

TEACHING EXCELLENCE AWARDS REPORT 2016

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1 Purpose of the report

Using the nomination data from the 2015/16 Teaching Excellence Awards (TEAs), this report aims to inform best practice in learning and teaching across Newcastle University. Through close analysis of the nominations received, it identifies key themes that students associate with teaching excellence. By calling attention to these themes, it is hoped that the report will be used for enhancement purposes. Newcastle University acknowledges that the student experience lies at the centre of its [strategy](#), while a key part of the University's [current mission](#) is to deliver excellent teaching and facilitate learning of the highest quality to enhance student experience even further. Accordingly, it is hoped that the information contained in this report will influence the University's strategy for improving the academic experience of students at Newcastle. In addition, the findings of this report will inform the future development of the TEAs, particularly with regards to award categories and criteria.

2 Executive Summary and Recommendations

- 333 nominations were received for the 2015/16 TEAs, of which 298 were eligible for analysis (all nominating students have the option for their comments not to be disclosed). These nominations are spread across eight categories: Contribution to Outstanding Feedback; Innovative Teaching Methods – SAGE Faculty; Innovative Teaching Methods – HASS Faculty; Innovative Teaching Methods – Medical Sciences; Support Staff of the Year; Taught Supervisor of the Year; Research Supervisor of the Year; and Contribution to Pastoral Support. The data from each category was analysed qualitatively, identifying key themes relating to teaching excellence.
- Upon analysis, key themes were divided into three areas: Teaching Methods; Teaching Approaches; and Student Impact. The nomination data pointed to specific characteristics that students identified with teaching excellence in each of these areas.
- **Teaching Methods.** A number of recurring themes were evident in student comments relating to what they considered to be excellent teaching methods.

- Unsurprisingly, the main focus of the nominations was **lecture delivery**. In addition to students valuing teachers for their ability to deliver lectures in a clear, well-structured and informative manner, a recurring theme in the nomination data was effective use of lecture materials, whether in the form of hand-outs, booklets, or presentations. Such materials were cited as helping supplement lecture content, making it clearer and, thus, aiding students' understanding of a topic.
- Teaching staff were also praised for their ability to demonstrate the **practical application of ideas** discussed in lectures and seminars. As well as citing the benefits of the effective use of case studies and illustrative examples of theoretical concepts, a number of students also praised teaching staff who were willing to supplement their own expertise with that of relevant industry experts. In doing so, staff were able to **demonstrate the connection between academia and employability more clearly**.
- On a number of occasions, staff were nominated for their ability to harness **storytelling as a teaching tool**. Engaging students by sharing anecdotes from their own experience was frequently cited as a tool that facilitated understanding. The value of storytelling as a learning tool that stimulates students' imagination and memory is [endorsed by the Higher Education Academy](#)
- Nominees' ability to **encourage open discussion** in class was highly valued by students. Nominations pointed to the importance of staff providing opportunities to share ideas with peers as a means of enhancing their knowledge and understanding. To this end, students valued the ability of staff to create welcoming, less formal learning environments, which allowed them to become active participants in the learning process.
- **Teaching Approaches.** Considerable emphasis was placed on a nominees' approach to learning and teaching. In many case, *how* nominees taught was regarded as being as important as *what* they taught.
 - Unsurprisingly, nominations often associated teaching excellence with particular **personality traits and attributes**. Foremost among these attributes were **approachability, enthusiasm** and **passion for the subject**. The nomination data also praised staff for their ability to **build rapport** with those they teach and a willingness to **'go the extra mile'** to help students. Staff who possessed some or all of these traits were frequently described as **inspirational**.
 - A recurring theme in the nomination data was the importance of **contact time**. Students highlighted staff who were able to supplement contact time in class with opportunities to discuss academic issues on a one-to-one basis. However, such nominations underlined the difficulties staff face in trying to accommodate student contact hours into their schedule, with references made to nominees working through lunch breaks and beyond typical working hours. To ensure staff are not overstretched and can provide students with the kind of support they value, **it is vital that appropriate student to staff ratios are maintained and that staff are allocated sufficient office hours as part of their schedule in which to meet students directly**. This issue is particularly pressing given the fact that student numbers are no longer capped.
- **Student Impact.** The nomination data foregrounds the impact of excellent teaching on students. The nominations often associated teaching quality with **improved confidence, marks, and understanding**. In addition, students cited the **new skills** they had developed, underlining the link between excellent teaching and **enhanced employability**. Taken

together, these factors were associated with **improved overall satisfaction** with the student experience at Newcastle.

- **Innovative Teaching.** Without using the term directly, nominations in the innovative teaching categories repeatedly highlighted the value of a **blended learning** approach. This approach is highly student-centred, incorporating various teaching strategies, where learning may be delivered by integrating online with face-to-face activities.
 - One particular method often associated with blended learning that was highlighted in the nominations was a **'flipped classroom'** approach to teaching. Flipped classroom strategies challenge the traditional lecture and seminar model, harnessing teaching methods that seek to extend the classroom by asking students to engage with study material outside of the classroom in preparation for putting the knowledge acquired into practice in lectures or seminars.
 - The **use of technology-enhanced learning** was often mentioned in the nominations in the context of excellent teaching. Nominations alluded to staff making effective use of technology and social media to stimulate engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. Distance learners, in particular, spoke positively about the flexibility that e-learning can offer.
 - Nominees were often praised for their **blurring of the traditional distinction between lectures and seminars**. Introducing opportunities for discussion into lectures was praised by students for creating a more interactive learning environment that **aids concentration, understanding, and the ability to retain information**.
 - Students' accounts of innovative teaching showed the importance of **knowledge exchange and information sharing**, as part of a collaborative learning process between students and members of staff. A number of techniques to facilitate this process were identified in the nominations. These included: **360-degree feedback**, in which students' work is evaluated in a variety of ways from multiple perspectives; **learning triangles**, in which students work in a group of three, exchanging knowledge acquired by each individual in set reading they have done prior to class; **'elevator pitch'** or **'speed dating'** style seminars where students present ideas to one another in a speedy, concise manner; and using the **PeerWise** website to collaborate and share ideas.
 - Another innovative practice highlighted in the nomination data was the use of instructional humour as a teaching strategy. This corresponds to existing research that points to the use of humour engaging students' attention and increasing their motivation.
- **Outstanding Feedback.** When describing outstanding feedback, students frequently referred to feedback that was **constructive, prompt, thorough, and tailored to the individual needs of the student**. The nomination data also foregrounded the value that many students attached to **'formative feedback'** oriented toward improving their performance in future assignments. More broadly, the nomination data pointed to outstanding feedback taking a variety of forms, with students referring to the **merits of both individual and group feedback**, demonstrating the value of adopting a **blended or holistic approach to student feedback**. The role of feedback in enhancing the student experience was frequently mentioned in the nomination data, with students referring to **improvements in understanding, marks, and confidence** as a result of outstanding feedback.

- **Supervisory Awards.** The overwhelming majority of nominations in the supervisory categories emphasised the link between excellent supervision and their nominees' personal and professional qualities. In addition to possessing **expert knowledge in their field**, which **helped supervisees to develop their ideas and progress academically**, nominees were also praised for the **intellectual generosity** and providing **practical support that facilitated the personal and professional development of supervisees**.
- **Pastoral Support and Professional Services.** There were significant overlaps in the key themes to emerge from the nomination data for the Contribution to Pastoral Support and Support Staff of the Year categories. On reflection, it was felt that this issue may have been due to the nomination criteria for each award not being distinct enough from one another, something which will be rectified for the 2016/17 awards.
- What was clear, when collating the data from these categories, is that, in some instances, **outstanding teaching serves a pastoral as well as a pedagogical purpose**. A number of nominations stressed the way in which the support they had received **helped mitigate personal extenuating circumstances** around issues relating to complex medical needs, specific learning disabilities, mental ill health, and bereavement. Moreover, the nominations in both of these categories and elsewhere demonstrated the vital role teaching and academic support play in **facilitating an inclusive learning environment**. The nomination data pointed to this kind of support resulting in **improved retention, enhanced confidence, better grades, and improved health and wellbeing**.
- In recognition of the specific challenges faced by staff at our campuses in London, Singapore, and Malaysia, a dedicated Outstanding Contribution to Teaching award will be introduced for staff at our branch campuses from 2016/17. NUSU will also begin consultation geared towards introducing a Diversity in the Curriculum Award from 2017/18.

3 Background

The TEAs were introduced by Newcastle University Students' Union in 2011/12. The awards were originally conceived as a way for students to acknowledge exceptional work by teaching and professional support services staff across the University. To do this, they would complete a qualitative nomination detailing why their chosen staff member was deserving of an award. As the awards have developed, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the data collected by NUSU during the nomination process offers a potentially valuable resource for learning and teaching development at the University. Accordingly, in the planning process for the 2015/16 awards, it was agreed that nomination data (with the agreement of those who nominated) would be analysed and a report produced, calling attention to key themes and examples of outstanding practice identified by students. By foregrounding student feedback in this way, it is hoped that the report can be used for enhancement purposes, in line with the University's commitment to working in partnership with its students to develop an academic experience that is as ['stimulating, relevant, challenging and satisfying as possible.'](#)

The issue of teaching excellence is, of course, at the forefront of current debates in Higher Education (HE). From 2016/17, universities will be encouraged to participate in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), in accordance with plans outlined in the [Government's HE White Paper](#). The TEF will measure the quality of teaching in High Education, with outcomes measured on the basis of teaching quality, learning environment, and student outcomes and learning gain. The results will be derived using three core metrics: data from relevant questions on the National Student Survey (NSS); data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) concerning non-continuation rates; and

employment destination, with data drawn from the Destination Of Leavers from HE survey (DLHE). In addition, each institution will provide a statement of findings supporting their case. Should institutions meet the quality threshold baseline, they will be awarded a rating of 'Meets Expectations', 'Excellent', and 'Outstanding', depending on their scores in the core metrics and the evidence presented in their statement of findings.

At NUSU, we are obviously keen for our members to receive the best possible quality of teaching during their time at Newcastle. However, while we welcome proposals in the HE White Paper for teaching to be given parity of esteem with research in HE and support the principle of significantly increasing participation in HE among Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, NUSU does not endorse the TEF. As part of the TEF, institutions will be given the opportunity to raise their tuition fees in line with inflation, in the event of them receiving a rating of Excellent or Outstanding (they will be able to raise fees by half the rate of inflation should they Meet Expectations). In December 2013, [NUSU Student Council](#) passed a motion mandating NUSU to oppose any increase tuition in fees. Our stance has not changed in the intervening period. It is our belief that by endorsing the TEF we would contravene this policy.

In addition, we have significant reservations about the proposed metrics for measuring teaching excellence. The TEF's emphasis on survey data means that there is very little focus on the practicalities of what constitutes excellent teaching. Statistics alone cannot provide an accurate measure of teaching excellence. Moreover, the pursuit of excellence necessarily involves both critical self-reflection and recognition of specific examples of outstanding teaching practice. This report calls attention to such examples at Newcastle University. By focusing on existing examples of what students identify as excellence in this way, it is hoped that this report will contribute positively to a culture of partnership between students and staff, one which will facilitate continuous learning and teaching enhancement.

4 Data set and methodology

A total of 333 nominations were received for the 2016 TEAs. These nominations were spread across eight categories:

- Contribution to Outstanding Feedback
- Innovative Teaching Methods – SAGE Faculty
- Innovative Teaching Methods – HASS Faculty
- Innovative Teaching Methods – Medical Sciences
- Support Staff of the Year
- Taught Supervisor of the Year
- Research Supervisor of the Year
- Contribution to Pastoral Support

Of the 333 nominations received, 35 stated that they did not wish their comments to be disclosed or used for research purposes. Accordingly, the data analysed in this report is based on the remaining 298 nominations.

Figure 5.1 below shows the breakdown of nominations by category.

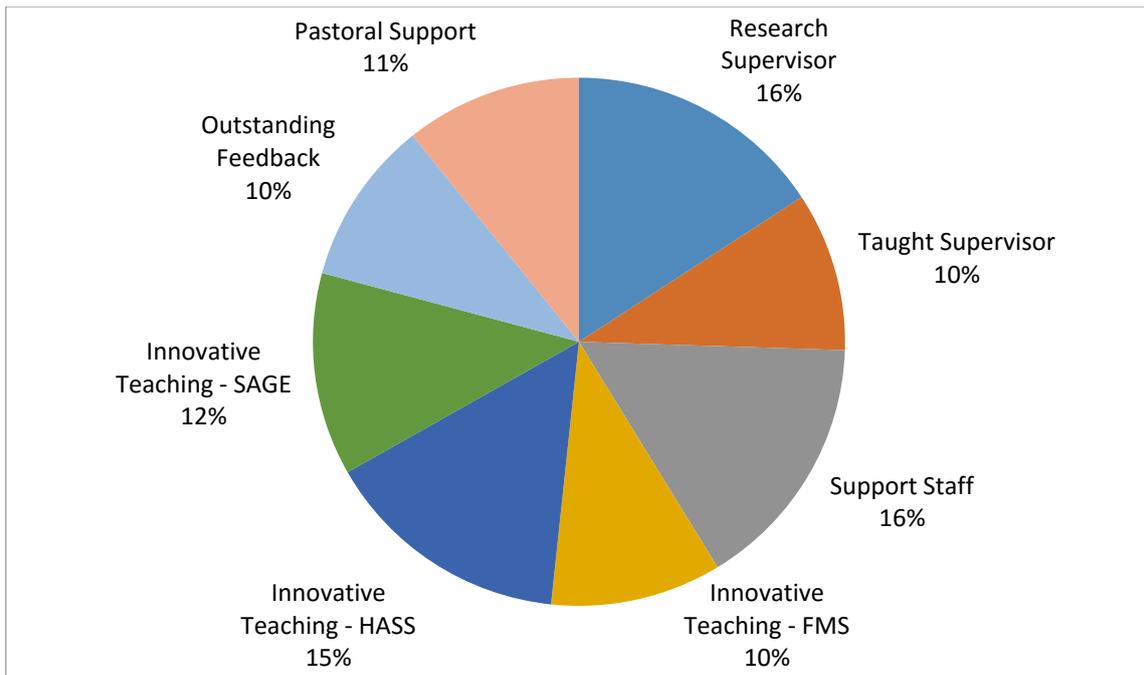


Figure 5.1 – Nominations Breakdown by Category

The final data set was analysed using qualitative research methods. The report analyses and comments on core themes with regards to excellent teaching and academic support, which are illustrated with quotations from students' nomination data. For the report to be genuinely representative of the views of students, it was felt that it was imperative that their voices were foregrounded. Accordingly, where appropriate, comments from students concerning the particular areas of teaching excellence identified have been included verbatim.

5 Findings

The findings below are, broadly speaking, classified according to the award categories referred to above. However, on analysing the data, it was felt that, given the commonalities between nominations in the taught and research supervisor categories and Support Staff and Contribution to Pastoral Support categories, it would be beneficial to conflate the findings for these areas into two rather than four categories. We have also identified some overall themes and data pertaining to enhancing inclusivity, equality, and diversity.

5.1 Overall key themes from the TEAs

With regards to excellent teaching, three attributes related to this concept were frequently identified in the nomination data: teaching methods; teaching approach; and student impact. Specific themes identified in the nominations relating to each of these attributes are explored below.

5.1.1 Teaching Methods

- **Lecture delivery**

A recurring theme in the nominations was praise for effective use and clear presentation of lecture material, such as hand-outs, booklets and articles. These materials were frequently cited as making lecture content clearer, thus improving student understanding. Comments included:

‘Their handouts are clear with extra diagrams, easy to follow notes and guaranteed methods for each process that the module requires.’

‘They deliver their lecture material with great clarity and take their time to fully explain important points.’

The vast majority of nominations referred to the way lectures were delivered. Nominations demonstrated that students value teachers for their ability to deliver lectures in a clear, well-structured and informative manner:

‘Their lectures are always clearly presented, engaging, funny and informative, whilst covering all the key learning objectives and providing interaction with students.’

‘They [...] ensure that all the content is very well structured and targeted at the assessments to improve students’ engagement and understanding throughout.’

It was also apparent from the nominations that students particularly appreciate when instructors are able to convey complex lecture material in an accessible, understandable way:

‘They convey really complex issues to students in a clear and easy manner which makes it very easy to understand.’

‘It is fantastic because they deliver complex material, but masterfully breaks down the problem and presents this material in such a way that it layers on top of itself.’

In addition, nominees were praised for their ability to spark interest in students by delivering stimulating and engaging lectures tailored to the level of knowledge of the class:

‘They always go above and beyond to make the content engaging and stimulating. They bring real enthusiasm and humour to each session and go out of their way to learn about the base

level of knowledge of students, which they then build on in an interesting and easy-to-understand way.'

- **Practical application of knowledge**

Many students praised the staff they nominated for enabling them to apply theoretical concepts in practice, suggesting this also had a positive effect on their understanding of the subject matter:

'They have drawn upon research and given practical examples throughout their lectures to demonstrate how the law applies in practice. They have consistently used this approach throughout the academic year and it has helped students to understand the law from different perspectives.'

Nominees often used practical examples, case studies or mock exams, to develop students' understanding of key theoretical concepts:

'They approach the module with stunning creativity, choosing excellent video materials and case studies to support the theory, initiating discussions during lectures, as well as recommending different movie screenings for every week, relevant to the theory.'

'...they were fantastic in the mock exam and took a lot of fear away from me by being their usual self.'

Students also appreciated when lecturers invited industry experts who provided real-life examples and shared their personal experiences from the field. This enabled students to develop their understanding of the broader applicability of the knowledge they were being taught. By doing so, such staff helped students to cement the connection between their studies and their career plans:

'...not only do they use their own experiences, but they provide us with valuable insights from industry experts. This illustrates relevant points particularly well and enhances our understanding, not only helping with our assignments but also preparing us for life after University.'

- **Storytelling as a teaching tool**

On a number of occasions, teachers were nominated for their ability to engage students by sharing anecdotes from their personal experiences. Examples of such comments included:

'Engages students with anecdotes from personal experience in medicine, goes into thorough explanation of most concepts and the occasional act to demonstrate certain conditions and methods of treatment.'

'...sharing anecdotes and photos of their experiences in the countries they lecture about, maintaining an informal, relaxed and approachable attitude.'

The value of storytelling as a learning tool that stimulates students' imagination and memory is [endorsed by the Higher Education Academy](#). It is an idea that has been explored extensively in research into learning and teaching in HE (see, for example, Alterio and McDrury, 2003 and Moon, 2010). Peg Neuhauser neatly encapsulates the value of storytelling as a pedagogical tool, writing: "stories allow a person to feel, and see, the information, as well as factually understand it ... because you 'hear' the information factually, visually and emotionally, it is more likely to be imprinted on your brain in a way that it sticks with you longer, with very little effort on your part" (Neuhauser 1993, p.4).

- **Encourage open discussion**

Teaching excellence was often associated with the nominees' ability to encourage open, thought-provoking debate in class. Students cited their belief that sharing their ideas with peers enhanced their knowledge and understanding by allowing them to become active participants in the learning process. Comments on this theme included:

'In order to contravene the archaic teaching methods in place, they offered a much more dynamic, robust and modern teaching style involving a meeting of all students on the course whereby a free forum and exchange of ideas was allowed.'

'The approach of encouraging discussions between students and then reflecting on these ideas as a whole group impacted positively on my experience as a student because it enabled me to feel like I was, along with the other students, participating in the learning process.'

In addition, nominations repeatedly stressed the ability of staff to create an open, welcoming learning environment where everybody's opinion is valued and even students who do not usually participate are encouraged to voice their opinion. To this end, nomination data also pointed to a positive link between less formal, less traditional teaching styles and students feeling more confident and being more likely to participate in class. In such cases, the result was often a greater sense of partnership between students and staff. Comments included:

'Students are more confident to speak up in their seminars than in other staff members' seminars as a consequence of their informal, peer-like teaching style.'

'Truly a lecturer who can transform a lecture into an open-minded discussion...'

'They make the quiet students participate, so discussions have much more interesting viewpoints than in other lectures.'

5.1.2 Teaching approach

Among the nominations received, repeated references were made to particular aspects of nominees' approach to teaching, examples of which are outlined below.

- **Personality traits**

Nominations often associated teaching excellence with particular personality traits and attributes. Among these, the most frequently commented upon by students were being *helpful* and *approachable*:

'They are an extremely approachable member of staff and are always more than willing to take time out to speak with students to discuss assignments, lecture material or to just generally have a chat.'

Nominees were repeatedly praised for their ability to develop a positive rapport with their students, creating an environment built on mutual trust and respect:

'They ensure that everyone in their group are comfortable and happy in what they're doing and make sure they maintain a closer relationship with everyone instead of having a distant student-supervisor relationship.'

'They are a people's person, who take the time to remember all their students' names and are an inspiration to women coming into computer science.'

Students also valued teachers for being *enthusiastic, inspiring* and *passionate*. These qualities inspired and motivated students to engage more deeply with their learning:

‘Their enthusiasm is contagious and we would have discussions that would have to be brought to an abrupt close at the end of a two hour seminar as otherwise they would have gone on and on.’

‘They have been an exceptional supervisor and an incredible teacher who was always very approachable, patient and inspiring.’

‘A thoroughly kind and humorous individual whose passion has inspired me more than any other lecturer.’

Finally, a number of nominations credited the positive outlook, dedication and willingness of staff to ‘go the extra mile’, in order to enhance their learning experience:

‘For them nothing is impossible and this positive attitude really reflects on our motivation to learn...’

‘They are extremely dedicated to ensuring students are catered for in all areas.’

‘Always willing to go the extra mile, they never fail to fill up the students’ thirst for knowledge, or even sparking interest within students.’

‘If a teacher is able to motivate their students they will naturally put more effort into the course which will result in better marks.’

‘They always go above and beyond to make the content engaging and stimulating.’

▪ **The importance of contact time**

Among the most frequently used words in the nomination data was *time*. Figure 6.2 below presents a concept map for ‘time’ and illustrates the immediate associations of this key theme as identified in the nominations.

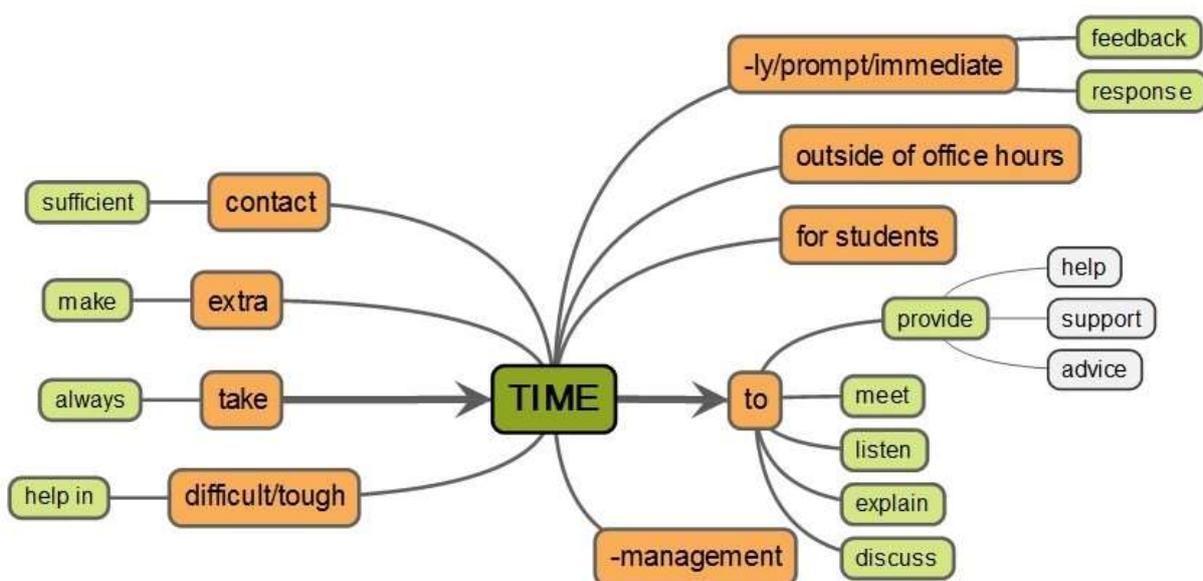


Figure 6.1 – Time – Concept Map

It is used most commonly in the context of the contact time they received from members of staff. Nominations highlight staff who were willing and, just as importantly, able to devote a significant portion of their time to meet and listen to students, explain study material, and provide academic support during difficult times during their studies. Comments include:

‘They spent a considerable amount of their personal time such as lunch breaks to assess my progress and to answer any questions I had, a privilege not granted to many at this formative time.’

‘They have supported me at every step of my project and helped me whenever I needed them no matter what time of day or night, or how long it took.’

‘During tough times with overwhelming assignments, they would frequently check in on us and ensure that we are fine.’

‘Personally their overall teaching approach gave me a lot of confidence and motivation especially in times where I felt particularly overwhelmed.’

Furthermore, students praised nominees for being generous with their time despite their busy schedule, as well as their willingness to make time for students outside of office hours or at a short notice. Crucially, however, nominations often stress that the quality of contact time is as important as the quantity:

‘Their workload is astounding and the fact that they always make time for their students is noteworthy, but they do not only make time but ensure that this time is well spent.’

‘They always make time to see me, often at very short notice. On several occasions they have spoken to me without prior arrangement and often late in the day, when they would probably much rather have been going home.’

Taken together, the comments above foreground the importance of staff being able to provide students with sufficient contact time, in order to enhance their learning. What is clear from the references to staff seeing students during lunch hours and late in the day is that finding the time to provide this kind of support is becoming increasingly difficult. Indeed, it is concerning that staff are having to use their own free time to help students, rather than being able to accommodate it into their normal working day. Given that student numbers have been uncapped since 2015, there is a danger that the issue will only get worse and further increase the already considerable strain many staff are under. Accordingly, it is vital that the University is committed to ensuring appropriate student to staff ratios that allow staff who teach to provide their students with sufficient contact time.

5.1.3 Student impact

Unsurprisingly, one of the main themes in the nomination data is the impact of excellent teaching on students. The nominations often associated teaching quality with improved confidence, marks, and understanding. These in turn lead to enhanced overall student satisfaction:

‘Most importantly, they made me feel listened to, and acted in a way which allowed me to improve my understanding, my confidence and my marks.’

‘Their positive and relaxed approach to supporting me in my work has given me confidence in my own ability and encouraged me to ask more questions when I am uncertain of something – this has improved my overall learning experience...’

‘Thanks to them I have been able to develop my skills and build my confidence which is something I had never felt able to do before coming to this university.’

Students also developed new skills as a result of their nominees’ teaching methods and approach:

‘Their modules are also focused on improving our critical analysis, writing and presentation skills, something that they have found we often struggle with.’

In addition, it was apparent from the nominations that students greatly value members of staff who strive to enhance the career prospects of those they teach:

‘They included a presentation at the end of the module on employability and skills gained from the degree that can be taken into the workplace.’

‘Their modules are very much focussed on developing your skills and employability whilst enhancing your knowledge.’

5.2 Innovative teaching practices

5.2.1 Blended learning approaches

In the innovative teaching category, students repeatedly highlighted the value of what has been termed [a blended learning](#) approach. This approach is highly student-centred, incorporating various teaching strategies, where learning may be delivered by integrating online with face-to-face activities. Research suggests that blended learning offers a transformative environment that enables students to develop their creative and critical thinking skills (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

- **Flipped classroom approach**

One particular method often associated with blended learning that was highlighted in the nominations was a ‘flipped classroom’ approach to teaching:

‘Having knowledge of cutting edge technologies and ensuring the seminars are always thought provoking, and new teaching techniques using a flipped classroom approach. They have provided a new style of teaching, and with a fresh twist of practical applications of computer science.’

Flipped classroom strategies challenge the traditional lecture and seminar model, harnessing teaching methods that seek to extend the classroom. Following this approach, students typically engage with study material outside of the classroom in preparation for a class where this acquired knowledge is put into practice using case studies, simulations, or experiments (Herreid and Schiller, 2013). Studies have found that this method of active learning is particularly effective for engaging millennial students (Roehl, Reddy and Shannon, 2013).

- **Technology enhanced learning**

The use of technology-enhanced learning was often mentioned in the nominations in the context of excellent teaching. Distance learners, in particular, spoke positively about the flexibility that e-learning can offer, noting its potential for individual as well as collaborative learning:

'I enrolled on this online module with perhaps not the most altruistic intention as I was primarily attracted to the flexibility of this approach to learning.'

'This exclusively online module is divided into 3 time-limited strands where students can learn either individually or collaboratively.'

Nominees were also praised for their ability to substitute their physical presence effectively and create a sense of community on online courses:

'...they showed that they could effectively translate their teacher presence for the online environment, and that more than anything encouraged us to buy in to e-learning.'

'It is obvious that a great deal of thought and care was taken to design the virtual classroom to enable students to 'dip in and out' of various topics and still maintain a sense of belonging and community. Thanks to them I am now a convert to TEL (Technology enhanced learning)!'

Use of digital resources in class was also considered to be an effective way of engaging students with course content. For instance, nominations alluded to staff harnessing technology or social media as a means of interacting with students and stimulating engagement both inside and outside of the classroom/lecture theatre:

'If their lectures allow it, they make them as interactive as possible, using remotes to take polls to find out how much we understand/how confident we feel about a subject.'

'I also have greatly benefited from their comments on Facebook and from their links to other resources like videos or websites, and I love the fact that they throw at us a wide variety of techniques so that we can explore them and find which one is more useful for us!'

'They have also made use of their Twitter account as a platform for spreading interesting and topical material to do with the module.'

In addition, the use of various digital media and online platforms was linked to increased class interaction and student motivation:

'Innovative approach to using the 2 hour slots by using interesting media platforms in which to engage the students, whereby students replied to questions on a post-it note site. This was trying to engage students who didn't feel comfortable replying out loud in lectures.'

'Their use of blogging as a way of expressing our learning, although not entirely unique, has complimented the teaching in class by creating a community of learners who share and engage with each other's ideas online outside of the classroom.'

'They are the only staff member I have come across in my time at Newcastle who fully utilises the Blackboard website. Everyone posted at least once a week on the Blackboard discussion page, opening up topics of debate on the specific texts as well as the broader themes of the module.'

▪ **Blend of lectures and seminars**

Another teaching strategy that was identified as innovative in the nomination was the blurring of the traditional distinction between lectures and seminars. Introducing opportunities for discussion into lectures was praised by students for creating a more interactive environment that enabled students to concentrate better, improving their understanding and ability to retain information learnt during the class:

'I find that short bursts of lecture and seminar make it easier to concentrate and stay engaged during a 2 hour period. [...] I find that discussing something straight away really shows whether you've understood it and makes it stick in your head much more than just taking notes in a lecture does.'

5.2.2 Knowledge exchange, information sharing, and collaborative learning

Students' accounts of innovative teaching showed the importance of knowledge exchange and information sharing, as part of a collaborative learning process between students and members of staff.

- **360-degree feedback**

One innovative technique highlighted in the students' comments was a 360-degree feedback. This is an effective method of evaluating students from multiple perspectives, offering a more extensive performance appraisal than traditional feedback methods (Lepsinger and Lucia, 2009). In an academic context, this may entail combining written feedback with peer, generic, and face-to-face feedback as part of a holistic approach. Comments from students on this point included:

'Novel feedback techniques used together for a 360 degree process.'

- **Learning triangle**

One nominee was praised for using a teaching method that the student characterised as a 'learning triangle'. This process involved students working in a group of three and exchanging knowledge acquired by individual reading prior to class, facilitating collaborative learning. The student wrote:

'Their approach is to group us in 'learning triangles' whereby we read a core paper and identify an additional paper to present to our 'triangle'. We write a short blog post prior to class in which we critique the core paper and explain why we picked the related additional paper.'

- **Elevator pitch method**

Another example of innovative teaching identified in the nominations was an 'elevator pitch' or 'speed dating' style seminar where students presented their ideas to one another in a speedy, concise manner. This information sharing method helped the students to refine their ideas and thoroughly engage with their campaigns:

'...they used the concept of speed dating as a way for each person to explain their campaign for social justice to each other. Half the group had to remain seated whilst the rest of the group moved their way around the room, speaking to each person for a minute... [This] was a really effective and original way of getting everyone thoroughly engaged and participating... The speed dating style seminar...directly resulted in the generation of the idea for my social campaign...'

- **Use of PeerWise website**

Another effective tool for sharing knowledge mentioned in the nominations was the [PeerWise web page](#). This online platform enables students to share their understanding of various topics and ask course related questions:

'They utilized a wide range of teaching resources, including the peer-wise website, booklets with relevant problems to work through, practice questions, multimedia sources etc.'

5.2.3 Humour as a teaching strategy

Another innovative practice highlighted in the nomination data was the use of instructional humour as a teaching strategy. One student, for example, commented on a teacher who impersonated various characters from history during class in order to engage students, while others praised nominees for using parodies of songs to make the material being studied more memorable:

‘...they dressed up as each philosopher and impersonated them, such as Karl Marx and Foucault. This was to help us remember who each person was, by putting on their accents and describing what theories they came up with.’

‘They encouraged us to make colour coordinated tables and even used parodies of song to help us become engaged.’

Banas *et al.* (2010) have compiled a useful review of the use of humour in educational contexts. Particularly relevant in their study is their assessment of the impact of humour in terms of student engagement and motivation. According to the authors, instructors’ use of humour effectively engages students’ attention and increases their motivation as well as their perceptions of an instructor’s credibility.

5.3 Outstanding feedback

5.3.1 Characteristics of excellent feedback

When describing outstanding feedback, some recurring characteristics were evident in the nominations. Among those who completed nominations in this category, students felt excellent feedback should be constructive, prompt, thorough, and tailored to the individual needs of the student:

‘Their feedback and criticism of my work is constructive and prompt. It has helped me stay focused and encouraged me to argue with experts in my field while believing that my arguments are valid.’

‘They send feedback on thesis chapters quickly but clearly spend a significant amount of time reading them very closely, as they provide detailed, specific comments every time.’

‘[Their] feedback is specifically tailored to individual students, and they deliver advice on a level the student can understand.’

Nominees were also praised for providing feedback with detailed comments on the assignment content, writing style, grammar, as well as referencing:

‘They turn over the assignments within one day, and the feedback they provide is very thorough, covering all aspects of the content, writing style and presentation, and grammatical and referencing errors.’

While turning around feedback within one day is clearly not feasible in most cases, the emphasis placed on the promptness of feedback in the nomination data illustrates the importance of staff being allocated sufficient time to provide feedback on summative assignments. Moreover, while there is clearly considerable value in offering generic feedback to identify common errors, the emphasis students placed on feedback tailored to the needs of the individual demonstrates the importance of this being the cornerstone of the kind of blended approach referred to above.

Another key theme in the nominations in the outstanding feedback category was the value many students attached to 'formative feedback' oriented toward improving their performance in future assignments. Comments included:

'Enabled all students in the class to know how to improve their work for their next assignments, in this and other modules.'

'The feedback and comments provided are very useful in a way that I can make use of [...] and not to repeat the same old mistakes, on my upcoming assignments.'

This practice of 'feeding forward' rather than feeding back has gained considerable attention in research into learning and teaching. Wheatley *et al.* (2015, p. 18), for instance, find that 'formative feedback not only benefits the student, but also benefits the lecturer in terms of charting students' knowledge and achievement at a modular-specific point in time, thereby further motivating students to engage more fully with modular material.'

Finally, one (perhaps surprising) characteristic that was identified in the nomination data for the outstanding feedback category was honesty:

'They are brutally honest (in a wonderfully positive way it has to be admitted!) but, in this day and age, where most educators appear to be trying to please students for fear of upsetting them (or being criticised on the feedback forms), their thorough and utterly honest feedback comes as a breath of fresh air.'

5.3.2 Form of Feedback

As alluded to above, the nomination data pointed to outstanding feedback taking a variety of forms. For instance, students cited the benefits of face-to-face feedback as a way of developing their knowledge and understanding:

'Their feedback, whether oral or by email, was always quick, concrete and supportive. It helped refine my work considerably.'

'...the one-to-one feedback session went even further by helping me improve the approach I took in researching and writing a better essay.'

A small number of student nominations also referred to the effectiveness of group feedback sessions:

'They also run feedback clinics, involving small numbers of students to get extra help on the difficult task of scientific report writing on a more personal level. This allows for more interaction, and students can ask questions they may otherwise be unable to. Spaces fill up very quickly – demonstrating their popularity amongst students, and reputation for providing outstanding feedback and support.'

'Each week comprises of lectures on Monday morning, and then we are set group coursework tasks to be handed in on the Wednesday, and then on the Friday we present and discuss our findings within a seminar style session, and get feedback on our submissions.' ... 'The seminar session also allows them to give us more general feedback on our own work and general problems and findings of all the groups, and also allows us to give feedback on others work.' ... 'It also gave us the opportunity to assess and question the work and ideas of other groups, giving us a wider knowledge of the topics covered.'

5.3.3 Student impact

The role of feedback in enhancing student experience was frequently mentioned in the nomination data. Analysis of the feedback related quotes revealed that outstanding feedback contributed to improvements in student understanding, marks and confidence:

‘It has been crucial in helping me to make progress in assessed essays and built my confidence which has had a knock-on effect on my other subjects too.’

What this and the nominations cited above illustrate is the importance of adopting a blended or holistic approach to feedback. Doing so provides students with the nuanced understandings, self-evaluations skills, and confidence necessary to be engaged and effective learners.

5.4 Supervisory Awards

5.4.1 Professional and personal qualities

The overwhelming majority of nominations in the supervisory categories emphasised the link between excellent supervision and the nominee’s professional qualities. Understandably, students particularly appreciated when nominees possessed expert knowledge in their field, which helped supervisees to develop their ideas and progress academically:

‘They are very knowledgeable in my field and they help me locate references that I need to support my arguments, making my work up to date with what is being done in the field.’

Students also greatly benefited from the intellectual generosity of their supervisors who shared their ideas and personal experiences with them, which in turn enhanced the student’s knowledge base:

‘By means of our conversations, and personal experiences that they shared, I was able to get an interesting insight into the world of research and science.’

‘They have shared with me their past lab experiences that have helped me overcome the hurdles in everyday lab practice.’

Furthermore, some nominees adapted their teaching style to suit the needs and learning of their supervisees:

‘They have gone above and beyond as my supervisor and have even taken up new tools just to suit my learning and needs.’

Students also praised supervisors for providing prompt, honest and detailed feedback on drafts of their work:

‘The detailed and comprehensive feedback that they have provided on my draft thesis chapters has been incredibly useful and has greatly improved my argumentation in academic writing.’

Nominations in these categories also frequently referred to nominees who not only fulfilled their academic role but also provided additional professional and pastoral support. Nominees acted as mentors to students and provided immense support and guidance throughout the whole research process:

‘Thanks to their suggestion and guidance, without their help and consideration, I would never have been able to finish my project.’

‘They have not only been an excellent guide throughout the years of my study but also a mentor. They shared with me their success stories, the challenges they faced and strategies to become a true researcher.’

This blend of pastoral and professional support was also demonstrated in the nominees’ personal interest in students’ academic progress and professional development:

‘They have gone far beyond the call of duty, and have taken a personal interest in my academic development, putting in place opportunities to ensure I can continue research activities now my project has finished.’

Similarly, it was apparent from the nominations that students value supervisors who strive to develop positive interpersonal relationships with students:

‘They ensure that everyone in their group are comfortable and happy in what they're doing and make sure they maintain a closer relationship with everyone instead of having a distant student-supervisor relationship.’

Certain personal qualities were also highlighted in the nominations. For instance, students frequently praised supervisors for being approachable, dedicated, patient and reassuring:

‘They have been an exceptional supervisor and an incredible teacher who was always very approachable, patient and inspiring.’

‘They have been a devoted dissertation supervisor, supporting my studies every step of the way.’

5.4.2 Practical research support

Nominees in the supervisory categories were frequently nominated for providing practical research support to their supervisees. This help took a variety of forms, ranging from helping students refine their research topic, assisting with applications for research grants, and pointing supervisees in the directions or relevant resources:

‘Given that my topic area was a large area of law, they helped me refine my topic and structure of the thesis whilst always considering the overall research question.’

‘...their guidance not only aided in the success of my project but helped me develop confidence and enhanced my research skills.’

‘They acted as a reference for [my] application which resulted in the Newcastle University Expedition Committee granting me £1000. They also requested funding on my behalf from the School, which gave me a grant of £500...’

‘They also provided me with secondary data collected by themselves and unpublished literature to ensure I had all the best resources available.’

‘Go out of the way to provide interesting new research articles.’

There was also a strong emphasis in the nominations on how supervisors' guidance and support helped students to become independent learners and researchers, something which was identified as a contributory factor in students deciding to progress into further study:

'Besides the formal act of teaching and helping me acquire the skills required, they encouraged me to become an independent learner.'

'Their approach to supervising and research has made me a confident and independent researcher.'

'...after having such a positive experience conducting research in Latin America I am inspired and determined to continue with a post-graduate degree that will allow for further study of the region, and hopefully further research abroad.'

Among the other key skills identified by students as having been developed as a result of excellent supervision were improved understanding, critical thinking, and creativity. Comments included:

'I have also become a much more effective and proactive critical thinker, as I have been pushed to challenge myself.'

'Their ability to make me feel like an equal rather than an inferior stimulated my creativity and ambition.'

'It really helped boost my understanding and confidence of working in the lab.'

In addition, some supervisors went above and beyond their prescribed role and taught their supervisees how to use certain computer programmes and statistical software necessary for conducting research:

'They also helped with all the practical side in terms of setting up the computer programme and ensuring it worked (despite a lot of technical difficulties!).'

'Them teaching me to do multivariate analysis set me up fantastically for the data coding and statistical modelling involved in my PhD research.'

Students in the research supervisor category also highlighted the help and support they had received while preparing for their viva, something which made the students feel at ease and enhanced their confidence:

'They really help you prepare for the viva making sure all loop holes are covered.'

5.4.3 Opportunities for professional development

In addition to the above, excellent supervision was frequently associated with nominees providing students with opportunities for professional development. In particular, many of the nominations reveal an appreciation for the way in which supervisors engage their students in so-called 'academic citizenship'. Put simply, this refers to learning what being an academic entails beyond the process of completing a research degree, by, for instance, encouraging students to disseminate their research through publications or conference presentations:

'They are stimulating us and make us more excited about our work by encouraging us to publish our work from early days of study.'

‘Because of their encouragement I feel that I have the courage to present my work in an international conference and send my work to prestigious journals.’

‘...they are also very resourceful in terms of helping us get funding to attend conferences and technical workshops...’

At other times, students appreciated nominees for giving them opportunities to network with industry contacts:

‘...I have been able to network extensively with other academics and important companies in the field whilst working within their laboratory, which I feel will be exceedingly helpful when I apply for jobs following further study.’

5.5 Pastoral Support and Professional Services Staff

Not only academic staff, but professional services staff such as receptionists, library assistants and laboratory technicians received nominations for TEAs. These nominations were found in the Contribution to Pastoral Support and Support Staff of the Year categories. There were significant overlaps in the key themes to emerge from the nomination data for these categories. On reflection, it was felt that this issue may have been due to the nomination criteria for each award not being distinct enough from one another, something which will be rectified for the 2016/17 awards.

Nonetheless, the nominations received in both categories called attention to some of the outstanding work being done at Newcastle to support students both pastorally and academically. Indeed, what is clear from the nomination data is that excellent teaching and academic support may, in some instances, serve a pastoral as well as a pedagogical purpose. A number of nominations stressed the way in which the support they had received helped mitigate personal extenuating circumstances around issues relating to complex medical needs, specific learning disabilities, mental ill health, and bereavement. Moreover, the nominations both in these categories and beyond foregrounded the vital role teaching and academic support play in facilitating an inclusive learning environment and ensuring equality and diversity.

5.5.1 Personality and professional traits

As in many of the other categories, students identified a number of specific personality and professional traits when nominating staff members in the support staff and pastoral categories. Foremost among these were approachability, compassion, and genuine concern for the wellbeing of students. Comments included:

‘They deserve to win the TEA because I find them to be a very understanding, compassionate, warm-hearted and approachable individual.’

‘If you approach them with a problem, they will always go out of their way to assist you or give you advice.’

‘This member of staff is kind, caring, extremely polite and really goes above and beyond to make sure you are spared unnecessary stress and can focus on your studies.’

‘They always have the student experience and wellbeing as the focus of their thoughts.’

‘In their role as a Disability Adviser, they are extremely committed to their job and the students they look after ... Their work ensured that I did not feel nervous at all when I came to Newcastle, whether it was re-assurance by email or meeting in person.’

Again, considerable emphasis was placed on the time and effort staff members dedicated to helping students. Nominees were frequently praised for ‘going above and beyond’ or ‘the extra mile’ in order to improve the experience of students:

‘...they will always go above the 'call of duty' and always have time to answer questions/provide help to students.’

‘...they go above and beyond their responsibilities. An example of this was when I arrived on my first day at the University and didn’t know anyone or the city. They took time out of their day to show me around the campus pointing out important places and introducing me to staff and colleagues.’

‘...they are always willing to help out students and will spend significantly more time than the basic minimum providing support services to them.’

This emphasis on staff having sufficient time to help students underlines once more the importance of ensuring adequate student-staff ratios.

5.5.2 Inclusivity, equality and diversity

Nominations in various categories foregrounded the way in which excellent teaching often facilitates inclusivity, widening access to the University among groups of students who might otherwise find it difficult to complete their studies. The nomination data pointed to staff helping students with various personal extenuating circumstances, as well as calling attention to staff being sensitive to the specific challenges faced by mature students, student carers, parents and guardians, students facing financial hardship, students with faith or belief, and international students.

When referring to the ways in which staff had ensured inclusivity, equality and diversity, students identified a number of approaches to teaching among staff as key to their ability in this regard. These are summarised below.

- **Flexibility/willingness to make alternative arrangements:**

‘Without the support of them, their flexible approach to meetings, their willingness to speak on the phone whenever I need to and their compassionate and understanding approach, I would never have made it as far as I have.’ [student parent living in France nominating their supervisor for the TEAs]

‘They went above and beyond the call of duty to help myself out in any way they can and have always made sure that the arrangements I require are implemented quickly and to my satisfaction.’

‘I have a degree in Law from an Italian University and our legal system is totally different compared to English common law. At the beginning of the course I found some difficulties understanding some of the arguments and they decided to set up some extra lessons in order to explain the necessary fundamental aspects of common law system to me.’

- **Demonstrating cultural awareness and sensitivity:**

‘In Singapore culture, it's not very frequent that students reply to the lecturer's questions but as they have made their lessons a lot more interesting, students are constantly participating in class.’

‘Education in Malaysia has made us into students who memorize facts and not being able to use our mind to think in a sensible way. This is a problem that a lot of us are having. They have totally changed the way I think and analyze in a more sensible and useful way.’

In recognition of the specific challenges faced by staff at our campuses in London, Singapore, and Malaysia, a dedicated Outstanding Contribution to Teaching award will be introduced for staff at our branch campuses from 2016/17.

- **Providing practical guidance and support with extenuating circumstances**

‘They recently helped with a serious funding issue and were sympathetic and practical throughout.’

‘...they have provided me with a great deal of practical advice regarding PEC forms and other matters. I honestly cannot thank them enough for all of the support they have given me, without a doubt I would not have made it to the end of my degree as the person I am now without their continued support, advice and encouragement.’

‘This year I have had various health issues and through it all they have offered outstanding pastoral support, being there to talk to, helping with PEC forms and contacting the school and other departments as needed.’

5.6.3 Student outcomes

The nomination data pointed to a number of important outcomes related to excellent pastoral support and inclusivity. These included improved retention, enhanced confidence, better grades, and improved health and wellbeing:

‘At one point I was feeling very very low and was thinking of dropping out of university and they talked to me about the problems that were bothering me and was able to help me work through them rather than running away from them. It was because of them and their loveliness towards me that I am still here today and why I am a much stronger person for seeing things through, I am forever grateful to them, if I had a different personal tutor I don't think I would still be in Newcastle at all.’

‘I believe they have helped to make my final year enjoyable and manageable and without their support I believe I would have left Newcastle and not finished my degree.’

‘Their advice has provided me with the confidence to address the problems that I have faced throughout my degree. Without their support and encouragement, I believe that I would have struggled to complete my degree.’

‘Their professional approach with the added belief gave me the drive and helped me remember why I chose to attend the university despite my age (I'm a mature student), they also helped in such a way that they boosted my belief in myself and gave me the confidence I lost due to personal issues.’

‘It has led to me improving my health and wellbeing and from this possibly improving my grades, due to their approach to their students...’

Such comments emphasise the pastoral value of excellent teaching. Moreover, they underline the importance of staff being aware of equality and diversity issues, as well as the need to be familiar with the University's Personal Extenuating Circumstances procedures. Being able to provide appropriate guidance to those who require additional support can have an enormous impact both on a student's academic experience and their overall wellbeing.

To acknowledge the work that staff are doing to ensure inclusivity, equality and diversity, NUSU plans to introduce a Diversity in the Curriculum award. Consultation with students will be carried out during 2016/17 to ensure that the award is fit for purpose, with the aim of introducing the award from 2017/18 onwards.

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