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Sustainable academic development: an integrative approach to internationalisation and career headway in the higher education

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Abstract: Various strands of internationalisation have been researched over the years yet; the empirical evidence on experiences of international students in the host universities is shallow, especially in the context of international graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs). The rapidly changing environment within the higher education has implications for the construction, delivery and management of educational training for this group to ensure sustainability of higher education system. Yet little contemporary research exists investigating the adaptability of academic development and institutions to such change. This paper empirically examines the value-added impact of a teaching and learning program for GTAs using qualitative research method, which offers interesting insights into the phenomenon.

Keywords: sustainable higher education; internationalisation; international GTA; teaching qualifications; career progression.

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Biographical notes: Tasawar Nawaz's research involves interpretive and positivist dimensions in the areas of inclusive finance, corporate governance, human capital, higher education, transnational education and internationalisation.

1 Introduction

During the last decade, the higher education sector has been transformed by various kinds of internationalisation processes that operate in a constant flux of globalisation (Stafford and Taylor, 2016; Whitsed and Green, 2016). As a result, internationalisation activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) have expanded dramatically in terms of volume, scope and complexity (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Tierney and Lanford, 2015). The rapid growth in academic and research collaboration, transnational education (Bedenlier et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2017; Toohey et al., 2017) and international franchising (Lemke-Westcott and Johnson, 2013; Wilkins and Huisman, 2012) have resulted in an increase in cross border student flow (Varghese, 2009). This phenomenon applies, in

particular, for postgraduate programs (Hénard et al., 2012; OECD, 2014; Winter et al., 2015) in the UK where half of the full-time postgraduate students are non-UK domiciled (HESA, 2014–2015).

Various strands of internationalisation have been researched over the years (see, inter alia, Gelezenis and Axaopoulos, 2015; Hassan, 2016; Kanama, 2016; Ongare et al., 2016), however; the empirical evidence on the experiences of international students in the host universities is shallow especially, in the context of international graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs). Given the increased attention on the internationalisation of higher education across the globe, it is imperative to revise the focus to include this group into the research agenda to find means of sustainable academic development (Askary et al., 2015; Mulder, 2010; Wiek et al., 2011). The rapidly changing environment within the higher education have implications for the construction, delivery and management of educational training for this group, yet little contemporary research exists investigating the adaptability of academic development and institutions to such change (Winter et al., 2015). Furthermore, a range of education development programs are taught in the UK to young academics, including graduate teaching assistant (GTAs), with the rationale to provide a generic overview of the practice of being a university lecturer (Kandlbinder and Peseta, 2009). However, the empirical evidence on the impact of these training programs remains largely unknown to date.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to critically reflect on the current practices in delivering GTA teaching development program from the prospect of an international student enrolled for one of these programs and suggest appropriate modifications to improve GTAs experience as well as contribute to the ongoing debate on sustainable education development. This study examines the perceptions of international GTAs on one of such programs in a UK university. In this study, the design of the same program has also been critically appraised and appropriate modifications to the design and practice of the program has been identified with reference to the underpinning literature. This is important given the implications for provision of the greater internationalisation of the postgraduate student body (Hénard et al., 2012). The paper equally contributes to the literature on sustainability in higher education (HE).

2 Background

2.1 Postgraduate students in higher education

International students in the UK universities represent a vast majority of the GTAs. Following Park and Ramos (2002, p.47) a GTA is “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.” Given the diversity in their background, these GTAs are provided with training related to their teaching and learning activities. However, it is fairly challenging to reflect on how an international GTA assimilates new concepts and epistemologies and how they are stimulated in practice.

Postgraduate students have long been used as teaching assistants to help with undergraduate teaching in the UK and North America (Park and Ramos, 2002). What is of interest is the introduction of intensified teaching and learning programs for new academic staff members and postgraduate (mainly, doctoral) students across the UK.

These programs are designed to provide sufficient training to enable this group to support teaching (Winter et al., 2015) in order to attain sustainability in the higher education. In this context, the fourth principle of Vitae (2008, p.11) establishes that “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.” Browne (2010) notes that the rise in training programs is due to the increasing emphasis on teaching quality, reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), UK. Equally, it is essential for universities across the UK to submit data on the qualifications of all their teaching staff to ensure their teaching quality (Grove, 2013). This suggests that the rising profile of teaching quality as an integral part of developing academic practice for this cohort (Winter et al., 2015).

As mentioned earlier, half of full-time postgraduate students in the UK are international. Notwithstanding, there is a lack of empirical evidence that focuses on the teaching development needs and experience of non-UK domiciled postgraduate students (Borg et al., 2009). Trowler and Knight (2000) note that like any other international student cohort, doctoral students also bring with them certain cultural physiognomies and discursive resources which impact on their academic acculturation and this is of relevance to their participation and engagement in teaching development courses. Likewise, Trowler and Cooper (2002) argue that participants bring distinctive norms and practices rooted in their teaching development regimes to the course that may diverse the UK higher education pedagogies which are student-oriented and transformative (Kandlbinder and Peseta, 2009).

Consequently, the teaching development course may be least compatible with the international GTA’s profile (Jiang et al., 2010). Trowler and Cooper (2002, p.221) suggest that ‘where there are incongruities between the two they need not be fatal if participants are able to, or are encouraged to, surface and reflect on previously tacit assumptions embedded in their teaching development regimes’. They further stress that to overcome the incongruities, participants need to ‘exercise discretion over the application of aspects of different regimes – applying them in different contexts as appropriate’.

In order to appraise, evaluate and amend the design of a teaching and development program (hereafter, GTA-LEARN), the program has been critically viewed from three different angles and each linked to three different questions:

- 1 Motives of international GTAs: why international GTAs undertake teaching development program?
- 2 Advantages and detriments for international GTAs: what are the benefits and challenges faced by the international GTAs on teaching development program?
- 3 Teaching qualifications and long-term academic career: does teaching development program help the international GTAs in their academic career?

3 Research design and methodology

3.1 Sample

The study was conducted in one of the leading research oriented universities in the UK. The university is actively involved in the internationalisation of higher education.

Primary data was collected through interviews with twenty-seven international GTAs on the program.

Initially, the research participants were approached during their sessions (for GTA-LEARN program), where the proposed research project was explained and a call for participation was made. Participation was voluntary. Contact details such as email addresses and telephone numbers were collected during this interaction. A written statement along with a formal invitation for an interview was sent out to all the potential participants at a later stage, prior to the interviews. Forty-two invites in total were sent however, 27 respondents agreed to participate in the interviews. Any concerns related to the nature of the interviews such as anonymity were dealt at this stage. Hence, the sample consisted of 27 individuals, including 19 male and eight female doctoral students who also worked as a GTA in their respective disciplines. The participants came from diversified ethnic backgrounds, which represented 13 countries across four continents around the globe. 53% of the participants were funded either by their respective governments or by the universities in their home countries. Whereas 31% of the participants were on host (sampled) university's scholarships and the remaining 16% were self-funded.

All 27 international GTAs voluntarily participated in this study. The participants in this study were from various discipline groups including business (which includes general business; marketing; economics; accounting and finance; tourism and hospitality management; shipping and logistics and supply chain management programs); engineering; arts; government and law. Since the majority of the participants were either sponsored by their governments or were on university scholarships, therefore, it was their fiduciary responsibility to work within their discipline as a GTA specially, those funded by the host university. The researcher was also partly involved in the delivery of the program, hence, was attending most of the sessions. Moreover, detailed notes taken during these sessions were used in the analysis based on the structure, delivery and operationalisation of the program.

Primary data was collected through face-to-face interviews with 27 international doctoral students who also worked as a GTA in the focused university. Interviews were conducted in various locations within the university such as liaison areas for staff and students, GTA's offices, class-rooms (after teaching sessions), by the lake etc., subject to the availability and convenience of the participants. The interview lasted forty minutes on average with longest interview of 65 and shortest interview of 20 minutes, respectively. The interviews started with more generic questions about the demographic characteristics of the interviewees such as background (including country of origin), current degree program of study, time since arrived to the UK, future intension, including career goals etc. the focus was then diverted to the more specific question about the GTA-LEARN, once the interviewee was observed to be comfortable with the setting of the interview. The final part was focused on the three main areas as outlined in the paper namely: motive, sustainable effect and career development.

The interviews were tape recorded for later analysis. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews to reflect on the body language and impressions of the interviewees and to reflect the recorded data. NVivo was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis was performed as the data analysis progressed. The data was revisited more than once to insure the accuracy. Emerging themes were benchmarked with the research objectives as well as with the existing literature to reach the conclusions presented in Section 4 of the study.

3.2 *The GTA-LEARN program*

Before moving further, it is imperative to discuss the design and delivery of the program attended by the sampled international GTAs. Participants attended this course between 2014 and 2015 academic years. The course was named as GTA-LEARN (for the purpose of this paper, the real name of the program has not been disclosed) and aligns with the UK Professional Standards Framework for Higher Education Academy (HEA). The program is further aligned with situated learning theory (see Lave and Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice by Wenger (1998) as cited in Winter et al., (2015). Moreover, GTA-LEARN also draws on “extensive on-going professional development model” suggested by Hardré (2005) in which participants are expected to put in practice the newly learned knowledge and pedagogies and amend the ongoing iterative process as appropriate.

The entire program was divided into two parts (i.e., GTA-LEARN-1 and 2) with ten in-class sessions in total for the full program with face to face interaction. GTA-LEARN-1 mainly consisted of taught components of six sessions including introduction to learning theories, supporting students with special needs, intercultural learning and teaching, small group teaching and site visits. GTA-LEARN-2 consisted of four sessions, which covered assessment and feedback, facilitating active learning, evaluation teaching and a micro teaching session. Following the completion of session 8, participants obtained the status of tutor and marker at the respective university while completions of whole course offered participants the option to apply for associate fellowship of HEA.

4 **Empirical results**

4.1 *Motives to opt for GTA-LEARN*

Most of the participants were found to be very keen on various pedagogic techniques and were highly motivated to learn while working towards the completion of their PhD studies. This observation is informed by the previous literature (see Barthwal et al. 2011), which documented that doctoral students opted for teaching development programs to learn about teaching, echoing the recent claims of Winter et al. (2015). Equally, most of the international doctoral students, perceived the UK teaching qualification as prestigious, whether in returning back to home countries or working in the UK and this was the main motivation to undertake GTA-LEARN program amongst the participants. This observation was confirmed repeatedly in all sessions, where the facilitator asked the same question: why are you here? The unanimous answer was to get the qualification as this will ‘help me to hunt down a job’. It was a common observation that such qualifications are increasingly demanded by the universities – both in the UK and abroad.

This raises question about the learning objectives. Most of the international students with previous teaching experiences were merely concerned about the contents of the program. A number of observations about the design of GTA-LEARN were made during the sessions and based on these observations some suggestions are put forward that could eventually improve the GTA experience on a teaching development program. Although, all the suggestions are subject to GTA-LEARN program, however, they may apply to other such courses offered across the UK and elsewhere.

4.1.1 Accreditation

The most contentious observation coalesced around the design of GTA-LEARN was HEA accreditation. Unlike many similar programs taught across the UK universities, GTA-LEARN, was not an accredited program by the HEA. It was particularly discouraging for those who had less than three years of working experience in the UK higher education and require to attain the UK teaching qualifications, i.e., Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (or PGCAP).

An accounting and finance GTA, who voluntarily opted for the program, have expressed his concerns about the design and accreditation of the program. In his words:

“[.....] the GTA-LEARN program had 10 sessions in total, each session lasting about two hours, followed by assignments and academic reading [.....] concisely, it required commitment that was time consuming and time is a luxury that I (as an international student) cannot afford.”

Similarly, a supply chain management GTA highlighted the time constraint put upon the international students. She went on saying:

“[.....] I was given 40 months to complete my PhD studies [.....] this is not enough time to complete a research project, let alone an academic certification – especially when it is not accredited!”

These accounts suggest that international GTAs are under further scrutiny by the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI), which allows them a limited time period (i.e., 40 months for full-time PhD studies) to complete their degree. This in turn made it fairly challenging for international doctoral students to cope up with GTA-LEARN as their prime objective was to complete their PhD studies on time.

A provision for international GTAs should be added in their offer letter – making pedagogic training compulsory. This will encourage them to undertake GTA-LEARN and equally grant them some extra time on their degree. This suggestion is consent with those of Young et al. (2008), who argue that training programs could prove extremely beneficial to doctoral students to strengthen their academic profiles and career growth. Similarly, Ongare et al. (2016, p.119) argue that curriculum frameworks offer “a unique opportunity for learning institutions to contribute to sustainability practices in their countries.” Other notable attempts include Hassan (2016), who adopted scaffolding approach to analyse a pedagogic underpinning used to support adult learning in a specific subject area in the UK higher education whereas Ongare et al. (2016) analysed the concept of sustainability at curriculum level in a Kenyan university.

4.1.2 Training and integration

GTA-LEARN was a voluntary program hence, it was at student’s discretion to opt for it and reap the opportunity to interact more efficiently with other academic staff. Research suggests that such training programs provide a good opportunity for participants to integrate with a wider network of colleagues (Turner et al., 2012; Smith, 2010; Bamber, 2008). The participants also expressed this motive as a marketing GTA described:

“[.....] I was made aware of the teaching workload (compulsory hours) during my induction upon joining the PhD program [.....] however, I was not made aware of any pedagogical support available for a young academic (like my-self) [.....] I wish I would have joined the program during my first year at the university!”

This suggests, making GTA-LEARN a compulsory training program with HEA accreditation will impact positively on student's experience.

Similarly, another interesting observation was made about the timetabling and advertisement of GTA-LEARN. According to a shipping and logistics GTA:

"I have had teaching on every Wednesdays [.....] that's when the sessions for GTA-LEARN were running [.....] it was not physically possible for me to attend both sessions concurrently [.....]."

Another GTA from arts added:

"[.....] I came to know about the program from a fellow student [.....] it was never advertised; no emails were sent, nothing!"

The accounts clearly suggest some serious concerns about the running of the program. It was observed that the program was poorly timetabled and often conflicted with the teaching commitments of GTAs. Therefore, teaching commitments should be considered while designing the program timetable. Equally, GTA-LEARN was not well publicised across doctoral students' community. A brief induction, underpinning the benefits of the program to the newly enrolled doctoral students is suggested. The above issues are at the core of academic debate concerning postgraduate students (e.g., Hodson and Buckley, 2011; Bennett and Turner, 2013; NUS, 2013), however, no concrete steps have yet been taken in this regards.

4.2 Advantages and detriments for international GTAs

Consistent with the earlier empirical findings in Australia (e.g., Barthwal et al., 2011) and the UK (see Park and Ramos, 2002; Winter et al., 2015), the overall experience of the sampled GTAs with GTA-LEARN was highly satisfactory.

"[.....] I enjoyed the inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary discussions the most [.....] this made me realise that one size does not fits all –a PhD in finance GTA."

An engineering GTA touched upon the feedback on academic practice:

"[.....] the instant feedback I received from my peers and the tutor during the micro-teach session helped me adjust my teaching practice [.....]."

"[.....] I have never recorded or video tapped my teaching practice before [.....] watching the recorded videos of me, teaching during the microteaching made me feel more confident! –an Accounting and Finance GTA added."

In terms of course delivery, cross-disciplinary discussions, group work, peer observations and micro-teach were reported to be very useful. The learning exercise was more meaningful to the international GTAs due to the teaching culture being distinct to that which they had encountered previously. Particularly, given the diversity of the cohort, GTAs found it interesting to learn various pedagogies practiced across the globe. On the other hand, some GTAs struggled to understand the course expectations as they did not have had background knowledge on the subject. Additionally, few reportedly found it fairly challenging to communicate in a second academic discipline.

4.2.1 *Teaching opportunities*

Trowler and Knight (2000) have opined that the situated and contextual nature of academic practice depends on the opportunities for GTAs to develop inter-subjectivity and teaching expertise (Donnelly, 2006). Austin (2002) is concerned that ongoing academic development of junior academics may be compromised due to the limited teaching opportunities. This highlights the significance of teaching opportunities for the GTAs. A GTA in finance have opined that:

“[.....] I was obligated by contract to teach for 120 hours per academic year [.....] this provided me a platform to put in practice the pedagogical theories I was learning during the GTA-LEARN sessions.”

However, there was no such provision for all those attending the program. As a result, those without any teaching opportunities struggled to complete their assignments, i.e., review of educational practice.

A plausible approach to deal with this issue is to actively involve the PhD supervisors in the process. The supervisors shall keep a fair balance in the allocation of teaching load to the assigned GTAs. This approach could also help in mitigating the complaints concerning lack of equity (Lee et al., 2010; NUS, 2013) in access to teaching opportunities for international GTAs as noted in the burgeoning literature (see inter alia HEA, 2011; Bennett and Turner, 2013; NUS, 2013).

4.2.2 *Language barrier*

English language proficiency and pronunciation, in particular, is another barrier reported by the sampled GTAs. Being an international GTA, communication was a structural barrier faced by a few. The problem, however, exists from quite a while (Rubin, 1993; Park, 2004) and it is a worrying lacuna for the academic community (see HEA, 2011; Nawaz, 2016a; Turner et al., 2012; Winter et al., 2015). Again, supervisors and personal tutors shall be encouraged to signpost the international GTAs to use the available resources at the university to overcome such shortcoming. This suggestion is consistent with Kanama (2016), who observed that viable student-supervisor relationships supplement creativity in graduate students in Japan which leads up to the successful completion of a research project. Similarly, Askary et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between effective communication skills, cultural norms and organisational sustainability, suggesting the importance of effective communication skills in sustainable academic development. Following a similar stream of arguments, Gelegenis and Axaopoulos (2015) have documented a framework for the specification of a modern module entirely devoted to cogeneration for the engineering discipline whereas Franchetti (2016) have provided further insights into the phenomenon.

4.3 *Sustainable academic development: teaching qualifications and long-term academic career*

Young et al. (2008) assessed a training program for GTAs using the theoretical lens of self-efficacy and reported that training programs make GTAs self-efficient across instructional areas, i.e., student involvement, instructional strategies and academic management. Likewise, Winter et al. (2015) investigated the non-UK domiciled GTA's experiences on a teaching development course and reported that GTAs perceived that

teaching qualifications could help them prosper in their academic career. This directly applied to the profiles of few included in the sample as they have managed to get some job offers while finalising their PhD thesis. Although the pedagogical training helped them prepare but it was the supervisory support that was regarded as the key factor in progressing in academia. According to a marketing GTA:

“[...] Although GTA-LEARN provided me with the opportunity to learn various pedagogies, however, it was my supervisor who supported me to implement and reflect upon these newly learned pedagogies.”

4.3.1 Supervisory support

It is well documented that student-supervisor relationship has a significant effect on students' academic development (Petersen, 2007) and success of a research project (Mainhard et al., 2009). However, doctoral students are used to fulfil the departmental needs for teaching rather than groomed as future intellectuals (Austin, 2002). Consequently, doctoral students (international students in particular) submitted lack of equity (Lee et al., 2010) and nepotism (NUS, 2013) in teaching opportunities and often look to their supervisors for formal guidance and direction (Borg et al., 2009).

Supervisors are considered as the porters of teaching opportunities and should be supportive of their doctoral students spending time on teaching. Supervisors should actively be involved in allocating teaching opportunities for GTAs and should encourage their students to undertake pedagogical training programs. This will not only strengthen their mutual bound but will also improve the teaching quality.

5 Summary and conclusions

The main objective of the paper was to critically reflect on the current practices in delivering teaching development programs to the GTA from the prospect of international students and suggest appropriate modifications to improve GTAs experience. Empirical evidence suggests that the overall experience of sampled international GTAs on the pedagogical training – GTA-LEARN was highly satisfactory, supporting previous research in the area (Park and Ramos, 2002; Barthwal et al., 2011) which also helped them to develop further in their academic career (Winter et al., 2015).

The findings suggest that pedagogical training programs are desired by the GTAs however, they are constrained by certain structural barriers, i.e., limited time period to complete their studies (as per UK visa and immigration regulations), lack of teaching opportunities and accreditation of the program by the HEA. These barriers can be removed by implementing a university (if not higher education) wide strategy.

The first step is to make the pedagogical training mandatory for all GTAs, either local or international. Such training will make the GTAs highly self-efficient across instructional areas (Postareff et al., 2007), will help them in managing the classroom (Luo et al., 2000) and will enable them to alter their pedagogic techniques to align with student needs (Young et al., 2008).

Furthermore, in response to Borg et al. (2009), to support international doctoral students the paper calls upon doctoral supervisors/mentors to play an active role in supporting their students to mitigate their perceptions of inadequate learning support (Mogaji and Adamu, 2015). Equally, GTAs are encouraged to reflect on their own

teaching philosophy and pedagogies during lectures and workshops. Such mentorship experience will provide the GTAs to overcome anxiety (Pelton, 2013), build confidence regarding mastery of common pedagogical skills (Barthwal et al., 2011) and a connection with pedagogical-content knowledge expertise (Hickson and Fishburne, 2006). This is known as the 'journeyman' approach (Halio, 1964, p.227) in which the GTA assumes additional responsibility, independence and authority in order to become an effective teacher. This must be supplemented by a fair and transparent teaching workload allocation to all GTAs. This will mitigate their perception of nepotism (NUS, 2013) and inequity (Lee et al., 2010) in teaching opportunities.

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