selecting a shortlist and winners
- Presenting Awards

In the first year of running an enhanced Teaching Awards process, the nominations & awards phases can be run as normal, so long as there is at least one free-response text box where students can describe why their nominee is an outstanding teacher.

One small addition may also be necessary: student nominators need to be informed that the text of their nomination may be used to inform research and a report. For example, here is the text used by the St Andrews Students' Association:

By submitting your nomination, you are consenting to us sharing the content of your nomination statement with your nominee. We will keep your name anonymous, but depending on the information you chose to include, it may be possible for a staff member to identify you.

The Students' Association may also use the content of the nomination statements as part of a research effort to identify good teaching practice at the University. All information collected will be separated from identifiable information and will be used as part of an aggregated study and report. A small number of nomination comments may also be included in future promotional materials for the Teaching Awards. If you wish to opt out of either process, or wish to withdraw your nomination, please email us at union.st-andrews.ac.uk.

Our data protection practices are in accordance with the General Data Protection Act (GDPR) and the Students' Association is committed to protecting the personal data of students.

After the initial year, data and findings from the enhanced analysis should inform the structure and focus of the normal nominations and awards process. (For example, encouraging clearer criteria or modifying scoring guidance).

Step Two: Researcher Onboarding (Detail)

Bringing in a student researcher to undertake the thematic analysis ensures that every step of the Teaching Awards remains student-led. Funding may be available through the Enhancement Themes or through a variety of other campus-based grants or Students' Association resources.

A funding proposal could estimate a ratio of roughly 100 hours of project-work for per 200 nominations. This timeline included estimates for the following phases:

- training/preparation
- data analysis and coding
- theme setting
- report writing
- and presenting findings.

Additional researchers or more hours may be necessary for larger nomination numbers.

At St Andrews

Our initial year of funding came from the Enhancement Theme. Long term, we are looking to invest in making the position a regularly-recruited student researcher post, hired through the Students' Association.

Advertising the post by contact departments who regularly undertake qualitative data analysis projects (e.g. Social Anthropology, Psychology, etc.) resulted in a large number of undergraduate and postgraduate applications.

Advertise the post as part-time, flexible, and project-based (rather than a set number of hours per week). The position offers an incredible qualitative data research opportunity, and the chance to present findings to many high-level University and Students' Association leaders.

The successful applicant should be trained or experienced in NVivo (a data processing software) or similar, in addition to contextual training that explains the process of the Teaching Awards and outcomes of the project. Additional training on GDPR and data protection is also recommended.

The researcher, in collaboration with the relevant education-focused Representatives and Students' Association Staff, should agree on and outline a timeline for each of the above phases. Regular check-in mechanisms can also be established. After the researcher is granted access to the nominations, coding and analysis can begin.

Step Three: Coding (Detail)

The primary analysis work of a Teaching Awards project will be with the qualitative data (i.e. the free response question[s] within the nomination form). Individual student responses tend to be highly varied, given that students will highlight personal observations and will write their nominations differently. Establishing questions and aims for the project in advance is essential to process such a full and diverse data set.

One initial approach for identifying questions and aims is to ask the researcher to read through a small sample of randomly selected nominations. This helps the researcher to evaluate the scope of work which can be reasonably undertaken in the project. Taking note of questions, perspectives, and observations, allows the researcher to discuss key outcomes with the other project leads and contributors.

At St Andrews

In our funding proposal, we opted to give special focus to the areas of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity as well as online/hybrid learning. This helped us to identify which categories of nominations to review and what kinds of codes would need to be identified.

During our initial review of a small sample of nominations, we came to a series of other, smaller conclusions. For example, we chose to ignore comments in which teachers were described as going beyond a reasonably expected workload.

Finally, we considered our audience. We sought to identify findings that could be useful to student representatives and teaching staff to enhance learning and teaching. Setting these priority areas and asking questions helped our researcher begin the coding process with project outcomes in mind.

Approaching the coding process, it is important to 'ask' the data: what are the most common features of excellent teaching mentioned by the students? How can these features be turned into applicable practical steps for improving the quality of teaching? And other such questions that align with the aims of the project.

After the questions and aims have been defined the researcher(s) can move to coding. The first stage of coding should take as broad of an approach as possible. All points of interest in the nominations should be broadly codified to preserve the context.

From there, the initial round of codes can be categorised, including an area for miscellaneous codes (the significance of which may be unclear initially).

The first round of coding, on top of its instrumental use, will provide the researcher with a better understanding of the data. However, the codes in themselves are not a sufficient basis for analysis. The researcher(s) should group, interpret, and translate them into themes.

Step Four: Analysis & Theme Setting (Detail)

Thematic analysis through NVivo coding (or similar, qualitative data analysis) demands significant input from the researcher. As a research method NVivo coding is not strictly systematised, which allows for a high degree of interpretation and creativity. Therefore, the exercise of thematic analysis will depend on the individual strengths and preferences of a researcher.

Once again, the main questions and aims of the project play a prominent role in turning codes into broader themes. In an analysis of Teaching Awards nominations, codes represent what students have talked about. By contrast, themes, should provide the researcher(s) with clear answers for the set questions.

At St Andrews

As previously mentioned, the practical applicability of our findings (both for teaching staff and for student representatives) was identified early as a top priority. Thus, in grouping the codes to define themes, we sought to ensure that each grouping allowed for an actionable set of practical steps.

As a result, we chose not to make popular, but intangible codes (“enthusiasm” or “engaging”) into thematic headings. Our three general theme areas ended up being centred around: (1) approaches associated with care; (2) creation of collaborative atmosphere; and (3) adaptation of teaching materials.

We adopted a separate list of codes related to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion as well as online/hybrid learning, which we made into separate headings with their own sub-themes.

It is probable that initial codes will change drastically or prove to be insignificant during the analysis stage. This is a normal part of thematic analysis. However, the researcher(s) should remain reflexive throughout the process to ensure that the analytical interpretation does not come at the expense of fitting the data into the pre-expected outcomes.

The researcher and the project management team should collaborate on the theme setting process, asking questions to align the data into related headings. Additional sub-groupings of codes contribute to the formation of sub-themes.

Once the coded data has been arranged into thematic and sub-thematic headings, detailed reporting can begin.

Step Five: Report Writing (Detail)

The purpose of a final report is to give detail and focus to the structure identified in the theme setting stage. An explanatory section at the beginning of each theme should reflect a definition of what kinds of student observations are included in the theme and provide a brief overview of any sub-structures below.

A final report structure might take the following form as an example:

- I. Introduction
- II. Methodology
- III. Theme One
 - a. Definitions and Key Findings
 - b. Subtheme(s)
 - i. Definitions
 - ii. Findings
 - c. Practical Steps
- IV. [Additional Themes, structured as above]
- V. Other Recommendations
- VI. Appendices
 - a. List of Codes

At St Andrews

We found it helpful to write two reports: a main, comprehensive report and a shorter version that focused primarily on definitions and practical steps.

The researcher should determine the best presentation of information to fit the intended audiences. Incorporating graphical illustrations, key quotes, statistical charts, and side-columns all help to present the findings of the analysis and their implications.

A finalised report can be published on the Students' Association Website and as an internally through the College or University.

Step Six: Enhancing Teaching (Detail)

In order to influence and enhance learning and teaching, the findings of the completed report can be presented to two groups of stakeholders: (1) Student Representatives; (2) College/University Staff.

Student Representatives

The final report paints a picture of what students consider excellent teaching to look like, providing an invaluable, data-driven resource for Representatives to advocate for improvements and enhancements to learning and teaching. Reps, from the course level up to education-Sabbaticals should feel empowered to use and present themes and practical applications to staff. The report also provides representatives with specific ideas for how to provide positive feedback to staff when practice aligns with the report's core themes.

Here are a few ways the report can reach representatives:

- Embed findings about what excellent teaching looks like in Course Rep Training
- Present findings (or practical applications) at a Rep conference or forum
- Use themes to form survey or focus group questions for Course Reps
- Encourage Reps to take themes and practical applications into student-staff meetings

College/University Staff

Findings from the report offer staff a valuable opportunity to make tangible, student-informed enhancements to their teaching. The report is based on nominations for teaching excellence, and therefore includes only positive enhancements for staff to consider and adopt. Findings can also validate and give context to existing good practice.

Here are a few ways the report can reach staff:

- Present the findings at key quality assurance bodies (e.g. the College/University Learning and Teaching Committee)
- Embed practical applications to training for new Graduate Teaching Assistants
- Build a workshop or staff development course on what students think excellent teaching looks like in practice

Finally, findings from the Teaching Awards report should be used to make improvements to the entire process for future years, noting that some changes may take several semesters to fully implement.