

Introduction: Digital Learning Experiences and COVID-19: Insights and Perspectives from GTAs

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In June 2021, I agreed with the doctoral college at the University of Leeds to organise a day of professional development dedicated to postgraduate research students who teach (in this volume, Graduate Teaching Assistants or 'GTAs' will be used to refer to these students, although there is no unified terminology across the different institutions in the UK). The event 'Postgraduate Teaching Experiences: What we can learn from them', which was part of the Festival of the Doctoral College, took place online and was structured in the following way. In the first session, I presented the findings and insights gained from the project 'Enhancing the engagement of postgraduate research students in teaching'.¹ The presentation was followed by a roundtable discussion on the enhancement of the pedagogic practice at the University of Leeds, with the aim of sharing a diversity of perspectives on the following points:

- The experience of being a GTA at the University of Leeds, exploring the extent to which GTAs feel valued and supported in their teaching context, and the level of control they feel they have over their classes and the wider teaching context.
- The working relationships between staff and GTAs from a staff perspective, exploring staff attitudes to GTAs, and whether student teaching benefits from GTA involvement and how staff might respond to greater GTA input.
- Student attitudes to GTAs and professional teaching staff: do undergraduates respond to the two groups differently? Do they have different experiences of these two groups?

In the final session of the event, GTAs presented on an aspect of their teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The session was about celebrating the teaching experience of GTAs and their contribution to teaching at the University of Leeds. Following the event, alongside the group of GTAs, we decided that a publication on the GTAs contribution to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic would be a useful resource. The academic literature in this field is not extensive due to the recent nature of COVID-19 pandemic, and so it will take some time to understand its impact on higher education. Also, despite the recognition of the importance of GTAs to the successful delivery of university teaching in recent publications such as in this journal and in blogs (Cornell, 2020), their role in and contribution to the adaptation to online teaching in higher education is still to be investigated. This special issue attempts to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching in Higher Education as well as lessons learnt from the experience of online teaching. This issue focuses on GTAs and their reflections on navigating a completely different teaching scenario. Furthermore, this publication aims to bring more understanding of the enhancement of the pedagogic practice in Higher Education through the engagement of GTAs.

¹ More information about this project can be found here:
<https://teachingexcellence.leeds.ac.uk/research/fellowships/enhancement-of-the-pedagogic-practice-at-leeds-university-through-the-engagement-of-postgraduate-research-students-in-teaching/>

Each academic year, hundreds of GTAs are employed by Higher Education (HE) institutions. Despite being underfunded, on precarious contracts and often lacking adequate support, this community still makes a very positive contribution to teaching in HE by bringing innovation in research-based teaching and curriculum adaptation, design and delivery. A finding emerging from the surveys distributed to undergraduate students, postgraduate research students, and academic staff as part of the project 'Enhancing the engagement of postgraduate research students in teaching' relates to the unbalance between the support structures dedicated to undergraduate students and those dedicated to postgraduate research students. This unbalance was exacerbated during COVID-19, with GTAs having to deliver online teaching and not always receiving adequate support. However, findings from the same surveys show that GTAs can facilitate student engagement as well as gain skills and experience that will be essential for their future career, if provided with support and resources. Therefore, more can be done to support the professional development of the GTA community. This special issue moves toward that direction, evidencing the very valuable and important contribution to pedagogic practice that GTAs were able to bring during very challenging times.

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to the nature and forms of university teaching, not least with the shift to predominantly online and digital modes of delivery. The fast and unexpected move to online learning has accelerated the growth of a new hybrid model of education, with online education going hand in hand with traditional education. The pandemic has given us the opportunity to review current teaching practices and make the educational system more relevant to, and engaged with, the needs of increasingly diverse cohorts. While there are concerns among academic staff and students that an acceleration to online learning, with little training and insufficient bandwidth, might result in poor student learning experience, more positive assessments highlight the benefits that a new hybrid model of education can bring (Abu et al. 2021; Almendingen et al. 2021). Learning online can be effective in several ways, as long as access to technology is straightforward. In asynchronous learning settings, students can learn at their own pace and have more control over their learning process as well as the opportunity to revisit the content as needed. Learning time might also be reduced as students can work at their own pace and skip or accelerate through concepts according to their individual needs. Additionally, in live online learning sessions, novel learning technology can be used to further engage, assess and evaluate during the teaching activities. However, to maximize the benefits of online learning, educators need to provide an effective learning environment and use collaboration tools to promote inclusion, interaction and engagement with the content.

The purpose of this volume is to showcase the valuable contributions that GTAs have made to successful teaching delivery in this dramatically changed learning environment. GTAs occupy a unique position in the university context through their own learning experience as students, and through their diverse pathways to postgraduate studies. Winstone and Moore (2017: 496) describe their position as "a transitory space between previously held and aspirational identities". They have competences and characteristics which engage undergraduates in their learning experience effectively as well as having advanced skills in information technology, the motivation to learn, innovative thinking, a sense of teamwork, and collaboration skills (Ball et al. 2020: 338-345).

GTAs, bringing their skills and research expertise to the undergraduate students (UGs), have become important contributors to Higher Education. Extensive data on GTA teaching at the University of Leeds, which we gathered through cross-university focus groups and electronic surveys as part of the project 'Enhancing the engagement of postgraduate research students in teaching', shows the positive perception UGs have of GTAs and of the teaching they deliver. The following table shows the answers of 214 UGs to statements targeted at understanding how UGs benefit from GTA teaching. UGs were largely positive about the teaching delivered by GTAs. 79% of respondents were

positive about the fact they would prefer being taught by both GTAs and lecturers rather than by lecturers only. The response to the statement 'being taught by GTAs makes me feel I get less value for money for my tuition fees' is very interesting. 57% of UGs felt negatively about that statement, which means 57% of UGs did not feel that being taught by a GTA impacted on their sense of value for money, 24% were neutral about that statement (they neither agreed nor disagreed) and only 19% felt that being taught by GTAs affected their perception of their value for money.

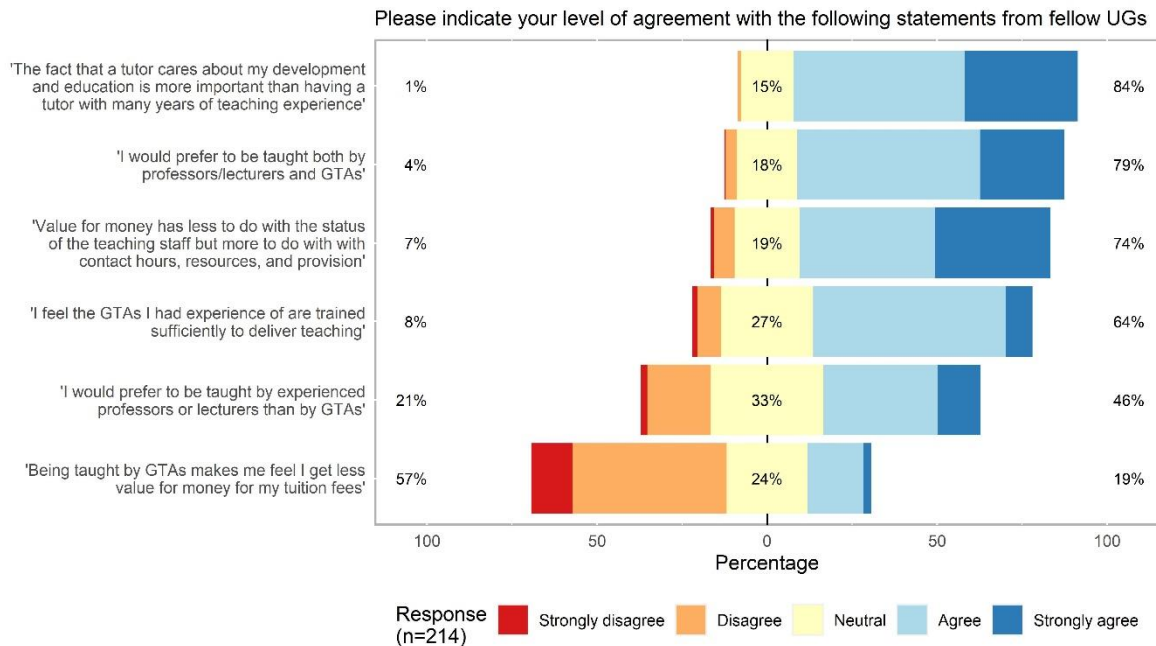


Figure 1: UG responses related to the benefit from GTA teaching (UG survey)

Results of the survey distributed to UGs to assess their perception of GTA teaching indicate that 80% of UG respondents agreed or strongly agreed that GTAs are passionate and enthusiastic about their teaching. Another interesting finding from the UG responses in their qualitative entries on good teaching is that an effective tutor does not simply impose knowledge on students but engages students in active learning activities. In the UG qualitative entries, GTAs were especially praised for creating online materials and being very helpful with online learning: "I have found GTAs very engaging, and they have produced excellent online lecture materials", "In such difficult times their importance has been noticed more than ever helping online learning go smoothly". The following table shows that the statement on creating interactive learning resources obtains the percentage of 79%, and that the statement 'fostering an engaging environment online' obtains the percentage of 75%.

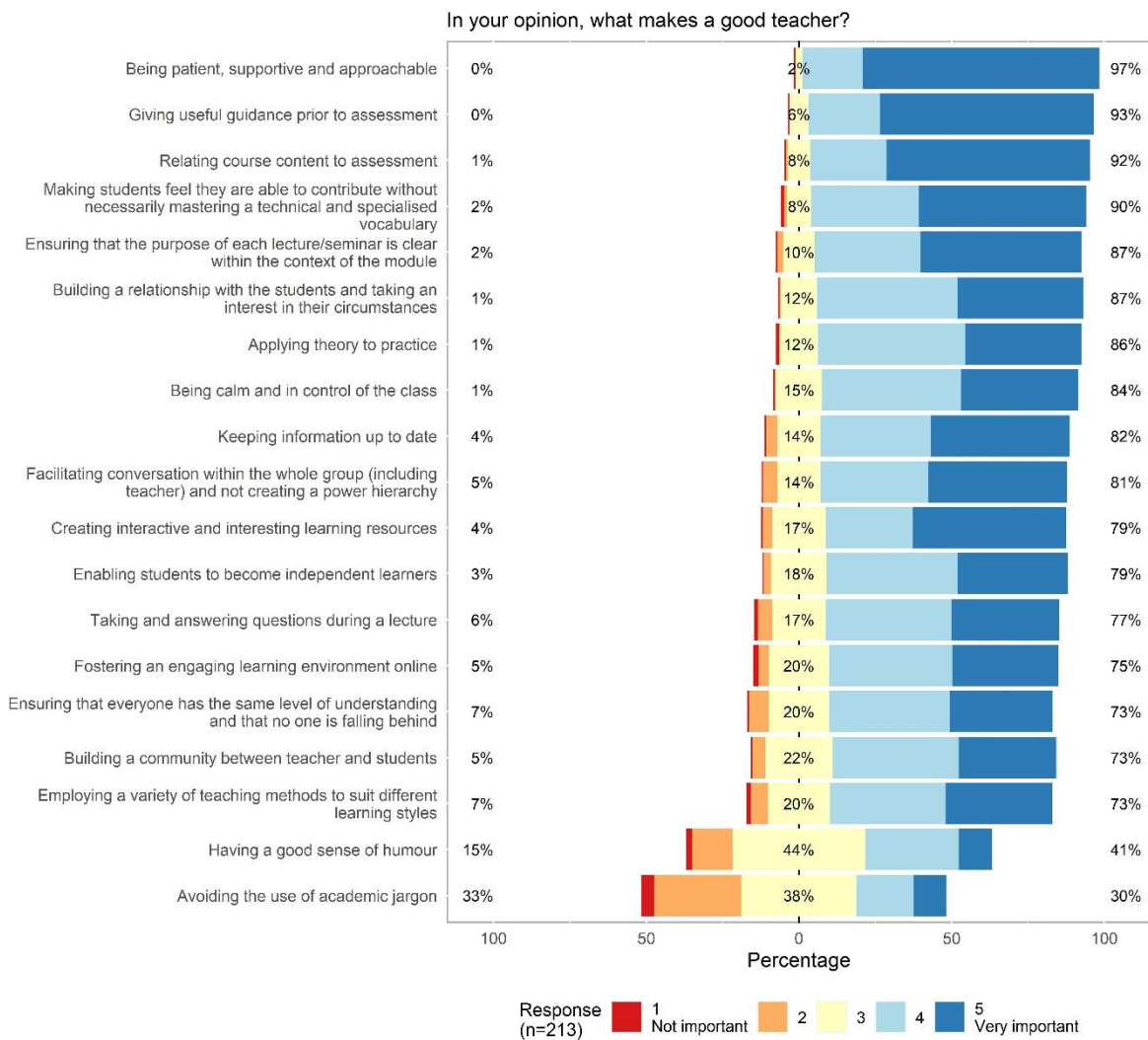


Figure 2: UG responses to the question of ‘What makes a good teacher?’ (UG survey)

GTA contribution to supporting and transforming online learning has received increased attention from scholars and practitioners (Muzaka, 2009; Standen 2018). In these challenging times, this volume aims to keep these conversations ongoing by evidencing the GTA positive input in the pedagogic practices in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. With many universities in the UK and all over the world integrating online courses into their educational provision, we felt it was important to highlight the important role of GTAs in supporting and transforming online learning. This volume 1) highlights lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic in adapting higher education teaching for an online environment and 2) examines the GTAs contribution to creating an effective online learning environment. Therefore, this volume draws on the diverse innovative and valuable experiences of GTAs in delivering and transforming teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences have the potential to contribute to long-term sustainable and positive innovations of teaching delivery across the university as a whole. From my own project, I have found that GTAs are a great asset for HE and can influence and improve pedagogic practices. Therefore, continuing this discussion through this special issue represents a very important and meaningful outcome of the project.

In this special issue, the authors examine crucial questions within the broad theme of innovative pedagogic practice in HE. This includes practical reflection on tools used in the teaching context

(embedding technology in the classroom and other teaching activities, promoting interaction and a sense of belonging through online teaching, and reflecting on the experience of the contingency teaching during COVID-19 in order to reshape face to face and traditional teaching). It also highlights wider discussions about supporting students with additional needs, embedding widening participation and inclusivity in the teaching practice as an international GTA and transferring pedagogical skills in public engagement settings.

The theme of inclusivity in teaching practices, which has been receiving increasing attention in HE pedagogy and scholarship (Collins et al. 2010; Danowitz and Tuit 2011), is explored in the paper 'Inclusive teaching in a pandemic: The experience of an International Graduate Teaching Assistant'. Sara Kaizuka highlights the unique contributions International Graduate Teaching assistants can make in improving inclusive teaching practices in UK higher education. Furthermore, Kaizuka offers her reflection on the development process of her identity as an international GTA during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The paper 'The Interplay Between Science Engagement and Science Education' brings an insight into how higher education can enhance widening participation events. The author, Alexandra Holmes, explores how the role of the postgraduate researcher has allowed her to deliver public engagement activities by approaching her audiences as a peer, rather than just a teacher, therefore encouraging a more inclusive and successful engagement and building student confidence in their ability to learn new and challenging topics.

Creating a sense of community and belonging where students feel accepted and connected is one of the most significant factors in students' success and retention in higher education (Pedler et al. 2022). This special issue also includes GTAs' perspectives on how sense of belonging was integrated in their teaching practice during the pandemic. The paper 'Teaching Research Skills from a distance – reflections of a GTA' by Johanna Tomczak reflects on the experience of a GTA delivering Research Skills seminars during the COVID-19 pandemic and how her approach has helped to create a sense of community to enhance students' learning experience, at a time where students were physically distanced.

The same topic is explored in the paper 'Together: Learning with and through a pandemic'. The paper investigates how teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to create an inquiry into the pandemic situation itself through a project titled: 'Fine Art as a Life Practice: Lessons from PGR teaching under COVID-19'. Through this project, Anna Douglas has encouraged a conscious attention to the affective context of relating and being present online, and reflects on searching for new ways to create a sense of being with and relating to each other.

Working in groups can improve student learning and prepare them for life experience (Taylor 2011). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made group and team working particularly challenging. The paper 'Field skills through a screen – reflection on plant identification teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic' by Sebastian Stroud explores the impact of the pandemic on student teamwork through his experience of developing an innovative and immersive online module, 'Plant Identification'. By using a mixture of online learning tools and activities such as interactive image boards, group forums, and self-directed fieldwork, Stroud led and delivered an online programme of plant identification teaching to small groups. Students were able to discuss and explore findings via several channels and seek guidance in these tailored small-group sessions with GTAs.

The paper 'Give me a minute, I just need to put you into your groups' brings a GTA's reflection on group working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on experiences of the potential for isolation and uncertainty for students in breakout room spaces, Gemma Carr reimagined the digital space in

terms of material presentation, facilitating student empowerment, and communicating and managing across multiple breakout rooms concurrently. These strategies contributed towards positive student experiences, providing pedagogical insights into newer online teaching practices. We hope that this volume will serve the purpose of creating new knowledge in the field of online teaching and learning and therefore be of interest to researchers and practitioners working in digital education and innovative approaches to teaching and learning. GTAs ability to be present and deeply connected to their students is not a fixed condition, but a state that needs renegotiation, within the context and challenges of GTA teaching life. GTAs can influence and improve pedagogic practices in HE and facilitate the connection between research and education, and between UGs and academic staff. It is, therefore, important to empower them, to give them the opportunity to explore scholarship, and to connect their research with research around education.

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