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Student-Led Teaching Awards: lessons from an initiative in Scotland¹

Introduction

Following a hugely successful pilot in Scotland in 2009-10, the joint Higher Education Academy (HEA) and National Union of Students (NUS) Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTA) initiative has gone from strength to strength. SLTAs are a positive method of raising the profile of teaching and celebrating best practice. In just three years they have become well established throughout the UK. This report brings together findings from the first two years of the SLTA initiative in Scotland (academic years 2009-10 and 2010-11). Based primarily upon data collected in the second year, this report will: provide background to the initiative, its ethos, aims and objectives; discuss some of the key findings from the initiative; and consider what can be learned through the analysis of the data available through SLTAs and the wider applicability of the SLTAs to the sector.

The report consists of three main sections. Section 1 details the history and the development of the SLTAs in Scotland and the expansion of the scheme throughout the UK. It provides a brief overview of the character of the scheme and how it was run (considered to be central to the scheme’s success). A section on the methodology discusses the evaluation of the scheme and analysis of the data from participants, which together form the basis of the remaining sections of this report.

Section 2 of the report focuses on the results of the evaluation process, pulling together themes from interviews and questionnaires completed by the scheme’s participants. This includes details of some of the common benefits of running the awards as reported by participants, as well as the common challenges faced and how they were overcome. This section also considers the potential wider impact of SLTAs for the sector.

Section 3 focuses on the results of an analysis of sample data received from individual participating award schemes. It considers how the construction of the criteria for winning awards may influence the content and number of the nominations and how one might use this phenomenon as a starting point for further research or targeted campaigning. The section concludes with a closer look at three commonly themed award categories and how data from SLTAs may be used to improve an understanding of student conceptions of excellence in their learning experience.

Following the main body of text in each section, a section summary highlights some of the key points and main findings in that section.

I. The Student-Led Teaching Awards initiative

I.1 What are Student-Led Teaching Awards?

The Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs) are the focus of an ongoing collaborative project between the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the National Union of Students (NUS). Initiated in Scotland in 2009-10, the first year involved eight Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs)². Two of the eight initial participants (University of...
Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt University) had previously, and independently, run SLTAs bringing valuable knowledge and experience to the new HEA-NUS initiative. The SLTAs saw participating students’ unions supported to design and develop their own awards scheme, in agreement with their partner institution, and with the deliberate flexibility to choose award categories and criteria, promotional activity, selection processes and the ultimate awards, as appropriate to their institution and student body. SLTAs were envisaged as a high profile and positive way both to raise the status of teaching in higher education, and to affirm the status of students as active partners in their learning and teaching experience.

Student-Led Teaching Awards have been embraced by the sector in Scotland3 and a successful first year saw an expansion of the scheme for its second round. In the 2010-11 scheme some 11,000 students’ nominations were received at 13 participating institutions (the majority of HEIs in Scotland).

As well as showing SLTAs to be immensely popular with both staff and students, the 2010-11 scheme explored the potential of SLTAs as an excellent opportunity to gather a rich body of data, both on the positive effects of the scheme, and on what students perceive to be praiseworthy learning and teaching practice.

1.2 Expansion throughout the UK

The 2011-12 expansion of the SLTA scheme and significant further investment has seen the HEA and NUS work with students’ unions across the UK. Drawing on the Scottish pilot, the scheme consisted of several streams of activity designed to demonstrate the benefits of running, and further raise the profile of, SLTA schemes.

A diverse group of 21 students’ unions new to the scheme were supported with grants and training to create their own SLTA schemes, while a further group of students’ unions, already running student-led schemes, worked on developing their awards and better utilising the data collected. In addition, a suite of resources has been made available to make the SLTA creation and development processes even easier. As with previous years, SLTA Network meetings formed an integral part of the scheme.

NUS research suggests that roughly 62% of students’ unions at multi-faculty institutions in 2011-12 ran student-led teaching awards. This includes those new to the scheme that year. Interestingly, however, this impressive figure drops to around 18% on small and specialist campuses, suggesting an area for further development4.

With NUS-QAA research finding teaching skills to be “the most important feature of good quality learning and teaching experience” (over 90% of participating students rating it as ‘important or very important’), SLTAs, and the data available through them, may not only help raise the profile of teaching in general (in line with initial objectives), but may also prove crucial in helping to identify and disseminate good practice at institutional level and across the sector. At the very least we can justifiably claim, among other qualities, SLTAs provide:

• a positive way to build and develop good relationships between the student body and their institution;
• an immensely popular and morale-building opportunity to bring students and staff together to celebrate success and mutual appreciation;
• a promising way to find out more about what students value most in their learning experience, including their conceptions of excellence in teaching.

3 It is worthy of note that, at the time of writing, unlike the rest of the UK there is no National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in Scotland. Thus institutional recognition and reward is all the more an important way to help raise the status of learning and teaching.

4 Thanks are due to Oliver Williams of NUS for a summary of the UK-wide scheme. A report on the findings of 2011-12 UK-wide scheme is forthcoming.

Each of these points will be discussed in more detail below, following remarks on the character and structure of the scheme, and the 2010-11 evaluation and analysis of the scheme that provides much of the basis for the findings in this report.

1.3 An ethos of partnership, collaboration and diversity

The SLTA initiative arose against a background of continuing growth in collaboration and partnership culture between student organisations (i.e. unions and associations, hereupon referred to as unions for clarity) and their respective HEIs. The initiative sought to encourage and facilitate this growth while:

- offering a novel, positive way to celebrate excellence in learning and teaching practice;
- recognising the diversity of participating institutions, and the differing needs and requirements of the institution and student body;
- providing a forum to encourage the sharing of ideas, experience and perspectives.

Qualification for participation in the project was simple and straightforward: applications were to a) secure a joint union-institution partnership, b) ensure the awards would be ‘student-led’, and c) offer no cash rewards for winners. With minimal membership restrictions, each union would be able to find the space to develop an awards scheme that best reflected the needs and culture of their respective institutions and students.

Participants were offered a grant to help ‘kick-start’ their SLTAs and facilitative support from the HEA and NUS Scotland to help ensure their success. The latter came in the form of quarterly ‘SLTA Network’ meetings, jointly hosted by HEA and NUS Scotland, and attended by both the participants’ union and institution representatives.

While a couple of participating institutions already had student-led teaching awards prior to the initiative, these meetings offered a unique opportunity for networking and discussion around the awards. Initially focusing on the practicalities of running awards schemes it was very quickly realised that SLTAs could have a much bigger impact than initially conceived and Network members began to identify and discuss new ways to capitalise on the potential of their awards schemes.

Each participating institution’s scheme comprised a number of awards under a range of categories and criteria. Students were invited to submit nominations for award categories such as Innovative Teaching, Best Feedback and Outstanding Support. Every participant was keen to avoid the awards being perceived as a ‘popularity contest’ (a concern expressed by staff at some participating institutions), with the strength of supporting statements invariably being adopted as the deciding factor, rather than the volume of nominations. This also helped ensure smaller departments were not disadvantaged.

Throughout the scheme a strong commitment was seen in all Network members to enhancing learning and teaching and partnership working. This positive attitude has helped both emphasise and strengthen the ethos of the awards, and to enhance their validity and credibility. While both the student-led aspect of the awards, and agreement of the institution were conditions of participation, the success and flourishing of these partnerships, and the enthusiastic staff reception of the predominantly student-initiated schemes, has been a vital factor in the initiative’s overall success.

The initiative in Scotland had a distinctive model. The HEA and NUS Scotland worked in active partnership with joint ownership and delivery of the support programme. This allowed for the frequent exchange and development of ideas and a flexibility that suited both the exploratory nature of an evolving initiative and the distinctive features of the HE sector in Scotland. Other models are, of course, available, with evidence of independent schemes, and a UK-wide scheme currently operational. For those interested in the process of setting up such a scheme, selecting a model of ownership and delivery appropriate to the circumstances will be worthy of some consideration.

As part of the UK-wide scheme NUS conducted a benchmarking exercise to gauge SLTA activity across the UK.
The distinctive model employed for the SLT A initiative in Scotland contributed to, and was perhaps necessary for, the evolution and success of the project.

The role of both the HEA and NUS Scotland in the SLT A initiative has been to facilitate and support individual institutional schemes, to promote sharing of practice, learning and challenges, and to develop a peer-support community of practice. The aim has been to allow every SLT A scheme to have the freedom to evolve organically; the resulting variety and language of individual award titles and categories reflect the culture, challenges and focus of each institution. The participating institutions have credited the helpful but hands-off approach of the HEA and NUS Scotland, and the ensuing flexibility, as a key factor in the success of SLTAs.

Allowing for the individual award schemes to evolve freely did not prevent certain similarities from arising. A useful feature of the Network approach is that it provided a forum for the open discussion of some of the issues and challenges faced in running SLTAs. Probably as a consequence of this, the majority of participants arrived at similar conclusions on a number of issues, particularly around the structure, processes and rules.

1.4 Methodology

While it was always recognised that there were potential lines of research enquiry into the Student-Led Teaching Awards initiative, it is important to note that this was not conceived as a ‘full-blown’ research project, in the first instance. The aims and objectives of SLTAs (outlined above) are geared primarily towards the practical benefits they can deliver. The success of the scheme in its first year, and the broader potential of SLTAs highlighted through Network discussion, made clear not only the importance of a continuing evaluation of the scheme, but of capturing and analysing some of the rich data available through SLTAs. Accordingly, a more detailed evaluation and a method of capturing a sample of the data were introduced to the scheme in its second year (2011-12). The methodology used for evaluation of the scheme and subsequent data analysis was as follows:

1. Evaluation questionnaire (appendix 3).
   To be conducted midway through the scheme, the questionnaire aimed to allow participants to reflect on their scheme’s progress and provide practical details about their scheme — preparations, promotional campaigns, timelines — and to highlight any challenges impacting upon their initial plans.

2. Impact interview (appendix 4).
   To be conducted towards the end of most 2010-11 schemes, the interview focused on the outcomes of running SLTAs, including the perceived impact upon the students’ union, student body, staff body and the institution. It also aimed to measure overall success. A record of responses would be taken for later analysis.

3. Analysis template (appendix 2).
   To be designed with two purposes in mind: to encourage analysis of individual schemes and to capture a sample of data sufficient for an overall analysis. It was to include a breakdown of nomination figures, categories of award and their criteria, samples of supportive qualitative statements for award winners and nominees, and any wider outcomes from running the schemes.

As an exploratory piece of research the hypothesis was, in a sense, open. While no specific hypothesis was due to be tested, there was an intention to develop a set of exercises and documents structured such that, once completed, would provide a sufficiently broad picture of SLTAs to be the subject of analysis. Once the schemes for 2010-11 were at or near an end, the data and other documents would be gathered and analysed to detect any emerging themes and trends.

All 13 of the 2010-11 participants provided a response to the three evaluation and analysis exercises described above (see Appendix 2, 3, and 4 for sample material). Reflection and analysis of the evaluation questionnaire, impact interviews and analysis templates form the basis for this report.
Two important points should be emphasised with regard to the collection of evaluation and analysis data. Firstly, it should be emphasised that the overall analysis of the schemes is based on a sample of the data rather than all (some 11,000) students’ nominations. While an analysis of a grander scale would no doubt provide a valuable addition to research on and around SLTAs, it is not within the scope of this report.

Secondly, it is important to note the essential role of SLTA Network meetings in providing valuable information and insight into both the initiative and its individual SLTA schemes. While such information does not easily submit to statistical analysis, it nonetheless formed an integral part of the scheme and its development, and was acknowledged as such by the majority of participants in response to evaluation activities.

**Section 1 summary**

The Student-Led Teaching Awards are an immensely popular and successful joint initiative by the HEA and NUS. The initiative has grown considerably in both scale and scope, encompassing the majority of HEIs in Scotland in its second year, and going UK-wide in its third year. By 2011-12, around 62% of multi-faculty HEIs across the UK were involved in SLTA activity. The SLTAs have proven to be:

- a novel, positive way to celebrate excellence in learning and teaching practice, while accommodating the diversity of participating institutions and their student bodies;

- an immensely popular and morale-building opportunity to bring students and staff together to celebrate success and mutual appreciation and to help build and develop student-institution partnerships;

- a promising way to find out more about what students value most in their learning experience, and their conceptions of excellence in learning and teaching.

This paper brings together the lessons from the first two years of the SLTA initiative in Scotland making use of the results of specifically designed evaluation and analysis activities from the scheme’s second year. Sections 2 and 3 look in detail at a selection of these findings.
2. SLTA evaluation and lessons from the initiative

The importance of success to the sustainability of such schemes is, of course, considerable, and the efforts taken to achieve success should not be underestimated. That the majority of HEIs in Scotland were participating by the second year, along with the sheer number of students’ nominations, and the development of a UK-wide scheme, are all testament to the success and appeal of the underlying principles. Success is further emphasised in impact interviews – the language used in response to questions of success is unequivocal and enthusiastic:

Absolutely a success … there is nothing negative to say about the awards.
(Stirling Students’ Union)

Absolutely a success … and have built upon last year’s awards.
(University of the Highlands and Islands)

Very much a success.
(Edinburgh University Students’ Association)

Once success is established, however, it is appropriate to reflect on deeper questions. What are the reasons for success and what were the challenges faced? What can be learned from this success and from the scheme in general? What, if any, are the wider implications and applications of SLTAs for the sector? It is these issues to which Sections 2 and 3 are dedicated.

2.1. Influencing partnerships and strengthening relationships

From the outset, the project was expected to have a positive impact, but the extent of this impact, and the energy and vibrancy generated by the schemes, was often remarkable. One of the most consistently reported benefits of running SLTAs was the development and strengthening of partnerships between staff and students.

The following quote typifies the way that many participating unions found positive impact both on their partnership with the institution and on staff-student relationships more generally:

On all levels, the strengthening partnership between staff and student has been impressive. Students have relished the opportunity to ‘give thanks’ to those who have made their experience the best it can be. Staff were bowled over by the simple act of a single nomination, and the awards have allowed us to demonstrate positive strength, ambition and maturity to the institution, to which the university have responded with incredible positivity. Simply put, this scheme has smashed any remaining ‘them and us’ culture; exactly the feeling that we students want on our campus. It is our community too and we must seize every opportunity to contribute to its future. (Heriot-Watt University Students’ Union)

2.1.1 Strengthening staff-student relationships

At SLTA Network meetings, unions and institutions shared concern that reductions in institutional budgets, greater scrutiny of performance, and increases to teaching, research, and administrative workloads, could adversely affect the staff-student relationships. With student surveys and satisfaction ratings increasingly being used as performance indicators, there has been a perceived risk that student engagement could be either feared or treated with suspicion by some academics.
It is against a background of such concerns that the positive character of SLT As comes into full force. The 11,000 students’ nominations received across the 13 schemes demonstrate the extent to which students appreciate committed and dedicated members of staff. The opportunity to express what they value did not go unappreciated:

> [The] students feel empowered and are given a platform to express what they find valuable in their learning experience. It has improved the student-institution partnership at a time when cuts are being made. (Stirling Students’ Union)

Students’ unions repeatedly mentioned the positive impact SLTAs had on their relationship with the wider student and staff bodies, putting them directly in contact with previously out-of-reach individuals and areas of the institution. The impact of this positive, celebratory message, and the extent to which students engaged with it, cannot be underestimated.

> The student body has embraced the awards. It has been a chance to give something back ... It has helped to develop relationships between staff/institution and students who are engaging with one another in a very positive light ... It is such a positive project. (University of the Highlands and Islands)

Given the number of nominations received, it is widely agreed that student support and awareness of SLTAs has exceeded expectation and many comments from nominees and winners indicate that staff support and appreciation for the scheme is also excellent:

> The first ever DUSA Inspire Awards were a huge success and students really engaged with the opportunity to directly reward their lecturers. The nominees were individuals who had not previously been nominated for University Teaching Awards and it proved asking students for their feedback is central to their success ... The evening proved very emotional and I was delighted to see how humbled the winners were. It was my proudest achievement this year. (Dundee University Students’ Association)

> Staff morale has improved. One winner takes the award with him wherever he goes. (Napier Students’ Association)

2.1.2 Relationships between institutions and students’ unions

Against an emerging culture of campus partnerships in Scotland, students’ unions and institutions were deliberately asked to co-sign the SLTAs funding agreements to ensure buy-in from both sides and help promote and develop working partnership. This approach proved both vital to the success of the scheme and central to its development.

> Staff … were very positive about the scheme from the outset. The Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) … gave his full backing to our work, as well as contributing ideas. (University of Glasgow)

As the projects developed, particularly during the first year (2009-10), some minor relationship tensions were reported. In some cases these tensions centred on ownership of the awards schemes. In others, it was in the ethos and planning. It is clear in the feedback from all participants that such initial tensions subsequently eased. Importantly, SLTAs were seen as revealing pre-existing tensions, rather than creating them, and in some cases providing a platform for resolution.

> SLTA Network meetings were cited by the majority of participating unions as providing valuable insight into union-institution relationships on other campuses, as well as support. They created a forum for positive discussion and several participants cited the combined patronage of HEA and NUS Scotland (in their joint role as neutral brokers) as helping to ease any existing friction. Whatever the cause, for any given scheme these tensions appeared to have largely dissipated by the second year: A reduction in the reporting of such tensions in the initiative over time suggests lessons from the collective Network experience were well received by newcomers.
Working in partnership on a positive project, combined with the benefits of interaction within a wider network, is seen to have directly contributed to a growth in mutual trust and respect between students’ unions and senior management teams. This is further demonstrated by institutions’ faith in the ability of students’ unions to take the lead in running the awards schemes, while providing support where possible.

The positive campus-wide influence of SLTAs has been of great benefit to students’ unions, often raising their status as partners of the institution and creating ‘political capital’ for other campaign activity. Running the awards had clear ‘reputational benefits’ for several students’ unions:

*The profile of (and respect for) NSA increased ... staff talked about the NSA as an organisation, remarking on how useful and positive the awards are.*
(Napier Students’ Association)

*The SA are fulfilling one of their main aims and functions which is to connect students with their institutions. The SA is now seen as a more valuable partner for the institution ... It has improved the student/institution partnership.*
(Stirling Students’ Union)

It is clear that the SLTA initiative has made, and can continue to make, an excellent contribution to the continued development of strong institution-union partnerships in the sector. As a note of caution, however, several unions raised concerns that with the extent of institutional change across the sector, and the sensitivity this often brings, the continuation of SLTAs may be at risk. In the 2010-11 scheme, several reported the need to ‘walk a fine tightrope’, as potential course closures threatened to overtake the SLTAs intended purpose. Others shared concerns that while they see the awards strengthening the relationship between students and lecturers, this may in turn affect their relationship with senior management. Some participants noted that sensitivities accompanying changes on campus seemed to affect the number of nominations for departments and staff members.

However, even in a shifting landscape, these issues have thus far failed to derail or impede the success of SLTAs. The independent, positive, student-led nature of the awards appears to have helped ensure almost universal support, and with space to operate flexibly, participants remain confident in their ability to manage any minor difficulties in relationships and the political impact of SLTAs. Both formal comments and opinions expressed at Network meetings indicated that unions and institutions, and students and staff, continued to welcome the awards as a “much welcome pause” and an “opportunity to raise campus morale during uncertain times”, and providing a positive focus for discussion.

2.1.3 Overcoming practical challenges

The success of the initiative is by no means chance, and many of the scheme’s impact reports indicated the challenges that needed to be overcome before the success could be enjoyed.

Unexpected success and unexpected workload

During the first year of the SLTAs project, several participants reported their schemes being almost a victim of their own success due to an overwhelming response from students, which students’ unions were not anticipating or fully prepared for. While this may sound like a ‘champagne problem’, union staff and officer workloads came under increasing pressure, creating an urgent need to identify and implement potential improvements.

*The level of hard work will be rewarded in the feedback you receive from the university and staff.*
(Napier Students’ Association)

While additional effort and workloads were invariably seen as worthwhile, recognition of the need to review administration, timelines, publicity, nomination submission procedures, judging panels and other structural components of individual schemes
were common features in post-award impact interviews. It should perhaps be expected that a new initiative comprised of largely new and independent awards would involve a degree of ‘organic’ refinement and development, but it is helpful advice for newcomers to the awards to be prepared both for a heavy workload, and for continual fine-tuning.

Larger, better-resourced unions, with a strong non-commercial staff base, were best able to cope in developing systems and administrative procedures. In unions with only one sabbatical, the challenges, owing to a lack of continuity, were more apparent.

**Addressing caution and scepticism**

Despite the generally excellent staff reception, a small amount of dissent and scepticism was reported in a few of the schemes (often in their early stages). In a small number of cases, staff withdrew from the scheme after being shortlisted or nominated for an award. Reasons given focused either upon concerns about the awards amounting to a ‘popularity contest’, or stemmed from objections to students being responsible for the identification and reward of best practice. In the worst cases, withdrawal accounted for two or three staff across a participating institution. With a very conservative estimate seeing a minimum of 600\(^7\) staff nominated across all schemes in 2010-11, and with only a few participants reporting this issue, concerns of this variety are perhaps not statistically pressing. In other cases (mentioned above) there was some perceived friction with senior management over the running of SLTA schemes. Whether these cases are statistically pressing or not, it is important that they are addressed.

Part of the issue appears to have arisen from a difficulty in clearly conveying the purpose of the awards. This task would no doubt prove especially challenging against a background of pre-existing scepticism, or even well-meaning but rigorous caution. However, that there were almost no cases where the institution was not eventually ‘won over’ by the positive nature of the awards may be taken as suggesting concerns might be averted with some careful communication of the character and structure of the awards.

*The University are extremely supportive of the SLTAs … and this has made the promotion a great deal easier. Last year some staff were critical and asked not to be considered for the awards but this year the feedback has been positive. (Glasgow Caledonian University)*

Reservations about the awards amounting to a ‘popularity contest’ should be partially averted by the fact that the quality of nominations, rather than the number, determines the winner; Consideration of some of the criteria used across the initiative, some of which contain detailed guidance on the pedagogical qualities of potential nominees, may also help assuage such concerns (especially if they are concerns about difficulties inherent in SLTAs).

Apprehension at the student role as being ‘responsible for the identification and reward of best practice’ might also be misplaced. The initiative has not sought to replace or interfere with institutional methods of reward and recognition. On the contrary, SLTAs were frequently seen as complimentary to institutional awards:

*Glasgow also runs a staff scheme, which has been fairly low profile for the last few years. It appears that the PETS [SLTA] scheme has also raised interest and awareness of the staff scheme … they seem to complement each other very well, as they are looking to reward completely different aspects of a person’s teaching career. We envisage the two schemes can happily co-exist in coming years. (University of Glasgow)*

The notion that students have something interesting to say about what they find valuable in their learning experience is at the heart of much current thinking and practice and widely accepted in principle. The initiative has not asked students to determine what constitutes excellence in learning and teaching per se. It has, tacitly, asked them to contribute their views by constructing a practical nomination for individuals they feel exhibit excellence (an explicit request for theoretical views might well yield
different results). Any comparison with other views on excellence in learning and teaching is beyond the scope of this report and, as far as we are aware, any data so far collected in SLTA schemes.

The practical implications of the awards are, to date, overwhelmingly positive, and SLTAs have been enthusiastically embraced by both students and staff. By far the majority of what little scepticism was encountered has been overcome. What remains, may be good reason for further investigation rather than a cause for pessimism.

The continued success of the schemes depends on the students’ union’s ability to ensure that the intent and purpose of SLTAs are widely understood across the institution. This requires participating unions to sustain a high level of publicity and dissemination, while continuing to raise student participation and staff engagement.

**Funding and sustainability**

Funding for the SLTA initiative from the HEA was always intended to be for a limited period, to act as a catalyst, beyond which institutional support and external sponsorship would be sought to fund continuation schemes. However, several unions were insistent on the need for continued funding from the HEA for two main reasons: 1) participants felt unable to secure sufficient institutional and/or external sponsorship, and did not have the finances to self-fund the project; and 2) HEA funding gave a ‘seal of approval’ and tangible support that provided evidence of the scheme’s authenticity and viability, and leverage to obtain further backing. Interestingly, the process of obtaining funding brought benefits over and above the funding itself:

*The financial support is very important. Money is essential, but the HEA funding provided more pull with the institution because the project was already backed and the ability to use the HEA name gives weight.* (Napier Students’ Association)

*Money, of course, is important to be able to run such events, but the process of bidding was also useful in clarifying aims and objectives.* (Edinburgh University Students’ Association)

These issues present genuine questions about how existing schemes might fare in the absence of financial backing from the initiative. In response to the first it is important that future schemes place financial backing high on the agenda. The second issue is perhaps more complex, but with some participants securing funding and/or backing in other respects (i.e. catering, design work, IT support, etc.) there are a variety of avenues to explore to help reduce dependence upon central funding. With the continuation of the initiative and of the individual schemes involved in all parties’ interests, the initiative as a whole should invest energy and time to help share solutions and practice in this area. In the meantime, it is encouraging that institutions have recognised the many benefits of SLTAs and in 2010-11, some unions reported significant or full financial support from their partner institutions.

**2.2. Influencing change and sharing best practice**

As the schemes developed, participants began to explore processes for the collation and analysis of data and how best to utilise and disseminate the results. Several institutions began identifying key trends within the results, in some cases triangulating these with other sources of student perceptions, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), the International Student Barometer (ISB) and course evaluation questionnaires.

Every participant has described some sharing of data and best practice, particularly with academic enhancement departments. Several participants, such as the University of Strathclyde, prepared best practice case studies of winners for dissemination; others have prepared summary reports and recommendations for representatives, departments and committees. Edinburgh University Students’ Association have taken this further by hosting their own ‘Inspiring Teaching Conference’ for staff and students.
as a means of disseminating valuable best practice. The data collected from the schemes are felt to be ‘invaluable’ by these institutions.

2.2.1 Student representatives and evidence-based campaigning

A further reported application of SLTA data was in the training and development of student representatives. As a number of the schemes moved into their second year in 2010-11, unions began incorporating the information gathered into handover documents and training events.

Triangulating SLTA data with other institutional data, such as NSS (as noted above), and departmental action plans, is a positive and powerful use of information generated by the awards. With better-informed and empowered representatives, some unions and institutions reported a positive impact on the quality of departmental meetings, increased engagement in course development, and involvement in ‘higher-level discourse’ on the structure and delivery of learning.

Participants frequently identified student representatives as playing an essential role in the success of the SLTA schemes, securing the engagement of a wide range of students across campuses. It is a fitting outcome of the awards that the rich wealth of data is being used to help facilitate, and further develop, the role of student representatives.

Participants have also viewed SLTAs as a positive, enhancement-motivated platform for raising awareness on specific issues in learning and teaching, sometimes using the awards to contribute to more targeted campaigns. Examples include the University of Edinburgh’s aim to improve the awareness and quality of feedback across the institution, and the University of Strathclyde Students’ Association, which sought a greater focus on teaching within a ‘research-based institution’. Following a major organisational restructure from 15 departments to seven schools at the University of Stirling, the SLTAs were used to promote cohesion and friendly competition within the institution.

Unions are also productively sharing SLTA data and commentary with their institutions. The openness on both parts may be symptomatic of a general shift toward partnership and better engagement at decision-making levels – a climate in which the SLTA concept has had space to thrive.

2.3. Positive engagement

Motivation to run the awards differed, being either fairly general (e.g. appreciation of good teaching), or quite specific (e.g. to fit a campaign issue). When asked to set out aims and objectives for the scheme, common statements included:

- To increase the focus of the wider student body on their learning experience.
- To raise the profile of teaching across the institution.
- To highlight the good practice occurring across the institution.

From the outset, unions were intent on using a different tone for SLTAs than other campaigns/initiatives in order to reach out to a wider group of students. Participants felt that the more positive, upbeat message of SLTAs made them easier to promote than established surveys. There is evidence to support this claim, for instance, more established surveys are often reported as harder to ‘pitch’ at leaving students. By contrast, final-year students were reported to be especially engaged with SLTAs, viewing the schemes as an opportunity to “give something back to staff that made a difference”.

The process of SLTA nomination was relatively simple, but in making a value judgement and providing a qualitative statement, each student is encouraged to reflect upon their learning experience. It was commonly predicted that an increase in student reflection on the learning experience would positively impact upon the volume and quality of
response to other student surveys. There have been instances of student nominations for institutional awards increasing following SLTA schemes, and the NSS being easier to promote following the introduction of SLTA schemes. Decisive proof might be a matter for further research, but based on current findings, we tentatively suggest students’ self-reflection upon the learning experience, promoted by SLTAs, might influence or contribute to institutional change and simultaneously improve the individual student’s own learning experience.

The different categories of SLTAs chosen by the participating institutions draw attention to different aspects of teaching, encouraging students to ‘analyse’ various aspects of their individual learning experience. How to encourage students’ reflection and engagement in their own learning has been an issue in higher education for some time. SLTAs offer a different, but complementary, opportunity to promote this self-reflection. There is potential here for development in the exploration of how the language used (for instance, in nomination forms or questionnaires) might best foster learners’ self-reflection.

With SLTAs encouraging a greater understanding of learning and teaching delivery and assessment among students, several unions hoped that student engagement would move beyond a current culture (‘survey-identify-respond’) that can arguably restrict students to being passive commentators and reaffirms existing boundaries between institution and student (as opposed to promoting genuine partnership). Participating unions hoped that through SLTAs, students would become more confident in actively contributing to the structure and delivery of their courses. The unions argued that this ‘step up’ in responsibility and ownership would lead to a greater feeling of inclusion across the campus. Perceived as a long-term ambition of the SLTA project, this reflects wider sector discussions on empowerment, partnership and ownership.

It would be most interesting to explore the future relationship of SLTAs with other recent developments such as the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) and the Student Partnership Agreements, as highlighted in the Scottish Government White Paper, Putting learners at the centre: delivering our ambitions for post-16 education.

2.3.1 Influencing staff development

The joint institution-union applications for funding encouraged the early inclusion of academic enhancement departments within some projects. For other participants, the link with institutional development was less immediate, but this tended to increase as schemes progressed. Some unions felt this represented a new opportunity for them to engage, and work in partnership with their institution, on staff development.

As institutions seek new methods to recognise and record good teaching practice, SLTAs are increasingly being turned to as evidence. Several institutions reported the use of SLTAs within promotions criteria and applicants’ evidence, with others considering their use in future. While participants generally welcomed this outcome, there was occasional unease at the impact that such use may have on the tone of the schemes. The potential role of students in the reward and recognition of teaching staff is an area for further investigation and discussion. Nevertheless, there is evidence that SLTAs can be used to help recognise and promote strong academic performance in teaching, and that HEIs are interested in further exploring this application of the awards.

Praising committed individual staff members not only served as a welcome morale boost, but raised the profile of academic development activity across institutions. Conferences, booklets and reports to learning and teaching committees all arose from SLTAs. Participants also reported that award ceremonies and student-led dissemination events promoted greater cross-institutional awareness and encouraged interdisciplinary discussion of teaching practice.

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Institutions felt that SLTAs enabled them to gain highly valuable student opinion on specific issues that were strategic quality enhancement priorities for them (e.g. assessment, feedback, mentoring) and, at the same time, uncover instances of best practice. Feedback from the participants suggests that SLTAs helped inform policy development and implementation in these priority areas, and increased awareness at all levels within their institutions.

2.3.2 The extent of student responsibility

As discussed above, participants have continually highlighted the important role the awards have played, and could play, in enhancing learning and teaching practice. SLTAs might additionally provide a deeper insight into student perceptions of learning and teaching (see Section 3). Using the SLTAs, and the information available through them, to help influence institutional change, looks like an increasingly viable prospect, with some impressive examples of the application of SLTA data already available.

However, this is not to say that SLTAs should be the sole driver for enhancing the status and importance of teaching. Many speeches at the awards ceremonies made reference to the need for “enhanced career opportunities for teaching-focused staff”, “better investment” and “the formal adoption and implementation of robust policy”.

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**Section 2 summary**

The success of the SLTAs was considerable, and was earned through equally considerable hard work. Unexpected numbers of nominations and workloads, concerns about funding, and isolated instances of scepticism about the awards, were all challenges faced and overcome by some participants. Despite the challenges, the outcomes were unanimously seen as worth the effort.

Among commonly reported benefits were:

- improved staff-student relationships and morale;
- enhanced status of students’ unions as partners to the institution;
- invaluable data on students’ perceptions of best practice in learning and teaching;
- increased interdisciplinary discussion of teaching practice;
- enhancing the status and importance of teaching in HEIs.

With some useful work already being undertaken at some institutions, there is scope for further use of SLTA data, both at an institutional level, and across the sector; as a rich source of data in itself, and in combination with data from other existing research and surveys.

SLTAs are a positive, morale-boosting initiative and the data generated by these award schemes are yielding valuable insights into students’ perceptions of their learning experience and proving a fruitful avenue of future research activity.
3. SLTA analysis and student conceptions of excellence

Having discussed some of the benefits and challenges of running SLTAs in Section 2 using feedback from the evaluation of the scheme, Section 3 will look in more detail at some of the findings from individual schemes and present an overall analysis of the initiative.

3.1 The influence of criteria on nominations

As discussed, participants decided upon the number, names and criteria for their awards, and even a fairly perfunctory analysis reveals a significant diversity in the language used for criteria. The possible impact of this language variance is significant.

Titles of awards varied from the informal and quirky, to formal and descriptive. The focus of the award criteria, as well as the criteria themselves, also varied; they were either quite descriptive, pointing to specific activities or qualities, or ‘open’ and ‘general’, allowing the nominating student to highlight those qualities with the best fit for the award.

Of the 13 participating schemes, eight used a collection of short, simple lists of features to describe each award category. In the other schemes, a paragraph described the awards and/or suggested the qualities and practices sought in potential nominees. Criteria varied from generalities, such as “passion” and “commitment” to specific, descriptive requirements, such as “they unite theory and practice with real world examples”.

The choice of criteria appeared to impact on both the number and content of the nominations. Specific criteria and guidance resulted in more focused, better articulated nominations, accompanied by stronger examples of learning and teaching practice. However, they yielded fewer nominations overall. Awards presented in more open and general terms appear to have received more personal, emotional responses from students, but contained less pedagogical supporting evidence.

An illustration of the difference between ‘general’ and ‘specific’ criteria and their apparent effect on nomination data and the number of nominations is presented in Table 1 (below). There should be recognition of the potential impact of other variables. Differences in local, or parochial, concerns as well as differences in method and extent of promotion, for instance, may well influence the number of nominations. It should also be noted that while the effect on number was very common, it was not universal. Although there is room for further investigation, the trend was sufficiently strong across the participating schemes to support the idea that there is a genuine link between the nature of the criteria and the content and number of nominations.

To eliminate the effects of some variables mentioned above, Table 1 focuses on two examples from the same SLTA scheme. The table shows a clear difference in both content and number of nominations. (The total number of nominations for the scheme is in parentheses.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Sample nomination</th>
<th>Number of nominations (total in parentheses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Detailed/ targeted criteria | Effective teaching that makes best use of technology to support learning | 1. Intentionally support social and active learning through technology that supports the sharing of information.  
2. Takes a human centred approach to learning – emphasising the student and the services they require; focus not just on deepening, strengthening, and constructing knowledge.  
3. Increases ownership of diverse devices that enrich learning. | “With encouraging her students to use PowerPoint and the use of video recording presentations, this has improved my communication and presentation skills which have given me confidence with my placements, especially when giving patient handover reports.” | 5 (252)                                                                                                                                          |
| More open/ general criteria | Effective teaching that offers support and recognises students as individuals | 1. High degree of responsiveness  
2. They are available.  
3. You feel you can approach them if you have issues or questions. | “By knowing that an extra level support is available, both academically and emotionally I have been able to focus on my studies.” | 85 (252)                                                                                                                                           |

Table 1: The effect of criteria on content and number of nominations

SLTA nominations, then, can be said to focus on two ostensibly very different aspects of teaching (in partial dependence on criteria):

- the personal attributes and style of the lecture  
- or tutor;  
- the content, structure and delivery of sessions.

It is an interesting finding that award categories with more general criteria (focused on personal attributes of the nominee) received a greater number of nominations. This suggests that students better identify, or are more comfortable articulating, the
personal attributes of the educator, and are less engaged by, or less able to clearly judge, pedagogical aspects of an educator's activities (like content, structure and delivery of teaching sessions).

This could be due to lacking a clear understanding of, or familiarity with, the language and concepts of pedagogical discourse. Alternatively it may simply be a reaction to the style of communication and language used in conveying pedagogical qualities. Personal attributes (engaging, considerate, enthusiastic, etc.) are likely to be readily identifiable (being in common usage in everyday life), whereas detailed descriptions of pedagogical virtues could either be confusing or disengaging (perhaps seeming somewhat detached from some students’ “pre-theoretical” view of their everyday learning experience). In short, is this a result of ‘emotive’ language being more tactile and engaging, and how can this be further harnessed or, if so desired, overcome?

We might suggest this issue is symptomatic of a more widespread challenge: that of communicating the development, methods, structure and delivery of courses, as well as professional development of staff. If true, we may expect certain factors in the development of student-led and student-centred learning to be affected. The significance of the wider challenge is a matter for further investigation, but the impact upon SLTA nominations and potentially, via these, on staff development and academic enhancement, seems to be a genuine matter for consideration when interpreting SLTA results.

The differing response rates, and the reactions to the varying styles, tones and criteria, are noteworthy. Although there are several (as yet) uncontrolled variables to consider, as a working hypothesis, this may aid the development of schemes, and be considered when developing wider communication and surveys. It is quite clear that the focus and language used in criteria has a direct effect on the content of nominations and on the thought processes behind them, and, putatively, also on students’ perceptions of learning and teaching; there is likely to be at least some link between what students are asked to measure excellence against, and their conceptions of excellence.

From a practical perspective, one thing is quite clear: in engaging the student body, students’ unions and institutions have a choice — widespread engagement on general issues, or a more focused and targeted interaction. Neither is worth discrediting, and both can be valuable. The former can be employed where the organisers wish to raise the profile of teaching in general, boost morale and create political capital. The latter will generate useful examples of best practice, focus the thoughts of students, and facilitate deeper discussion and analysis of learning and teaching.

3.2 Student conceptions of excellence in learning and teaching

Despite the awards schemes varying greatly in nature and tone, several overarching themes have emerged. As discussed (see Section 3.1), two key themes emerged from analysis of individual awards, their criteria and students’ nominations:

- the personal attributes and style of the lecturer or tutor;
- the content, structure and delivery of sessions.

Throughout the schemes, there are many personal stories detailing extraordinary support and dedication to students: individuals who have made a student’s experience uniquely memorable, and have ‘gone the extra mile’. Students appeared delighted with the opportunity to recognise and raise the profile of such staff members at an institutional level. SLTAs are clearly of immense benefit to campus morale and the profile of teaching excellence within the institution. By comparing the various awards and the nomination data from across the sector, we are able to get a unique insight into areas of commonality regarding teaching methods and support, through the lens of student perceptions of their learning experience.

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9 It should perhaps be noted that the people constructing nomination forms were not often expert questionnaire writers and researchers.

10 There are no doubt ways in which a balance of both can be achieved.
Earlier, the possibility of gaining insight into what students’ value most in their learning experience was highlighted. This section will take a closer look at what we might come to know of students’ conceptions of excellence in learning and teaching by looking at nominations across several commonly themed award categories: feedback, academic support and innovation.

3.2.1 Feedback

Many awards schemes had individual awards dedicated to assessment or feedback, but, regardless of the title or category, students continued to single out good and/or prompt feedback for praise. It is commonly seen as a key component of a positive learning experience from the students’ perspective. Feedback is a prominent issue in student satisfaction surveys (most notably in the UK, the NSS), students’ union campaigns, institutional policy, academic development, etc. It is perhaps no surprise then that a large number of successful nominations highlighted its importance.

Nomination comments detailed innovative peer-to-peer marking, tutorial delivery, group work and online dissemination. They also described judgements based on expectations such as turnaround time, quality of comments, lecturer availability:

She is so organised and so efficient with assessment feedback. When an assessment is due the results are always back within three or four days even though she may have up to 13,000 word reports to mark, and that is just for one class. The feedback she gives is always top notch. It is always very well set out and very clear on what is good and what needs to be touched up.

She is great at being responsive and dedicated to giving constant constructive feedback... She is constantly on hand to guide us with feedback.

There is a common divide in the student perception of what constitutes best learning and teaching practice, which is a matter of emphasis. It occurs between pastoral, ‘one-directional’ teaching, and more active, ‘self-led’ learning. The majority of students appear to perceive staff-student interactions, such as feedback and teaching delivery, as largely passive activities (i.e. student as ‘the recipients of knowledge or instruction’). The above nominations are clear examples of this viewpoint, with a focus on timing, length, tone and quality of comments. The students are basing their evaluation on ‘delivery’ in the most literal sense. Evidence of less traditional methods of assessment and feedback appear sparse in comparison to nominations and awards reflecting the passive learning view.

Some nominations highlight more innovative and complex approaches to feedback, but these are in the minority. This dominant traditional perception of feedback as tailored, written commentary on (probably) summative assessment, contrasts with recent developments in student-led/student-centred learning.

The perception among students’ unions appears to be similar, with a tendency to use similar terminology when describing what constitutes ‘good feedback’.

One might infer that students are viewing their learning experience from a ‘consumer perspective’, expecting to receive instruction, and rating their experience based on the standard of delivery. On this view, staff are most valued as suppliers of knowledge, rather than as mentors, guides or facilitators. It is important to explore what is fuelling this perception. A situation in which staff, striving to meet the increasing demands, albeit with the intention of delivering the best for their students, could well be perpetuating a cycle of expectation, demand and response.

There is an important question here about what is fuelling the disparity. Is it that instances of exposure to more innovative methods of feedback are proportionally as sparse as the nominations suggest, or is it that such methods are under-reported? A recalcitrant passive view of feedback may explain an undervaluing, and hence under-reporting, of innovative methods. More modestly, the mere ‘meeting of expectations’
about feedback (rather than any innovation) may simply provide a stronger motivation for nominating. The data used in this study are, however, insufficient to draw any firm conclusions about the extent to which student expectations around feedback are being met, but the importance and students’ value of feedback are clear.

3.2.2 Academic support

Academic and pastoral support was also a popular focus within awards schemes. Students consistently described the outstanding contribution a supportive member of staff can make to their experience, with many nominations offering a very personal and powerful narrative. These examples included pastoral support during difficult or exceptional circumstances, continued academic support for students with accessibility issues and, more generally, the availability, awareness and compassion of staff members.

Support for students appears to have been a common motivator for nominating across all categories, regardless of whether or not awards schemes had a dedicated award. In the majority of schemes that had a separate, specific award, academic and pastoral support generated the largest number of nominations. Again, such examples highlight, strengthen and promote the bond between students and staff. Strong examples of such nominations include:

\[
\text{On numerous occasions she has been known to surpass the call of duty in an effort to support us, not only in an academic capacity but also in times of personal upset. The deep rooted respect we all have for her is testament to this.}
\]

\[
\text{Encouraging and supportive, ready to help, willing to ask favours on behalf of me, cares more about her students than following university rules.}
\]

Students appear to have responded in a similar manner to ‘Best Teacher’ type awards. Examples of exceptional personal and class support were often the most common evidence supplied, thus demonstrating the strong affinity students have with the personal attributes and actions of individual staff members and the recognition of supererogatory activity:

\[
\text{His door is always open, you’ll go to him hoping he has have five minutes spare to ask him a question. Instead he’ll stop what he’s doing, fully discuss the problem with you, look things up online for you, or even gives a demonstration.}
\]

\[
\text{If one student was having difficulty in an area of study, he would amend his already great notes, to include extra tuition for all students ... thus negating any shy person from (being excluded).}
\]

\[
\text{Furthermore, of all of my lecturers he has the most office hours each week to see students, which is really reassuring as it shows that he really is there to answer any questions his students may have. He always seems like he genuinely cares about his students and his subject area.}
\]

While the majority of nominations appear to focus on receiving support, some identified the need for this to tie in with independent learning. This finding is worthy of further discussion and exploration. In a culture of self-led learning and against the growing discussions around ‘consumerisation’, how should the staff-student relationship be defined and what should the role of staff be?

There are also possible tensions between budgetary and resource considerations and the value of individualised support and staff dedication. This often occurs even outside of formal contact hours, putting considerable pressure on staff workloads and time. This is clearly foremost in many students’ minds when nominating, with several participants identifying a marked shift in the distribution of nominations when provision was under threat. Issues of parity in relation to the level of student support across cohorts, departments and institutions are also a factor.
3.2.3 Innovation

’Innovation’ was also a common theme across the various awards schemes, often with a dedicated individual award. It is unsurprising that participating students unions regard innovation so highly; it is seen as fundamental to enhancing the student learning experience. SLTAs offer a potentially unique method of identifying and championing good practice, and so hopes for further insight into student conceptions of innovative teaching may naturally be high.

However, there was variation across the participating institutions surrounding the description and definition of ‘innovation’ in criteria. Descriptions ranged from the general ‘uses innovative teaching methods’, to the more detailed ‘outstanding contribution to leading edge content and curriculum design’. Some criteria included attributes and practices that would not normally be described as particularly innovative such as timely feedback or communicating enthusiasm. With such variation, it is perhaps not surprising that the content of nominations was ‘mixed’ when it came to reporting praiseworthy innovative teaching.

The lack of clarity on innovation is not peculiar to SLTAs. ‘Innovation in teaching’ is a commonly used phrase, but a clear, commonly held definition appears lacking. It may well be that the innovation in questions needs to be situated within a particular context in order for it to make genuine sense. After all, what might be considered innovative teaching in a particular discipline may not always be considered innovative in all disciplines.

Reviewing the nomination forms from individual SLTAs appeared to provide little consensus in the aspects of teaching delivery students perceived as innovative. Students variously considered all of the following as innovative:

- humour;
- availability;
- inspiring;
- exciting;
- passion and commitment;
- atmosphere created;
- challenging;
- adaptability;
- accessible;
- assessment;
- feedback;
- unusual presentations;
- relating content;
- online learning;
- technology in class;
- use of role play;
- flexible materials;
- use of workshops/tutorials.

One might conclude that such a spread of responses is inevitable; the awards schemes should be revealing an abundance of best practice. However, even in those categories specifically aimed at innovation, and with quite detailed descriptions and titles, students still appear to have struggled with the identification of best practice and its separation from other desirable attributes in learning and teaching delivery.

In some instances, the examples provided are even more surprising, listing practices or teacher qualities that can be expected to be of a reasonable standard in higher education. In fact, students referencing seemingly ‘basic’ attributes, or citing ‘good’ rather than ‘best’ or ‘innovative’ practice, appears a common trend across all categories of the awards. Awards specifically seeking out innovation would be expected to draw out the most interesting of students’ perceptions on learning and teaching matters. Instead, we find:

[She] is always thinking positively and makes lectures interesting.

He always gives constructive feedback on pieces of work and notably tries to end it on a positive note which is encouraging to the student.
He uses his slides very efficiently, incorporating relevant images, text and case studies, often the results of cutting-edge research.

These examples indicate that a proportion of students struggled with either identifying or articulating what is exemplary. As mentioned, this may be symptomatic of students being incognizant with teaching pedagogy, uninspired, uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the language of academic development, which can appear as jargon even among academics. Add to this the influence of criteria on nominations and an apparently general lack of consensus on what constitutes innovation in teaching, and an expectation of a coherent picture of student conceptions of innovation may be somewhat optimistic. One might conclude that the conflation of fairly basic practices with ‘innovation’ is a rather sombre reflection of student experience.

We believe, however, that the following explanation is more plausible. A lecturer who lights up a subject with passion, energy and insight, over and above those around them, may appear to their students to be doing something ‘innovative’. There may be ‘innovative’ (different, new, or unusual) ways to deliver a ‘chalk and talk’ seminar; especially if seen as containing something ‘new to’ the student.

Awards organisers and academic development practitioners, on the other hand, are more likely to be seeking out innovations in delivery, content and practice: something ‘new to’ the institution, or even the sector. There is a perspectival difference: a difference in who the practice is ‘new to’.

The following nomination from a student at the University of Aberdeen exemplifies the former view of ‘innovation’:

If you (leave) a tutorial or a lecture ... and feel you have gained more knowledge in these two hours than in two years studying History, then that is what innovative teaching is.

This is not to say that nominees are not practising something ‘new to’ or different to the institution or sector. That someone could instil in their students the feeling expressed in the above nomination suggests they are doing something worthy of further consideration. The difference in perspective, however, will be important when interpreting the data in nomination forms and perhaps more widely.

Is it reasonable or even fair to ask a student, with limited exposure to the full spectrum of teaching methods, to identify innovation and best practice in an institution? How can the student perspective help to create a fuller picture of the impact of various teaching methods on students’ engagement with their own learning?

A promising response to the latter question is that the student perspective will provide something that other perspectives will find difficult to replicate: the ability to point to teaching activity that offers something different, memorable, or ‘new to’ the student body. Innovation in teaching is indeed a complex issue, but SLTAs may well provide valuable insights into students’ perspectives.
Section 3 summary

There was significant diversity in award categories and nomination criteria across the schemes, but some strong themes emerged in both. Several category themes were common across a broad range of individual schemes (e.g. feedback, academic support and innovation).

- Nominations provided evidence of disparity in student perceptions of feedback. A few nominations detailed innovative and complex approaches to feedback, but the majority revealed a perception of feedback reminiscent of a traditional ‘passive learning’ view of HE.

- Academic support was a common motivator for nominating even where there was no dedicated award. Powerful narratives emphasised the major contribution a supportive member of staff can make and nominations demonstrated the strong affinity students have with the personal attributes of staff members.

- Nominations were most varied when reporting innovative teaching. They often pointed to personal attributes or standard practices such as ‘timely feedback’. This may emphasise the substantive impact criteria can have on the content of nominations, or the differences in perception of ‘innovation’ between students and those cognisent with academic development research.

- Specific criteria and guidance (in any award) resulted in better articulated nominations with stronger evidence, but yielded fewer nominations overall. General criteria received a greater number of personal, emotional responses from students.

The significance of criteria and language as influences on nominations became clear with evidence suggesting criteria can influence both content of nominations and the number. This finding in particular provides a platform for further useful research into student conceptions of excellence in their learning experience.
Concluding remarks

The Student-Led Teaching Awards initiative in Scotland has been a considerable success. Expanding to encompass the majority of Scottish HEIs in only its second year, the opportunity for the collection of a rich body of data across a broad sample of HEIs initiated the production of a set of materials designed to yield a picture of activity and impact across the SLTA initiative. The data obtained forms the basis of this paper.

The reasons for success, and some common challenges faced by SLTA Network members, emerged clearly through a series of questionnaires and interviews. Having been embraced enthusiastically by both staff and students, it has become clear that SLTAs provide a unique framework for the strengthening and development of staff-student relationships and of union-institution partnerships.

There is strong evidence to suggest SLTAs can provide, at an institutional level, a method of gathering invaluable data on student perceptions of best practice in learning and teaching, increased interdisciplinary discussion on teaching practice, and enhanced status of teaching. With the level of participation increasing year upon year, and a number of SLTA-themed events having already occurred since the initiative started, there is good reason to think there may be similar sector-wide impact. The evidence for the practical benefits of running SLTAs is compelling.

The rich body of data available through SLTAs also presents some unique opportunities for research. Not only is there potential for triangulation of SLTA data with other sources of sector data, but the potential for insight into what students consider to be excellence in learning and teaching practice through SLTA data alone is evident. This report has attempted to highlight some initial findings in this area. Besides some valuable examples of innovative practice, students’ affinity with the personal attributes of teaching and support staff, differing perceptions of best practice, and the influence of criteria on the content and number of nominations, all provide the basis for some appetising questions. Although the initiative itself and SLTA-based research are still somewhat in their infancy, their value and impact are evident for institutions and their staff, student bodies, and the sector in general.
### Appendix 1: SLTA Network members 2009-10 and 2010-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>2009-10 Network</th>
<th>2010-11 Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
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<td>✔</td>
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<td>Robert Gordon</td>
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<tr>
<td>West of Scotland</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2: Sample of analysis template fields

Student-Led Teaching Awards: Scheme analysis template

Institution name:

Total number of nominations received for all awards (2010/2011):

Total number of nominations (where applicable) received for all awards (2009/2010):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award category</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Total number of nominations</th>
<th>Winner</th>
<th>Reason(s) for choice</th>
<th>Supportive qualitative comments (from nomination forms)</th>
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Appendix 3: Sample questions from the evaluation questionnaire

SLTA evaluation questionnaire

A Overall progress

1 Please provide an summary of progress to date including:
   a Key achievements
   b Challenges
   c Notable changes made from the submitted project plan

B Preparation and campaigns

2 Why did you choose to run a student-led teaching awards scheme and what were the perceived benefits at the outset?

3 How would you describe the partnership between student association and the institution in the awards scheme? How did staff perceive the scheme at the outset of the project?

4 What categories of awards did you use and how did you decide upon them? (thematic/subject area/college)

C Promotion and nominations

5 How did you promote your awards to students and staff? What resources were used?

D Selection and awards

6 Who was involved in short listing/selection?

7 What were your selection criteria?

8 How did you present your awards? For example, at an awards ceremony?

9 How are the outcomes of the schemes being disseminated within the institution?

E Sharing resources

10 Please provide the following in hardcopy and electronically where possible:

   • Emails/Feedback from nominees
   • Publicity used (freebies/websites/graphics/posters/flyers/screen savers/t-shirts etc)
   • Photos/Videos of promotion, award ceremonies or dissemination events
   • Media coverage (Student, local or national)
   • Criteria for awards
   • Bid outlines to external sponsors
Appendix 4: Sample questions from the impact interview

SLTA impact questionnaire

A Impact and lessons learned

1. What impact do you feel the awards have had within:
   • the student association?
   • the institution?
   • student body?
   • staff body?

2. Overall, what aspects of the awards scheme do you feel worked well?

3. Are there any aspects of the awards scheme you feel worked not so well?

4. Is there anything you plan to do differently in the future?

5. Have there been any unexpected consequences of running the teaching awards scheme?

6. In summary, would you consider the awards scheme a success at your institution and what do you think have been the main benefits of this initiative have been?

7. Any final remarks for someone interested in developing a student-led teaching awards scheme at their institution?

B Support from the Higher Education Academy & NUS Scotland

8. What aspects of the support you have received through being involved in this project have you found:
   • Most useful?
   • Least useful?

9. Have you any suggestions for improving the support you might receive in the future e.g. trialling a peer mentoring system?

10. Have you any suggestions for how the Student-led Teaching Awards website (www.studentledteachingawards.org.uk) might be improved to make it more interactive e.g. to allow uploading examples of practice, provide opportunities for online discussion / support etc?
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