

Supporting GTAs Who Teach: Foreword

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The Policy Context - Sally Bradley

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in many universities in the UK and beyond are likely to have multiple roles in a single institution: aspiring academic, student, teacher, researcher and employee. These roles have developed in the context of growing undergraduate numbers and the challenge for universities in terms of employing sufficient staff to teach them, leading in turn to a major expansion of GTAs in the UK, the US and Australasia. This expansion reflects both economic considerations – part-time staff are cheaper to employ and easier to dispense with – as well as the educational goal of giving would-be academics a chance to gain experience of teaching. However both these goals need to be set in their broader educational, economic and political contexts. These include the extent to which undergraduate expectations have changed as a result of higher tuition fees, for example, institutional messages about the importance of high performance in league tables, the UK National Student Survey and other perceived markers of quality. There is also the strong likelihood that most GTAs have their own strong recent undergraduate memories, want to do their best for their students and are painfully aware of what they do not know. Given all this, what characterises quality support available for this group?

The discussion regarding the quality of teaching, teaching qualifications and professional recognition have been around for many years from the Dearing Report, in 1997, to more recent reports such as the Browne Review (2010). This recent report suggested that one of the conditions of funding would be the requirement that all new academic staff would undertake Higher Education Academy accredited teaching course. And included “the option to gain such a qualification is made available to all staff – including researchers and postgraduate students – with teaching responsibilities.” (Browne Review, 2010, p45). Such was the level of interest that the Review of the UK Professional Standards Framework (2010) consultation asked a specific question relating to the development need for Postgraduates who taught:

F. Qualified to Teach: The need for those undertaking teaching in higher education (including full-time and part-time/sessional staff as well as postgraduates who teach) to demonstrate capability by being appropriately qualified, through, for example, the successful completion of a teaching qualification (i.e. a PG Certificate in Higher Education or its equivalent). (p6)

The question remains: why is this important? This short paper outlines some of the drivers for both Postgraduate students who teach and for higher education institutions where they may work.

As a Postgraduate student who teaches

Employability and the potential for future employment is of interest to all Postgraduates, therefore using every opportunity to add value to a CV and create some future proofing, irrespective of the final career destination will be useful. The Vitae Researcher Development Framework, in Domain D: Engagement, influence and impact, encourages teaching as this provides an opportunity to “Engage[s] with and share[s] research through research-informed and student-focused teaching (Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited, 2013).

The 2005 European Charter and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers also recognises the value of teaching to postgraduates, providing a caveat that teaching loads are appropriate and that training is available to the postgraduate students. Recipients of some Research Council grants are encouraged to teach but restrict the number of hours

per week. The value of gaining teaching experience is evidenced in Career Paths of AHRC funded PhD Students: Final Report which suggests that:

4.2 The majority of those employed in academic positions in the university sector say their job involves both teaching and research. (Innes and Fenny, 2012, p21)

It would therefore suggest that gaining recognition for teaching would enhance career opportunities within academia.

For the institution employing Postgraduate students as teachers or as someone supporting student learning

The pressures of the National Student Survey and fees in the UK along with Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) indicators make it an imperative that those who are teaching or supporting learning are “appropriately qualified, supported and developed teaching and support staff” (QAA, 2012 a, p13) to ensure student.

The QAA Chapter B11: Research degrees -Indicator 14 (2011, p23) goes on to state that “Research students have appropriate opportunities for developing research, personal and professional skills” and that teaching provides an opportunity to develop a range of skills and share their subject knowledge. The QAA go on to say that Postgraduate students who are engaging in teaching and supporting learning should be appropriately trained and supported.

The recent QAA Quality Code supports the statements laid out in the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2011) encouraging academic practice development activities and ???. Employers will ensure that where researchers are provided with teaching and demonstrating opportunities as part of their career development, suitable training and support is provided. (p11) This builds on The European Charter and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (2005, p21) which sees teaching as a valuable opportunity to disseminate research but also “considered a valuable option within the researchers’ career paths.” But the Science and Technology Funding Council rules concerning tenure clearly state that:

“Students may undertake teaching, demonstrating and, subject to the approval of their supervisor, other paid work directly related to their training. However, the total demand on

their time, including time spent on preparation and/or marking etc, should not normally exceed six hours per week.” This is supported by NERC Studentship and Doctoral Training Grant (DTG) who encourage teaching and demonstrating with a proviso that:

The total time spent (including preparation and marking) should not exceed six hours in any week during term time. (NERC, 2012, p10)

ESRC funded studentships encourage teaching and demonstrating but stipulate that students must “spend a minimum of 1800 hours each academic year on their doctoral research and research training”. (ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide Guidance for non DTC studentships 2013, p38)

Gaining Professional Recognition for Postgraduate Students who teach and/or support learning

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) have introduced the Associate Fellow status (AFHEA) which maps to Descriptor 1 of the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (UK PSF 2011). This specifically identifies, “Early career researchers with some teaching responsibilities (e.g. PhD students, GTAs, contract researchers/post doctoral students etc.)” (p4) enabling this group to gain appropriate recognition for their role in teaching and supporting learning. For Postgraduates who teach there is an opportunity to gain recognition directly from the HEA (see <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/associate-fellow/applying-to-become-an-associate-fellow>) or through institutional internally recognised CPD schemes.

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However, with increased institutional pressure, in the UK, through the inclusion of teaching qualifications in the Higher Education Statistical Agency data there will be an additional incentive to evidence Associate or full Fellowship on a postgraduate CV along with recognition for the contribution to the student experience made by Postgraduates who teach.

Supporting Graduate Teaching Assistants: structures and practices -

Fran Beaton

What follows is a brief description of what is offered in one HEI to support Graduate Teaching Assistants, an evaluation of the effectiveness of that provision, a consideration of the factors which have been found to contribute to the development of confidence and capability and also the problematic aspects. The intention is not to claim that what is done at this university is unique or better, but to suggest that locally responsive sustainable structures are the most effective way of ensuring a constructive experience for all concerned.

Since 2010 a requirement to teach has been built into all University postgraduate scholarships, of which 100 per year are awarded. This is likely to continue until at least 2014. Support for GTAs at Kent is currently in three main locations. The first is the Graduate School, a member of a Doctoral Training Centre which focuses chiefly on the development of research and transferable skills. Initial workshops in preparation for teaching run before term starts, organised by the Graduate School and taught by

experienced Education academics from a central Educational Development Unit. That same Unit also offers credit-bearing provision (a 60-credit PG Certificate in Higher Education) for fulltime probationary academics, of which GTAs normally take half initially, entitling them to Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. At the time of writing, some 200 GTAs have passed the elements of the programme which confer eligibility for Associate Fellowship. Individual Schools (departments) offer GTAs subject-specific provision at intervals, again normally throughout the first year of teaching, either taught by subject specialists or team-taught with PGCert staff. What is essential is coherence, careful and sustained liaison and planning across the piece. When this happens, the novice GTA experiences supportive pre-service, initial and continuing professional development, with opportunities to build interdisciplinary networks with people at comparable stages of their career as well as to receive on-going subject-specific support. So what are the potential pitfalls?

First and foremost, it is important for responsibilities and expectations to be clearly communicated. What is expected of a GTA, what are the boundaries around the role, to whom should a GTA go to seek help, advice and guidance? These are aspects which need to be addressed and reinforced periodically by all concerned. Practice may vary: how much guidance do GTAs get when planning their teaching? What does 'marking' mean? Checking MCQ assignments against an answer grid, commenting on student essays, being involved in formative or summative assessment processes? Within a School, is there someone who is specifically responsible for GTAs ongoing support and welfare? If so, is this role recognised? There is a risk that GTAs fall outside the more widely used systems of peer review for fulltime staff and their performance may only attract attention when difficulties arise. Institutionally, what developmental activities are open to GTAs and how are these communicated? Finally, it is crucial to have a sustainable framework for all this. There is a clear need to have enthusiastic, committed people on board but if support is in the hands of a small number of enthusiasts then it only takes one person to leave for the whole thing to falter and stall. Undergraduate and postgraduate education is too important for this to be allowed to happen, so here are three concluding questions for the reader to ponder.

- Thinking of your own institution/context, what are the next steps which you could take to support the professional development of GTAs?

- Who are the gatekeepers in your institution who could help you make this happen?
- Are there other people, resources or outside bodies you could draw on?

Post Graduate Students Who Teach (PGWT) – Institutional Perspectives **– Sandy Cope**

As previously highlighted, university students, by and large, are concerned with their employability prospects at the end of their study. The same can be said of Post Graduate Students. For those aspiring to have an academic career, teaching experience is highly desirable, particularly when evidence of such can be demonstrated in a recognised way. Having worked in a number of institutions, some commonality in considerations for post graduate support usually underpins the basis of discussion. Typically the question of what evidence is suitable for practice (accredited provision which will be the first module of the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching, accredited provision aligned to the first module of the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching but distinct and separate, stand alone workshops to provide an opportunity for Associate Fellow of the HEA or some combination thereof), and when in the study cycle should the development for the student occur?

To join or not to join – that is the question.

Discussions amongst colleagues in the sector will quickly highlight the variability in approaches to supporting PGWT, and whether this group of participants should be joined with, or kept separate from, new academic members of staff who are required to join the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching (typically named - in Higher Education, in Academic Practice, or in Professional Practice).

Some universities deliberately keep these two discrete groups apart, whereas others take the deliberate decision to join them together. The basis for this decision is not always clear. In joining the PGWT with the new academic staff, positive considerations are typically cited as: distinct groups learning from each other; all participants new to teaching can share

experiences; working together on Faculty programmes and curriculum issues, and coherence of provision. However, there are distinct disadvantages to such practice: power relationships (there have been cases of PhD students and supervisors in the same cohorts); the expectations of the different roles, and issues of experience (if PGWT have no experience at the point of joining module one of a Post Graduate Certificate, how can they complete what in essence is typically an experiential learning based programme?) Perhaps the decision to put disparate groups in the same cohort is purely financial rather than pedagogic – would other disciplines consider putting, in effect, pre and post qualified cohorts together?

It's a matter of timing

At a recent SEDA workshop on 14th February 2013 "[Supporting postgraduates who teach: a forgotten tribe?](#)" on the topic of PGWT, one participant felt that PhD students were not advised early enough about the career implications for completing the provision offered by the university. A typical thinking cycle for PGWT, without such advice, might be – 'I've analysed my data, I'm just about to write up, my viva is coming, what do I do next?, better get myself on the teaching qualification as it will look good on my CV.' Typically, just at the point when they should not be doing it. Institutional practice on when provision is taken varies - in the first year only; in anticipation of forthcoming teaching; at the point where a student begins to teach; when the student becomes aware there is some provision to take, or just when the student decides to take it.

However, it is not untypical to find this type of statement in a university policy:

The student's supervisor will be given the opportunity to comment on the appropriate stage for a candidate to undertake teaching duties and on the potential impact on the progress of their research degree studies. (Hull, 2013)

There can be quite devastating consequences for the students career if they are not aware of such provision until late in their study cycle.

Whilst there has been some commonality in the provision of Post Graduate Certificates in Learning and Teaching in the sector, such as staff having to participate on the programme

within the first year of employment; having some contractual or probationary requirements to participate; time incorporated into the academic workload models and non-completion having promotion implications, the position for PGWT appears less unclear at this moment in time.

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