# Introduction to Postgraduate Pedagogies: Centring Graduate Teaching Assistants in Higher Education

Nicole Anderson, University of Edinburgh, UK

Thomas Lowe, University of Groningen, Netherlands

Anastasia Patsiarika, University College London, UK

Since the inaugural issue of the journal in 2021, *Postgraduate Pedagogies* has welcomed three doctoral researchers as editors, all of whom are active Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). In this introduction to the second issue of Postgraduate Pedagogies, the new editors will first of all reflect on their experiences of being GTAs, before identifying key themes within this issue: GTA teaching practices and development, precarities and the effect this may have in shifting GTA identities. These themes emphasise the continued need to explore who the graduate teaching assistant is and how they teach. These explorations are as vital as ever, with the COVID-19 pandemic bringing the concerns of GTAs more into the spotlight. Furthermore, the contributions in this issue emphasise the digitalisation of education and precarity that the COVID-19 pandemic forced all in academia to encounter. However, as the contributions show, GTAs often bear the brunt of these issues and are at the forefront of innovation and change in teaching practice.

Given their liminal role, they are perfectly suited to innovate how university teaching is done.

**Anastasia Patsiarika, University College London, UK**

GTAs are a vital part of the university's teaching community. My role as a GTA has shown me that students consider them friendly and approachable while enjoying their novel teaching practices that usually involve student-led teaching and incorporation of technology in the classroom. The coronavirus pandemic has further highlighted the importance of GTAs in higher education, as GTAs have supported teaching throughout the pandemic by delivering lectures online and in a hybrid way - both in the classroom and online. Teaching assistants have been further utilised to help the main instructor with marking and providing feedback, meetings with students and the creation of question banks for online evaluation tests (Brown & Krzic, 2021). Transition to online teaching has proved challenging even for experienced instructors who often deployed GTAs to coordinate the online activities and assist them with student engagement. I have personally used an online platform to deliver virtual laboratory courses so that students could have the opportunity to practise in a laboratory environment thus somewhat overcoming the limitations due to the pandemic. My role as an editor for *Postgraduate Pedagogies* has offered me the opportunity to connect with academics and teaching assistants from other universities and introduced me to other GTAs' teaching practices. The articles that have been

submitted to the journal so far have evidenced the importance of the role of GTAs in the academic environment. A characteristic example stems from the articles of Clark (2021) and Elliot and Marie (2021). They both outline that GTAs have a unique position acting as both teachers and students, something that enables them to bridge the gap between students and staff, mediate between the two and empower them to learn from each other and exchange innovative ideas.

**Nicole Anderson, University of Edinburgh, UK**

Reflecting on my GTA experience, I often find myself balancing the joy of teaching with the trials of working in insecure and precarious job conditions. Teaching fulfils me, and I find it generative to be in relation to, and building community with, other students and GTAs. Being part of the *Postgraduate Pedagogies* editorial team has further extended these relations across institutions and across borders. Teaching allows me to engage in critical discourses and practise critical pedagogies in multi-disciplinary contexts. I learn from the students around me, and they have challenged my perspectives in ways that inform my own research. However, these joys exist within long-standing outcries for fairer working conditions and employment, which often creates tensions in balancing my teaching, research and personal time. In editing this journal, it has been affirming to learn that both these positive and negative feelings are often shared by the wider GTA community.

Through reading these accounts, I see that despite differences between institutions, pedagogical methods and lived experiences, a sense of community is still constructed. Sharing experiences through these accounts highlights that these structural conditions that can often be divisive have potential to connect and bind us together. Editing this issue has allowed me to see how community can be constructed through difference. Being part of such an experienced and welcoming editorial team has not only enriched my knowledge of pedagogical literature and resources but has allowed me to build upon my idea of a GTA community. I am grateful to learn from my colleagues and understand the value of threading these experiences together through the publication of this second issue.

**Thomas Lowe, University of Groningen, Netherlands**

Upon joining the *Postgraduate Pedagogies* editorial board and preparing this issue, I have noticed that GTAs have such varied experiences based on their contexts. Based on my experiences teaching in the Netherlands, I feel like a valued staff member of the department and my efforts in teaching are recognised. As such, I think it is crucial that GTAs are considered as part of the academic staff because for many PhD candidates (PhDs), these experiences as a GTA are the first steps in an academic career. Furthermore, these GTA experiences are critical in motivating or demotivating PhDs to continue in academia. Yet, I also realise that the situation for PhDs in the Netherlands can be quite different to that of

PhDs in the UK. For example, I am not obliged to teach at all and only do so because I enjoy it. This is not the case for some GTAs in the UK, who need to teach in order to supplement their income. Thus, it is understandable that some of the zest of teaching is taken out when you feel obliged to teach. Furthermore, the differences and similarities experienced by GTAs have become more visible with the transition to digital learning, where it is possible to work with people all over the world. With this, it has been suggested that a 'digital resilience' has been fostered along with a virtual community (Bellamy et al., 2021). Whether this continues post-COVID-19 (whenever that may be) remains to be seen. However, there is a great opportunity borne from the COVID-19 pandemic for GTAs to be recognised for the work they do and a crucial point at which to learn from the variety of contexts we were able to experience online.

Our reflections as GTAs highlight several of the themes identified in the contributions to this issue, showing how our experiences often share some common ground despite institutional differences. We elaborate upon some of these themes in the following section and demonstrate the challenges GTAs may face in their role, both in the present and the future.

### Theme One: Teaching Practices and GTA Development

GTAs are part of the main workforce for many universities in the UK and abroad delivering lectures, laboratory training,

marking, student mentoring and support. The role serves the university, the GTA and the students. Universities deploy a high number of non-permanent employees that provide effective teaching solutions, an approach that facilitates GTAs to gain experience in teaching and develop their teaching practices. In many instances universities also offer training courses for inexperienced GTAs and in some universities these courses are often compulsory. Training is of particular importance as it provides GTAs with the important tools and examples for undertaking their teaching role, particularly as GTAs progress through stages of their teaching journey. Experienced and trained GTAs tend to adopt more instructive teaching practices (providing students with activities) and less traditional (providing information for students) or translational approaches (focusing on student-teacher relationships) (Lee, 2019). Interestingly, student engagement with GTAs and vice versa happens at comparable levels, showcasing that the students share a mutual interest with GTAs for interaction and engagement (Wan et al., 2020). Furthermore, GTAs tend to develop close student-teacher relationships, especially with first year students (Reeves et al., 2016), something that can be explained by their unique position as both students and teachers, which offers them the ability to bridge the gap between students and staff (Clark, 2021). Additionally, GTAs have a high self-efficacy capacity despite their low experience in teaching (Chiu, Corrigan & Hui, 2019). Here it should be noted that it has been observed that self-efficacy tends to decline in the second year of teaching before improving again in the third

year. This shows that constant and effective support of GTAs is of particular importance to ensure their ability to deliver high quality teaching throughout the duration of their GTA role. Finally, GTAs should be further monitored for their ability to implement evidence-based teaching as, despite GTAs' overall good performance they sometimes find it challenging to implement this particular skill (Becker et al., 2017). In conclusion, GTAs' teaching practices involve high student engagement through activities in the classroom, achieving positive student-teacher relationships, where students are willing to engage in the classroom as well as in one-on-one interactions with the GTA. Training is of particular importance in order for the GTA to acquire the essential knowledge to make their teaching practices more engaging while continuous support will further ensure the effective implementation of the knowledge offered during training. GTAs are utilised regularly to support teaching while they are uniquely positioned to enable student-staff relationships. Therefore, universities should focus on investing in GTA training and investigate effective and timely ways to prepare them for their teaching duties.

**Theme Two: GTA Precarity**

The contributions within this journal remind us that GTA teaching practices are often undertaken within precarious conditions. The recent UK University College Union (UCU) strikes highlight the issues with working conditions for GTAs, who are typically unsalaried and often hold fixed or short-

term contracts. Gill and Donaghue (2016) show that higher education is one of the most reliant sectors on casualised labour, with over 70,000 academics in the United Kingdom working on insecure contracts (UCU, 2022). Within this precarious work, structural conditions further drive significant pay gaps; UK universities demonstrate a gender pay gap of 16%, a disability pay gap of 9% and a race pay gap of up to 17% (ibid.), making it difficult for researchers and GTAs from underrepresented groups to secure stable employment after graduation. It is argued that the neoliberalisation of Euro-American universities sustains these gaps by promoting values of individualisation and economic competitiveness (McCaig, 2018, Jaines, 2021). These values create a condition where success and worth are assigned based on various performance metrics (Heijstra, Steinthorsdottir, & Einarsdottir, 2017). With permanent jobs in British academia becoming scarcer, Bosanquet (2017) shows how GTAs and early career researchers feel they are held to a higher scrutiny to achieve these metrics and demonstrate an exemplary teaching and research record. Consequently, GTAs often feel they must become constantly "self-managing and self-improving" in order to secure an academic future (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). In all, precarity and job insecurity has created a condition where GTAs feel a responsibility to "over-perform", which often leads to academic burn-out and can have a long-standing impact on GTA mental health and wellbeing (Heijstra, Steinthorsdottir, & Einarsdottir, 2017). Green et. al. (2020: 1312) show how the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened these issues and

exacerbated these fault lines within Higher Education. As a consequence, GTAs and doctoral students have reported experiencing feelings of "low self-worth, isolation and intellectual fatigue" (Atkinson et. al., 2021: 1). It has become clear that the long-standing economic, social and psychological impact of COVID-19 requires strategies to address GTA mental health (Son et. al., 2020) and consider how these issues may intersect with GTA job precarity more broadly. Green et. al. (2020: 1313) draw upon Arundhati Roy (2020, n.p.), who argues that "historically pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew" suggesting the potential of post-COVID-19 recovery to restructure precarious conditions and achieve more equitable futures.

**Theme Three: GTA identities**

Academic precarity highlights the unstable and uncertain "liminal" spaces in which GTAs develop their academic identities (Atkinson et. al., 2021). In thinking about imagined futures, Keefer (2015) conceptualised the idea of "doctoral liminality" by examining the psychological tensions experienced by students. GTAs are often considered to have a liminal identity, which is a combination of the roles of teacher and student (Winstone & Moore, 2017). Not only are they still progressing in their own education, but they are now active parts of the education of others. GTAs have been conceptualised as undertaking a crossing or boundary zone, where their identity is not so established or clearly defined

(Prøitz & Wittek, 2020). Crossing these boundaries is further impacted through structural uncertainty and insecurity, where GTAs often feel the need to juggle several roles and identities as a way of making ends meet and also to be seen as marketable. Despite this, due to GTAs' multiple roles and responsibilities, GTAs are considered to have an incomplete professional identity (Harland & Plangger, 2004; Winstone & Moore, 2017). This is reinforced by the interactions they experience with both staff and students through teaching and learning (Compton & Tran, 2017), which gives the GTA a unique position as a mediator between these two groups (Elliott & Marie, 2021). While the GTA identity is often associated with financial need, the opportunity to produce an academic self-hood and develop pedagogical skills are also benefits of the role (Hastie, 2021). The identity of GTAs' is informed by a variety of external influences, such as the ways they are considered by students. Kendall and Schussler (2012) found that students viewed professors as confident, in control and experienced, while GTAs are perceived as uncertain, relaxed and able to personalise teaching. This ties in with the liminality of the role, where confusion, uncertainty and a lack of confidence abound (Keefer, 2015). The views of students may reiterate the notions of what a GTA is like, reinforcing the views that they are not quite staff, but also not quite students. Furthermore, the background of each GTA can influence the identity work they experience. Class, ethnicity and nationality are just a few factors that play pivotal roles in the identity formation of the GTAs. In

conclusion, GTA identity is multifaceted and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, vitally important to discuss in academia.

**Outline of Issue Two**

In this issue, we present eight articles that elaborate on these themes, based on various GTA experiences. The contributions reflect on pedagogical practices, narratives and identities, and examine some of the tensions inherent in these experiences. The contributions to this second issue of *Postgraduate Pedagogies* are summarised here in order:

The first contribution, entitled 'How can Graduate Teaching Assistants support and promote student mental health?' by Emma Wilson focuses on the mental health challenges faced by students in higher education, especially during the coronavirus pandemic, and the ability of GTAs to alleviate students' mental health burden by gestures of kindness, empathy, and a shared sense of humanity.

In following the theme of GTA support and wellbeing, 'GTA teaching practice development in the time of Covid-19: A collective reflective on how "having the chats" led to much more', Rhea Kinsella, Trish Finegan, Muireann Ranta, Barry O'Sullivan, Manasa Hedge, Uday Hasmukh Kalyani, and Shane Ryan provide a 'collective reflective' account on how GTA identities are constructed through collaboration and engagement with other GTAs. By contributing reflections and experiences of the peer-support initiative 'Hear to Help', the article demonstrates how a sense of belonging was created

through these sessions. By allowing a space to express emotional and academic concerns, the article explores how a community is built by making visible different facets of the GTA experience.

The next article further discusses strategies for creating safer and more inclusive environments for GTAs. In 'One size fits none in international higher education: A UK-based case study on how to foster inclusive participation and active engagement in the classroom', Mattia Zingaretti and Roberta Spelorzi consider the challenges surrounding the promotion of inclusive participation and active engagement within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in an international context, as is the case with UK universities. Overall, this article notes the preference for a welcoming and safe environment, the continued existence of a 'language barrier' even for those fluent in English and the importance of a 'small culture' co-created by teachers and learners in the classroom. Ultimately, this article provides reflections and recommendations on how to foster inclusive participation and active engagement for all Higher Education instructors, including GTAs.

The next contribution reflects upon the GTA engagement and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 'Teaching the Teachers: Reflections from two Graduate Teaching Assistants', Dr Anna Grimaldi and Dr Mani Sughir Selvaraji offer a critical reflection on their experiences as two former GTAs, who were tasked with creating a digital learning program during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The

authors' experiment in 'teaching the teachers' shows how pedagogical theory, in particular Freirian concepts, can be a helpful tool for challenging the ways in which GTAs are valued. Thus, the authors hope to encourage the application of these concepts to scrutinise the relationships between senior and junior staff members and those who are temporary and permanent.

Contributing to the discussion of digital learning programs and tools, Ekaterina Rzyankina and Frikkie George's article, titled 'Exploring Graduate Teaching Assistants in the virtual space during COVID-19 using Cultural Historical Activity Theory perspective', explores the roles, responsibilities and challenges for GTAs during the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Technology, through the lens of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The article finds that the digital tools used played a vital role in the students' support and performance. However, the participants expressed many tensions in their engagement with students and lecturers and adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic context.

This is followed by 'IDEAS (Inspirations for Digital Engagement Activities) to support the teaching practice of early career Academics' by Silvia Colaiacomo and Leo Havemann, who showcase the collaborative work of UCL academics that led to the development of open educational resources entitled Inspirations for Digital Engagement Activities or IDEAs, a collection of activities and teaching practices that support teaching online and in blended

contexts. The article highlights the importance of IDEAs in supporting GTA teaching.

The article titled 'Experience Report: Challenges and opportunities of remote labs for computer science department' by Douglas Fraser, William Kavanagh, Ethan Hunter, Alexandrina Pancheva, Jack Parkinson, Iulia Paun, Tom Wallis, Mireilla Bikanga Ada, Helen Border and Gethin Norman further considers the challenges, benefits and positive developments of implementing online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Using survey evidence, the authors consider how the new approach to teaching was negatively perceived and further discuss the phasing back to face-to-face teaching, which mitigated the shortfalls of online-only lab delivery. This hybridisation was viewed unfavourably and despite the inclusion of some in-person teaching, the students preferred solely online classes to a hybrid approach.

Lastly, in 'Shape Shifting – Autobiography as a tool for exploring boundary practices: A GTA's perspective', Kristyna Campbell contributes an autobiographical article that reflects on her experiences as an "artist-turned-GTA". By reflecting upon her career and her movement between different "communities of practice", she shows how subjective knowledge can be transferred to others through pedagogical practice. She explores how GTAs utilise their liminal identities to recontextualise their existing knowledge and contribute to new transdisciplinary discourses and teaching spaces.

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