

# **Examining the impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Teaching Assistant working conditions**

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## **Abstract**

Retaining academic staff within higher education institutions (HEIs) has long been a matter of concern, yet little appears to have changed. However, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic may have intensified concerns regarding the working conditions in higher education, especially impacting graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Young and Bippus (2008) and Shum, Lau and Fryer (2021) argue that GTAs lack the confidence to perform their responsibilities, while Alhija and Fresko (2021) argue that low salaries, increased workloads, and decreased levels of job satisfaction are some of the contributing factors that led to GTAs finding new employment opportunities. There should be increased levels of support for GTAs to ensure that they can perform all of their contractual duties to a high-quality standard. This literature review examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GTAs and what this may mean for the future of GTAs in academia. This paper will conclude with recommendations for HEIs on what can be done to support GTAs.

## Introduction

Metcalf *et al.* (2005) and King, Roed and Wilson (2018) claim that there were existing concerns before the COVID-19 pandemic which led to issues retaining academic staff, though as a result of a system-wide problem. From their survey data with 80 academic staff, Selesho and Naile (2014) report that working conditions were likely to be an influencing factor in the retention of academic staff. Although, Rashid and Yadav (2020) indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have exacerbated those concerns in the wider academic sector, including Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and academic and research employees due to a lack of support. As agreed by Alberti *et al.* (2022:54) who report from their experience as a GTA during the pandemic, noting that “basic course coordinators are responsible for helping GTAs manage uncertainty, but when they also lack information about directives coming from the administration, they become proverbial blind leaders of the blind”. While HE senior colleagues may have attempted to support GTAs during the pandemic, personal difficulties may have made it challenging for HE senior colleagues to provide further support as the pandemic led to significant uncertainties and disruptions (Alberti *et al.* 2022). GTAs may be referred to as early career researchers, or as Nikolic *et al.* (2015) explained, seasonal employees, casual teachers or teaching assistants. The role of GTAs is to contribute to teaching and/or other projects on a part-time basis as GTAs are often employed alongside their academic studies (Park & Ramos, 2002; Young & Bippus, 2008; Muzaka, 2009). This literature review provides an exploration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GTAs while paying close attention to the wider sector issues that have been on-going and perhaps magnified

due to the significance of a global crisis. The literature examined in this paper relates to GTA, early career researcher and academic experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic from an international perspective.

The aim of this paper is to:

Understand key contributing factors to GTAs' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consider the working conditions in higher education before COVID-19 and understand the implications of the pandemic.

### **Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The following section explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic examining key literature from international perspectives. As Alberti et al., (2022) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging experience for many in academia and therefore it is important to understand the experiences and perceptions of GTAs, and early career researchers/academics. In Nigeria, Yunusa *et al.* (2021) interviewed seven university lecturers to understand their perspectives on COVID-19 in higher education. Their findings identified that poor digital technology, lack of access to the internet/digital divide, and a stop on research activities, attending physical conferences and workshops were perceived challenges. Fields *et al.* (2020) interviewed ten learning assistants to identify their experiences of transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on a rural Hispanic institution. The findings identified that participants lacked a suitable workspace at home for academic study, they had other commitments to their families which limited the time they

could spend on their work, and they had unreliable internet access. Jackman *et al.* (2021) explored the perceived implications of the national lockdowns on doctoral researchers and early career researchers in the UK. 1,142 participants completed an online survey between April – May 2020. Their findings established that the national lockdown created poor working environments, limited access to resources, increased perceived pressures and psychological difficulties. They claim that it is important to consider personal circumstances and individual needs during that time and the implications on their working abilities during a global crisis. Aristovnik *et al.* (2020) conducted a large-scale study exploring students' perspectives on the impact of the first wave of COVID-19 in early 2020, with a sample of 30,383 students from 62 countries. In their findings, participants were generally more satisfied with the support they received from teaching staff and their universities' public relations. Although, similar to Jackman *et al.* (2021), a lack of computer skills and higher workloads prevented participants from improving their performance in a new teaching setting, they were also concerned with increased boredom, anxiety, frustration and concerns about their future professional career and studies. Aristovnik *et al.* (2020) identified that participants with certain socio-demographic characteristics including males, part-time, first-level, applied sciences, a lower living standard, or from Africa or Asia, were less satisfied with their academic experiences during the crisis. In comparison, females and full-time students were more affected by their emotional life and personal circumstances.

Through an online survey, Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma and Singh (2021) explored the impact of the pandemic on students attending varied educational institutions including

schools, colleges and universities in Delhi, India; 879 of the participants were aged 18 – 39 years old and were attending a college or university. The data identified that sleeping habits, daily fitness routines, effects on weight, social life and mental health were evident for participants, their results suggest that participants established different coping mechanisms to help them overcome stress and anxiety. Coping mechanisms include but are not limited to listening to music, online gaming, web series, sleeping, social media and reading. In their article, McGaughey *et al.* (2021) describe the findings of their large-scale study examining the impact of the pandemic on 370 academic staff in Australia. They concluded that work-related stress, technology, work-life balance, and the consequences on the future of academia were perceived concerns which impacted GTAs' experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. In their literature, Riforgiate, Gattoni and Kane (2022) explain from their experiences during the pandemic that they witnessed issues with student mental health, diversity, inclusion, and affordability as well as being challenged by furloughs and staff dismissal due to funding issues. The literature presented in this section recognises that significant challenges and issues were being experienced by academics from institutions internationally. This demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic had implications for the quality of work being produced, the mental health and well-being of both staff and students, funding issues and creating a positive work-life balance.

### **Supporting Graduate Teaching Assistants**

It is clear from the previous section that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a variety of challenges for GTAs and

therefore, it is necessary to understand how to support GTAs to ensure that they are able to continue to progress in their academic career through quality support. Kendall and Schussler's (2012) online survey aimed to compare professors and GTAs from the undergraduate students' perspectives in the United States of America. Their findings identified that GTAs were perceived as uncertain, nervous, and hesitant, whereas participants claimed that professors were confident, knowledgeable, and organised. This may indicate that further work is required to support GTAs to further develop their skills and gain additional confidence. Venkatesh (2020) acknowledges that to support an individual is to give assistance and help the individual to handle demands and cope with the pressures of their personal and professional responsibilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Alberti et al. (2022) recognise that GTAs required an increased level of support to ensure they could operate and perform their duties alongside their academic studies.

Osman and Hornsby (2016) reported that 49 academics responded to a survey and follow-up in-depth interviews to understand early career academics' perceptions to develop their teaching practices in South Africa. In their findings interviewees claimed that they began their careers with little experience which resulted in difficulties balancing the working responsibilities of teaching and research; also, difficulties in becoming accustomed to the academic culture. In their conclusion, they acknowledge that early career academics get little support for teaching and there needs to be a greater balance between research and teaching.

Through interviews, Remmik *et al.* (2011) examined the teaching and development possibilities of 25 early career academics in Estonia. Their findings identified that support through informal relationships created opportunities to learn

in the academic community and develop their teaching abilities. In addition, as part of a wider collection of research, Ellis, Deshler and Speer (2016) reported the findings from an analysis of an initial baseline survey completed by 341 participants which was created to support the growth of a professional development program to improve GTAs' professional development in a mathematics department in the United States of America. Their results showed that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were aware that changes were needed to their GTA professional development provisions and were willing to engage in the development of their programmes to support GTAs. Supporting Ellis, Deshler and Speer's (2016) findings, Shum, Lau and Fryer (2021) surveyed 310 graduate students to evaluate their teaching approaches, self-efficacy, interest, and teaching ability through a mandatory 10-week training course at a research-intensive university in the Asia-Pacific region. Their data identified that pre-existing teaching beliefs can be changed by attending training courses specific to supporting them with their teaching approaches and self-efficacy.

King, Roed and Wilson (2018) interviewed 30 academic staff in five UK HEIs, they concluded their qualitative study by advocating for an induction process that is not a series of training commitments, but instead, a developmental and supportive approach to cater for their specific needs to help them perform their responsibilities more efficiently. They recognised that structured and guided programmes should be reviewed to support the changes in working conditions and the development of GTAs as early carer academics. This is important for GTAs as they are at the beginning of their careers; Alberti *et al.* (2022) suggest that training and professional development are pivotal to their future

progression in their career. Therefore, tailored training specifically for those at the beginning of their careers may help to encourage them to pursue further and more permanent roles in HE. In addition, Remmick *et al.* (2011) assert that informal relationships can help to develop teaching abilities and gain a greater sense of comfort in the academic community. This therefore suggests that increased support both formal and informal through building relationships and participating in organised training are beneficial for GTAs, early career academics and researchers.

### **The wider academic sector**

While it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging experience for many, Park (2002) and Slack and Pownall (2021) recognise that there are wider sector issues that have perhaps been exacerbated by the crisis. Loveday (2018) interviewed 44 individuals on a fixed-term contract in a UK HEI. Their findings suggest that luck was perceived as the way to obtain a role in HE, even on a fixed-term contract, “it’s sort of like a gift that’s fallen out of the sky: I’m just lucky” (Loveday, 2018: 5). This suggests that obtaining a role, even fixed term, in HE is brought on by chance, rather than the skills, qualifications and suitability for a role. Park (2002) investigated the perceived benefits and limitations of employing GTAs in the United Kingdom (UK) as part of a case study in a research-led university. Through email correspondence, 22 staff and 15 graduate student participants provided data suggesting that GTAs are useful in delivering tutor supervision. The GTA role provides doctoral students with an income to support them through their studies, and to provide experience teaching on



undergraduate courses. However, participants claimed that their workload varied throughout the year and that their salary was relatively low. In comparison and more recently, Alhija and Fresko (2021) obtained written recommendations from 158 GTAs to examine the challenges of being a graduate teaching assistant in order to understand how to improve GTAs' work performance. Their findings were similar to Park's (2002) study, where participants most frequently mentioned working conditions in two categories: salary and non-salary employment conditions. A major recommendation was for their salary to represent the amount of work completed in order to perform the assignments of their roles. In addition, participants were concerned with job security and the need to arrange their roles so not to interfere with their academic studies. Slack and Pownall (2021) examined predictors of GTAs' well-being in HEIs in the UK through a mixed-methods survey, 83 doctoral students participated, and 80 participants offered recommendations for improving GTA well-being as an additional qualitative element of the survey. Participants' concerns and recommendations included increased pay, further training and continued professional development opportunities, mental well-being support and acknowledgement and realistic expectations of the time required for teaching preparation and marking. In their study, Menard and Shinton (2022) explored the career paths of researchers who experienced long-term employment on short-term contracts through examination of case studies of academic staff in a UK research-intensive university, interviews were conducted with 24 academics including research staff. Unequal access to opportunities for developing a teaching portfolio, poor or lack of managerial support, bullying and discrimination were perceived obstacles to career progression in academia. Implementing

strategic solutions to support GTAs post-pandemic is to ensure that they can sustain the demands and pressures that may have developed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As argued by Venkatesh (2020), the nature of jobs has changed. They claim that supporting employees adequately is to ensure that job loss, changes and outcomes are managed to create new and more sustainable working conditions and to ensure that the sustainability of a workforce is upheld. Alberti *et al.* (2022) recognise that the GTA role is an initial step into a more permanent academic post; therefore, supporting GTAs is to ensure that they are confident and willing to pursue further academic positions with a greater understanding of how to perform their responsibilities.

Alberti *et al.* (2022) indicate that there are concerns surrounding the working conditions of GTAs but also that this may be a wider sector issue, not only being experienced by GTAs but academic staff overall (Selesho & Naile, 2014). The University and College Union (UCU, 2022) recognises that HE staff have been participating in industrial actions throughout 2022 and 2023 with the hope to improve working conditions for all. Alberti *et al.* (2022), Jackman *et al.* (2021) and McGaughey *et al.* (2021) claim that working conditions during the pandemic were challenging and therefore, it is important that GTAs are being given increased levels of support to ensure that they are feeling comfortable and confident within their roles. In their review, Persky *et al.* (2020) report that modifications were essential to sustain working conditions during the most challenging periods of the pandemic; they argued that even just changing the times for meetings helped to accommodate the pressing work demands that the pandemic caused. Basalamah and As'ad (2021) aimed to analyse the effect of work motivation and the implications on

the job satisfaction of management lecturers at a private university in Indonesia. 105 participants contributed to a survey and the findings identified that participants' perceived motivation impacted their job satisfaction and therefore, fair compensation could be a motivating factor to increase job satisfaction. In line with recent industrial action in the UK, The University and College Union (UCU, 2021) and Ali and Andwar (2021) argue that failing to offer fair working conditions and compensation to employees diminishes the work they contribute within the organisation. It is important to consider that GTAs may be experiencing increased challenges to perform their academic and professional responsibilities, which may have been magnified by the pandemic. However, it does appear that these concerns relate to a sector-wide issue and therefore, academics and researchers at every level may require increased levels of support to navigate their roles and responsibilities post-pandemic.

## **Recommendations**

This literature review has established a key number of recommendations which have evolved from the literature examined here; it is evident that increasing work is being conducted on GTAs and early career researchers/academics especially since the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore, this should be sustained in order to continue to understand the GTA experience and their contribution to academia. It would be useful to explore the role of the GTA in more depth to understand their specific needs and wants post-pandemic. In their literature, Selesho and Naile (2014) and Alberti *et al.* (2022) suggest that increased support and professional

development programmes are key to supporting early career academics, not only as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but also due to wider issues with working conditions in academia. Employers and employees need to have a clear understanding of job expectations and ensure that they fulfil only what is expected of them as per their job description which is being continuously fought for by the UCU (2022). Any further expectations and/or increase in work demand should be compensated fairly and negotiated fairly between employer and employee. In addition, Ali and Andwar (2021) recognise that wages are a key reward for employees, acting as a motivating and stimulating factor. Therefore, acknowledging that offering wage increases to employees who are delivering high-quality standards over some time will show them value and appreciation for their work ethic and devotion to their jobs. Basalamah and As'ad (2021) argue that rewarding staff for their time and effort is essential to increase job satisfaction, therefore HEIs should put forward incentives to ensure staff job satisfaction remains high. Loveday (2018) suggests that obtaining a career in academia is based on luck, however, Hassard and Morris (2018) and Richardson, Suseno and Wardale (2021) claim that casual contracts create job insecurity and fail to demonstrate appreciation toward academics. Therefore, contractual negotiations should be performed to ensure that fixed-term contracts are not long-term and instead, offer employees the opportunity to become permanent employees. Although there may be underlying reasons why HEIs have been unable to offer improved and increased levels of compensation, the most effective way to maintain high-quality standards is by providing employees with the correct training and support to support them in their future careers. Improving working conditions is a necessary action to take, consistent failure to

improve academic working conditions may be impacting the retention of employees in HEIs and this must be prioritised, further exploration of this is necessary (Alberti *et al.* 2022).

## **Conclusion**

This literature review recognises that the working conditions in HE are challenging. Significant knowledge outlines the working conditions of GTAs during the pandemic and recognises the potential implications for the future by providing GTAs with quality support. For GTAs and early career researchers, the development of the COVID-19 pandemic may have significantly impacted the initial years of their careers due to unstable conditions and during their own doctoral studies. Radical actions can and should be taken to address the sector's ongoing issues and create better opportunities for future GTAs. However, the working conditions and the COVID-19 crisis may have increased the issues for GTAs and early career researchers/academics which were apparent before the pandemic. Thereby, this suggests that greater work is needed to improve the working conditions and create a more stable and enjoyable sector. Further research is needed to monitor the working conditions of GTAs and early career researchers/academics.

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