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Graduate Teaching Assistants: responding to the challenges of internationalisation

Jennie Winter^{*a}, Rebecca Turner^a, Sharon Gedye^a, Patricia Nash^a, Vivien Grant^a

^a*Pedagogic Research Institute and Observatory (PedRIO), Plymouth University, PL4 8AA, UK.*

Abstract

The last decade has seen intensification in moves to professionalize the practice of university teaching, including Graduate Teaching Assistants. It has also seen significant growth in terms of the internationalisation of the postgraduate student body and changing expectations around doctoral training. These transformations 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. This paper reports empirical research exploring these issues using a UK-based case study. The research investigated the international doctoral students' experience of a teaching course and subsequent academic development. GTAs reported institutional and cultural factors governing access to teaching opportunities particularly in relation to the international cohort. We explore the possible reasons for this, and the implications for the case institution and the wider HE sector.

Keywords: doctoral students; GTA; international postgraduates; teaching development; teaching opportunities

* corresponding author jennie.winter@plymouth.ac.uk

Introduction

The last decade has seen intensification in moves to professionalize the practice of university teaching, which in recent years has extended beyond the remit of new lecturers to include doctoral students. Many institutions have embedded courses for postgraduate teachers, often entitled Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) courses, which aim to provide sufficient training to allow this group to support teaching and learning alongside their research studies (Park and Ramos, 2002). A growing significance has been placed upon this training; partly in response to a mounting emphasis on teaching quality, value for money and enhanced participation (Browne, 2010).

For example in the UK, the role of GTA courses developed in the late 1990s, due to the blossoming academic development agenda, and the Roberts report (2002) which supported teacher training as part of doctoral training in transferrable skills. GTA training was recommended across the sector and although it was

not a requirement (Park and Ramos, 2002), by 2010 provision had flourished. More recently UK universities have been required to return data on the qualifications of all staff who teach (Grove, 2013). Even before this reporting requirement Lee, Pettigrove and Fuller (2010) reported that over 50% of UK GTA courses were compulsory, 57% were assessed, and that there was a clear trend towards linking content with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). The UKPSF emerged from a proposal in the White Paper, The Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) was invited by Universities UK (UUK), the Standing Conference of Presidents (SCOP) and the UK HE funding bodies to consult with the sector to develop the framework. This professional framework is an enabling mechanism to support the professional development of teaching in Higher Education and in the case of GTA courses allows participants to gain recognition, usually at Associate Fellowship level through the HEA. Furthermore, according to ‘The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers’ led and managed by Vitae, Principle Four (sub-section11) of the seven principles states 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” (Vitae, 2010). These examples illustrate the rising profile of teaching quality as an integral part of developing academic practice for this cohort.

In response to the increasing provision of GTA training, research has considered factors such as disciplinary context (Neumann, 2001); the challenges GTA participants have in reconciling educational episteme with that of their own discipline (Young and Bippus, 2008); and the longer-term impact of training on academic development (Gardner and Jones, 2011). This paper aims to contribute to the published research by focusing on the experience of a particular group who undertake GTA development – international doctoral students. This is important given the implications for provision of the greater internationalisation of the postgraduate student body (Hénard, Diamond and Roseveare, 2012).

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2012-13) 48.6% of the UK fulltime higher degree (research) population are non-UK domiciled. Whilst we do not have robust longitudinal data on the number of international participants undertaking the GTA course at the institution used in this study, the current assessed phase of the course is made up of 41% non UK domiciled participants. There is limited research on the teaching development needs and experience of international doctoral students (Borg et al., 2009; Jindal-Snape and Ingram, 2013). Undoubtedly, in line with other international student groups, international doctoral students bring with them cultural characteristics and discursive resources which impact

on their academic acculturation (Trowler and Knight, 2000) and this is of relevance to their participation and engagement in GTA courses. Teaching and learning regimes (Trowler and Cooper, 2002) in UK Higher Education are pedagogically distinct and based on transformative, student centred and reflective teaching practices (Kandlbinder and Peseta, 2009) which may be unfamiliar concepts to the international GTA student (Jiang et al., 2010). The expectation of the international GTA student is that they not only assimilate new epistemology and concepts, but also activate them in practice, which may be challenging for both student and academic developer. With these contextual issues in mind the research that informs this paper aims to explore:

- the motivations of international students to undertake GTA training
- the benefits and challenges experienced by international students in undertaking GTA training
- the impacts on the GTA of participating in training on the on-going academic development of international students

These aims will be addressed by comparing the educational development experiences of home and international students on the GTA course at the study university.

The Graduate Teaching Assistants course at the study university

This study took place in a post-1992, UK University, which is one of the largest in the country. In 2013 there were over 30,000 students including 3,214 postgraduates of which 293 were PhD students and 110 of these were non-UK domiciled. The GTA course has been running since 1999, with the specific remit of providing an introduction to teaching and learning for doctoral students and specialist support staff. Before 2012 the GTA course was voluntary, and undertaken at the discretion of the student. However, after this date, due to the growing expectation for doctoral students who intend to teach to have received training, the GTA course became a requirement. Additionally, the course team had noted the increasingly international profile of the cohorts. Given these changes, the teaching team commenced this study in order to explore the extent to which provision meets the needs of participants.

The course consists of two components, a taught component of five sessions introducing participants to learning theories, teaching in different situations (e.g. group work, lectures), inclusivity, principles of assessment and feedback and evaluating teaching. Alongside these taught sessions participants are encouraged to engage with a series of online tasks. Following completion of the taught component, participants receive certification to teach in the institution, they can go on to complete an optional, assessed

National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 6 20 credit module (this is equivalent to third year at undergraduate honours level), which awards the student with ‘Associate Fellowship’ recognition with the HEA. The course is informed by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory and Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice. It also draws on Hardre’s (2005) ‘extensive on-going professional development model’, where GTA students are encouraged to apply new knowledge about their practice, reflect, and make changes in an on-going iterative process. Currently the course is delivered four times a year with approximately 100 doctoral students / support staff completing the course annually.

Methodology

Given the diversity of those undertaking the GTA course, and also the broad aims of this study, we used a mixed methodology to generate both quantitative and qualitative data (Woolley, 2009). We felt this approach would be sensitive to the different issues facing GTA students with respect to accessing course content, developing as teachers and reconciling pedagogical perspectives with their own disciplinary worldviews (Woolley, 2009). Initially an online questionnaire captured demographic information, evaluated course content, delivery and assessment: and the impact on Continuing Professional Development (CPD). It contained a mix of Likert scale, closed and open questions and was administered using Survey Monkey. The questionnaire was sent to all who participated on the course between 1999 and 2012, with contact via university email and alumni networks. Of 626 people contacted, 171 responded, giving a response rate of 27.3%. This is in line with response rates found in similar studies (e.g. Brew, Boud and Namgung, 2011). The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 20.0 to obtain descriptive representations of the data. Subsequently Chi square were calculated in order to examine observed and expected frequencies of data relating to respondents disciplines, country of origin, year of completing the GTA course and role. There was a relatively even response between male (48%) and female (52%) participants. Thirty two per cent of responses came from international participants and of this group English was a second language for 28%. Respondents had all completed the GTA course; 24% had also completed the assessed component to obtain Associate Fellowship of the HEA.

We should note that the research reported here is part of a broader project which investigated the impact of discipline, nationality and professional role on academic development. This paper reports solely on comparisons between UK and non-UK domiciled students.

Table 1 here ‘Questionnaire response demographics’

The questionnaire results informed the development of a semi-structured interview which sought to examine emerging themes. The interviews explored GTAs experiences of completing the GTA course (and where relevant the assessed component), their application of the knowledge gained on the GTA course and the longer-term impacts of the course for on-going academic development (McAlpine and Åkerlind, 2010). Ten GTA participants were purposefully selected for interviews to be representative with respect to home and international participants (6:4); gender (M=5, F=5); discipline; and representation from those that had (n=3) and had not (n=7) completed the assessment. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim then analysed using NVivo. Thematic content analysis was undertaken and data were interrogated to identify motivations, challenges and impacts. Categories were further refined through subsequent cycles of analysis (Silverman, 2006).

Results

Results are presented around each of the three research aims. Each sub-section presents a summary of general findings in relation to all of the student responses. The perspective of international participants is highlighted and contrasted in order to explore significant findings that pertain to this group.

Motivations for undertaking the GTA Course

The main reason GTA participants gave for undertaking the course was to *learn about teaching* (81%), echoing the findings of Barthwal et al. (2011). There was no variation in motivations according to discipline. Neither were there significant differences identified in the motivations driving engagement for home or international GTAs, with the exception that international GTAs were significantly more likely ($p<0.01$) to want CPD certification. This supports previous work which identified that international doctoral students are strongly motivated to undertake GTA programmes due to a perceived prestige in returning home with a UK teaching qualification (Lee et al., 2010).

In terms of drivers, our data indicate that encouragement from a PhD supervisor was important, with 75% of respondents reporting this, and there was no significant difference between the international and home cohorts. Those studying within medical and health disciplines were most likely to receive encouragement whereas those in the sciences reported the least encouragement ($p<0.01$). The relevance of supervisory

support for engagement with, and on-going development beyond, the GTA course, became an emergent thread throughout the analysis.

Benefits and challenges experiences on the course

All GTAs reported high levels of satisfaction. In terms of course delivery over 87% reported that discussion activities, group work, lectures and the ‘micro-teach’ were useful. Least popular were the supported online activities. This is similar to the findings of Barthwal et al. (2011) and Park and Ramos (2004) who also reported high levels of satisfaction. International GTAs reported higher levels of satisfaction with the course content, delivery ($p<0.01$) and the relevance of the assignment ($p<0.05$) than home students. Although there was no clear reason for this identifiable in the data, it is possible this may be evidence of culturally determined social desirability bias (Bernadi, 2006), i.e. the international GTAs may be more likely to respond in ways that are viewed positively by others. Alternatively it may be that the learning experience was more meaningful for international GTAs due to the teaching culture being distinct to that which they had encountered previously; all four of the GTA international interview respondents highlighted this as being significant to them. For example:

I realised that [the GTA course] is mixing more practical [sic], it is not as theoretical as at home. Here you do a lot of research, the lecturer presents the topic to you and you go and research for more information and back at home you are spoon-fed. (Interview 2: international student)

UK and international GTAs reported challenges e.g. a lack of background knowledge, critical thinking, communicating in a second academic discipline and understanding course expectations. This is similar to the findings of Borg et al. (2009) and Chadha et al. (2009).

There was a lot of reading there and a lot of theory there but it just doesn't always match up.

(Interview 7: home GTA)

For many international GTAs though, these difficulties were particularly acute, and compounded by challenges relating to language fluency:

We have to read a lot of papers and for a foreign student it means that a paper could be quite hard.

(Interview 9: international GTA)

Those completing the assignment reported longer timescales to undertake this work (100% of home GTA participants took less than one month to complete the assignment compared to 73% of international GTA participants) and attributed writing in a second language and unfamiliar discipline as possible causes. However, in contrast, international GTA participants also reported that being a student of education enhanced their understanding of the expectations upon them in their wider PhD role, in particular around feedback, collaboration, research presentation and self-evaluation; something not reported by home GTAs.

I went back to my country and there is a very big international conference ... of course I was still nervous because it is a big conference but it helped me to kind of build confidence and presentation skills.

(Interview 9: international GTA)

This is an interesting point as there is a burgeoning literature on the academic challenges associated with the internationalisation of HE (Jindal-Snape and Ingram, 2013). In undertaking the GTA course, students occupy a liminal space, in that they hold multiple identities including those of student and teacher (Gunn, 2007). This dualism creates both challenges and opportunities that have been noted elsewhere (Chadha, Turner & Maunder, 2009) yet little has been directly written about the potential of academic development to influence this through GTA provision.

The interviews with international GTAs explored the degree to which GTA teaching practices were fit for purpose in international contexts. Two of the four international GTAs interviewed had implemented practice learned on the GTA course in their home countries. One reported they were able to challenge the way curricula were developed in their institution to move away from ‘vanity’ courses based on lecturers’ interests to curricula better informed by social-economic needs. The other described how their peers:

[...] valued the techniques and pedagogies, anything which they saw as modernising and raising the bar of the university...I was in such demand.....the students loved it, they absolutely loved it ...it was a novelty for them to receive feedback in that way.

(Interview 1: international GTA)

Other international GTAs shared this optimism:

So in terms of the GTA course I sense it is transferable, and the ways, the methods, and the teaching and the embracing of technology. (Interview 6: international GTA).

I was thinking about using different teaching styles compared to the traditional teaching style.

(Interview 9: international student).

This indicates a potential impact of GTAs as international agents of teaching, learning and curriculum change on their return to their home countries.

On-going academic development

Qualifications and teaching opportunities were identified as important in encouraging long-term academic development. In terms of qualifications, 22% went on to pursue further CPD through Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) (13% home and 9% international) and most GTA participants did this because professional recognition was perceived to enhance employment opportunities (53%). 58% of all GTA participants reported using the course as evidence of their teaching experience (36% home and 22% international). As teaching qualifications may in the future be used as an indicator of institutional teaching quality, this trend is likely to continue changing the emphasis from attendance to assessment (Lee et al., 2010).

Key to on-going academic development was the opportunity to teach during and beyond the GTA course. Interviewees suggested that this limited the potential benefits of the course, particularly in terms of implementing and reflecting upon their new knowledge of teaching and learning. There was evidence that individual and departmental practices limited teaching opportunities. In particular we found that:

- I. Supervisors acted as gatekeepers of teaching opportunities and were not always supportive of their PhD students spending time teaching (Table 2);
- II. Some schools or departments had policies in place that prevented PhD students teaching in the writing up stage;

III. Fewer GTA participants are being offered teaching, have no teaching opportunities, or have to actively seek out teaching (Table 3). This is perhaps a consequence of growing numbers of postgraduates (HEPI, 2010), combined with tightening teaching budgets.

Table 2 here: Support from supervisors to teach

Table 3 here: Year cohort and ease of obtaining teaching opportunities

It was also relevant that the types of teaching that GTA participants had access to were sometimes limited. This hindered the development of more rounded teaching experience:

[...] when I did the GTA course I was only doing the demonstrating for the labs so I had student contact but it was very minimal in terms of teaching. (Interview 7: home GTA) see also Table 3.

Controversial evidence about teaching opportunities for international GTA participants emerged. There was no variation in home or international GTA participants' teaching experience before they took the GTA course. It may be the case that this experience relates to teaching in their home country before their arrival at the University to pursue a PhD and that since arriving in the UK their teaching opportunities have been limited. Table 4 demonstrates that regardless of teaching type, international GTAs were consistently less likely to have experience on a par with home GTA participants, and international GTA participants did report significantly ($p<0.01$) fewer opportunities (47.9%) to teach post GTA course than home GTA participants (70.7%). This was supported by interview data where international GTA participants described struggling to obtain teaching. For example, one GTA participant who enquired about teaching opportunities said:

[...] unfortunately I got smacked down by my supervisor – you have got a few more papers to finish off. (Interview 6; international GTA).

This participant went on to say:

"There are times when I think I am bored staring at the monitor and I wish I was involved with students again [...] it is something I miss"

Although this is not currently well researched, the literature suggests there is evidence of a lack of equity in access to teaching opportunities for international teaching assistants (Lee et al., 2010), and clearly following on from the findings presented here, further work to address this issue is needed.

Table 4 here: Teaching experience during and after GTA course insert here

Discussion

The data discussed in this study reveal issues relevant to the development of GTA provision, particularly in relation to the changing motivations to engage with CPD and inclusive teaching practices on course. There is an existing literature which documents the impact that intrinsic/extrinsic motivation has on student learning (Pintrich, 2003) and yet another on teaching which is mindful of the needs of international students (Archer *et al.* 2010)) and it is not our intention to repeat this well-articulated and accessible guidance. However, findings which have less presence in the extant literature have emerged from this study, for example those which suggest that engagement with the GTA course can potentially enhance international GTAs understanding of the expectations upon them in their wider PhD role. In order to develop academically the PhD candidate as a student-researcher must become reflectively aware of their meta-cognitive strategies within the appropriate cultural context as well as developing their research potential; these are interlinked practices which are increasingly recognised by the institutions governing research careers (Vitae 2010). There is considerable interest in the potential links between research and teaching (Healey and Jenkins 2009) which have predominantly focused on how research informs teaching; however, our finding, as a yet under-explored dimension of the academic experience offers fruitful possibilities for strengthening knowledge which advocates the benefits of teaching for research

The most contentious findings of this study coalesce around access to teaching opportunities. The situated and contextual nature of academic practice depends on the opportunities for GTAs to develop inter-subjectivity (Trowler and Knight, 2000) and teaching expertise (Donnelly, 2006). If opportunities are limited for certain groups of students then the potential for on-going academic development of GTAs is compromised (Austin, 2002).

In considering the management of teaching opportunities, more can be done to encourage transparency and equality. Our data show there is no one way to access teaching. This echoes recent work which has

explored the experience of GTAs, revealing disparity in employment conditions across the sector (HEA, 2011; Hodson and Buckley, 2011). Indeed, the recent NUS (2013) report ‘Postgraduates who Teach’ stated that 25% of respondents believed the allocation of teaching to be ‘unfair’ or ‘very unfair’ and identified bias and nepotism as causes for this.

The proposition that there are social-cultural barriers to allocating classes to international doctoral students suggests tensions between their holistic development and demands for quality assurance. Austin (2002: 105) notes how “the use of TAs [Teaching Assistants] usually responds to departmental needs to cover courses or sections, not to the development of future professors”. International colleagues may experience language difficulties and / or have pre-conceived teaching practices which are inappropriate to a UK setting (Turner, Huang and Poverjuc, 2012). However, universities are tasked with postgraduate development and the cultivation of future academics which should be inclusive. This has been recently recognised by Vitae (2011) which has acknowledged issues of equality in early researcher development and identified ethnicity as one factor of this. As Borg et al. (2009) note, “given the increasing focus on global education and the internationalisation of higher education, institutions may want to consider how international postgraduates can best be supported” (Conclusions and implications, para 1). We suggest centralised guidelines on the equitable provision of teaching opportunities for GTAs may mitigate inequality and help to embed teaching as a normative requirement within a PhD.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the experience and issues of doctoral students’ who have undertaken a teaching course (GTA), and the subsequent impact this has had on their academic development. The research reported here has examined the institutional and cultural factors governing access to teaching opportunities, particularly in relation to the international cohort. Our findings have reaffirmed the disparities and lack of transparency of access to teaching opportunities documented by others (HEA, 2011; Hodson and Buckley, 2011; NUS, 2013). Universities have a responsibility for postgraduate development and the fostering of future academics (Vitae, 2011). Differences in opportunities to gain teaching experience impacts on the inclusivity of professional development opportunities of doctoral students with international colleagues experiencing difficulties possibly as a consequence of language difficulties and / or having culturally different teaching practices and expectations (Turner, Huang and Poverjuc, 2012). We support the view of Borg et al. (2009) in

their call to consider how international postgraduates are best supported, and suggest centralised guidelines on the equitable provision of teaching opportunities for GTAs as a way of mitigating inequality.

Further research is clearly necessary. This study represents findings from a single institution; it would therefore be helpful to understand the experience of doctoral students developing their teaching experience from other institutions. Furthermore, the research reported here is part of a broader study that investigated the impact of discipline, nationality and professional role on academic development. Given the wider focus of the original research, and in the light of our findings on international doctoral students, there are a number of aspects on which further research might usefully focus: It would be beneficial to conduct interviews with a larger number of international doctoral students, particularly those that undertook the assessed phase of the GTA. This would enable a greater exploration of their expectations and experience of teaching and would permit a more robust analysis of the distinctions between the teaching culture of doctoral students and UK teaching cultures to be investigated. It would also be useful to explore how the experience of doing the GTA has impacted more widely on their experience of being a doctoral student. Responding to these areas would advance knowledge about the experience of international GTAs and which could be aligned with the developing literature on GTA employment conditions.

Author Biographies

All contributors work with the Educational Development team at Plymouth University and are active researchers in PedRIO. Jennie Winter has a broad research portfolio including educational for sustainability, transformative learning and student use of technology. Rebecca Turner specialises in the experience of new lecturers, particularly those delivering HE in the FE sector, Sharon Gedye's interests include personal tutoring and employability. Patricia Nash and Vivian Grant are both Research Assistants in PedRIO.

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