

The Donkey in the Department? Insights into the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) experience in the UK

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This paper describes a study of how Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are used in a research-led UK university, which sought insights into – recruitment and selection, allocation to tasks, induction and training, time-budgets, payment, feedback, quality assurance, responsibility and autonomy, and overall GTA perceptions. The evidence suggests that many GTAs feel like “donkeys in the department” because of their heavy workload, sizeable responsibility and limited autonomy. The paper closes with a call for a nationwide discussion of the most appropriate role and framework for GTAs.

Introduction

A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT ASPECTS of the graduate student experience in the UK have been studied, including the research culture within which they operate (Deem & Brehony 1999), the processes of actually doing postgraduate research (Potter 2002), and the PhD examination process (Tinkler & Jackson 2000). Yet some aspects have yet to attract much attention or research. One important gap is research on the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) experience from a UK perspective (Nyquist & Wulff 1996). This gap persists, despite a long tradition of using TAs in North America, which is supported and illustrated by an extensive academic literature (eg Marinkovich, Prostko & Stout, 1998), and despite the existence of journals such as *The Journal of Graduate Education* and the limited-circulation US-based *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant*

Development. The persistence of this gap is also surprising given the publication of appropriate codes of practice by the National Postgraduate Committee (1993), the Quality Assurance Agency (1999), the UK Council for Graduate Education (1999) and the Association of University Teachers (2001a, 2001b).

This paper explores the GTA experience in the UK, based on a case study of how GTAs are being used in one particular University. It evaluates what role GTAs play within departments, and examines the claim that they are simply academic workhorses, or – as one of our survey respondents put it – “the mules in the department”.

The paper is in four sections. Section one outlines the context, focusing on the definition and history of GTAs in North America and Britain, and the need for a better understanding of GTA approaches and prospects in Britain. Section two introduces the case study of Lancaster University. Section three discusses results from the case study, which reveal interesting aspects of the GTA experience in practice. Section four offers a summary and outlines some implications of the study.

The Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)

For the purposes of this exercise we can define a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) as any postgraduate student who teaches (usually undergraduate students) part-time, on a paid basis, for a department, whilst also engaged as a research student at the university, working on supervised research towards their higher degree (usually a PhD, but in some cases an MPhil or MRes).

As Gillon and Hoad (2001) point out, within the UK, “although [undergraduate] student numbers have increased, the government has

consistently reduced the funding it gives to universities to support each student. Consequently, universities themselves have been forced to make savings and find ways of teaching a greater number of students with an ever-decreasing unit of resource. One way they have found of doing this has been to employ a greater number of part-time staff, many of whom are postgraduates, to do certain teaching tasks.”

Employing graduate students to help with undergraduate teaching is not in itself new, even within the UK, but what is new is the growing scale on which it is happening, and the increasing dependence of many degree schemes on this part-time staffing. In one sense this is merely one part of the changing face of graduate education in the UK (Becher, Henkel & Kogan 1994; Burgess 1997). Whilst science lab classes and field teaching have traditionally relied heavily on graduate demonstrators, it is only in recent years that graduate students have been called upon to assume a wider role in teaching undergraduates, in ways reminiscent of universities in the United States.

The UK has much to learn from North American experience in using graduate students as teachers, particularly amongst the larger and leading research institutions (Lambert & Tice 1993; Shannon, Twale & Moore 1998). There a significant proportion of introductory undergraduate courses have long been taught by doctoral students, freeing full-time academics to concentrate on teaching graduate courses and engage in research and scholarship (Eble 1987). The North American model of undergraduate education often relies heavily on the engagement of graduate teaching assistants, which in turn provides funding to recruit graduate students and thus sustain graduate programmes, cultivate an active research culture, contribute to the institution’s broader research mission and train future academics. The teaching assistant (TA) mechanism thus provides a means of funding graduate study, a cost-effective solution to augment the supply of instructors, particularly on large courses, and a valuable apprenticeship model for future professors.

Current developments in European universities point to similar responses to external pressures through the use of more part-time positions (Sporn 1999). This drift away from expensive, tenured, full-time academic staff towards cheaper

part-time staff who can be employed in more flexible ways fuels creeping casualisation, which is occurring at the same time as the British Government is requiring greater accountability in how public money is being spent within higher education (Slaughter & Leslie 1997; Thompson 1997).

Case Study

This paper reports on a case study of GTAs at Lancaster University, a medium-sized (by UK standards) campus-based university in North-West England, which was founded in 1964. In 2000-1 it had a student population of 10,199 (FTEs), of whom 2,924 were graduates (1,189 on research degrees and 1,735 on taught degrees). A total of 207 graduate students were employed by the University as GTAs, in one capacity or another.

Lancaster University has a good reputation for the quality of its teaching (Harrison 2001) and research; on the basis of RAE 2001 scores, Lancaster is ranked seventh in the *Guardian* league table (Guardian Unlimited 2002). This niche is important, because it helps to explain the importance the university attaches to sustained high quality in undergraduate teaching, graduate study (both taught and research), and academic research and scholarship. The deployment of GTAs, within an agreed institutional Code of Practice (Lancaster University 2000), must be viewed in this context.

This paper is informed by a survey of GTAs carried out during the summer of 2001 (Ramos 2001). The survey was based on three departments from different faculties – Environmental Science (Environmental & Natural Sciences), Sociology (Social Sciences) and English (Arts & Humanities). These were chosen because each has long-established practices of employing doctoral students as GTAs. Each Head of Department was interviewed, along with 11 GTAs and 7 other members of the University (appropriate administrators, Students’ Union Officers and staff from the Department of Educational Research).

Data were collected using closed and open-ended questions, in a semi-structured format. Each Head of Department was interviewed separately, face-to-face. For practical reasons four of the GTAs were also interviewed one-on-one,

but most were interviewed in groups of 2 or 3. All participants in the survey were assured of anonymity. Interestingly, all staff declined the option but 73% of the GTAs requested that their identities remained confidential. Interview sessions were tape-recorded with the participant's permission, and later transcribed and coded.

The GTA Experience

The survey was designed to throw light on how GTAs are being used within the university, and it had a particular focus on the experiences of the GTAs themselves. This section summarises the main findings and their implications, and is structured into major themes. Where appropriate, the GTA voice speaks for itself.

Recruitment and selection: It was quite striking that in all three departments there is no systematic way of recruiting GTAs from the existing pool of graduate research students. Unlike the North American model of GTAs, in Britain research students are selected and admitted primarily on the basis of their research potential; only after being admitted is their suitability to teach taken into account, and then in a rather ad hoc way. In all three departments the final decision about hiring GTAs rests with the Head of Department, this decision being informed by available funding, teaching need, and the availability of research students with appropriate subject knowledge. Not all graduate students who had hoped to be selected as a GTA were appointed, but the survey did not probe the basis for these decisions. There was no evidence of open advertising of GTA possibilities, and in each case students simply "signed up" with the department (most commonly with the departmental secretary) for courses they wished to teach. Sometimes this decision was strongly influenced by the desire to work with one's research supervisor. None of the GTAs included in the study had been formally interviewed; the norm was an informal discussion with the Head of Department. Several GTAs expected to be tested on their competencies before selection and appointment, but this did not happen. Many of them also expected some form of feedback, after selection, on the appropriateness of their qualifications and/or teaching experience.

Allocation to tasks: Selection was heavily influenced by the task to be performed. Most GTAs had teaching assignments with first year

undergraduates, either exclusively (55%) or as well as years 2 and 3 (36%). Only the most experienced (who had completed or nearly completed their PhD, and/or those with appropriate previous teaching experience) were allocated teaching with second and third year undergraduates. The GTAs performed different tasks in different departments – those in Environmental Sciences were mainly responsible for lab/practical and field-work, whereas those in Sociology and English mostly led seminar and small discussion groups. Few of the GTAs presented lectures, and those that did lectured only occasionally and on themes directly relevant to their own research interests and experiences.

Induction: Differences in attitude between the GTAs and Heads of Department were quite pronounced when it came to induction of the GTA into the culture, standards and procedures of the department. None of the three departments had a formal induction programme, although since the survey was carried out (summer 2001) at least two of the departments have given serious thought to the matter, inspired by the needs of the institution's own internal quality assurance regime. From the department's perspective, a formal induction programme would be time-consuming and thus costly, and there was little appreciation of the importance of properly inducing GTAs in order to help them feel like valued colleagues, introduce them to departmental procedures and practices, and increase their effectiveness at teaching.

From the GTA's perspective, the lack of a formal induction programme leads to insufficient and inadequate briefing and preparation for their teaching assignments, which in turn creates confusion over the role they should or might expect to play within the department. Lack of induction also partly legitimises lack of support and empathy from other staff within the department, who remain uncertain about the status and niche of the GTAs within their social and intellectual hierarchy.

Training: Few of us are natural teachers, gifted with the ability to communicate effectively, encourage and empower our students to take responsibility for their own learning, and to evaluate and mark work in ways and to a standard that is appropriate. Most successful teachers benefited a great deal from training, in both the conceptual and the practical dimensions of

effective teaching and learning. This training often starts with the GTA, as the novice academic. Yet, even today – and despite strong encouragement from the National Postgraduate Committee (1993) – training is usually recommended but not required for GTAs. The survey showed that all three departments encouraged their GTAs to take appropriate training courses – generic and subject-specific – but none made it a condition of employment. Two departments claimed to be thinking seriously about introducing mandatory training for GTAs, for quality assurance audit purposes. The subject-specific training is mostly done in the department, and is often very informal; it often boils down to little more than a guided run through the lab/practical class material in advance of the lab/practical session itself.

At Lancaster, GTAs and probationary academic staff have access to a structured generic training programme – the Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (CiLTHE) – which is taught by experienced staff from the University's Higher Education Development Centre (HEDC) and recognised by the Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT). The CiLTHE programme provides a broad introduction to pedagogic issues and styles, challenging the aspiring teacher to think through and articulate their educational philosophy, and to reflect on how this informs their practice. A quarter (27%) of the GTAs interviewed in the survey took Part I of the CiLTHE programme, and most of them found it extremely valuable, both as preparation for their teaching duties and as part of their broader personal development. Some – particularly the science GTAs, who demonstrated lab/practical classes, rather than leading group discussions or engaging in other more open-ended forms of teaching – commented that the programme was too general for their very specific practical needs.

Time budgets: The University's *Code of Practice on the Employment of Postgraduate Students* (Lancaster University 2000) recommends that GTAs should not spend more than 6 hours a week, on average, on teaching duties, in order to protect their time needed for research. Whilst this average might well be met over the year, inevitably teaching timetables make bunched demands on GTA's time, and most of the GTAs interviewed in the survey felt that their teaching duties were taking up too much time. Many

questioned exactly what activities should be counted in the 6 hours a week, because the norm was to significantly under-value time spent in preparation and marking, and time invested in attending departmental meetings. The total time committed or required was invariably significantly heavier than the direct contact time, and many GTAs felt uneasy about their time budget, particularly when they felt it was their research that was suffering the most. In this sense, there is direct conflict between time spent on GTA duties and time invested in making progress with their research.

The experience of one GTA was very salutary, if perhaps not unusual:

“Just for the 3 seminars, 3 lectures, office hours and a team meeting, I've already put in 8 hours of physical presence per week. What's not included is the reading and preparation of the lesson, which takes another 2 hours. Then I have to attend to all assignments, 4 marked and 4 unmarked. Going through each of them takes a full day, so add 8 extra days per term.”

From an institutional point of view, completion rates are highly important, particularly in an institution which relies heavily on postgraduate funding from research councils (especially ESRC) which expect completion within 4 years and which impose draconian sanctions (including the withdrawal of funding) on institutions that fall below their defined threshold on completion rates.

Payment: Just as problematic from the GTA point of view is the matter of payment received for work done. The University has an agreed hourly rate for part-time teaching work, but the precise amount depends on the nature of the tasks performed – demonstrating a lab/practical class is less demanding and thus pays less per hour than leading a seminar or delivering a lecture. Most GTAs receive the agreed hourly rate only for contact time, so that time spent on important functions such as preparation, marking and attending meetings is not rewarded financially (and do not appear in the time budgets agreed on appointment as a GTA). Most GTAs are altruistic enough not to let this compromise their willingness to “put the time in” and “do the job properly”, although they are well aware that their salaries do not fairly reflect the actual number of hours they commit to teaching. Many commented that, if they tallied up total hours worked as a GTA, they would be receiving much less than the minimum wage. This does little to boost their

self-image and notion of self-worth, their feeling of being valued by their department, and their sense of fairness. It compounds the problem of unrealistic time budgets, and reinforces the GTA's feeling of compromise between their research and teaching responsibilities.

Feedback: One area in which the GTAs expressed feelings of uncertainty was in their desire to know whether or not their teaching matches up to the course leader's expectations, both in terms of academic content and their approach to teaching. This seemed to be a more pressing issue that any absolute measure of success or effectiveness, with the GTAs eager to please and impress their department as a primary goal. Given that departmental support for their job applications will be very important, one can readily appreciate why! But it is also a reflection of the fact that, to the GTA, the course leader might provide a role model to emulate; if not a role model, then at least a model of how teaching might be approached, and a benchmark against which to judge their own performance. Yet, almost universally, the GTAs reported receiving limited feedback. One GTA commented how "Only the enthusiastic staff members will occasionally ask to meet with you for an update. In the three years I've been teaching, that has happened only once." As well as lack of feedback, most GTAs were also denied the opportunity to have academic staff directly observe their teaching, reinforcing the feeling of isolation and the sense of being under-valued. This could also be read as a positive thing, however, because the lack of observation could also be read as affirmation of the department's confidence in their abilities. More times than not, one suspects, it is probably best accounted for by lack of staff time!

Quality assurance: Using part-time teachers to deliver courses inevitably requires careful thought about how best to handle quality assurance issues, such as how to ensure that academic standards are maintained if not enhanced. This has two dimensions to it – standards of assessment, and standards (quality) of delivery. All three departments have published marking criteria, which guide GTA assessment of students' work and provide a useful benchmark against which inconsistent or inappropriate marking can be identified. Most GTAs reported that any assignments they marked were subsequently double-marked within the department, providing

some assurance that standards have been used properly and consistently. In at least two departments, GTAs took part in mark standardising sessions (eg several sample pieces of work were marked by the GTA and by the course leader, and the marks and comments were compared and moderated) before they were allowed to mark undergraduate work. But quality assurance is not confined to marking of work, because it also embraces the question "How do the GTAs know that they are doing a good job?" This question provoked a number of different types of responses from the GTAs, mostly variations on the theme "Because we haven't been sacked yet!". A number of GTAs commented that they received little formal feedback on their teaching and marking, and would have welcomed more.

Responsibility and autonomy: Many of the research students interviewed in the survey expressed dissatisfaction over the very limited discretion they had, as GTAs, over matters of course content, delivery and assessment. They felt they had little autonomy or freedom to innovate and experiment in their teaching, and felt that creativity was inevitably suppressed by the role they had to play. It was in this context that one GTA commented "we are just the mules of the department".

Whilst that might be an untypically cynical perspective, nonetheless many GTAs felt that they were simply "carrying out the job", with little sense of ownership, engagement or job satisfaction. This has an important bearing on the GTA's sense of identity and academic value, particularly for those who see themselves as apprentice academics. It severely restricts the GTA's ability to exercise academic leadership and responsibility, and compromises the way their students see them. As one GTA expressed it "We only carry out what's been assigned by other people, with little or no leeway. The seminar hour is so structured so that somebody has selected the reading, somebody has told the students what to do as assignments, and somebody has even listed the questions we're supposed to ask. So, my main function is really a bit of a shepherd to ensure that they attend the meetings and that they participate in the discussion."

This is, of course, a double-edged sword. Whilst many GTAs bemoaned the lack of autonomy and the limited responsibility they were

given in course design, delivery and assessment, being given bounded responsibilities does at least reduce the risk of them being over-burdened with teaching responsibilities, protects their time for research, and reduces the academic and personal pressures on them. It also protects the department's responsibilities for academic quality assurance and enhancement.

Overall GTA perceptions: Closely allied to the GTAs feelings of ownership of the process of teaching, was their sensitivity to and awareness of the wider context of their contribution to the mission of the department and the university. A number felt uncomfortable that their role in need-based, in the sense that departments only call on them to teach where and when the need arises. The way in which departments use GTAs is reactive rather than proactive, in the sense that departments are unable to plan further ahead than about 12 months in determining likely staffing needs, and investment in GTA activities is a tactical response to a particular (and often very course-specific) problem rather than a strategic decision informed by medium- and long-term academic planning.

Some GTAs felt that their departments were not entirely convinced about their abilities to deliver and assess the course effectively, citing the lack of autonomy given to them in matters of course content, delivery and assessment. Another recurrent theme was the GTA's sense of marginalisation within their department, with a restricted role in departmental decision-making and their ambiguous role as neither fully staff nor fully student.

Conclusions and Implications

It is tempting but would be wrong to over-generalise from a small case study in one institution. It would be equally wrong to conclude that the institution studied is deficient in its GTA procedures and provision. The aim of this small study was to explore the GTA experience, and in doing so a number of interesting and important themes have become apparent. The two most prominent (and potentially problematic) themes are work-load and payment, but the survey also provided useful insights into recruitment, induction, training and mentoring.

Two particular themes deserve much more detailed research. One is the mismatches in perception between the GTAs themselves and

their Heads of department, over important issues such as work-loads, fair rewards, time budgets, induction, training and mentoring. The second is the ambiguity inherent in the role of the GTA – they provide a valuable (and in some cases essential) contribution to undergraduate teaching, yet their status remains ambiguous ... they are both student and teacher, but neither fully. The problem is not necessarily that this role is contested, it is more to do with underlying tensions between responsibility and power, with the marginalized niche that GTAs occupy within departments, and with lack of ownership of the teaching and learning process.

The survey results also provide interesting insights into the ways in which custom and practice at departmental level reflects a blend of worthy aspiration and resource-based constraint, so that departments often have to 'cut corners' in order to cope with existing student numbers, funding constraints and the availability of suitable graduate students to help as GTAs.

There are clear implications for the development of institutional policy and operational frameworks for using GTAs, and on the need to revisit and where appropriate revise institutional Codes of Practice, both in the light of national codes and frameworks, and in the light of institutional experience and practice. It is important to recognise the tensions between theory and practice, and between ideal and actual practice, and to have codes of practice that are realistic.

Whilst the survey itself did not throw much light on the subject, the fact remains that higher education in the UK is becoming increasingly dependent upon the contribution of part-time staff and GTAs. These part-timers often carry a disproportionately heavy burden of the low-level teaching (years 1 and 2), work on short-term contracts (and thus have little job security), and are hired (often at short notice and usually on low wages) as, when and where need arises. Concerns over such casualisation of employment belong not just to the National Postgraduate Committee (1993) and the trade unions (Association of University Teachers 2001a), because the trend has implications for quality assurance in and academic credibility of institutions, as well as for the training of future academics.

In many ways the evidence does support the notion that GTAs are seen and are being used as

“the donkeys in the department”, because they do carry heavy burdens and without them it would sometimes be difficult if not impossible to cope with rising student numbers and student expectations. Whilst this might indeed be so, it remains the case that many GTAs are happy with their lot, because to them “the big picture” (gaining useful teaching experience and transferable skills, contact with bright students, closer academic relationships with course leaders, and so on) is more important than just work-load, payment and status.

This case study is offered as a contribution to a discussion which is now over-due, at the national level within the UK, on what role the GTA model might best play in trying to reconcile the multiple objectives of delivering high quality teaching and learning experiences to ever-increasing numbers of undergraduates, while university funding is severely constrained, and at the same time providing appropriate funding opportunities for graduate study and further enhancing the research culture, critical mass and academic output of UK universities.

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