

# **Listening to the Learners: The Student Voice Awards Scheme at City University London**

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## **Introduction**

The 'Student Voice Awards' scheme was launched at City University London in 2008, with the first awards made in 2009. It was set up by staff at the Learning Development Centre (LDC) - which provides a range of educational development programmes and services for staff involved in facilitating student learning - in conjunction with members of the Students' Union (SU). There is a good deal of research supporting the importance of accounting for the student voice; see, for example, Trowler's (2010) literature review which addresses broader student engagement issues. This document provides an introduction to the scheme introduced at City University London, discusses how it was implemented and outlines how data collected as part of the scheme has been used to inform other educational development activities at the University.

## **How the scheme works**

Each year, undergraduate and postgraduate students are contacted and invited to nominate lecturers and professional staff with whom they have worked for an award, if they feel that a particular member of staff was inspiring or made a positive impact on their learning experience. This represents a departure from 'traditional' staff recognition schemes, in which students do not play a direct role in the selection of award winners. Instead, this initiative foregrounds the 'learner voice' (Porter, 2008). Criteria for the awards are decided by students at the SU, with guidance offered by LDC staff. At an early stage, it was also decided that the criteria should not be over-prescriptive, the intention being to encourage a wide range of nominations, and give students the freedom to determine what they thought was important to be recognised. Indeed, members of the SU take an active part in promoting the scheme and in selecting award winners, therefore ensuring that it maintains its sense of student ownership. There is at least one award available in each School, and one in Central Services, to ensure that it is institution-wide. Note that all staff who are nominated are informed of this.

## **What the students say**

We have provided below some examples of student quotations, which have formed part of the nominations process in previous years. The quotations reveal how enthusiastic members of the student body have been in participating in the scheme and celebrating good teaching.

'.. his teaching methods are amazing and he really motivates the students. The tutorials are very interactive and have an open atmosphere, a lot because of personality. He has a very pedagogical approach, and makes sense of even the most challenging... equations'.

"She is very passionate about her work and the topics she teaches about, and this is reflected in the way she teaches'.

"His course is structured clearly and effectively, with lectures covering the material, online tests to ensure we study as we go along, and written coursework. There are online meetings to go through the tests, which is a very effective way of learning'.

“His teaching methods are very innovative and interesting, and he engages every single student in his lectures. His methods of teaching usually make me visualise myself in the role of a businessman addressing the various issues that businesses face. I believe it is his immense dedication to teaching students that make him worthy of this award’.

### **Initial feedback**

Although a formal evaluation has yet to be undertaken, comments and anecdotal evidence suggest that the scheme has been successful in terms of student participation, with many nominations received. Staff have also commented on its value both in terms of promoting good practice in teaching but also in improving staff morale. The scheme has provided the opportunity to collect rich feedback from students on positive aspects of their teaching and learning experience, often overlooked in traditional surveys. Students have nothing to gain from submitting a nomination and are not compelled to participate: consequently, feedback that is collected is freely given. Following the awards in 2011, an evaluation will be undertaken, which will include some comparison with similar initiatives at other universities.

### **Enhancing other areas**

We were aware that students’ nominations provided data that could be used in other ways to enhance learning and teaching across the University, as well as reduce the burden on students with respect to numbers of surveys that they were being asked to participate in. Therefore, as a means of celebrating the awards, winners are announced at the University’s annual ‘Learning at City’ Conference, where student quotations are drawn on to illustrate the teaching qualities of each winner. Second, some of the comments are used to inform aspects of the MA Academic Practice (lecturer development) programme. These provide illustrations of the student perspective which are integral to several modules, and also inform some of the module content. For example, the comments are useful when focusing on stakeholder engagement and the student role for the curriculum design module. Finally, the data is being used for a JISC-funded curriculum design research project entitled PREDICT, which is currently being undertaken by staff at the University. This involves the researchers exploring students’ views of the design of modules and use of specific strategies that enhance their learning or assessments that they identify as relevant and engaging. The data is being used to develop guidance for future curriculum development, especially learning, teaching and assessment strategies that inspire and engage students. Further details are available on the JISC website (details below).

### **Future plans**

In its first two years, the Student Voice Awards has proven to be a popular and valuable initiative, providing an example of successful collaboration both in terms of the joint running the scheme and through promoting good teaching practice. We are also about to appoint a Student Intern within the Department to explore other ways in which we can gain student input into learning and teaching developments. We encourage colleagues at other institutions to consider such schemes, though when doing so, it is important to consider specific institutional and contextual factors at the planning stages, taking account of local issues and work-practices (Trowler, 2005), including those of the students themselves.

## **JISC website**

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/curriculumdesign/predict.aspx>

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## **References**

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