

Editorial

Fresh Air for Graduate Teaching Assistants

Prof Dilly Fung, London School of Economics and Political Science

In many universities, Graduate Teaching Assistants are as essential as the air on campus. They deliver thousands of hours of core teaching, balancing their own research passions and deadlines with tasks that include teaching, assessment and feedback, and student support. They contribute to vital strategic initiatives such as developing more inclusive curricula, improving online learning resources and enhancing staff-student partnerships. Simultaneously wearing the hats of a staff member and a research student, a teacher and a learner, an adviser and a supervisee, they frequently pull off the most challenging of roles, transforming themselves through sometimes stormy conditions from emergent experts in their field into versatile and effective scholarly educators.

In some university settings, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are, however, almost as invisible as the air that students breathe. Institutions struggle, even when willing, to give GTAs voice. In recent years an increasing number of institutions have been recognising the high quality work of GTAs through annual teaching awards and through fairer policies and remuneration arrangements. But university structures, funding streams and hierarchies do not lend themselves to the recognition and promotion of GTAs, who are both teachers and research students and who do not, therefore, find themselves strongly represented either on

education-focused or research-focused decision-making bodies. For all the superb work they do, their voices can be lost in the crosscurrents of the sometimes competing research and education 'portfolios' of senior leaders. Are the experiences, conditions and successes of GTAs to be recognised and overseen by the Pro-Vice Chancellor (or equivalent) for Research, or the PVC Education? Some universities have developed sound policies and found supportive oversight structures, while others still struggle to get it right. Meanwhile, GTAs work tirelessly, sometimes at great personal cost, to provide the best possible education for their students. Although some get support, encouragement and opportunities to develop themselves as educators, others can feel overwhelmed, ignored or even abused by individuals or systems that exploit their liminal position.

Yet it is vital that the higher education sector gets this right. It needs to develop a much deeper understanding of GTA roles and opportunities in order to enhance them. It also needs to develop platforms, such as this timely new journal, through which GTAs can showcase their work not only as researchers who educate, but as scholars who investigate and publish on pedagogic practices. Graduate Teaching Assistants are uniquely positioned to design research questions that will peel back the onion of practices relating to teaching, learning, curriculum design, student support, inclusion and exclusion, and so much more. They can also surface issues relating explicitly to GTA roles and their contributions to our universities' complex educational ecosystems.

The articles in the first edition of this journal demonstrate the range and depth of Graduate Teaching Assistant insights. Elliott and Marie, in 'Advancing student-staff partnership through the unique position of GTAs' and Clark in 'Bridging the Power Gap: GTAs and Student-Staff Partnership' focus on the possibilities and tensions relating to staff-student partnerships that focus on learning, teaching and assessment. This is a theme on which much has been written and said in recent years, but the honesty of these articles is refreshing. The authors recognise the lived tensions of so-called partnerships in which, to be truthful, some partners have much more power than others. They also highlight the potential for authentic partnerships in which the processes of working as partners reflect a fairer distribution of voice and influence.

In 'Class Act – Reflections on a working class academic sense of self as a Graduate Teaching Assistant', Hastie writes about the 'in-betweenness' experienced by those who are situated not only between student and staff identities but also between working-class and middle-class identities. This rang true for me personally, a senior university leader still traversing the identity gap between my own working-class upbringing and the cultural dynamics of my current role with its prestigious opportunities, benefits and trappings. It is vital to recognise the elitisms of academia and address the need for GTAs, students and staff from all backgrounds to see their own cultures and identities fairly represented in the university's organisational and community activities. Jaines explores related themes in 'Perverse Relationships: The Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Neoliberal University', arguing powerfully that while the liminal position of the GTA is 'a specific form of invisibility; a blind spot within which the

logic of the neo-liberal university proliferates as an absence', there is hope: 'the GTA has a specific opportunity in the current moment to reimagine the contracts of reciprocity upon which teaching and research depend'.

Mathers et al. focus in on their teaching roles, reflecting on the value of teaching observations. They draw on work by Stephen Brookfield to present a model for the integration of teaching observations and associated reflective practice into GTA development, highlighting the ways in which these practices together provide 'mutuality of benefit (observer and observee) with opportunities for improvement (of teaching and reflective practice) through constructive feedback'. Kunz and Brill also home in on an area of practice, that of teaching on fieldtrips. Analysing both the benefits and challenges that arise when GTAs are involved with fieldtrips, they conclude with a set of clear and positive recommendations for departments.

The varied, thought-provoking papers in this first edition of *Postgraduate Pedagogies* illustrate both the richness and the tensions in the lived experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants. In one moment GTAs are negotiating relationships, partnerships and spaces in a complex organisational structure. Elsewhere they are drawing on scholarly insights in their own fields as they critique the underpinning assumptions and structures that surround GTAs and the contexts in which they work. Alongside there are moments for focusing on the specifics of teaching – ways of learning from one's own experience, developing specialist roles and attributes, and helping to shape departmental and institutional policies and practices. These dynamics, sometimes contradictory and often illuminating and creative,

reflect the diversity of the landscapes occupied by GTAs and provide fertile ground for this much needed journal. *Postgraduate Pedagogies* will create spaces in which GTAs can breathe, speak and be heard.