

Student Choice Awards 2019

What do students value most?

Summer 2019

studentsunionucl.org/sca
reps@ucl.ac.uk

 **STUDENTS'
UNION UCL**

Introduction

The Union has now been running our awards for UCL staff for seven years. This year, 1478 nominations were submitted for 764 different staff members. These awards help 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 are vocal when the academic experiences of our members do not meet their expectations, and approach head on the sometimes difficult conversations required to drive improvement.

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

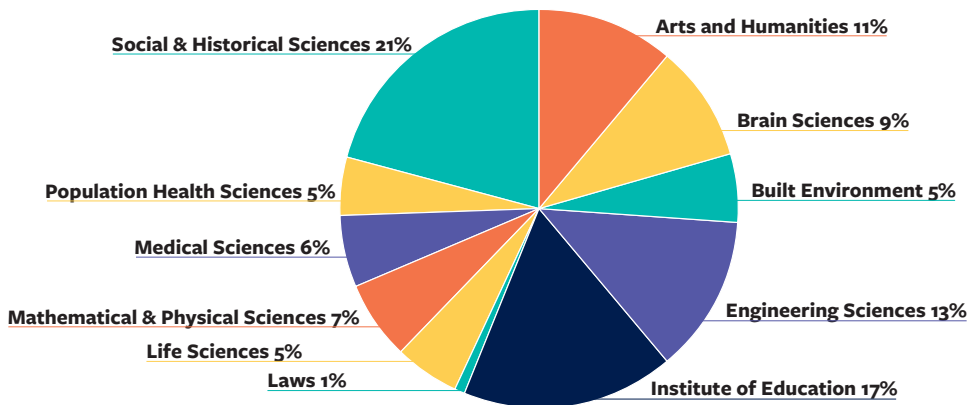
In this spirit, for each of our eight award categories, this report provides a digestible summary of the practices students have told us they appreciated the most. We hope this will be as enjoyable and informative for readers as compiling the report was to us.

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.***

1478 nominations submitted

764 different staff members nominated

Nominations by Faculty





1 Active Student Partnership
Listens to and works with students and their representatives to improve and positively change education

3 Amazing Support Staff
Does not hold a teaching role yet makes a difference to learning with help, patience and care

5 Exceptional Feedback
Establishes positive relationships with students through pastoral support and academic guidance

7 Brilliant Research-based Education
Educates with cutting-edge knowledge and facilitates students to contribute to innovative research

2 Diverse & Inclusive Education
Ensures curriculum and/or research recognises marginalised scholars, and shines a light on diverse perspectives

4 Inspiring Teaching Delivery
Delivers exceptional teaching, using innovative and engaging methods to hold interest and help learning

6 Excellent Personal Tutoring
Listens to and works with students and their representatives to improve and positively change education

8 Outstanding Research Supervision
Provides support yet fosters independence to help research students succeed

Active Student Partnership

The award for Active Student Partnership recognises staff who have supported students to work as partners in all aspects of their education. It recognises staff who are committed to listening and working with students and their representatives to improve and positively change their education.

Students' time at UCL is all about developing themselves as critical, creative and independent thinkers who are practically minded and great problem solvers; it's essential that students are given a voice in reflecting on and improving their educational experience.

The nominations for this award show three clear themes. Students value staff that:

- actively seek feedback and provide the tools to do so
- act on feedback whilst being transparent about actions and progress
- are invested in student development in and outside the classroom

Students recognise and appreciate the efforts of staff who actively listen to student feedback and take the feedback seriously. Students appreciate the formal channels to raise feedback, such as SSCCs, but also strongly value informal feedback channels such as in-class discussions, written feedback sheets, and Moodle surveys. In order to develop a stronger student-staff relationship, it is important that students feel that they can approach staff with honest thoughts and ideas that will be listened to and acted upon.

Nominations particularly highlight those members of staff who work with students to co-create solutions. Students value the chance to have an input into their education and enjoy working with staff to find innovative solutions. They recognise that some challenges may be out of the staff members' control, or may not be a quick win; transparent and honest communication is key. Students like to know what is going on behind the scenes and when they can expect change.

Lastly, students really value staff members who appear invested in their personal, academic, and professional development. They value extra- and co-curricular events that complement their studies, and enjoy working with staff to implement these.

Most Valued Practice

Actively seeking student feedback

Nominations show that students appreciate staff actively seeking feedback rather than waiting for formal meetings to discuss. Students like these informal discussions and feel more actively listened to as a result.

“He seeks and welcomes all forms of feedback”

Providing a platform to discuss solutions

Students value a platform to discuss solutions to challenges rather than just reporting them. Discussing both positive and negative aspects of their learning experience helps identify areas of best practice and areas for improvement.

“She works with you to find solutions and conveys that even if her hands are tied, the issue is valid and matters”

Closing the feedback loop

Agreeing actions and keeping students regularly updated on progress helps foster the staff-student relationship and creates more open channels of communication.

“He had multiple meetings with us and created a plan of actions. He made an open announcement in person regarding the situation”

“When concerns were brought to Selena’s attention via the student reps, she started offering additional weekly small-group workshops, which we were so appreciative of! To ensure the workshops would meet the different needs of the students, Selena used surveys in Moodle beforehand to gather questions and prepare the content accordingly. In particular, face-to-face and distance learners, part-time and full-time students, all have very different needs and conditions to address. The initiative and responsive attitudes and strategies that Selena has taken are remarkably inspiring and motivating for us students.”

Diverse & Inclusive Curriculum

Students are becoming increasingly conscious of social issues and how the content of their course relates to real-world politics. The award for Diverse & Inclusive Curriculum recognises staff who work to ensure their curriculum or research recognises marginalised scholars, and shines a light on diverse perspectives. Students across the disciplinary spectrum are taking a critical eye to the traditional academic canon, and are keen to interrogate themes which have previously been taken for granted or missed entirely.

In their nominations for this award, students celebrated staff who are enthusiastic to explore diversified approaches to their subject. They really appreciate alternative perspectives to the “standard curriculum” and enjoyed learning about new topics as part of their courses.

Most importantly, students feel that these staff members offer them a safe environment to discuss and debate these complex themes. Students particularly appreciate staff members encouraging them to form their own views as a result of these discussions and to not be afraid to challenge each other’s perspectives to form a deeper understanding.



Most Valued Practice

Including underexplored themes

In a predominantly white-dominated, Western-centric curriculum, students really value the chance to explore complex themes they would not usually get the chance to. They appreciate the alternative narratives and discourses on offer and find these topics critically engaging and purposeful.

“It offered something new and interesting that we do not often get the chance to explore”

Fostering healthy debate in a safe environment

UCL has students from a plethora of backgrounds and students value being able to explore and challenge their peers’ views and have their peers explore and challenge their own. Students enjoy having healthy debate in a safe university environment and value staff who encourage them to have a voice.

“It sparked a debate among students of all nationalities and ethnicities, allowing us to explore certain matters and concepts of race, racism and prejudice that would otherwise be very difficult to discuss”

Encouraging students to form their own world-views

Discussions and debates help students widen their own world views to encompass these complex and underrepresented themes. Students value this opportunity to take an open-minded approach to education and expand their knowledge.

“Without these seminars my world view would be narrower”

“Christine’s seminar series focused on writers of colour from the early 20th century, whose work is often overlooked, dealing with ideas of double consciousness, marginalisation and assimilation. She also shone a light on the queer undertones of many texts we read, aspects that have been suppressed in the past to appeal to a less open-minded audience.”

Amazing Support Staff

The Amazing Support Staff Award thanks staff who may not be in teaching roles but still make a huge difference to students' learning at UCL. Administrators, admissions officers, technicians and others, students value the help, patience and care these staff members offer them throughout their degrees.

Nominations for this award show the enormous power that support staff have to shape students' experiences and make good departments, great. Students told us that there are two main areas of excellence that they value in support staff: relevant and responsive communication, and informed advice and guidance.

Staff nominated for this award display certain traits that students highly value. Students recognise members of staff who are approachable, excellent listeners, and keen to support them in their journey.



"I personally wish all PhD students could have a Nadine in their department or programme. Friends and family can't always relate to the unique position of a PhD student and departmental tutors might not know us well enough personally to help in all situations. Nadine ticks all these boxes and more. She is extremely approachable and easy to talk to. She always comes up with innovative projects that we can get involved with to develop our transferable skills alongside our PhD."

Most Valued Practice

Offering relevant and responsive communication

In this category, more than any other, students praised the timely and accurate communications they receive from support staff, particularly via email. Students also highlighted that office hours are beneficial and help them approach staff with queries when they can fully devote their attention, contributing to delivering smoother solutions.

“She is incredibly quick to reply to any questions or requests to meet and encourages us to chase her up if she does not respond”

Using individual knowledge and expertise

Students recognise that support staff are often the backbone of departments and are filled with knowledge about what happens behind the scenes. Many nominations praised the expertise of these staff members and how they apply this to find practical solutions.

“She knows everything that is going on. She is up-to-date on all academic information”

Signposting where necessary

Whilst students do not expect staff to have all the answers, they appreciate their willingness to actively provide practical help where possible. Students recognise that support staff take time to point towards the relevant sources and people who can help.

“If she doesn’t know the solution to a problem, she either gets an answer from the person who knows, or gets you in a room with them”

Sharing opportunities to get involved

Invites to join committees, co-curricular events, guest speakers, careers fairs, etc., are predominantly shared by support staff and students praise this throughout their nominations.

“If it weren’t for his emails, I’m sure a lot of us wouldn’t have had the opportunities that we have now experienced”

Inspiring Teaching Delivery

The award for Inspiring Teaching Delivery recognises staff members who deliver exceptional teaching using innovative and engaging methods. These staff members capture students' attention, inspire them to explore their interests, and challenge their views, all whilst helping them to learn.

Students value staff members who deliver their teaching with enthusiasm, and who are inspiring and engaging with their audience. They appreciate tailored teaching relevant to their interests, and staff who are happy to diverge from the script in order to help them learn.

Students praise staff members who take into account their teaching environment, making it supportive and comfortable so that students feel confident in speaking up and unafraid of being wrong.



"I would like to nominate Dr Hans for using technology to deliver a student-centric learning experience. Syntax is not everyone's cup of tea, but it's fair to say that even those who have no desire to pursue syntax further were won over by Hans' enthusiasm for the subject. Video lectures, Socrative quizzes, hot questions, and Moodle forums provided a "flipped classroom" format that created a high level of student engagement who had to take responsibility for their learning."

Most Valued Practice

Using innovative and engaging teaching styles

Nominations show that students value staff who deliver content in creative ways. Some methods highlighted include using technology to make lectures interactive, using videos to further develop learning topics, and facilitating group discussion and debate.

“This includes using alternative media forms to supplement our understanding of set readings, ranging from contemporary documentary to a clip from a modern opera”

Showing passion for teaching and the subject delivered

Students truly appreciate staff being passionate about their teaching. Many nominations highlighted that staff members clearly love what they do and what they teach, and that this has a huge impact on their learning experience.

“He never fails to express his love for what he is teaching”

Making complex learning digestible and understandable

Content of courses can often be complex and difficult to process. Students value those staff members who take the time to relate their learning to memorable scenarios or processes that help them digest the information they are being taught.

“The reason I could understand, remember and apply the ideal gas law so quickly and efficiently is his comical but pertinent comparison to Twitter. $PV/n=RT$, for retweet is an image that just stayed in my head”

Exceptional Feedback

Providing good quality assessment feedback has been on UCL's agenda for a number of years. Quality feedback contributes to student development, helping them to progress and succeed. This award for Exceptional Feedback recognises staff who provide constructive and useful feedback on students' assessment and learning.

Students particularly value tailored written and/or verbal feedback that is designed to address their individual development. They place high value on feedback that enables them to reflect and improve in advance of future learning opportunities. Students really appreciate an opportunity to discuss the work and feedback in person, and feel that this maximises their learning and development.

In their comments, students paid particular attention to the timeliness with which feedback is returned. At a basic level, this means making sure marks are returned according to academic regulations within one calendar month of the deadline. Students do not feel that time should affect the quality of feedback received. Students identify staff members who provide detailed, high quality, and meaningful feedback within the set timeframes and highly value this.

Regarding quality of feedback, the key theme students praised is the provision of balanced, detailed comments that allow them to reflect on their work. They enjoy receiving clear, practical, and realistic action points for how to improve their work and develop their academic skills. Students appreciate hearing positive feedback about their work as well as areas for improvement so that they can identify good academic practice that they should carry forward into their work.

"During and after each GP day, Abhishek gave exceptional and personalised feedback to each of us individually to the extent I had never seen before from any other teaching in my degree. His feedback encompassed both specifics about things that were covered that day and tailored to my own performance, with more general feedback and advice for our lives as doctors in the future. This was extremely useful for me as I could reflect on and evaluate what I did well and what I should improve in the future – a very important learning tool to improve my future career skills."

Most Valued Practice

Giving personalised feedback

Above all else, students really value staff who take the time to provide tailored and personalised feedback.

“To think that he gave every student taking his class such personalised and detailed responses shows his dedication to teaching”

Discussing feedback verbally

Students highly praise staff who take the time to give and discuss feedback verbally. They express that from this, they are able to reflect on the feedback, apply it to their future academic work and also think about how they can apply it to developing their careers.

“He would always ask us how we think we did and then give us constructive feedback”



Excellent Personal Tutoring

Every student has a range of support needs both within and beyond their studies. The Excellent Personal Tutoring award recognises members of staff who go above and beyond in their roles providing exceptional pastoral support and academic guidance to their students and showing a willingness to listen. These staff members are truly invested in their roles as Personal Tutors and take the responsibilities seriously.



It is difficult to identify a one-size-fits-all model to personal tutoring as tutor-tee relationships vary massively across UCL. What students value most is that their personal tutor sees them as an individual, and is flexible to meeting their needs. Students do not perceive a divide between pastoral and academic support from their tutors, and most nominations highlighted staff members' ability to recognise them both as learners and as people. This appears particularly relevant in nominations from students from overseas or with particular personal circumstances.

Most Valued Practice

Providing academic guidance and pastoral support

As is expected, students recognise that personal tutors are there to both support them with their studies, and to also help them balance challenges from their lives outside of UCL with their education.

“She is interested in helping me at UCL and is happy to talk about anything in my life that may be affecting my studies”

Taking the time to listen

Personal tutors who have regular, meaningful meetings with their tutees are those who students praise most. Students want to feel that they are being listened to and appreciate when staff members take time to have a conversation with them that does not feel rushed.

“She creates a calm, supportive atmosphere and makes sure we feel listened to”

Getting the most out of the tutor-tutee relationship

Nominations show that different students have different needs and recognise those personal tutors who adapt to these. Tailoring the support offered to the tutee will help build trust and allow both student and staff to get the most out of the tutor-tutee relationship.

“Due to his empathetic approach, he has managed to build a relationship of trust with me easily”

“I consider her a personal mentor. She respects the diversity of students and finds and supports the strengths in each of us, even if we ourselves may not see them. I have approached her several times for guidance and direction and each time leave with a renewed perspective on my issues. In her work, Cloda Jenkins connects all aspects of an economics students’ experience; the academic learning, the search for career opportunities, and more general pastoral care – and this is what makes her a true champion.”

Brilliant Research-Based Education

Brilliant Research-Based Education is at the core of UCL and students benefit from the expertise of academic staff. This award recognises staff who educate students about the latest, cutting-edge information, and who enable students to create knowledge by conducting their own research.

The nominations show that students value staff who incorporate the latest research into their teaching which provides them with insights into emerging knowledge and issues of the future. Students recognise staff who provide supporting materials to help them explore the frontiers of knowledge and who encourage them to explore their own channels of research to produce something new and exciting.

Students are aware that staff at UCL produce top quality research from their own labs and offices; they want to benefit from this in the classroom too. They welcome staff to guide them with their own expertise but to also inspire and nurture them to pursue their own research interests and think about how this fits in with wider discourse.

As well as academic staff knowledge, students value input from industry experts and guest lecturers to expand on the topics they have touched on. These activities help students look beyond research that is relevant in the present, and focus on what may be coming in the future.



Most Valued Practice

Being up-to-date

UCL is renowned for its outstanding research output and students recognise that staff are at the forefront of the research arena. They enjoy hearing about developments in their areas of interest and value staff being up-to-date on current and future developments.

“He is at the very cutting-edge of his field; a world leader”

Encouraging students to create their own research avenues

Students particularly enjoy learning about the questions that still remain unanswered. They value staff who encourage them to pursue avenues of interest and create their own innovative research.

“We were given the freedom to formulate and answer our own research questions, with many opportunities for feedback”

Bringing in industry experts and specialists

Inviting speakers from industry to conceptualise how course content is relevant to their sectors is particularly welcome by students. They feel this enriches their experience and gives them the autonomy to own their research.

“She brings in expert speakers to help students gain more insight and knowledge, which is quite special”

“She encourages us to conduct our own studies in a professional manner through the assigning of presentations, formative critical reviews, and recommendations for future research essays based on current developments. To help us she provides excellent recommendations for how to profitably investigate these areas in our own time. As a result, many of us are researching barely investigated areas of research in our essays which helps each of us build off each other and truly feel like we are collaborating in cutting-edge research.”

Outstanding Research Supervision

Being a research student involves complex independent research meaning good supervision is essential for guidance and support. The award for Outstanding Research Supervision recognises staff who provide students with support yet foster the independence they need to help them succeed.

Students value research supervisors who demonstrate enthusiasm for their role and who are prepared to go the extra mile to support them. For many research students, feeling lost or overwhelmed by the complexity of conducting extensive independent research is not an uncommon occurrence. Research supervisors are in a unique position to help students deal with these complexities, whilst equipping them with the skills, resources, and confidence to succeed. Students value insights into career development and research supervisors play a key role in this. Many research students see their supervisors as mentors both in their subject of research and in academia as a career.

Many nominations show that research students value their supervisors encouraging them to push their boundaries, with many encouraging publication and conference presentations from an early stage. Research students feel that this better prepares them for their careers as academics, or in industry, and value the resilience they build as a result of these processes. They understand that their work may not be accepted for publication on first submission, but excellent research supervisors help them refine their ideas whilst allowing creativity and ownership. Students commended research supervisors who asked them probing questions that made them think critically about their work and, as a result, produce more rigorous research.

“Miranda always engages fully with the ideas and findings that we bring to supervision, points out possible further avenues of inquiry, and raises critical questions where they are in order. She finds the right balance between providing guidance and letting us take ownership. Miranda encourages us to publish early, aiming for high-impact journals and for conference presentations based on the principle that if we get accepted straight away, we may not have aimed high enough in the first place. In doing so, she encourages us to be confident and ambitious while also teaching us that disappointments are a normal part of academic life that should not discourage us.”

Most Valued Practice

Challenging students to be the best that they can be

Students recognise and respect research supervisors encouraging them to push them out of their comfort zones whilst providing support. They highlight that supervisors inspire them to achieve what they perceived originally as unachievable through challenging their thoughts and believing in their abilities.

“He challenges me with tasks that hone my research and critical thinking skills”

Providing a pillar of stability

Conducting research may be a hectic and stressful time in students' academic careers. Students highly value supervisors who serve as a constant in the chaos. They appreciate advice on how to remain grounded and on track for success, even in times of challenge.

“She is the most stable point in my academic life this year”



Summer 2019

studentsunionucl.org/sca
reps@ucl.ac.uk



25 Gordon Street | WC1H 0AY