

Title: Graduate teaching assistants: here today, gone tomorrow?

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Abstract:

The discussion paper wishes to explore the academic and professional development needs of Graduate Teaching Assistants to effectively fulfil their role in supporting student learning.

SEDA Values

Indicate which SEDA Values may be relevant to your proposal:

An understanding of how people learn		Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice	√
Working and developing learning communities	√	Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity	√
Continuing reflection on professional practice	√	Developing people and processes	√

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session, delegates will have:

- Discussed the impact GTAs may have on contributing to a positive student experience
- Discussed the nature of the provision of development opportunities for GTAs in developing their scholarship in becoming professional academic practitioners
- Considered the impact of informal mentoring and learning communities on supporting the GTAs in their roles
- Consider the wider ethical impact this may have on developing people and processes

Session Outline

Higher education institutions are increasingly becoming reliant on a pool of post graduate students taking on teaching responsibilities in higher education in various different capacities. The main reason for taking on these post graduate students in teaching roles is said to be the increased number of students entering higher education. However, the contribution that these post graduate students make seems to far exceed the initial reason for offering them teaching positions. (Sharpe 2000; Park 2002)

Sharpe (2000) explored a number of initiatives to train GTAs and proposed a framework for GTA development. She reported a move away from ad hoc workshops to short courses to

support the development of GTAs. However, she found that due to the wide range of varying responsibilities GTAs have in their role, this course alone cannot fulfil their needs. This begs the question as to how the scholarship of the GTA can be developed to effectively fulfil these wide-ranging responsibilities in their short period of tenure.

Park and Ramos (2002) explored a range of issues varying from recruitment, selection, task allocation, induction, training and payment to issues around getting feedback from departmental colleagues, quality assurance, responsibility and autonomy. Their paper closes with a call for a nationwide discussion on the most appropriate role and framework for GTAs. (Park and Ramos 2002)

In a further study by Park in 2002, he recommended the development of an unambiguous definition of the role, responsibilities and rewards for GTAs to ensure the delivery of a high quality teaching and learning experience to increasing numbers of undergraduates as well as to enhance the research culture and research output of UK universities.

Following a review of lessons learned by North American universities, Park (2004) noted that the key lessons are around training, development, supervision and mentoring of GTAs. The experiences and support of the GTA as teacher and as researcher is seen in the North American model as having a determining influence in the GTA being an aspiring academic.

The questions then are: Have we moved on since these reviews? What is the situation at your institution and how does this fit into our values around nurturing scholarship and professionalism? What is best practice in moving forward to ethically meet the needs of all the stakeholders involved?

Session Activities

The session will commence with an overview of the research conducted in the UK related to the role and experiences of GTAs (10 min) and the exploration of a pilot survey conducted at a post-92 institution. (10 min) This will be followed by a round table discussion of the development opportunities available to GTAs to support them in their roles. (10 min) Delegates will be encouraged to comment on their experiences of informal role support available to the GTAs. Key points will then be discussed in the context of the findings from an initial pilot study at presenter's own institution.

References

Park, C. (2002) Neither fish nor fowl? The perceived benefits and problems of using Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to teach undergraduate students. *Higher Education Review* 35 (1), 50-62

Park, C. (2004) The Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA): lessons from North American experience. *Teaching in Higher Education* 9 (3), 349-361

Park, C., and Ramos, M. (2002) The Donkey in the Department? Insights into the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) experience in the UK. *Journal of Graduate Education* 3, 47-53 (2002). *Journal of Graduate Education*.

Sharpe, R. (2000) A framework for training graduate teaching assistants. *Teacher Development* 4:1, 131-143