

Inclusive teaching in a pandemic: The experience of an International Graduate Teaching Assistant

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the unique contributions International Graduate Teaching Assistants (IGTAs) can make in improving inclusive teaching practices in UK Higher Education (UK HE). In addition, this paper identifies four unique challenges IGTAs face in taking up a teaching position in UK HE – the lack of support from their supervisors, limited subjects they can teach, problems with credibility, and language barrier. This paper will use the author's personal experience of teaching an international politics module as an IGTA both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions to analyse the unique contributions IGTAs may be able to offer in internationalising the curriculum. Through synthesising this experience with current literature on GTAs, this paper identifies the importance of supervisors and training in preparing IGTA for their role. This paper aims to encourage more international PGRs to become IGTAs.

Introduction

This paper argues how more international postgraduate research students (IPGRs) should be encouraged to work as graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in the UK higher education (HE) sector. UK HE, once comprising of just a handful of the population, has grown dramatically in recent years in terms of student numbers and diversity of its cohort. Degree holders once accounted for just 3.4% of the UK population in the post-war period. But by 2000, their numbers had grown to one third of the population (Bolton, 2012: 14), and they continue to increase (Bolton, 2021: 9). Such an increase in student population size in UK HE has also resulted in diversification of the student cohort. For instance, there is an acceptance gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds – measured by their ethnicity and eligibility for Free School Meals, and the most advantaged saw continued decline in acceptance rates (UCAS, 2020: 6 & 16). While such change is cause for celebration, it also means there is a growing need to develop more inclusive teaching environments.

However, creating a truly inclusive teaching environment has proven difficult. There have been attempts to support academics in designing inclusive lessons such as the publication of a book by Grace and Gravestock (2009) titled *Inclusivity and Diversity: Meeting the Needs of All Students*. However, changes to teaching practices are increasingly seen as insufficient and discussions have progressed to focus on the limited diversity among teaching staff. While surface-level diversification may seem inadequate, a survey by Times Higher Education found “lack of [HE] role models representing all ethnic groups” may lead to attainment gaps between minority and non-minority students (Bothwell, 2019). This paper argues that to tackle this issue, International Graduate Teaching Assistants (IGTAs) could play a crucial role.

IGTAs are critical as they can help diversify the teaching cohort, at least in the short-term. Data shows that PGRs made up 4.4% of the total student cohort in the year 2019/2020, a relatively consistent figure throughout the years (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021d). There was a total of 110,675 PGRs studying in the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021d), and 45,575 students were IPGRs (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021b). Thus, 41.2% or nearly half of all PGRs studying in the UK were IPGRs. Considering both the consistent share of PGRs and the high share of IPGRs, they are a reliable pool of diverse teaching staff in UK HE. While there needs to be continued efforts to diversify the academic staff on long-term contracts, in the immediate-term, IGTAs have an important part to play in creating an international learning experience for students. Furthermore, there needs to be better understandings of the barriers IPGRs face when trying to become IGTAs, which differs from that of home GTAs.

This paper argues that IGTAs can be vital role models and can help diversify the teaching staff. I use my personal experience as an IGTA to illustrate some of IGTAs strengths and unique challenges. The paper is split in two - the first half focuses on the existing literature and data on GTAs and the unique challenges faced by IGTAs. The second half is a case study on my own experience as an IGTA at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Leeds. I will explore how my unique international experience informed my teaching practices and examine the importance of my supervisors and training which helped me to become an IGTA. Following the footsteps of Alex Hastie (2021) who encouraged working-class PGRs to become GTAs in the first volume of *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, it is hoped that this paper will help encourage more IPGRs to become IGTAs.

Finding exact figures of GTAs is a challenge as this data is not collected at either university or national level, and there is no clear definition of PGRs who teach. For example, York University calls PGRs who teach ‘GTAs’, while the University of Leeds calls them ‘Teaching Assistants (TAs)’. Lack of a unified terminology makes it difficult to assess data collected by some researchers on the topic of IGTAs. For instance, the closest research that analysed IGTAs and their experience of teaching in UK HE is one conducted by Winter et al. (2015) who sent out surveys to PGRs who were on a GTA course. While this is a sound methodology, it does mean that PGRs who are not on a formal GTA

courses may have been left out of the data collection. Additionally, the PGR identity has been said to play an important role in their development as teachers in the literature (Fotovatian and Miller, 2014; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; McAlpine, Javac-Martek and Hopwood, 2009; Watts, 2009). However, PGRs still in some cases struggle to form a clear identity as they exist in the space between staff and student (Compton and Tran, 2017; Teague, 2021). Straddling two identities means some PGRs may not even identify as a GTA.

Despite these limitations, an approximation of the number of GTAs can be made based on the study by Winter et al. (2015). According to their research, 41% of those participating in a GTA course were IGTAs (Winter et al., 2015), a considerable number of IPGRs thus teach and have gained limited academic attention. At present, diversity among academic staff is limited with only 18% being BAME, and the proportion becomes even smaller among professors of whom just 11% are BAME (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021a). Compounding this issue is the fact that fewer BAME students pursue a PhD compared to their white peers (Khan and Cowell, 2020). This translates to fewer BAME academics in the future. Furthermore, since it takes five to seven years for a lecturer to be promoted to a senior lectureship, which is a grade below to that of a professorship, it will take decades to narrow the current gap in the number of BAME professors (National Careers Service, 2021; University of Leeds, 2021c). Thus, in the short-term, to ensure more undergraduate students are taught by ethnically diverse teachers, universities will need to rely on PGRs. In sum, in the current limitation of representation and diversity in academia, IGTAs may become key role models for undergraduate students. However, the next section will outline how IPGRs require more active encouragement to take up teaching positions.

Challenges for IGTAs

IPGRs face challenges *before* they start teaching. This is in addition to the challenges they face *while* they teach. There is an opportunity gap between domestic PGRs and IPGRs. The study by Winter et al. (2015) found that IPGRs were far less likely to have an opportunity to teach compared to their domestic peers. While only 47.9% of IPGRs were offered teaching roles, 70.7% of UK students were given the opportunity (Winter et al., 2015).

This paper identifies four key reasons for this gap. The first concerns the role played by the supervisor. Winter et al. (2015) found that 75% of respondents stated that the support from their supervisors was a key reason for pursuing teaching. Conversely, lack of support can discourage application for roles. In other words, there is a systematic problem as well as an emotional and subjective one. The systematic issue stems from the fact that supervisors are usually consulted or are asked to be referees in the application process. Supervisors may refuse to be referees as some supervisors may prefer their PGRs to focus on their research rather than teaching (Bok, 2013). However, this alone does not explain why there is such a significant gap between international and domestic students as supervisor support will be equally important for both.

The second possible explanation is that it is challenging to find a teaching course which aligns with the research focus of the international PGR. Studies point that international academics (especially female academics) are often siloed to teach subjects that are related to their nationality or race (Skachkova, 2007: 705-706). This means that some IPGRs may find difficult to apply to teach subjects that do not relate to their research. While there is no available research findings or data as to what degree this happens and how much this affects PGRs, it may still explain the opportunity gap between domestic and IPGRs.

The third issue faced by IGTAs is that their teaching credentials may be questioned more often than their domestic peers. For many IPGRs, English is either not their first language or they may have a distinct accent which may delegitimise their credential as a teacher (Skachkova, 2007: 707-709).

There are, of course, ways in which a similar issue can affect a domestic PGR. For example, a British PGR who studies translation in the UK may find it harder to teach Japanese if there is a Japanese PGR who also studies the same subject. In this case, the UK PGR may be seen as less credible compared to a native speaker. In a study by Skachkova (2007: 710), they show how Japanese academics teaching Japanese in the United States noted this advantage when teaching, as compared to American teaching staff.

However, the fourth and perhaps greatest barrier that exists which prevent IPGRs from teaching is their lack of confidence in teaching in a foreign context. English proficiency has been raised multiple times by IPGRs as one of the biggest challenges they face while completing their doctorates (Andrade, 2006). Considering that the majority of classes in the UK are taught in English and many of the students are native English speakers, this fact may be creating a sense of hesitation among IPGRs and prohibits them from applying. In addition to these concerns, IPGRs may be struggling to adapt to a new culture and new academic requirements, as well as having to live in a new location far from their family and friends (Jindal-Snape and Ingram, 2013: 17; Le and Gardner, 2010: 260). These factors combined form a unique barrier against IPGRs from applying for teaching roles.

In sum, these four explanations may be insufficient in explaining the opportunity gap when viewed in isolation. However, when combined it makes a strong argument as to why this gap exists. Lack of encouragement from supervisors, lack of suitable subjects to teach and a higher likelihood of their teaching credentials to be questioned, coupled with the pressure to teach in a second language, and the stress of adapting into the UK HE may together create a sense that teaching is not for them.

Individually, these issues are not unsolvable. For example, at the University of Leeds, supervisors are required to go through a central training process to supervise students. Supporting or encouraging international students to teach may be included within such training programmes. Teaching opportunities could be more widely shared between schools so that IPGRs could choose to apply from a broader selection of modules. Universities could develop a teaching workshop aimed at training PGRs who are not confident in teaching in English. In the following section, this paper will argue for the benefits of IGTAs. This argument will be drawn from my personal experience of teaching. By doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the growing literature on the rationale for hiring IPGRs to become IGTAs as presented in the literature review by Ban (2023). Similar to the findings of this paper, Ban (2023: 49) finds that by hiring IPGRs, universities benefit from “internationalisation at home”. The additional contribution this paper makes is to argue that by having IGTAs, such internationalisation can strengthen support for international student teachers as well as diversify the curriculum by introducing minority voices.

I am an IGTA from Japan who teaches at the University of Leeds, and English is my second language. Being part of the 13% of all academic staff who are BAME (University of Leeds, 2021b), and teaching politics (part of social studies), a subject field with just 11% of students being ethnically Asian (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021c), I remain a minority within the field. This is important to consider in the subsequent section in which I discuss how my knowledge of Japan in the classroom helped broaden the knowledge of the students. It also acts as a caution as to how representative my experience can be as compared to other IGTAs who may share the same ethnicity, as others may face different challenges and strengths to the ones expressed in this paper.

While my own experience echoes that of other IGTAs from some literature, such as pursuing teaching to gain financial security and experience (Park, 2004: 349), there are some notable differences. For example, I had little to no difficulty teaching in English, despite this being the focus of other studies on IGTAs (see Yule (1992) and Yule and Hoffman (1990)). Unlike those mentioned in the literature (Skachkova, 2007), my research does not involve Japan nor do I teach my own language or culture. Thus, the kind of advantages noted by Skachkova (2007: 705-706, 710) of an ethnic minority female academic teaching subjects related to her own language or culture does not

apply in my case.

Still, I believe that by having minority staff teach politics helps diversify students' perspective of politics, shifting it from a Western focus to include broader perspectives. In the field of politics and international relations, this over-representation of Western perspectives has been identified as an issue (Acharya and Buzan, 2007). As an IGTA, bringing in international perspectives to the class was my primary contribution to the university experience for students. There is a clear pedagogical advantage to expose students to diverse perspectives as it has been found to help students appreciate the complex nature of issues, advance their ability to interact with people from different backgrounds, and help foster a sense that they are part of a more diverse in-group (Hurtado et al., 1999: 40-43; Milem, 2003: 137-138). I hope that through this small contribution, I will inform future school-wide or university-wide policy change that will help further internationalisation in this institution (Luxon and Peelo, 2009: 54).

The following section explores how my experience teaching an International Politics module as an IGTA enabled me to notice the IT skills gap among international students and diversify the curriculum by actively incorporating international case studies.

I became an IGTA teaching a module aimed at first-year undergraduate students titled 'International Politics'. I taught this module twice, during and after pandemic-related restrictions were in force, thus enabling me to draw lessons from both online and face-to-face teaching. The section will first explore how IGTAs may have better understanding of potential IT skills gap which stems from differing level of use of the internet leading up to pursuing HE. This will be followed by a discussion of how IGTAs are able to diversify perspectives by introducing students to different norms.

The IT skills gap: Differences in international education practices

One of the key contributions that IGTAs will likely be able to bring is their first-hand knowledge of different education systems and practices of different countries. For example, most courses in the UK HE expects students to use internet sources in their research and assignments. Even before the pandemic, there was an assumption in UK HE that students will be able to access materials online, with the majority of university correspondence and reading assignments being distributed online.

However, internet use in education is far from a universal practice. For example, Japan is extremely technologically advanced, boasting famous technology companies like Sony and Hitachi. Internet infrastructure is also highly developed with around a 90% adoption rate, roughly the same as that of the UK. The internet speed is much faster in Japan, averaging 137.19mbps, compared to 63.74mbps in the UK (Speedtest, 2022). Yet, Japan ranks among the lowest when it comes to internet use during school hours. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Japanese students spend only 25.6 minutes using the internet at school, far less than British students who spent 47.7 minutes (OECD, 2019). While this data does not represent university students, and when it comes to internet use *outside* of school, the duration does increase; it still indicates that IT use in schools is limited. When this is applied to students from developing countries, or mature students who may not have been taught to use the internet in their studies, it becomes clear that this could potential pose a divide in IT skills among students, which may be overlooked by domestic GTAs accustomed to using online sources.

This is where the personal experience of IGTAs becomes important. I went through the Japanese compulsory education system and experienced first-hand the steep learning curve of being suddenly required to use online sources in UK HE. Such lived experience helped me explain in detail where students can find information online accompanied by guidance on how to access the information.

This was of particular importance when seminars were delivered online, and teaching staff were forced to share all relevant materials online. To reduce any potential IT skills gap, I took screenshots of where students can access relevant materials and included step-by-step guidance to accompany the images. This was of importance to new academic staff as well, as they were often unfamiliar with the university websites and therefore benefited from my support in navigating the online platform. In short, IGTAs may be more familiar with potential gaps in IT skills which allows them to take preventative action to ensure that all students can access relevant materials online, a point worth bearing in mind in post-COVID-19 learning environments.

Enriching learning experience through cases studies

The existing literature focuses on the unique advantage IGTAs may have in linguistic and cultural understanding (Skachkova, 2007), but similar advantages can be found when IGTAs are able to bring unique case studies that show a different perspective to their teaching. In my seminars, I was able to use a case study from my country and challenge prevailing discourses developed in the West. Presenting an alternative perspective helped students broaden their understanding of the topic and encouraged international students to share examples from their own country. One week, students were set a reading by Greitens (2017: 423) which included a brief mention of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan. The “deep approach”, according to Biggs and Tang (2011: 26-27), is a method in which students are encouraged to interact with academic materials at a deeper level by actively linking together what they learn in the classroom with what they learn from their reading. Applying such approach to my teaching, I expanded on the topic in my seminar. I used data on energy sources in Japan from the International Energy Agency (2022) and emphasised how this disaster shifted the energy supply of Japan away from nuclear power. I added that despite environmental perspectives, it is important for Japan to be able to move away from coal-powered energy to nuclear energy, and that the Fukushima disaster solidified the Japanese public in opposing nuclear power altogether (Klein, 2022). Using the unique case study of Japan helped bring complexity and nuance to the debate over nuclear power. I chose the Japanese case study for two reasons: 1) it was mentioned in the reading material, and 2) I was aware of the wider political and economic challenges surrounding the topic, which set Japan apart from other countries. Thus, IGTAs may be in a better position to bring more international examples in their teaching which in turn will provide a more global educational experience to all students.

However, it is important to emphasise that I would not have been able to teach as an IGTA without prior support and training. The following sections will explore the important role of supervisors and training which help IPGRs to become IGTAs.

Role of Supervisors

Winter et al. (2015) argued that supervisors play a significant role in PGRs’ decision to become a GTA. This section will add to this work by discussing the important role my supervisors played in my own decision to teach. From the outset of my PhD programme, both of my supervisors encouraged me to teach. Before I started teaching as a TA, I had doubts about my ability to teach, similar to the concerns expressed in the study by Skachkova (2007: 705-710). In the first meeting I had with my supervisors, I expressed my desire to teach. Not only did they share advice on the training opportunities offered by the university, but one of my supervisors immediately gave me the opportunity to deliver a politics workshop for A-level students. Their encouragement and giving me the opportunity to teach provided a crucial first step into gaining the much needed confidence and

experience. While my supervisors played a critical role in introducing me to teaching, the training offered by the university helped develop my teaching skills.

Training to teach

At the HE-level, there are no formal ways in which academics are taught to teach. However, I felt I needed training as I had the added apprehension of teaching in English, and in particular teaching politics in the UK in my second language. In my first year as a PGR, I participated in a *Foundations in Teaching* workshop. This was a mandatory half-day workshop for PGRs planning on becoming GTAs. While I found the workshop helpful in learning the basics of pedagogic practices, I felt I required further training as an IPGR with no prior experience in teaching. With the support and encouragement of my supervisors, I started working as an Education Outreach Fellow, a role open to current postgraduate students, to deliver academic workshops with the aim of widening participation among disadvantaged students. In designing and delivering politics workshops for A-level students, I was taught to use clearly defined learning objectives and outcomes as advocated by classic works by Bloom (1956) and Mager (1990). These objectives were of particular importance when collecting student feedback on the workshops as it asked students to evaluate if they had achieved the learning goals. The learning objectives and outcomes remain the first and last things I cover in every class that I have taught.

Working as an Education Outreach Fellow helped me form networks with other educational charity organisations in the area. I was further introduced to tutor work for the Linacre Institute which aims to advance educational opportunities to A-level students in the North. Through tutoring, I gained in-depth understanding of current limitations in the UK education system, which includes the limited focus on writing up to the post-16 level. One-to-one discussions with A-level students from state schools in the North helped me realise that students had little opportunity to have their writing assessed despite this being a key assessment at UK HE.

This knowledge was further cemented when I attended the School of Politics and International studies' committee meetings that were open to PGRs. Discussions were often focused on challenges in teaching writing skills to undergraduate students. While the university does offer support through workshops delivered by the university library services, students are often not signposted to such services, and it requires the students to be proactive in identifying their academic problems and applying for the workshops. While signposting students to such services is important (Henderson, Shure and Adamecz-Völgyi, 2020: 746-747), as long as it is not a compulsory component of their curriculum, not all students will access the services. Such insight into the realities of the UK education system and the potential barriers faced by disadvantaged groups of students was something that I, as an international student, was only made aware through these outreach programmes.

That being said, the university does offer additional training to help PGRs incorporate inclusive teaching practices. For example, the university offers a workshop called *Everyday Inclusive Teaching* (University of Leeds, 2021a). This workshop taught me how to re-design educational material so that it was inclusive to diverse needs such as those with disabilities or for international students. Examples included using appropriately sized and coloured fonts on PowerPoint slides, including Alt texts to images and using plain English. While the university notifies teaching staff in advance of any disabilities that students want to disclose and ones that require adjustments to teaching delivery, fewer adjustments are required if the teaching materials are designed in accordance with inclusivity requirements to begin with. Thus, while the university offers training to help prepare PGRs to teach, IPGRs and especially those with little prior experience in teaching may require more opportunities to develop their teaching skills and better understanding of the challenges to the current UK education system.

Conclusion

This paper has shown three unique strengths IGTA's hold. IGTA's are in a prime position to increase diversity among teaching staff, understand diverse student needs, and help provide an international learning experience for students by bringing in diverse perspectives. The barriers against IGTA's such as language barriers, lack of supervisor support, or problems over credibility can be easily overcome by better formal teaching training and encouraging supervisors to support IPGRs in pursuing teaching roles. The experience discussed here is merely one of many and similar strengths may be found among domestic GTAs. However, the main aim of this paper is to make the case that IGTA's can make a positive change to the UK HE. I hope that I have been successful in persuading other IPGRs to teach.

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