

GTAs Enhancing Education Fund (EEF): Supporting Student engagement & Providing resources for GTA agency

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Abstract

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are often an underfunded and underutilised resource in Higher Education departments. However, when provided with resources and autonomy, GTAs can facilitate greater student engagement and develop core professional skills necessary for future academic roles. This article explores the development and outcome of the Enhancing Education Funding (EEF) call, developed by the Arts & Humanities Research Institute at King's College London (KCL). The EEF was created on the principles of collective participation, with the dual purpose of supporting students' engagement para-COVID-19 and enhancing the autonomy and leadership skills of GTAs in the Faculty of the Art & Humanities, KCL. Under EEF, seven projects were funded to support ten GTAs in leading curriculum-based, supervisor-supported projects between 2021-2022. Details of the theoretical basis for the funding call, the funded projects and the GTAs evaluation of their projects are provided. Findings are based on hour-long focus group interviews conducted at the end of the project, with all awardees and summaries of seven end-of-project reports produced by the ten funded GTAs. The findings from this

study highlight that where collective participation is used, GTAs can be given more responsibility and autonomy and can create engaging content for students that can supplement the curriculum in a valuable manner. However, this can only be effectively achieved if GTAs are established with a framework of continuous support, particularly in areas such as administration and receive resources, such as payment for time.

Introduction and Background

By 2021 there was growing evidence of declining student engagement attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hope, 2021) and the abrupt transition students experienced from face-to-face to distance learning (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Khalil *et al.*, 2020; Lemay, Bazelais and Doleck, 2021; Wester *et al.*, 2021; Garris & Fleck, 2022, 2022; Ngo, 2022). Increases in self-directed study time (Studente, Ellis & Desai, 2021) and absences in face-to-face contact time among students (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Joshi *et al.*, 2022) broad the symptoms of declining student engagement, which reported to be less attention and effort (Garris & Fleck, 2022), increased student stress levels (Dyczkowska, 2021: 156), increased burnout (Chen, Kaczmarek & Ohyama, 2021) and less participation during classes and seminars (Whiting, 2022). Whilst this decline in engagement was not limited to a single university but a systemic issue replicated across faculties and universities globally, evidence of it within the Faculty of the Arts & Humanities at King's College London was the initial inspiration for the creation of the Enhancing Education Fund (EEF).

As a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), I was at the forefront of witnessing declining student engagement. This reduction was particularly evident in students' social and behavioural engagement. It manifested in behaviours such as refusing to turn cameras and/or microphones on during small group engagements, leaving the seminar up to 10 minutes before the end of the session and refusing to present or relay work to the wider group by maintaining silence, even when given opportunities such as delegating a respondent, providing me with feedback to read aloud or typing the response in the

chat box. Each of these behaviours demonstrated a reluctance, or refusal to engage that was not evident during in-person seminars. On reflection, this change is potentially attributable to several factors, including a change in my ability to provide alternative solutions for engagement and to elicit responses from students with the shift to online learning.

As the pandemic progressed, it became evident that there were activities, workshops, or resources that I could produce to enhance student engagement if the correct supervisory support and resources were provided. This reflection revealed the precarious position in which GTAs exist, within the higher education framework, in often both wanting to further student engagement but being limited in their reliance on more senior academics for support and resources. This precariousness is also noted by Hastie (2021), who refers to the 'in-betweenness' of student and staff identities in GTA's experiences, Winstone and Moore (2017) who refer to the liminality of GTA's status as neither a teacher or full student, and Jing (2020), who refers to graduate teaching assistants as "the Other teacher". Park and Ramos (2002: 47) take this observation a step further, denoting that "evidence suggests that many GTAs feel like "donkeys in the department" because of their heavy workload, sizeable responsibility and limited autonomy". For me, the chance to gain experience as a GTA is invaluable for my future career. However, the restrictions on paid hours and a lack of autonomy in designing and planning seminars has limited my opportunities for learning and confidence building.

In this regard, I feel there were chances missed to integrate my work and ideas more readily into the modules I taught on,

because of the junior nature of my role. Despite their wide range of roles and responsibilities (Sharpe, 2000), GTAs can be broadly categorised as postgraduate researchers who facilitate university-level (typically undergraduate) teaching and assessment within the context of defined modules (Ryan, 2014). Undergraduate student's educational experience can be enhanced, with increased one-on-one support and additional opportunities for informal feedback, by effectively engaging with GTAs. Whilst academics have made several positive observations of GTA's impact on student's experience (Groccia, 2001; Fung, 2021; George & Rzyankina, 2022), it is essential to note that these positive impacts are often only apparent when an effective framework of training and an appropriate departmental environment is fostered (Young & Bippus, 2008). This environment occurs where GTAs are provided with appropriate resources, peer-support and are viewed and valued as an essential member of the wider faculty teaching staff (Smith *et al.*, 2021). As Jenks and Cox (2020) summarise, some successful approaches to supporting GTAs include collaborative teaching, supporting GTAs to become active departmental members and establish academic identities (Fairbrother, 2012) and defining pedagogical commitments (Madden, 2014). Despite the evidential methods and attributed importance of integrating GTAs into modules and departments, opportunities to enhance GTA's roles in undergraduate education are overlooked (Campbell *et al.*, 2021), with scholars denoting that even willing institutions struggle to give GTAs a voice (Fung, 2021: 1).

Teaching experience is essential for GTA's professional development and future career prospects (Hardré, 2005; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021), particularly for those who

wish to pursue a career as a lecturer, teacher or researcher within higher education. These job roles require specific skills such as self-efficacy (Campbell *et al.*, 2021; Shum, Lau & Fryer, 2021), confidence, autonomy and decision-making. There is a wealth of literature which highlights the positive impact that engaging trainee teachers¹ in extra-curricular projects, workshops or seminars can have on a trainee's cognitive and practical skills development (e.g. presentation and task development, conceptualisation, leadership, time-management and organisational skills) (Guadarrama, 2002: 173; Buskist, 2012; Hung, Lim & Lee, 2013: 208; Blessinger & Carfora, 2014), and psychological empowerment (Seery & Donnell, 2019: 427). Within secondary school teacher training literature, one form of support approach through mentoring and autonomy is termed collective participation.

When applied to GTAs, this approach sees multiple members of a collective (in this case, a department) work together to achieve an outcome both beneficial to the collective (in this case, enhanced student engagement and curriculum knowledge) and the individual (in this case the GTA's core skills and future career as educator). It is from this understanding of creating a project with mutual benefits through collective participation that the EEF was developed.

The Enhancing Education Fund (EEF)

¹ This literature refers to trainee teachers employed within a secondary school setting. GTAs are effectively teachers in training, and so it is inferred that the findings would also apply to GTAs. However, literature specifically exploring GTAs in this context is very limited.

*In January 2021, I raised the issue of dwindling student engagement and missed opportunities for GTA's to the then team I was working for at the Arts & Humanities Institute King's College London: Dr. Edward Stevens (current Impact & Knowledge Exchange Manager, KCL), Mr. Mark Johnson (current Festival Manager, Being Human festival) and Professor Anna Reading (Professor of Culture and Creative Industries, KCL). As a team, we developed 'The Enhancing Education Fund', a small grant (£1000) funding call for **postgraduate researchers (PGR)** who had experience as **Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA)** in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities. The grants were intended to enable GTAs to lead the **design** of a course or skill-specific engagement activity for students in collaboration with module convenors. Whilst the premise of the fund was developed from an understanding of collective participation, as previously explored, the design, developed over three months, further facilitated impact through several mechanisms.*

Firstly, as reasoned above, the fund supported GTAs to develop agency by enabling them to plan and lead a project. GTAs often follow the directions of senior staff but have limited opportunities to create programs (Curren, 2008: 606). Therefore, this funding call provided a platform from which GTAs had to collaborate with module leaders (obtaining signatory sign-off and short recommendations on projects) but within a context which emphasised the leading role of the GTA. In this regard, agency was developed through collective participation, where GTAs were required to plan, design, and deliver the project under the mentorship of the module leader using the following supportive but structural framework:

Design Phase (the 3rd of May to the 31st of July, 2021): Awardees were allocated funding and used this time to design, prepare and organise the resource or activity, for the start of the Autumn 2021 term.

Delivery Phase (September 2021-December 2021): Module Convenors ensured that the planned activity or resource was implemented, in line with the current Government and College Covid-19 guidance.

Analysis & Feedback (December 2021-January 2022): Awardees were to submit a one-page report detailing actual activities and how their understanding of engagement as a PGR/GTA had developed because of the project.

One mechanism that supported this structure was the provision that GTAs could claim payments for their time at the same rate as college-wide GTA pay. GTAs are often underfunded with limited resources (Dougherty, 2010; Banks & Spangler, 2021). When funding calls are applicable, their limits ensure that GTAs or postgraduate students cannot claim salary costs. To improve inclusivity in applications and solidify the position of the GTA in the broader faculty dynamic, we ensured that GTAs could claim payment for their time throughout the project. Overall, embedding the GTA with decision-making responsibilities within the course framework and supporting them with an income enhanced the development of their academic identity and agency (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010), supporting the development of CV-enhancing skills and personal and professional development.

Secondly, the funding call supported students across the

Faculty of the Arts & Humanities at King's College London by providing additional activities and resources tailored to their courses. GTAs were viewed as being in a unique position to facilitate student engagement because within the Faculty of the Arts & Humanities, they are often more likely, as seminar leaders, to engage closely with smaller groups of students (from 10-28 students per group), rather than large scale lectures (upwards of 30 but more often 80+ students). It was proposed that this close contact with students ensures that even though GTAs are more junior in terms of their academic career and potential teaching experience, they would be more likely to understand the current cohort knowledge and the perceived challenges associated with a module. One mechanism that supported this structure was the inclusion of a student on the panel of three judging funding call submissions and selecting successful applicants. The three panellists were: Dr Mary Seabrook (the Head of GTA Development/STF), Dr. Aleksandra Kubica (Research Officer for The Bridge Group), and Karina Au (CMCI BA student). They based their assessments of the projects on its feasibility, appropriateness, departmental support, and the GTA's understanding of the benefit to students. In including Karina, she was best placed to understand if applying GTAs had an accurate perception and understanding of current student's course concerns and could therefore ensure that the activities and resources which were funded were most likely to have the most significant impact.

Methodology for selecting funded projects

Each applicant was required to read two pages of call guidance before completing three sections: Approval, Project

Details and Budget. The approval section was used to confirm module convenor support (in the form of a signature), whilst the Project Details section included questions such as: Provide a brief overview of the project. Consider the project aims and delivery. Please also consider if all Covid-19 restrictions were to be lifted would you adapt the project and if so how (500 words)

If this project was to be approved, how would it benefit students on this course or module (200 words),

Why do you want to lead this project and what do you hope to gain from this experience (150 words)

The panel of three were given a week to read over the applications and provide an indicative score of between 1-5 for each response by each applicant.

1	Has not answered the question at all
2	Has answered the question in part
3	Has answered the question satisfactorily
4	Has answered the question well, providing a clear outline of the project/ demonstrating critical reflection / demonstrating feasibility
5	Has answered the question strongly. Has provided an excellent outline of the project aims and objectives/ demonstrating strong critical reflection / articulating specifically how they might gain from the programme / provided a clear and appropriate budget demonstrating value for money

Table 1. Marking Criteria for assessing the suitability of the

*projects*²

This assessment method meant that each applicant received three overall scores, one from each panellist. I collated the individual and overall scores into a single spreadsheet and in a two hour online meeting the three panellists then cross-compared scores. The fifteen projects were then ranked. Some projects were immediately categorised as 'to be funded' because all three panellists scored them highly across the questions. Others required debates between the panellists and lead to proposals such as the merger of some projects with similar goals. The conditions for funding were then relayed to the GTA applicants.

Funded Projects

Launched in March 2021, the funding call saw overwhelming support from the PGR community at King's. The funding call closed on the 25th of April, 2021, with fifteen applications received from across the Faculty of the Arts & Humanities. The successful seven applications represent a diverse set of projects, facilitating impact across six departments and affecting upwards of ten undergraduate modules offered by KCL.

² This process and the marking matrix was inspired by the Undisciplined Spaces funding call, designed by Dr. Edward Stevens and Mr. Mark Johnson.

Project Name	Project Lead(s)	Connected Module & Department	Project Description
Interactive Discourse Analysis Workshops	Lauren Cantillon & Taylor Annabell	7AAICC30: Research approaches. Culture Media & Creative Industries Department	This project provided a training opportunity in discourse analysis for CMCI MA students interested in the role of discourse(s) in language, media and culture.
Decolonising the Archive	Sandip Kana	British Imperial Policy and Decolonisation, 1938-64 6AAH3017& 6AAH3018. Department of History	This project saw the creation of a digital journal and a short lecture, guiding students on using the resource and facilitating student access to a much more comprehensive range of perspectives and primary sources than those principally drawn from British archives.
Bridging the Gap between School and University Music Resource Pack	Kristina Arakelyan, Rhys Sparey, Susannah Knights	Theory I. Undergraduate, 1st year. Department of Music	This project created a one-stop-shop resource for undergraduate students, supporting them to settle into the Department of Music by

			helping them develop basic skills needed for theory- and essay-based courses.
Undergraduate Reading Group	Adam Bull	Modules across the Undergraduate BA in Digital Culture 2021-2022. Department of Digital Humanities	This project consisted of a series of reading groups led by postgraduate research students for undergraduates in the DDH department. The choices of readings were led by the groups themselves and were not required to fit neatly within the standard departmental curriculum.
Renaissance Hands: Palaeography Skills Workshop	Julian Neuhauser	'Early Modern Literary Culture' and 'Books that Matter'. Undergraduate, 1 st Year & 3 rd Year respectively. English Department	This project saw two 'transcribathons' (skills workshops) held. These 'transcribathons' gave students the opportunity to acquire and build skills in early modern English palaeography, or the study of 16th and 17th-century handwriting.

<p>Postcolonial Film Club</p>	<p>Claire Crawford</p>	<p>5SSPP210 Postcolonial Theory & 4AAOB103 Introduction to Politics. Department of Political Economy</p>	<p>This project created a fortnightly film club consisting of a 3-hour film showing and discussion group. It aimed to engage students in post- and anti-colonial topics before they make their second-and third-year choices.</p>
<p>Writing London through the Queer Archive: Joe Orton</p>	<p>Katie Arthur</p>	<p>Department of English, Undergraduate, 1st year, Writing London: Autumn module</p>	<p>Based on the life and work of the outrageous and highly influential playwright Joe Orton (1933-67), this project consisted of a practical workshop introducing students to literary London using hands-on archival and creative research methods.</p>

Table 2. Information about the seven projects funded under the EEF.

Analysis of case for GTA led projects

To analyse the impact of this project, all awardees submitted a one-page report detailing the actual activities, student feedback³, and reflections on their experience and engaged in a focus group termed the 'end of project meeting'. Student feedback denoted within the reports was overwhelmingly positive. Many of the reports included observations from the students such as *'it brings a new practical element to the module that doesn't happen in other seminars'* and more specific observations such as *'It absolutely enhanced the class, it allows us to view texts as those in the early modern period would have, interesting and engaging. Allows us to look through their [i.e., early modern writers'] eyes'*. It is worth denoting that these responses were reported by GTAs themselves within the report and that they could have engaged in selective reporting. Yet what was consistently noted over four of the seven feedbacks, was the provisions that the funding provided creating opportunities for practical engagement not ordinarily available within the module, which was also echoed in the GTA's reflections. One GTA noted that it enabled them to *'Curate tailored materials for practical sessions for students'* and *'develop materials for an introductory lecture integrated into the course syllabus'* (GTA

³ Each GTA was asked to collect feedback, but the mechanism for doing so was left to their discretion. Whilst this provided the GTA's with additional agency and creativity in collecting responses, one limitation of this is that there was no formal process for collecting feedback. As this was a pilot project, a better more structured feedback system is something that could be developed if further iterations were developed.

1)⁴.

GTA 6 summarised the overall impact of the EEF fund as:

'The financial support meant that I could offer students access to a type of practice-based learning...that they never had encountered before. The freedom to design the activity meant that I could bring a project to the department that I knew would be welcomed and which fits well with some of our (perhaps underexplored) strengths. It also gave me the opportunity to lead a pedagogical project, meaning I have a very concrete example of leadership in teaching to put on my future applications. Not only that, but developing this programme as a new type of 'practice based' teaching has given me more confidence with similar teaching activities and has allowed me to securely add an activity-based approach to my pedagogy.'

This quote firstly indicates the success of the funding call in enabling this project to extend the scope of the department, providing additional relevant and course related opportunities for student engagement. Secondly, it explicitly denotes the significance of the project in providing the GTA with an example of leadership which will support the GTA's future career. In this regard, this project and the GTA's developed capacity to design and deliver content within the scope of limited budget and resources, and within a set timeframe, is a replication of the conditions of future work as a lecturer. This early exposure to this leadership opportunity means that this GTA has an explicit example of impact on

⁴ All GTA's have been randomly allocated a number (e.g. GTA 6) to anonymise quotes.

student engagement they can use to secure future work. Finally, this quote emphasises the GTA's development of key skills, aforementioned in the literature review. In being offered the opportunity to experiment with a new form of pedagogy, this GTA was able to develop specific skills such as self-efficacy (Campbell et al., 2021; Shum, Lau & Fryer, 2021) and now has the confidence to replicate this form of practice in the future. It could be inferred that this experimentation is important because by increasing this GTA's toolbox of pedagogy, it will enable the GTA to further adapt the design and delivery of different future content to different learning environments and contexts. Fundamentally, by providing the GTA with different tools for teaching, the conditions for positive student engagement increase. The provisions for responsibility and the additional experience the project provided is also mirrored in GTA 3 and GTA 10's reflections:

'It has allowed us to consider further the series of small decisions made in developing curriculum and feel the weight of responsibility in how we position approaches to students and select particular texts for them to engage with'. (GTA 3)

'The project has reinforced our teaching skills, since it demands that we consider pedagogy and inclusivity....it has encouraged us to re-evaluate our own theory, writing and analysis skills, by necessarily considering what it means to write and analyse well, which are inevitably useful for our own research purposes. Our involvement with GTA work was limited in the academic year 2020-21 because of the pandemic, and this has also been a great opportunity to continue developing our skills as educators. (GTA 10)

Here, both GTA 3 and GTA 10 describe how the project

provided an opportunity to reflect and re-evaluate their current practices, developing a better understanding of how students engage with certain texts and pedagogical approaches. These skills are not only fundamental to a future within higher education, as they form the premise of curriculum design, but pertain to the GTA's current development as an academic. Furthermore, it can be inferred from GTA 10's responses that this project provided a chance for the development of teaching skills such as communication, collaboration, and adaptability. And regarding developing skills such as teaching outside of the classroom:

'It's helped me conceptualise how teaching might build student engagement in non-educational settings...through a recognition of the need to build confidence for students who have not had much access to institutional environments before. In this way, the project has affirmed my belief in an inclusive, accessible, and creative pedagogy'. (GTA 1)

Yet despite the provisions of the module leader support, some GTAs experienced difficulties in organising and implementing the sessions. Organising room bookings at KCL were denoted to be *'very complicated'*. Complications stemmed from rooms already being scheduled to host events or teaching time, and the GTA's needs were seen as a lower priority within the hierarchy of the university. The GTA leading one project felt they were unable to *'respond to student feedback about the sessions being too late in the evening, because the room booking team would not let me have a room in the afternoon'* (GTA 7). In this regard, further support from both the module convenor and the project funder (AHRI) was needed. This demonstrates the need for

more administrative support for GTAs, particularly where provisions such as room bookings, equipment hire, or equipment use may occur.

Other feedback focused on the challenge of ensuring that resources were '*collaborative, interactive, and engaging*' but functioned within the '*parameters of accessibility*' (GTA 9). In this regard, it was proposed that a future funding call should embed further support and training, particularly in designing accessible resources. It should be supported by broader faculty-wide training for GTAs in accessibility practices within the classroom. Furthermore, awardees proposed that the application form for the funding call be amended to ask about the skill competency level of GTA's where specialists or specific platforms (e.g., KEATS) are embedded within proposals. This would ensure that if training in a specialist skill is needed to deliver the project, this skill deficit could be addressed through module leader or funder support earlier in a project's development.

Conclusion

Overall, as is evident in the above findings, the provision of funding and associated support from projects such as EEF, which rely on collective participation, can support GTAs to work in collaboration with established academic staff and module convenors to challenge and enhance course content (Pierson, 2018), developing transferable skills such as communication, collaboration and problem-solving necessary for career development and to enhance student engagement. In this regard, if GTAs are given more responsibility and autonomy in this structured manner, they can create

engaging content for students that can supplement the curriculum in a valuable manner. Yet these provisions must be embedded within a framework of continuous support, particularly with greater provisions in areas such as administration. Therefore, future opportunities like this should enact a balance of supporting GTAs to establish agency, facilitating autonomy and confidence building in the design of module-specific content through facilitating payment, embedding them within the department infrastructure, and providing effective bespoke training relevant to their developmental needs (Bale & Anderson, 2022).

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