Lecturers on demand: Student perceptions within Student-Led Teaching Award nominations

Sophie Banks, The Open University, sophie.banks@open.ac.uk

Abstract

Student-Led Teaching Awards allow students to nominate their lecturers for various awards, such as Best Lecturer, Outstanding Student Support, Most Innovative, and many more. They give students the opportunity to recognise the lecturers who supported their university experience in that academic year. This research study contributes to the growing literature in Student-Led Teaching Awards that has previously mostly focused on lecturers' perceptions of the Awards. This research study is an original contribution as it analyses how students perceive their lecturers and their teaching practice as written in the student nominations about their lecturers. This research study analysed Student-Led Teaching Award nominations for 750 lecturers, over a four-year period (2016-2020) from a UK teaching-oriented university. A thematic network analysis was used to decipher how students perceive their lecturers and found four distinct areas: students as consumers, students as learners, lecturers as academics and lecturers as educators. Throughout these four areas, it is clear that lecturers are expected to undertake duties that fall outside their normal duties, expected to perform, and expected to be on demand. Overall, this research study claims that students are experts in teaching excellence, and their viewpoint gives us an insightful view into lecturers' teaching practice, and it warns of the Higher Education sector perpetuating the unhealthy work-life balances of lecturers.

Introduction

Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs) are an informal method of gathering student evaluations of teaching for the purpose of recognising lecturers (and professional services staff and students in some SLTAs). The National Union of Students (NUS) and Advance HE, started a pilot scheme for SLTAs in 2009 (National Union of Students & Higher Education Academy, n.d.). In 2025, institutions across the United Kingdom (UK) are running SLTAs in varying formats but what unifies them all is that they are student-led. SLTAs are student-led because students play a part in organising the awards, they make nominations, the judge the nominations, and select the winners for each award. No matter if the SLTAs are based in the university or the students' union (association or guild), no staff are allowed to nominate or choose the winners for staff awards within SLTAs.

The literature on SLTAs is small but is a growing area. The majority of the literature on SLTAs focuses on lecturers' perceptions of SLTAs, however, there is literature that focuses on the best practice found within the nominations (Matheson, 2019; Lowe & Shaw, 2019). Despite

there being a small pool of literature in this area, there are two emerging schools of thoughts. The first is that SLTAs are popularity contests, as students do not understand what teaching excellence is (Bradley et al., 2015; Madriaga & Morley, 2016). The second is that SLTAs are fairly organised and therefore cannot be popularity contests, and that students have an important viewpoint on teaching excellence (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019; Matheson, 2019).

SLTA nominations give a wealth of data that can be used to analyse what lecturers do, and how lecturers act, which students value. None of the previous research in this area has looked at the nominations to discover the width and breadth of practices value. Instead, they have interviewed SLTAs winners to discuss their best practice (Matheson, 2019), and discovered the best practice relating to assessment and feedback (Lowe & Shaw, 2019). Therefore, this research study will discover how students perceive their lecturers' and their teaching practice when nominating them for the award of Best Lecturer in SLTAs to demonstrate the width and breadth of lecturers' duties that students value.

Literature Review

Teaching Excellence

The term 'teaching excellence' has been used widely within the Higher Education (HE) landscape for over fifty years (Percy & Salter, 1976), and, "appears to be embedded within the policy rhetoric of higher education today" (Su & Wood, 2019, p.81). Despite the term being within the HE vocabulary for so long there does not appear to be one singular definition and is understand differently by different players in the HE landscape (Skelton, 2004; Palmer & Collins, 2006; Warnes, 2021; Dransfield et al., 2022). The term teaching excellence is used in various contexts across the HE landscape and is a HE buzzword. Moore et al. believes that term has lost its way and states that 'excellence' is now 'good' (2017, p.2); indeed, someone's excellent is someone's good (Wood & Su, 2017). It is difficult to decide when teaching excellence really means excellent teaching.

It can be argued that the expectation that all teaching should be excellent is intensified by the students as consumers movement. The phenomenon of students as consumers, aligns students as, "someone who, as a result of rational financial exchange, considers themselves to have purchased a particular product (a degree) and therefore expects access to certain quality services" (Raaper, 2021, p.133). In the UK, studies have found that students align themselves to this phenomenon (Nixon, et al., 2018); see themselves as learners rather than consumers (Tomlinson, 2017); or identify with being both a learner and a consumer (Gupta, et al., 2023). Despite this range of views, UK policymakers continue to force students into the consumer role (Sabri, 2010; Tight, 2013). Whether one aligns with the students as consumers or students as learners phenomena, it is clear that teaching excellence as a term is important to the UK HE landscape.

Student-Led Teaching Awards

Since 2009 and the rise of SLTAs, two schools of thought have emerged from the literature. The first school of thought has a negative viewpoint on SLTAs. Madriaga and Morley were concerned with the, "relative lack of critique of such awards schemes" (2016, p.167). In this school of thought, staff are said to believe that SLTAs are popularity contests. There is also a belief that students do not understand the term teaching excellence, in which Madriaga and Morley call it: "questions of student ability and awareness to discern teaching excellence" (2016, p.171). Indeed, even in literature about wider student evaluations of teaching, there are academics who do and do not "trust students as appropriate feedback givers" (Karm, Sarv & Groccia, 2022, p.211). SLTAs fit within this wider literature, and it is clear that certain groups of academics do not believe student feedback is valid.

The positive school of thought believe that SLTAs are a positive event within the negative feedback world of HE. There are academics who believe that students relish the opportunity to thank their lecturers (Wheeler & Gill, 2010; Bradley et al., 2015; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). SLTAs are an informal method of gaining student evaluations of teaching and sit outside of regular university monitoring. Academics in this school of thought are keen to dispel arguments from the negative school of thought. As organisers of a SLTAs scheme, Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting (2019), have stated how SLTAs are not popularity contests. They also confirm that SLTAs are "not popularity contests since they are evidence-led and give awards based on the quality of teaching as indicated in students' nomination comments (not the quantity of nominations)" (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019, p.65).

Within SLTAs literature, gaps have been called out several times (Thompson & Zaitseva, 2012; Seng & Geertsena, 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). There is a wealth of data found with the SLTAs nominations that is underutilised (Thompson & Zaitseva, 2012; Seng & Geertsena, 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). There is work beginning to emerge from these calls. We are now seeing the literature on SLTAs move from these two schools of thought to analyses on what the nominations tell us. Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting (2019) began to look at the themes found in their SLTAs nominations whilst also defending SLTAs. Matheson (2019) held interviews with SLTAs winners to have a deeper dive into their best practice. Lowe and Shaw (2019) looked at their SLTAs nominations to discover best practice in assessment and feedback. There is a real need for academics to use this underutilised source of data to understand more about HE.

Methodology
Context

The dataset for this research study was from SLTAs at a UK teaching-oriented university, with approximately 25,000 students. The SLTAs at this university were launched approximately ten years ago and are well established in the institution. Students are invited to nominate via an

online form in the Spring. Students are required to give the name of the lecturer (or professional staff or student) they are nominating. There is also an open textbox for them to write a nomination for this person. The students are able to write as little or as much as they like.

This dataset is made up of SLTA nominations from the academic year 2016/17 to 2019/2020. During this time period, there were nine different awards. Out of these nine awards, five are for staff members, of which one is for non-teaching staff. The other four awards are for students and student representatives. For this research study, the award of Best Lecturer was selected as it was the only award that focused solely on learning and teaching. For this award, students were asked to only consider the teaching provided by the staff member, and not other activities they may undertake, such as course leadership or supervision, as they were covered by other awards. Best Lecturer was also the most popular award in relation to the number of nominations received every year. Every year, the entire SLTAs would receive approximately 1,500 nominations, of which the Best Lecturer award would receive about 200 nominations.

In the four years of this research study (2016/17 – 2019/2020), 750 lecturers were nominated for the award of Best Lecturer. Out of these 750 lecturers, there were 291 female lecturers and 459 male lecturers, as shown in Table 1.

Year	Female Lecturers	Male Lecturers	Total Lecturers
2016/17	60	118	178
2017/18	77	118	195
2018/19	78	126	204
2019/20	76	97	173
Total	291	459	750

Table 1. Number of Lecturers Nominated for Best Lecturer Award by Year

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the confidentiality of the staff members within this dataset, the dataset was anonymised before being shared with the researcher. This included the removal of staff names, course and module titles, gender, and any local information. This article includes direct quotes from the STLAs. To preserve the student voice, these have been kept verbatim. However, the researcher has endeavoured to ensure these direct quotes do not contain any identifying information about the staff or the institution. The researcher previously worked for this institution and organised the SLTAs. Therefore, the researcher acted in line with insider researcher ethical guidelines (Toy-Cronin, 2018).

Thematic Network Analysis

This research study uses thematic network analysis, a method of analysing qualitative data which was devised by Attride-Stirling (2001). This method is similar to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) in both the researcher breaks down the dataset for analysis and looks for recurrent themes. In a thematic analysis, these themes are usually displayed as themes in sub-themes. A thematic network analysis differs, and themes are organised into three levels: Basic, Organising and Global. Attride-Stirling (2001, p.388) describe Basic Themes as the "lowest-order theme that is derived from the textual data". Organising Themes are the next level and represent groups of Basic Themes as "clusters of similar issues" (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). Lastly, Global Themes are the "super-ordinate themes encompassing the principal metaphors in the data as a whole" (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). Teaching practice is made up of smaller actions and intentions. Using a thematic network analysis, rather than a thematic analysis, allows for the connections to be found in the dataset and to 'illustrate the relationships between them' (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These relationships are displayed in network maps, as shown in Figure 1.
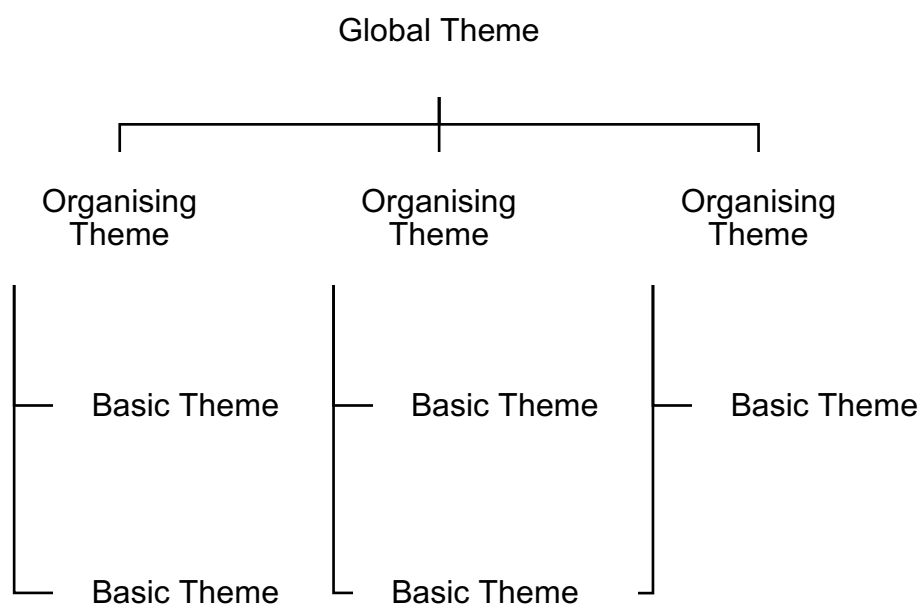

Figure 1. Example of a Network Map

As the researcher did not want to lose the student voice, the nominations were broken down into individual nominations and analysed by hand, rather than by a software (such as NVivo). Although the dataset was broken down into individual nominations, the nominations were also separated by each academic year, so the dataset could be analysed as a comparison over the years if the researcher wished. Some lecturers were only nominated once, some lecturers were only named but were not given a written nomination by the students, some had several nominations, and some had lengthy written nominations. The researcher felt it would be

more equitable, and in line with the student voice, to treat each induvial nomination as a separate entity.

In the first read through of the nominations, there were 167 codes found. At this point, the researcher was not concerned with duplications or similar codes. Instead, the aim was to understand the dataset and begin to see the patterns within it. Next, the researcher analysed the dataset in line with the 167 codes to see where there were duplicated. 55 codes were removed at this stage due to duplication. Another readthrough focused on the similarity of codes. To assist with this stage, the researcher recorded the frequency of mentions of each of the 112 codes; this resulted in 65 remaining codes. The researcher used the 65 codes to create 38 Basic Themes by analysing how the codes could be simply grouped together. The aim was to ensure that codes formed Basic Themes that were broad enough to be separate entities from other Basic Themes, and not so small that they would become invalid. The researcher reread the nominations by the Basic Themes groupings, rather than the original method of by lecturer, by academic year. The researcher sought out patterns and relationships that group the Basic Themes into Organising and Global Themes. A codebook was produced to represent each of these Themes, what the inclusion and exclusion criteria were, and example quotes from the nominations.

Results

Global Theme 1: Students as Consumers

This Global Theme contains all data from the SLTAs nominations that defined students as consumers. The Thematic Network Map for this Global theme is shown in Figure 2 and discussed in full, theme by theme, below.
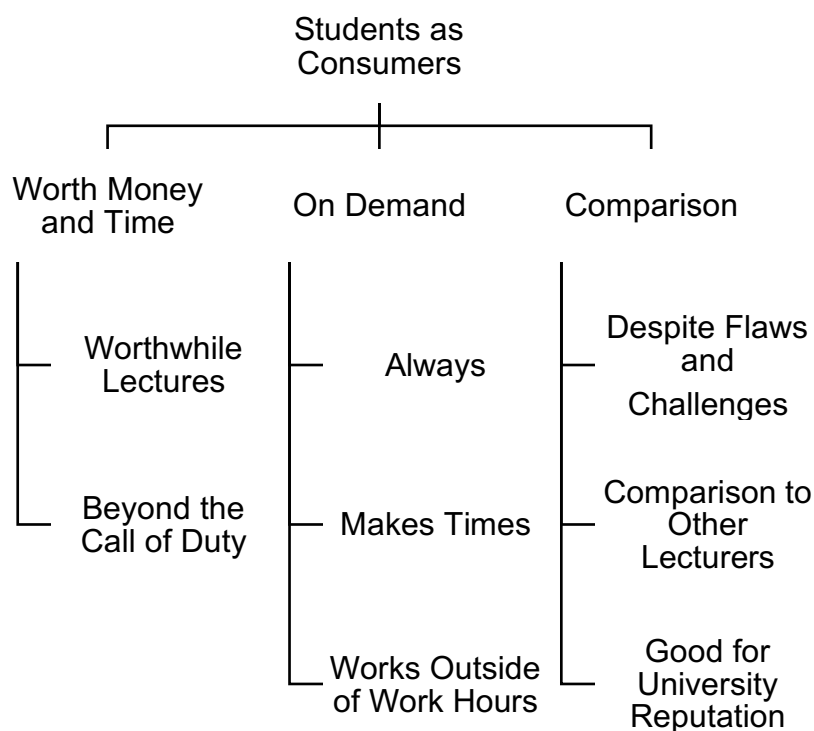
Figure 2. Thematic Network Map of Global Theme 1 – Students as Consumers

Organising Theme 1.1: Worth Money and Time

Within this Organising Theme, students praised lecturers who provided a high-quality service that allowed them to be successful, rather than referencing lecturers who empowered them as learners.

In Basic Theme 1.1.1: Worthwhile Lecturers, the nominations relate to the students as consumers phenomenon. In these nominations, students state that they felt their lecturers are worthwhile, in terms of their time being well spent, but also being worth the money. Students praised their lectures for always being *'beneficial'* and for being *'fully committed to making [the] educational experience worth your time'.* They also pointed out the lecturers' lectures that were so worthy that you *'wouldn't dream of missing one'.* This Basic Theme encompassed the praise from students that focused on the worth of the lectures, rather than how, what, and how well they learned.

In Basic Theme 1.1.2: Beyond the Call of Duty, students nominate their lecturers for *'going above and beyond'* and *'going the extra mile'.* Student nominations within this Basic Theme demonstrated how much their lecturers had done, including that a lecturer had *'supported me with my health issues when I couldn't go on a trip and managed to get me a funded trip on different transportation so I could go on the trip'.* A different student wrote *'believe it or not, the email came through at around 4am – (dedication right there!)'.* This work is not outside of the realms of normal duties of a lecturer, but does show how lecturers are going above and beyond to undertake their duties.

Organising Theme 1.2: On Demand

Within the scope of Organising Theme 1.2: On Demand is the concept that students perceive their lecturers to be *'consistently present'.*

Basic Theme 1.2.1: Always brings together the nominations that feature the word *'always',* or relevant synonyms. One nomination had the word always in every sentence:

> *'This lecturer always makes the most complex of lessons simple and easy to understand. They are always approachable when you're unsure about anything and is very easy to talk to. They always show that they are interested in you as a person not just as another student and takes the time to recognise you. Their feedback is always useful and timely so that you can improve upon it for the next piece of work.'*

Lecturers are seen to be on-demand, *'consistently present'* and *'always'* there for their students.

Basic Theme 1.2.2: Makes Time includes the nominations that include phrases such as *'they make time'*, *'they give up their spare time'*, and *'they are willing to go out of their way'*. Students are praising those who make time for them, but we could also read this as the lecturers who put them first. One student commented that they knew their lecturer would *'meet with me ten times a week if it would help me and that is rare to come by'*.

Basic Theme 1.2.3: Works Outside of Working Hours has all the nominations that discuss how lecturers have worked outside their usual working hours. Students described this in several ways, from *spare time'*, *'availability 24/7'*, to *'sacrifice[ing] their home time'*. Students in the Basic Theme not only valued being put first, like Basic Theme 1.2.2, but being putting in front of a lecturer's own personal life and commitments.

Organising Theme 1.3 Comparison to Other Lecturers

Within Organising Theme 1.3: Comparison, students demonstrate that they can evaluate teaching practice by comparison to others.

Basic Theme 1.3.1: Despite Flaws and Challenges shows how students want to praise their lecturer whilst stating that they may have flaws or face challenges. Students referenced challenges such as illness and childcare responsibilities, but also more teaching focused challenges, such as their lecture being *'the last one of the week'*. Students also reference their lecturers' flaws whilst stating that this flaw did not detract from them deserving to win Best Lecturer. One student stated in their nomination that *'while their assignment written feedback is basic', yo*u can see them for further verbal feedback, and *'their feedback might not be the fastest, however, it helps to improve for the next assignment'*. These nominations almost sound like product reviews.

Basic Theme 1.3.2: Comparison to Other Lecturers contains nominations where students praise one lecturer by comparing them to another. Students commented that their lecturer gave them further assignment feedback where *'other lecturers have brushed me off when I've asked'* and that *'if you ask them a dumb question, they are not condescending like most other lecturers'*. Students may not always be able to write about teaching excellence, but they can certainly tell you what they deem to be bad practice.

Basic Theme 1.3.3.: Good for University Reputation focuses on the nominations where students refer to their lecturer as respected, popular, and good for university reputation. One student stated that their lecturer is a *'fantastic person to have representing the course and the university'*. Another makes a stronger claim, *'does the university want lecturers to fly the flag and put the university on the map? Please get more lecturers like them'*. Students in this Basic Theme 'sell' their lecturers and show how they are commercially effective.

Global Theme 2: Students as Learners

This Global Theme encompasses themes and codes that relate to students as learners. The Thematic Network Map for this Global Theme is shown in Figure 3 and discussed in full, theme by theme, below.
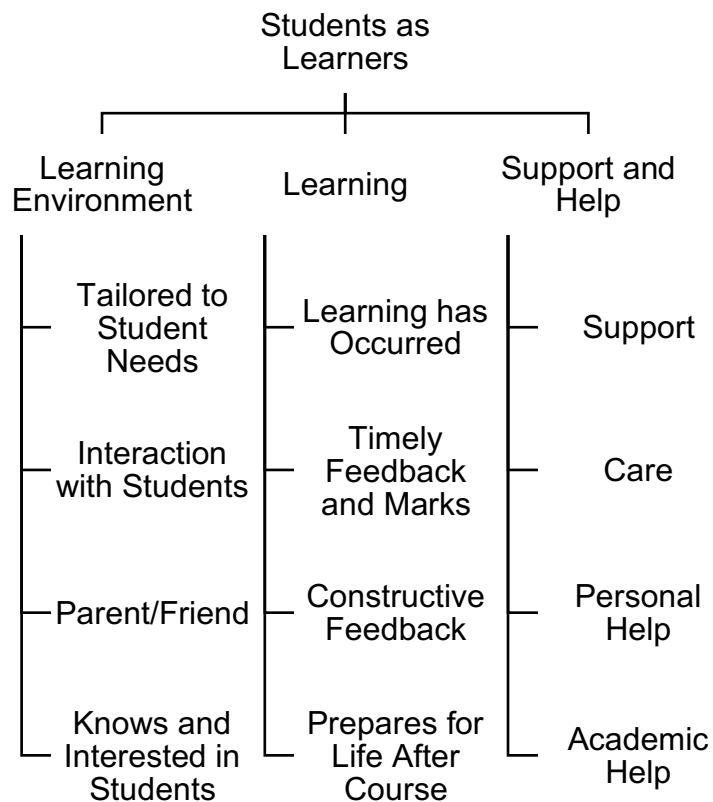
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                        Students as
                          Learners
                              |
        ┌─────────────────────┼─────────────────────┐
   Learning                Learning            Support and
   Environment                                    Help

   Tailored to           Learning has            Support
    Student               Occurred
     Needs

   Interaction            Timely                  Care
   with Students         Feedback
                         and Marks

   Parent/Friend        Constructive            Personal
                         Feedback                 Help

   Knows and            Prepares for            Academic
   Interested in        Life After                Help
   Students              Course
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Figure 3. Thematic Network Map of Global Theme 2 – Students as Learners

Organising Theme 2.1: Learning Environment

This Organising Theme brings together the Basic Themes that reference the safe learning environment the lecturer has built.

The first Basic Theme, 2.1.1: Tailored to Student Needs includes nominations in which students reference the ways their lecturers have tailored the content or their teaching style to the needs of their students. Students praised lecturers who *'teach […] in multiple ways so as every student understands'* and *'always [trying] to cater for our needs'*. One lecturer was nominated for *'making voice recording of readings for [dyslexic] students and reading and discussing texts aloud with us in class to aid our understanding'*. Students wish to praise lecturers who made an effort to produce an inclusive learning environment.

Basic Theme 2.1.2: Interaction with Students depicts the myriad of positive ways that their lecturers interacted with them, including how students felt they could ask questions and were

listened to. One student called their learning environment a, *'safe and encouraging classroom environment where everyone feels comfortable to engage'*. Lecturers have created *'a sense of community [that] brings students together'* for interaction.

Basic Theme, 2.1.3: Parent/Friend, contains the nominations where students referenced their lectures as a parent or a friend. Students wrote in their female lecturers' nominations that they found them to be parental, *'she is very much like a parent'*, and motherly, such as *'she's like a mother to our course, and we wouldn't know what to do without her'*. In contrast, students called their male lecturers their friends.

The final Basic Theme, 2.1.4: Knows and Interested in Students, describes how lecturers are genuinely interested in their students. One student wrote that their lecturer *'always show[s] that they are interested in you as a person not just as another student and take the time to recognise you'*. Students felt valued when a lecturer knew their name and recognised them in and outside the classroom.

Organising Theme 2.2: Learning

This Organising Theme collates the Basic Themes that relate to how learning has occurred for students in various formats.

Basic Theme 2.2.1: Learning has Occurred includes references to how learning has occurred and therefore has changed the student. Students wrote that they *'always take something away from their lectures'* or *'always learn something from their lectures'*. Students also reference the change in themselves, *'I always leave their lecturers with a brain explosion of knowledge'* and that they are, *'inspired to find out more for myself'*.

Basic Theme 2.2.2: Timely Feedback and Marks describes getting feedback and marks/grades back on time. Students also reference why timely feedback matters, as they can use it to *'improve upon it for the next piece of work'*. Although students had different definitions of how timely is timely – e.g. *'always back within two weeks'* – there was a common thread that timely meant before the next assessment.

The third Basic Theme, 2.2.3: Constructive Feedback focuses on how students praised their lecturers for providing constructive feedback on their assessments. Students valued *'insightful'* feedback that led *'to a greater understanding of [their] work overall'*. Students wrote that this constructive feedback enabled them to develop and grow, ready for their next assessment.

Basic Theme, 2.2.4: Prepares for Life After the Course references the ways in which lecturers prepare their students for life after the course/module. Students referenced this in line with employability and how the lecturer has assisted *'in finding students opportunities outside of the classroom'* or *'creating opportunities for career development'*. The students also mentioned how their lecturer helped them build skills that are not *'only helpful for Uni life*

but to carry through into the real world'. Lastly, students wrote about how their lecturers have inspired in them a sense of lifelong learning, *'they show us that learning is a way of living and learning knows no barriers'*.

Organising Theme 2.3: Support and Help

This Organising Theme has four Basic Themes and brings together all the ways lecturers care, help and support their students.

The first Basic Theme, 2.3.1: Support brings together the nomination where students write about how their lecturers support them. This Theme contains references to non-specific support, such as: *'outstanding [support] […] on an individual level'*, *'the love and support they gave us never faded'*, and *'unconditional'*. Some students referenced that this support is what kept them going in the course. One student wrote that they *'probably wouldn't still be on the course if not for'* their lecturer and the support they gave.

Basic Theme 2.3.2: Care refers to how lecturers cared about their students. In this Theme, the word genuinely was used a lot by students. Some examples are *'there is always a sense that they genuinely care about their job and students'*, they *'genuinely cared about every single one of us'*, and they *'genuinely care about my personal wellbeing as well as my success at university'*. Food was also mentioned with this Theme as students felt that their lecturers bringing them in food was a show of care. One student commented that *'understanding that students found early mornings hard, they would bring in coffees, teas and biscuits on our early lectures'*. Interestingly, students said that only their female lecturers made the food; they said that their male lecturers brought it in.

Basic Theme 2.3.3: Personal Help focuses on how lecturers helped students in personal, emotional or mental health matters. Students believe that their lecturers took an *'interest in your health'* and provided *'a strong level of pastoral care'*. A few nominations went into details of how lecturers provided mental health support. Although it would not be ethical to share many of these nominations due to the high level of detail, one student commented that their '*lecturer is without a doubt my life saver'*.

Basic Theme 2.3.4: Academic Help brings together the nominations in which students reference getting help in academic matters, in and outside of the classroom. One student wrote that *'if there is uncertainty with a subject topic, they will always find the time to help you with either 1 to 1 teaching or hosting specific tutorials on the subject if there are a few students who are also having difficulty'*. Another student wrote that their lecturer had 'given me confidence and helped me to change my mindset from "*OMG! I can't do these reports'* to *'OMG! I can do these reports"*.

Global Theme 3: Lecturers as Academics

This Global Theme collates the Basic Themes and codes that relate to lecturers being academics. The Thematic Network Map for this Global Theme is shown in Figure 4 and discussed in full, theme by theme below.
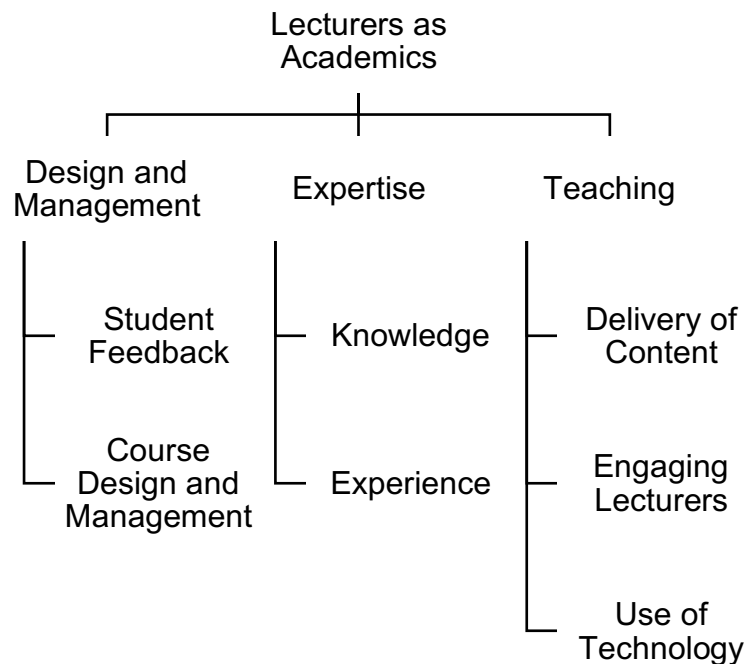
Lecturers as Academics

Design and Management — Expertise — Teaching

Design and Management:
- Student Feedback
- Course Design and Management

Expertise:
- Knowledge
- Experience

Teaching:
- Delivery of Content
- Engaging Lecturers
- Use of Technology

Figure 4. Thematic Network Map of Global Theme 3 – Lecturers as Academics

Organising Theme 3.1: Design and Management

This Organising Theme brings together two Basic Themes that relate to the design and management of the course/module and how student feedback impacts this and the lecturers' practice.

The first Basic Theme, 3.1.1: Student Feedback depicts the ways the lecturers asked for, listened to, and acted upon student feedback. The students commented that their lecturers were *'champions [of] student voice'* and that they made students feel, *'like our voices are heard'*. Students also praised lecturers who asked for student feedback, *'always checks up on students to ensure they are doing things correctly and are happy in the way they are delivering the material'*. Students also praised lecturers who listened and acted upon feedback, with lecturers making changes based on student feedback.

Basic Theme, 3.1.2: Course Design and Management brings together all the student nominations that have mentions of course design and course management. Students valued the way their lecturer had *'thought through the whole learning experience process for the*

student including facilitating learning via group work, use of props and effective use of technology.' Another student discussed the variety of pedagogical tools their lecture employed, *'when it comes to their pedagogy, they use a variety of teaching methods from blended learning, expert-class debates, videos, self-reflection, and the old classic of lecturing'.* Students were able to reference learning as a journey throughout a module and course.

Organising Theme 3.2: Expertise

This Organising Theme has two Basic Themes that focus on lecturers' expertise.

Basic Theme 3.2.1: Knowledge describes lecturers' knowledge of their subject and knowledge of teaching. One student wrote how their lecturer's knowledge was an *'inspiration'* and that it is *'it is an absolute pleasure to learn from their vast intellect'*. Students valued being taught by someone who was knowledgeable in their subject area, such as their lecturer paying *'rigorous attention to academic developments [to] ensure teaching resources/sources are contemporary and relevant'*. There was little reference to the lecturer's own research, but we cannot know if this is because students did not feel it was relevant in their nominations or if their lecturers shared their own research.

Basic Theme 3.2.2: Experience describes how lecturers have experience in the industry of their subject area. Students wrote that their lecturers' *'apply their experience to the course to give students a deeper understanding of how the material applies within the field'*, *'they always have a great story to tell from their experiences'*, and they *'have got us in touch with some big names within the UK industry'*. It is important to note that the participating university's courses lent itself to lecturers coming from industry, which may not be the case for all universities.

Organising Theme 3.3: Teaching

This Organising Theme contains the three Basic Themes that relate to the teaching practice of the lecturer.

The first Basic Theme, 3.3.1: Delivery of Content depicts how students perceive their lecturer's delivery of content. It includes references to teaching style and command over the classroom. Students wrote about how their lecturers *'present in a lively manner and connect with room and you on an individual level'* and how their lecturers are *'animated while teaching'*. Students shared how this enabled them *'easily understand'* the content.

Basic Theme 3.3.2: Engaging Lectures describes how students find their lectures to be engaging and enjoyable. Most of the nominations in this Theme discussed how it was the lecturer's manner of bringing the students into the lecture in an engaging way that the

students valued. One student wrote that their lecturer's '*classes are very engaging and enjoyable, a pleasure to attend*'. Another commented that their lecturer, '*never carries out a boring lecture [and] keeps us entertained*'. Students wanted to attend these lectures and felt that they aided their learning because they were engaging.

Basic Theme, 3.3.3: Use of Technology brings together descriptions of lecturer's good command of technology. This Theme did not speak to innovation with the use of technology but rather focuses on Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) spaces and how their lecturer has uploaded, '*all of the lecture materials and additional guidance is on VLE in the appropriate files*', and how this was done, '*well in advance*' of the lecture itself. Students also praised lecturers who used the VLE spaces to facilitate additional learning, such as, '*new articles that will help us learn more about the module they teach*'.

Global Theme 4: Educators

This Global Theme encompasses the Basic Themes and codes that relate to lecturers as educators. This Global Theme differs from the previous one as it focuses on activities and traits that would be applicable to the broader term of educator. The Thematic Network Map for this Global Theme is shown in Figure 5 and discussed in full, theme by theme, below.
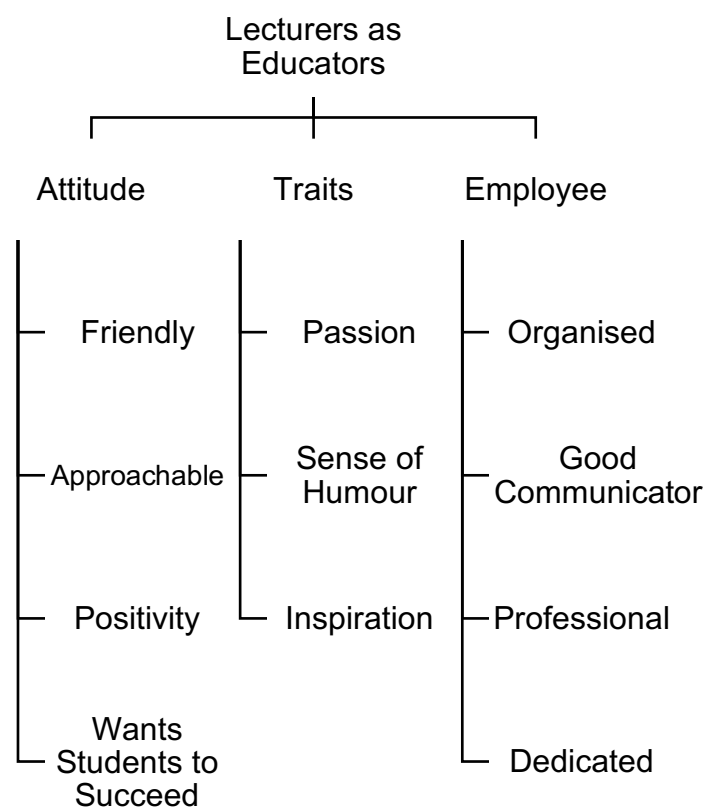
Figure 5. Thematic Network Map of Global Theme 4 – Lecturers as Educators

Organising Theme 4.1: Attitude

This Organising Theme encompasses the Basic Themes that relate to the lecturer's attitude. Within this Organising Theme, there are four Basic Themes.

Basic Theme, 4.1.1: Friendly depicts how the lecturer creates a learning environment that is friendly. One student wrote that their lecturer '*make[s] every single student feels welcome*', and another commented that their lecturer is '*so friendly that no one is afraid to come to them with any issue*'. There is a sense within these nominations that the lecturers in question are not just friendly to individual students but to all.

The second Basic Theme, 4.1.2: Approachable brings together nominations that reference the lecturer as approachable. Students wrote that their lecturers are '*always approachable when you're unsure about anything and is very easy to talk to*' and '*extremely approachable if further help needed*'. One student commented that they '*always feel comfortable talking to [them] about any difficulty I face*'. Students value lecturers' '*open door policy*' and praised those to become the '*first member of staff to go to if [they] had an issue/needed help*'.

Basic Theme 4.1.3: Positivity incorporates how the lecturers are positive and sharing this makes the learning environment positive. Students wrote about how their lecturer's positivity had an effect on them, '*always bubbly and happy, which projects onto others*', '*always brightens up your day with their smile and laughter*', and '*no matter what mood you're in they will always match it with a smile and positive energy*'.

Basic Theme, 4.1.4: Wants Students to Succeed, describes how students believe that their lecturer wants them to succeed. One student wrote that their lecturer, '*just wants their students to do well and hates to see them falter*'. Students valued the lecturers who boosted their confidence and empowered them to, '*achieve their full potential*'.

Organising Theme 4.2: Traits

This Organising Theme collates the Basic Themes that encompass how students perceive their lectures' positive traits and how this has an impact on their learning.

Basic Theme, 4.2.1: Passion brings together all the nominations where students state that their lecturers are passionate about their subject area and teaching. Students stated this made learning more enjoyable. One student wrote, '*they are passionate about their subject so much so that one does not want to ever miss any lecture*', and another stated, '*they are always enthusiastic when it comes to delivering the subjects that they teach, and it makes me*

enjoy the subject even more.' One student shared how their lecturer's passion made them '*excited for my career in the industry*'. Students went beyond the words passion and enthusiasm and wrote, '*their love for their subject has no bounds.*'

Basic Theme 4.2.2: Sense of Humour depicts the ways lecturers had a sense a humour and were funny. Students valued lecturers who, '*makes the whole class laugh*' but also, '*never fails to get key information across*'. Students saw it as a tool to calm them during a, '*stressful time at university*' and that their lecturers' sense of humour, '*sort[s] you right out at 9 o'clock in the morning*'. One student wrote about an intriguing new career path, '*if they could be a stand-up academic comedian the crowd would love them*'.

The final Basic Theme, 4.2.3: Inspiration incorporates the nominations about inspirational lecturers. Most nominations with this Theme were simple statements, such as '*they are a very inspirational lecturer*', '*they are an inspiring person*', and '*they are an inspirational teacher*'. Other nominations elaborate. One student wrote that their lecturer inspired them to be '*excited about my future career in the field*'. Another student praised their lecturer, who had '*inspired many students to want to keep doing this degree*'.

Organising Theme 4.3: Employee

This Organising Theme combines the four Basic Themes that reference how the lecturer is a good employee.

The first Basic Theme, 4.3.1: Organised contains the nominations in which lecturers are organised. This Theme contains mostly simple statements, such as '*they are very organised*' and they are '*always organised*'. In these nominations, organisation and consistency went hand in hand. Students valued the lecturers who could be relied upon for their organisation.

Basic Theme 4.3.2: Good Communicator depicts the ways in which lecturers communicated effectively. This Theme encompasses a myriad of activities relating to communication. Students value clear and transparent communication, '*their communication was clear, and we always knew what we needed to do to prepare for their module*'. They also praised lecturers with timely communications, '*they respond to every email within 24 hours, which is their self-set goal*' and that was consistent and regular, '*they are great at staying in contact with us, letting us know what to read ahead of class and emailing us with any information or news they think we would be interested in*'.

Basic Theme 4.3.3: Professional contains the nominations that refer to lecturers as professionals. This included references to how lecturers, '*are always on time (10-15 mins) before the lecture or tutorial time throughout the year*'. Although most nominations were simple statements about professionalism, with one student elaborating slightly, calling their lecturer the, '*ultimate role model in all aspects of professional life'*.

Basic Theme 4.3.4: Dedication describes how dedicated lecturers are to their course and their students. Quite a lot of nominations referenced simple phrases regarding dedication, such as that their lecturer was '*very hardworking*', had an '*amazing work ethic*', and a '*dedication to the degree that should be honoured*'. Other nominations included specific examples, such as '*they are hardworking, even on modules that they don't teach*', and they '*put together endless amount of work and tireless hours to create a simulation that better us*'.

Discussion

Students in this dataset write in a manner that poses themselves as solely a consumer, solely a learner, or as both a consumer and a learner simultaneously (Brooks et al., 2021). Both the students who aligned themselves as consumers and those as learners valued a consistent high-standard service that is on demand; the difference between them is why they value this type of service. For students as consumers, there is an expectation to receive this service due to the financial transaction they have made, and because of this, they expect to be worth the money they have spent (Raaper, 2021). For students as learners, they value this service because it will enable them to become successful, as self-defined by the student, develop their skills and knowledge, and become a lifelong learner.

In the student nominations, it became clear which role they assigned themselves due to the words they chose. For the students, as learners, they made references to, '*being excited about their future career*', that, '*learning had occurred*', and they had changed because of it, and they have been shown that, '*learning is a way of living*'. The students, as consumers, nominations differed greatly. These nominations almost read like product reviews (Wang, et al., 2023). These nominations made references to lectures being, '*worthwhile*', '*consistently present*', and even turned their lecturer into a commercial advertisement for the university.

A common thread in both students as consumers and students as learners nominations was how students were made to feel. Several of the Basic Themes reference how students value their lecturers who made them feel positive, welcome, safe, important, and inspired. Additionally, there are also several Basic Themes that discuss how lecturers know their students, interact and care about them, want them to succeed, and tailor their teaching to their individual needs. This shows that students felt that they could approach their lecturers, who were friendly and positive. They also appreciated that their lecturers wanted them to succeed as much as they did (Thompson & Zaitseva, 2012; Bradley et al., 2015). Students were inspired and motivated by their lecturer's passion. This led to them being excited by future study and employment in their subject area. Therefore, it appears what students really value is being known by their lecturers and made to feel like an important human being (Allred et al., 2021; Dransfield et al., 2022).

In the interest of looking at the nominations in line with the HE sector, the researcher mapped the nominations against Advance HE's UK Professional Standards Framework 2011. The UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) is used to recognise staff in Advance HE's Fellowship, which is a globally renowned scheme (Advance HE, n.d.). By reviewing the nominations through the lens of the UKPSF, the researcher was able to validate the finding that students can evaluate teaching excellence as their nominations reference every single dimension within the UKPSF. Therefore, this research study firmly aligns itself with the positive school of thought within SLTAs.

This research study demonstrates that students do have a valid viewpoint in the teaching excellence rhetoric. However, if we look at what the results of the study mean for lecturers, there are worrying elements. The first element is how the dataset highlights how lecturers may be seen as performers. The lecturers need to deliver engaging content, regardless of their mood or personal circumstances. Students were clear in this dataset that they value passion, excitement, inspiration, and positivity; lecturers need to provide this in order to be in chance for a nomination. Additionally, this dataset shows that students evaluate teaching excellence by comparison; lecturers cannot have an off day, or they face being compared to their colleagues.

The second worrying element relates to emotional labour and unhealthy work/life balances, something which has already been raised in Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting's (2019) study. Lecturers appear to need to undertake either emotional labour, which, in Sprague and Massoni's words is, "frequently invisible and uncounted" work (2005, p.791). They may also need to undertake their normal duties in unusual hours or by forgoing some other area of their life. There is a worry that by rewarding those who have unhealthy work/life balances, we are keeping lecturers in a space where they need to have unhealthy work/life balances in order to be seen as an excellent teacher. It is important for students, SLTAs organisers, and the wider HE sector to not 'mistakenly promote a poor work/life' balance (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019, p.74).

Conclusion

Students are able to recognise, evaluate, and verbalise teaching excellence. They have their own approach and their own viewpoints, which differ from academics, but they can judge the quality of the teaching they are receiving. Matheson agrees; they confirm that 'students, when asked for evidence-based nominations, are clearly able to recognise teaching excellence' (2019, p.15). In this research study, students hit every dimension of the UKPSF, demonstrating that they evaluate teaching excellence in a way that aligns with a renowned HE teaching framework. This research study aligns itself with the positive school of thought within the SLTA literature and confirms the belief that students can judge teaching excellence.

Students discussed the width and breadth of lecturers' actions and their teaching practices that they valued within the nominations they wrote. Both students as consumers and students as learners wished to receive a high-level university experience, but their reasoning differed. Students as consumers wished the money they spent on their degrees to be worthwhile, whereas students as learners wanted to grow and develop in their personal academic journeys. Despite their differences, both students, as consumers and learners, wished to be truly known by their lecturers (Allred et al., 2021; Dransfield et al., 2022; Ashwin et al., 2023).

SLTAs organisers need to consider how to avoid SLTAs unintentionally perpetuating unhealthy work/life balances (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). If SLTAs organisers do nothing, they risk praising lecturers for unhealthy work/life balances and putting pressure on staff to maintain such practices. Future studies should evaluate motivations within the SLTA process to understand what role SLTAs play in the wider lives of lecturers. It would also be beneficial for this research study to be undertaken in varied institutions across the UK, and with Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 SLTAs nominations, to understand the wider picture across the UK over the last ten years.

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