

# Student Choice Awards 2018

What do students value most?

May 2018

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**The Union wishes to thank Dr Melissa Powell, without whom this report would not have been possible.**

## Introduction

The Union has now been running our awards for UCL staff for six years. This year marked the first time we've reviewed and refreshed these categories since the awards were first founded, helping us not only recognise a wider number of staff for a more diverse range of activities, but to generate richer information about what students value. That is the focus of this report.

As a union, we're vocal when the academic experiences of our members don't meet their expectations, and we approach head-on the sometimes difficult conversations required to drive improvement.

But equally as important is recognising those things that are excellent, and the aspects of their education that students love. Highlighting these helps us understand what is working well, to identify and share innovative practice, and to make education better by recognising those positives.

In this spirit, for each of our eight award categories, this report provides a digestible summary of the practices students have told us they appreciated the most. We hope this will be as enjoyable and informative for readers as compiling the report was for us.

Most importantly of all, to every member of staff who has inspired a student to write in and tell us how brilliant they are – **thank you**.



**Sarah Al-Aride, Education Officer 2017-18**

## Active Student Partnership

Students' time at UCL is all about developing themselves as critical, creative and independent thinkers who are practically minded and great problem solvers, so it's essential that students are given a voice in reflecting on and improving their educational environment. The award for Active Student Partnership recognises staff who have supported students to work together with them as partners in all aspects of their education. This might be in the classroom, but also includes a wider view of the organisation and priorities of their departments.

The nominations for this award show two clear themes. Students value staff support for active partnerships by actively asking for students' opinions, by responding quickly and effectively to students' concerns and suggestions when they're made, and by involving students in identifying those solutions throughout.

In terms of teaching and course content, students appreciate staff who consistently provide them with opportunities to express their thoughts on their teaching. This could be by:

- Directly asking for feedback in person
- Creating surveys and written feedback sheets
- Creating a friendly atmosphere so that students are comfortable coming to them with comments and ideas

Students recognise and appreciate the efforts of lecturers who take this feedback seriously, and are able to adapt aspects of their teaching accordingly, such as by providing extra revision materials for complex topics, or tailoring content to students' interests. Particularly in new courses or in programmes with complicated structures, students appreciate staff asking for their opinions on how things are going, and keeping students informed and actively involved with the changes and improvements which are being made in response.

Beyond taught hours, students also put a lot of value on staff who encourage them to get involved with initiatives like ChangeMakers or as an Academic Rep, support them to be involved in decision-making, and who genuinely listen and respond to students' input through these initiatives. In all cases, students value staff who show respect for and value their opinions, who

involve them in shaping the development of their departments, and who make sure that they're honestly and realistically informed.

### **Practices students particularly praised were:**

- Actively asking for feedback from students about all aspects of their education and broader experience
- Taking an interest in how students are responding to their teaching, creating appropriate feedback opportunities in class, and adapting their teaching accordingly
- Making sure students are informed about how they can get more involved in decision-making within their department and the wider university
- Working with students to think through how their ideas could best be implemented, ensuring they feel respected and valued, and are kept aware of progress

“Rosalind led a UCL ChangeMakers project last year which aimed to harmonise marking criteria of assessments for our course, and to develop a feedback mechanism for students to make the best use of the comments we are given. This opportunity has not only let students voice their opinions over different modules on the course, but also made it possible for module leads to get together and hear from students, to come to an agreement. She has been the most supportive and helpful coordinator of the project”

## Amazing Support Staff

Whether administrators, admissions officers, technicians or others, students have described support staff as ‘the glue that holds the department together’. Members of support staff are often the most consistent presence throughout students’ degrees. These nominations show they have enormous power to shape students’ experiences and make good departments great.

Students told us that there are three main areas of excellence that they value in support staff: relevant and responsive communication, pastoral and practical support, and encouragement of student voice.

In the nominations for this award, students highlighted the importance of both quality and promptness in communications with them, and the two often go hand in hand. Quick responses to emails and student queries make a huge difference to students, helping them to feel valued and well-supported in their education. Several students told us how their department has built up a small ‘fandom’ or meme culture around a particularly excellent teaching administrator and their ‘speed of light’ email responses.

High-quality regular emails to student cohorts are also singled out for praise, and there is a balance to strike here between providing helpful and relevant information without overloading inboxes. Students have particularly appreciated being kept regularly up-to-date with practicalities (coursework deadlines, admin forms, etc.), and also appreciate circular emails highlighting well-selected and relevant events or lectures.

Another key area that students have highlighted is excellent practical and pastoral support. Whilst students do not expect staff to have all the answers, they appreciate informative practical help where possible, and being pointed towards relevant sources when they can’t. This applies not only to academic life, but also to emotional and personal support. Students nominated staff who are known to be approachable, kind and sympathetic listeners, and who provide practical, supportive suggestions.

Finally, students are enthusiastic about support staff who treat them as partners and take an interest in their development outside of their course.

This included:

- Enthusiasm for the work of Academic Reps, and encouraging their voices on committees
- Supporting students in running their own co-curricular societies and events, and being ready to support and champion their work
- Helping to arrange skills and training events, and encouraging students to get involved with non-course-based academic opportunities, such as the 3-Minute Thesis competition

In all of these ways, excellent support staff have defined their departments and have tremendously improved students' experiences of UCL.

### **Practices students particularly praised were:**

- Practical advice and support from staff where possible, and being able to direct students to other sources of support if unable to help.
- Simply making sure to reply to emails within a reasonable timeframe; even a line of acknowledgement helps students to feel like they matter at their university

“Lisa is always very clear in explaining processes and deadlines, and in letting us know when she will be unavailable or working elsewhere. She pre-empts queries by sending around information well in advance of any changes, deadlines or events, which is hugely reassuring, and keeps us updated about events and opportunities that are available within the Institute and beyond”

## Amazing Support Staff

Students are aware that staff at UCL produce top quality research from their own labs and offices, and they want to benefit from that innovative expertise in the classroom too. In our awards, students recognised staff who give them the opportunity to base their education in new ideas in their field as well as grounding them in its core principles, providing an exciting educational experience that sets them up well for further research and careers.

Students have told us that they are inspired by staff who engage them with research in two key ways: by using their own current research to inform their teaching, and by introducing them to the latest papers, ideas and developments in their field. Students value this because it encourages their own creativity and critical thinking. Showing students that their field is a living thing, full of unanswered questions and developing theories, gives their education purpose, and motivates them to do their most innovative work.

Students praised staff who brought their own research into teaching without letting this dominate, but used it instead as a jumping-off point to get students excited about current research, and create opportunities to work with new ideas. One highly-praised lecturer working with biofuels inspired students by drawing on her own research and industry partners, and tailoring experiments for interested students that would allow them to find out more about this area themselves. It is important when academics use their own research not just to lecture 'at' students, but to encourage them to become active in the conversation too.

As students' progress through their education, they put increasing value on being made aware of the latest research in their field, even if this isn't directly integrated into teaching. As well as setting readings, commended staff have done this through sharing articles, setting up journal clubs, and starting discussion groups. Whilst taught postgraduates seemed to particularly appreciate co-curricular efforts, undergraduate students seemed to put significantly more emphasis on the use of contemporary material within courses.



### Practices students particularly praised were:

- Staff incorporating their own current research into classes in an interactive way
- Sharing new and recently published articles through journal clubs and Moodle forums
- Inviting speakers and using case studies from industry and professional sectors to show how course content is relevant in a variety of ways
- Explaining current research trends and highlighting questions still to be answered

“Lee incorporates cutting edge research into lecture material. Even since the end of the teaching the topics covered have jumped back into the media spotlight such as Cambridge Analytica and voter behaviour. Uniquely, he also brought in experts from the field into the lectures to give us an idea of how the ideas are manifested in the practical world of politics”

## Diverse & Inclusive Education

As movements such as Liberating the Curriculum and Everyday Feminism enter the mainstream, students at UCL and in the UK generally are becoming increasingly conscious of social issues, and how the content of their courses relates to real-world politics. Students across the disciplinary spectrum are taking a critical eye to the traditional academic canon, and are keen to question and interrogate things which have sometimes previously been taken for granted.

In their nominations for this award, students celebrated staff who respond creatively to these issues, and who are enthusiastic about exploring diversified approaches to their subject.

Students praised staff who champion diversity and inclusion in both their course content and their attitude to teaching. Building a liberated curriculum within courses is very important to students. This also supports UCL's investment in research-based education, as it encourages students to think critically and be intellectually involved with up-to-date questions. Students spoke highly of staff who encouraged discussion of these issues, or who responded positively to thoughtful critique in class.

In some instances, students were excited when modules were created that focus explicitly on these theories. It was also noted and praised when existing curricula were broadened, such as using case studies from a broad global range of perspectives or ensuring that secondary reading lists represented the work of women and BAME scholars.

## Practices students particularly praised were:

- Maintaining diverse, open and international hiring policies and including empowerment and international development in research
- Encouraging students to work together and learn from each other's backgrounds in class
- Being visibly and enthusiastically involved with on-campus equality initiatives, including Athena Swan, Zero Tolerance to Sexual Harassment and Diversity & Equality Committees
- Encouraging representation from underrepresented groups on student-staff committees
- Openly and supportively discussing the importance of issues around disability, accessibility, and mental health
- Designing modules that foregrounded these theories and concerns
- Creating diverse and well-rounded reading lists

“Cathy is the first lecturer I have that made a conscious effort to make the curriculum as inclusive and diverse as possible. Being used to reading articles written only by white males, it was very refreshing to have a more open reading list that incorporated women, disabled people, LGBT+ and people of colour. Her active effort to make a diverse and inclusive curriculum was appreciated because it is something that lecturers don't seem to pay too much attention to. I know that this conscious effort contributed to making the class so great and challenging”

## Excellent Personal Tutoring

Personal tutoring is, as the name suggests, a highly personal issue. Every student has a range of support needs both within and beyond their study. It can be a difficult task, but an excellent and caring personal tutor can have the most meaningful and fundamental effect imaginable on the development and wellbeing of their tutees; in one case, a student told us that her personal tutor literally “saved my life”.

As personal tutoring relationships are by nature very individual, it is difficult to imagine a one-size-fits-all model of an ideal personal tutor. What most nominations had in common was that a tutor paid attention to the uniqueness of the individual, and was flexible in meeting their needs.

There are some core qualities that students have told us they deeply value in their personal tutors. Unsurprisingly, important aspects here are kindness, approachability and willingness to listen to the problems students are facing. Providing visible and compassionate support when they face difficulties in their academic or personal lives was also highly valued.

Great personal tutors have made a significant impact on students’ academic lives and career development. Whilst course tutors are usually approached first for one-to-one subject help, what students’ valued from their personal tutors often related to their next steps in life. Students praised tutors who wrote them thoughtful references, and demonstrated their knowledge of them as an individual, as well as those who engaged with students individually to help them choose modules and explore career options. Several students specifically highlighted practical encouragement and support for applications for further study.

Notably, students do not perceive any divide between pastoral and academic support from their tutors, and most appreciated staff who were able to support them both as a person and as a learner.

Lastly, some students have told us how valued their personal tutors are in helping them to fit into life at UCL. This seemed to be a particular theme in nominations from overseas students, for whom beginning their study in London can be daunting. One student described how their personal tutor helped them to find out about and get involved with international student societies at UCL. Even making sure that students are aware of opportunities

for meeting others and pursuing interests outside of their course can be a simple way for personal tutors to ensure that their tutees feel at home at a new university.

### **Practices students particularly praised were:**

- Noticing and proactively approaching students who appear to be under stress
- Refraining from judgment or criticism, treating students' concerns with empathy and showing that they are taken seriously
- Sending follow-up emails to students facing difficulties to check-in on how things are going after meeting with them
- Being ready to point students to further sources of support and relevant services, whether the issue is personal, emotional or academic
- Having to hand helpful information on module choices and career resources
- Being sensitive to the potentially different needs of international and home students

“In class before Christmas 2017, I cracked and the pressure left me upset, scared and very depressed. I was wondering how I would pay my rent, UCL fees, everything! Anne spotted my increasing panic in class, quietly took me off and calmly listened, then created a course of action. She contacted student fees, the hardship fund, the course administrator, UCL careers and a recruitment company in the same afternoon”

## Diverse & Inclusive Education

For a while now, providing good quality feedback on students' work has been an area of focus for UCL. Students have clearly demonstrated that reflecting on their work and being shown how to improve is a very important part of their education. In their comments on feedback, students paid attention to both timeliness and quality of feedback, although interestingly, staff who are providing the most praised feedback also seem to return it quickly too.

It comes as no surprise that students place high value on getting feedback on their work on time. At a basic level, this means making sure marks are returned according to departmental deadlines. However, students have told us that they appreciate different forms of feedback, from comments on essays to in-person conversations about their progress. Staff availability to talk about topics further and improve understanding was particularly noted. In some cases, staff had provided general feedback to their entire class to bridge the gap between submission and individual assignment feedback, which was also welcomed.

As for quality of feedback, the main thing students praised were comments that reflected on their work in a balanced way, and gave them clear, practical, realistic action points for how to improve their work and develop their academic skills. Students appreciate hearing the good and bad points of their work and being given action points for development that are manageable and appropriate to their individual level.

### Practices students particularly praised were:

- Relating comments to detailed marking criteria and learning outcomes
- Providing examples and models of good answers to set questions post-submission
- Giving constructive suggestions of how students could have improved less successful areas of their assignments, which they can use for their next piece of coursework
- Pointing out things that went well and explaining why, so that students can replicate good approaches in future essays
- Encouraging students to reflect critically on their own work

“The feedback was extremely clear and helpful in understanding what I had done well and why, and what could be improved on. It was obvious to see what I could have incorporated and how I should have elaborated my answers. It has enabled me to understand how to improve, more than any other feedback, which is normally a few single remarks. The feedback did not leave me confused and deflated as I didn’t know how to improve, but made me feel positive knowing what direction to go in and how to assess and critique next time”

## Inspiring Teaching Delivery

So many qualities go into making an inspiring teacher, and students praised a wide array of aspects that have inspired them in their teachers. Whilst an ability to engage students, good (but adaptable) preparation and a clear passion for their subject are fundamental, students have given us broader examples of what is most important to them in how they are taught at UCL.

Most important of all, according to students, is a focus on independent learning. Students have shown us that they prefer active participation in teaching, and appreciate teachers who not only directly ask for their thoughts and opinions on the topics, but who seriously engage with this input, adapting their teaching accordingly and encouraging students to develop their ideas. An open atmosphere where students feel comfortable debating constructively is ideal.

Students also highlighted specific activities that great teachers have used to support independent thinking and critical development, including:

- Student-led seminars
- Anonymous peer review of each other's work
- Asking students to come to sessions prepared with questions to ask
- Encouraging constructive questioning of and feedback on not only course content, but the lecturer or seminar leader's own teaching approach
- Setting own-choice coursework assignments that allow students to follow their interests and pursue original research

Students' enthusiasm for the use of contemporary material in teaching relates strongly to the Brilliant Research-Based Education category. As in that category, students find being on the cutting-edge of research exciting, and this helps give purpose and motivation to their courses. There is also overlap here with Diverse and Inclusive Education, as students have responded well to teaching that allows them to think about current social issues. All of this is not just a matter of academic research, but also connections with industry and careers, from lab work, to finance, to translation. It is important to students to see what they are learning in the context of a bigger picture.

Thirdly, students across UCL have told us that they value teachers who respect their individual interests and approaches to learning, and who are able to tailor their teaching styles accordingly, whether this is to the culture



of a whole class or to an individual student. Many students praise staff who are able to get every member of a class talking, who are open to students' questions, and who find exciting material for particular classes based on knowledge of that group's interests. Some lecturers have taken the time to ask students individually about their academic interests, and have taken these to heart. Even as simple a gesture as learning students' names within one or two weeks of teaching is frequently cited as highly meaningful to students.

All of this, furthermore, is supported by interesting and appropriate choices of teaching activities. Again, students like these to be interest-based and connected to the 'real world' nature of their topic. These have included guest speakers, museum trips, use of audio-visual and news media, interactive quizzes and even a visit to a Bulgarian restaurant.

### **Practices students particularly praised were:**

- Approaches which support students to think independently and critically about taught materials
- Ensuring up-to-date research and contemporary material forms part of the curriculum
- Adapting teaching to individual and group learning styles, and developing a rapport with the group and individuals
- Use of different, interesting, engaging and diverse teaching methods, especially within the same module

“As far as teaching goes, she coordinated a course in Islamic Archaeology last term and it was pure brilliance. Islamic Archaeology is a huge, diverse, and growing field, but she's managed to strike a balance between 'classic' scholarship and modern research, broad debates and regional focus, history, archaeology, and heritage. More importantly, she was brilliant at getting every single person to talk - not in an intimidating way, but in a relaxed and stimulating discussion setting”

## Outstanding Research Supervision

Being an early career researcher can be daunting. For many research students, progressing to a PhD means a big change in the day-to-day approach to their work, and they can sometimes feel lost or overwhelmed by the complexity of conducting extensive independent research. Good supervision is therefore essential in equipping students with the skills, resources and, importantly, self-confidence to succeed in this demanding experience. As supervisors and students work closely together over the course of several years, this relationship is extremely important, and sets the course for the beginning of the careers of future academics.

Some of the qualities students value in excellent supervisors are not dissimilar from those of personal tutors. For example, it is important to research students to feel that their supervisors invest time and interest in them, know them as individuals, and are responsive to their questions.

Many research students also face challenges in their personal life during their degree, or face internal issues, such as feelings of isolation, self-doubt or crises of confidence in their work. Pastoral care is a highly important aspect of supervision, and supervisors who sympathise with the challenges of long-term research are highly valued.

Academically, the key quality that students noted in their supervisors is the encouragement of critical thought and self-led research. Many students commended supervisors who asked them probing questions that made them think critically about their work and produce rigorous research as a result, as well as encouraging them to disseminate their ideas through conferences, talks and publication.

What students told us was most important in a supervisor, however, was career development. There are numerous things that excellent supervisors do to support the overall development of their students as early career researchers. This included helping students get involved in wider academic networks, including conferences, research groups, and with colleagues from other universities or sectors. Sharing information on ongoing conferences, recently published research, practical support and advice on publications, conference presentations, funding applications, and career and post-doctoral opportunities, and creating opportunities for professional collaboration were also strong themes.

### Practices students particularly praised were:

- Help with career development and building an academic profile through publishing and networking
- Challenging students to think critically about their work and foregrounding independent research
- Acknowledging the potential stresses and emotional difficulties of PhD work and creating space to talk about this
- Being attentive to students' individual pastoral issues, listening to concerns and being aware of available sources of support

“Cliff is very good at foreseeing potential issues in our work, but remains calm and reassuring at even the most stressful of times. This not only includes instances where our research has taken an unexpected turn, but also when we have faced challenges in our personal lives. He consistently offers excellent pastoral support and has been very supportive during difficult times, whilst also being pragmatic and setting realistic goals to get us back on track.”

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