

Foreword

GTAs negotiating development trajectories in the modern edu-factory.

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The third issue of Postgraduate Pedagogies provides a rich assemblage of the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) experience, capturing the nuances of practice within the complexity of a rapidly changing education-factory. The articles offer a range of perspectives from the community of GTAs about the duality of the lecturer/GTA-PGR role, identity transitions, and the skills, attributes and knowledges needed. The Postgraduate Pedagogies Journal continues to demonstrate the uniqueness of knowledges and insights that GTAs provide in Higher Education Institutions, including a kaleidoscope of the dynamics of their relationships with each other, their students, experienced colleagues, and their institutions. This issue also provides well-structured and analytical solutions for enhancing staff recruitment, professional development, and the student experience.

Higher Education (HE) is intrinsically linked to societal norms and values; the activities and outputs of academic life have their geometric patterns imprinted in the real world. Issues like widening participation, international student numbers, and the utility of training and qualifications are continuously

debated because of wider implications, both personal and collective. As such, the student experience and pedagogies that support transformative learning are scrutinised on account of the enduring influence they have. GTAs' liminality with respect to connection with students is often described as positive, this argument is overwhelmingly supported in this issue. All the GTAs link their papers to student engagement and success. It is also evident that a GTA community of practice has developed and is strengthening the capabilities of members through reflexive exploration and an ethics of care.

Drawing on a broad variety of methodologies and concepts the authors discuss their contribution to HE, even though GTAs have limited access to training, professional development or supportive scaffolds which could enable them to learn by taking risks and evaluated decision-making. The discourse around GTAs is increasingly taking place against the backdrop of precarious and conflicting roles which affect the mental and psychological wellbeing of many overburdened, teaching laden GTAs. The teaching load skewed towards GTAs who have little discretionary power is restructuring academic staff recruitment; though the skills and responsibilities required to be efficient lecturers are becoming more complex. Primary skills such as self-efficacy, confidence, autonomy, and decision-making are repeated throughout the issue.

Xueting Ban makes a case for international GTAs inclusion in academic life. Ban reveals the challenges PGRs from outside the UK face with respect to meeting stringent visa conditions and the contributions they make to support University incomes. The paper by Ban states “four fundamental academic benefits” for recruiting international PGR students as GTAs in UK HEIs, highlighting the innovation their intercultural engagement provides for internationalisation at home.

The challenges of including GTAs in the mainstream of academic institutions is critiqued extensively by Kirsty Warner. Warner presents findings of the evaluation of an intervention designed to “improve inclusivity in applications and solidify the position of the GTA in the broader faculty dynamic.” Such interventions, Warner concludes are required to support freedom and opportunities for GTAs to design teaching activities autonomously. GTAs are able to develop valuable professional skills which empowers them to develop confidence, agency, and self-efficacy.

The working conditions of GTAs are notably varied across HEIs based on institutional resourcing, administrative gatekeeping, pedagogic ethos, and depth of mentoring and coaching relationships. Campbell et al. reflect on the experience of teaching from the periphery within a Russell Group university as an opportunity to develop individualised pedagogies. The GTA community in the Campbell et al. group supported each other through reflexive encounters that

enabled them to employ ethics of care and use relational pedagogies which they argue students need. GTAs are in a position to offer consistent levels of support because of their proximity to the student experience. Bethan Davies' experience of teaching was not as favourable as their colleagues at UCL. Davies argues for better support and recognition. The working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, Davies' suggests, made already challenging circumstances for GTAs even more uncertain. GTAs had to contend with isolation, increased workloads, and unequal access to opportunities.

Alice Leavey turns attention to the need for more structured mentoring and leadership for GTAs. Picking up on Davies' criticism about the use of discretionary power by senior academics, Leavey argues that academics should be leaders who have responsibility for nurturing and empowering early career academics. Alex Perry warns against homogenising GTA identities, Perry reflects on their experience as a GTA, a junior academic, albeit with considerable industry experience. Perry understood the skills required and the attributes necessary for balancing competing industry demands, professionalism, and self-care; this was not presented to students. Perry wrestles with the conflicting tensions of sharing relevant industry experience with the normative hierarchical positioning of elevating the ideas of senior academics. They argue for ethical approaches to teaching and mutual respect and integrity between GTAs and more experienced academics.

Lowe et al. present reflections from the use of a Community of Inquiry approach used by GTAs in the discipline of geography, reporting that student engagement was enriched by GTA support. The COVID-19 pandemic had deskilled students due to restrictions of using physical spaces to learn together. GTAs enrich learning experiences for students by discussing their own research. Carleigh Bristol Slater also uses their experience from primary education to enhance student engagement in hybrid learning environments. Slater emphasises how their previous knowledge of developing collaborative pedagogies enabled them to tackle the problem of poor engagement in HE classrooms. Ionescu replicates this approach in their interdisciplinary classroom by introducing “the two Es – of emotion and exploration” to empower students to make connections between theory and practice. Alma Ionescu demonstrates that GTAs can develop their academic practice by asserting their authority and credibility using evidence-informed approaches to support transformative learning in their classrooms.

Nick Lawler develops a model for enabling students to become critical thinkers. Lawler argues that GTAs have unique strengths because of their proximity to undergraduate students, pointing to research which highlights that GTAs are more attentive, accessible, and more invested in the students they teach. Lawler’s model supports a systematic structured, scaffolding for learners to develop critical thinking skills.

Volume 3 of Postgraduate Pedagogies spans the diverse experiences of GTAs. All the authors provide personal and distinctive perspectives, ranging from the challenges faced as Early Career Researchers with little autonomy, complex teaching responsibilities, a novice determination to make a difference and varying mechanisms of support from Institutions and the HE sector. This issue makes a persuasive case for embedding institutional support mechanisms for GTAs to develop academic skills, competencies, and attributes, as well as their own voice. It is also a celebration of the Community of Practice GTAs have developed and used to promote their self-efficacy and positive student experience.