

Student Academic Choice Awards Report

1. Summary

- 1.1. The first cycle of the Student Academic Choice Awards, our new student-led teaching, pastoral care and research supervision awards scheme, started with the opening of nominations in February and the awards ceremony on 21 May.
- 1.2. Receiving 557 nominations from 441 students for 251 College staff, across eight categories, the SACAs received a higher level of participation than targeted in our operating plan. Over 25,000 words were written within the nominations.
- 1.3. The event itself had 130 attendees, drawn from student nominators, staff nominees, key College figures and Union staff. Those staff members shortlisted, along with details of the eventual winners can be found online at www.imperialcollegeunion.org/academicchoice.
- 1.4. While popular with the student body and well-received by participants, the organisation of our first awards scheme posed some challenges. However, these difficulties were mostly centred around developing our capacity to handle this new piece of work within our calendar, and we are confident that the process will be smoother for the second cycle.
- 1.5. Negotiations with faculties to align the SACAs with their own award schemes are underway, and outline dates for the second SACA cycle have been drafted.

2. Background

- 2.1. In early 2012, we identified the lack of an Imperial College Union-led teaching awards (TA) scheme as a gap in our provision compared to our peer Students' Unions.
- 2.2. As a result of discussions with College management, funding was added to our annual block grant specifically to support a student-led teaching and research supervision awards scheme.
- 2.3. Sessions at the Students' Unions 2012 Conference, a paper published by the Higher Education Academy and the media impact of prominent TAs across the UK – particularly in Scotland – had demonstrated the sector-wide trend towards initiating and developing such schemes, and provided existing models to borrow and adopt for our own purposes.
- 2.4. These resources enumerated the various benefits of organising a TA scheme, which are complementary to a number of our strategic aims and act in support of our academic-related discussions with College.
 - 2.4.1. Creation of student-owned space for positive dialogue with College and its staff on academic and pastoral issues.
 - 2.4.2. Opportunity to demonstrate strength of student feeling on academic matters, by designing categories around the problems most often raised by our members – such as poor feedback or inadequate PhD supervision.
 - 2.4.3. Opportunity to emphasise to College and its departments the importance of considering teaching and support ability in staff appraisal and promotion considerations.
 - 2.4.4. Opportunity to publically collaborate and engage with College to work towards increasing academic standards.
 - 2.4.5. Opportunity to increase the number of students engaging in the Union's activities.

3. Organising the Student Academic Choice Awards

- 3.1. As the first iteration of a complex new piece of work, organising the first SACAs cycle proved a challenge in some respects. We have now developed methods, supported by an IT infrastructure, for students to nominate staff, for shortlisting candidates and to select winners which can be used in future years.
- 3.2. Inevitably there were a number of issues raised whilst organising the event which posed dilemmas such as the invite list, the event's size and the method of selecting of winners.
- 3.3. It was important that students alone chose the awards winners. We therefore chose to invite student academic representatives to sit on our panels – all of whom are current students (at both Undergraduate and Postgraduate level).
- 3.4. Academic representatives have a good knowledge of teaching and research within Imperial, and represent their cohort of students. The representatives were selected to ensure a diverse mix of departments and study levels were represented as appropriate - inviting Postgraduate students to sit on Postgraduate awards and so forth. This was a valuable opportunity for student representatives to become involved in and engage with the Union.
- 3.5. This year's SACAs coincided with the Easter holiday and exams in the summer term, meaning that a number of undergraduate students were unable to attend both the selection panels and the event itself. The issues this raised – predominately low participation in selection panels and low attendance by Undergraduates at the event itself will be avoided in future by alternative scheduling. Similarly the length of the nomination period and time period in which selection panels can be held will also be reconsidered.
- 3.6. At this year's event staff and students attended in relatively equal numbers – a balance which worked well. Next year we would like to encourage more students (especially those who nominated staff) to attend by ensuring the event does not coincide with the exam period and giving invitees more notice to attend.
- 3.7. The nomination period and the ceremony itself were promoted on the Union website, in all student emails and directly to academic representatives.
- 3.8. There is potential to increase the volume of publicity in future years, particularly through an increased online presence. A wider range of promotional methods other than emails and website content could also be used.
- 3.9. Overall in light of the lessons learnt through this year's SACAs an increased awareness of the tasks involved in organising the project means that for next year a greater attention to detail will be possible and issues from this year can be avoided.

4. Risks and opportunities around 2014 SACAs

- 4.1. As outlined previously we are keen to develop the SACAs, building on our past challenges and driving the event forward to new heights of success. We have identified a number of risks and opportunities that next year's event may bring.
- 4.2. Opportunities:
 - 4.2.1. There has been interest from the faculties of Engineering and Natural Sciences to incorporate their existing faculty-level teaching award schemes with the SACAs following the success of this year's event.

- 4.2.2. Talks are underway with these two faculties and we will shortly be approaching Medicine and the Business School to discuss their awards.
 - 4.2.3. Merging the awards would strengthen the Union's links with College, creating a strong culture of collaboration and increase the award's profile across the university. Faculty-level awards attract large cash prizes for some of their awards – ensuring interest and support from staff.
 - 4.2.4. Following the success of the inaugural SACAs the event is now on the radar of staff and students alike. We will be looking to harness the enthusiasm expressed by both students and staff to promote the event and the nomination period to students in 2014.
 - 4.2.5. A number of staff expressed an interest in heavily promoting the SACAs to their colleagues and students to ensure a higher volume of nominations in future – a technique we will aim to utilise. This will be invaluable in helping us to our nominations targets over the coming years.
 - 4.2.6. This year we exceeded our participation targets with over 441 students nominating staff across a number of categories, though much room for growth in participation exists.
 - 4.2.7. There is opportunity to evolve the SACAs ceremony into an event with even greater impact. Aspects which may be incorporated include key note speeches, student group participation, award times, timing the awards to be closer together, a champagne reception and external guests.
- 4.3. Risks:
- 4.3.1. This year a number of the award categories received a very low number of nominations. To provide legitimacy and competition the Union aims to receive a high number of nominations for all categories.
 - 4.3.2. We wish to encourage more nominations in all categories in 2014 by ensuring students have a clear understanding of the meaning of each category. Publicity will clarify these categories in more detail than used this year.

5. Opportunities for the future – continued engagement with College and Union strategic aims

- 5.1. In line with our aim to emphasise the quality of teaching within College we will be improving the online presence of the SACAs in 2014. The aim of this will be to promote areas of excellence and ensure examples of quality teaching are highlighted to College staff.
- 5.2. We will explain each category in detail, showcase previous nominees and the winners of the 2013 SACAs.
- 5.3. This campaign would take place before nominations open, during the nomination period, once shortlisted categories have been announced, before and after the ceremony. It is hoped that this will increase the number of nominations and number of students nominating.
- 5.4. To reiterate our aim of promoting quality teaching, research supervision and pastoral support we will be using the awards as a platform for educating College staff about examples of best practise.

- 5.5. Outlining the reasons staff were nominated or won in their category using nomination text as evidence will help educate staff about areas they can improve, or ideas to bring to their own work.
- 5.6. In line with other Students' Unions (such as Edinburgh Union) winners of the SACAs could be used to promote best practise directly to colleagues through the proposed rep conference due to be held in early 2014. As well as educating colleagues this will help to promote College support for the academic representative system, and motivation to improve education as a whole.
- 5.7. Nomination text could also be used within the Educational Development Unit to educate personal tutors, supervisors and other staff about student expectations and up-to date teaching techniques. ICU staff could assist in the delivering of this if required and the Educational Development Unit have already expressed interest in this work.
- 5.8. The ICU buildings have been identified as a preferable venue for next year's SACAs award ceremony. This would give ICU greater control over the organisation of the event itself and allow us to incorporate ICU's existing resources with greater ease.
- 5.9. Holding the event at ICU would also lead the event to be more closely associated with the Union, for us to showcase an event within the building and distinguishing it from other College events, while minimising expenses made externally.

6. Summary of recommendations for 2013/14 cycle

- 6.1. The following recommendations have been identified when planning and delivering the next cycle of the Student Academic Choice Awards.
- 6.2. The winners of awards this year will be invited to be part of the proposed rep conference in some capacity.
- 6.3. Discussions with the Educational Development Unit will be held over the coming months regarding how to best utilise the nomination text for enhancing the training and development of College staff.
- 6.4. The key dates for the entire project will be set in the next few weeks and included in communications to key students and staff to avoid schedule conflicts.
- 6.5. A longer nominations period will be made available and the deadline for nominations brought forward to allow greater time for panels to meet which to some extent will avoid the Easter vacation period.
- 6.6. Greater publicity before and during the nominations period will be undertaken using examples from the shortlisted and winning candidates from this year, together with the methodology used this time around.
- 6.7. More students who nominated staff members will be invited to the awards ceremony.
- 6.8. The content of the awards ceremony will be reviewed to ensure maximum impact next year and the ceremony will be held within the Union Building.
- 6.9. Discussions will be pursued with the various faculties with the aim of incorporating their current teaching awards if appropriate agreement can be reached to ensure the awards remain completely student led.