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Continuing professional development in learning and teaching for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs): An institutional response.

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Abstract

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), many of them postgraduate research students, are being employed in higher education in a number of roles and with a number of responsibilities regarding learning and teaching and enhancing the student experience. This is in addition to their primary role as researcher. Research training is being provided variously at national, university and departmental levels. Support for GTAs' learning and teaching role and for their further development in this role is often provided in an *ad hoc* manner at departmental and university levels (though increasingly also through the support of Higher Education Academy subject centres). This paper outlines the approach that a large research-led university has taken to the continuing professional development of its GTAs. This is examined in terms of the initial support provided to GTAs as well as a more advanced level of support, encapsulated in an accredited Masters level course. The paper concludes with a proposal for research into the learning experience of the GTAs as well as for further research which will examine ways in which the university may support a larger number of GTAs in addition to other staff on hourly paid contracts.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants, Continuing Professional Development

Introduction

In many universities, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) have become a major part of the teaching team, providing for improved staff student ratios in a mass higher education system (Park, 2004, Regan & Besemer, 2009). Their activities are primarily in terms of tutoring and demonstrating in large first year classes, but increasingly they are

developing expertise in assessment, course and programme design (Lueddeke, 1997; Scott, 2008). Support for GTAs in all aspects of their roles is far from uniform, and is generally determined by the higher education institution, and the department in which they teach (Lueddeke, 1997). Dwyer (1998) suggests that university training should "provide its graduates with the knowledge and skills and allow them to take responsibility for their teaching and for their ongoing development as university teachers" (Dwyer, 1998, p.265). However, it is not made clear how this should be taken forward, and indeed, how much learning and teaching involvement there is from GTAs (Scott, 2008).

Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

Concerns within departments and institutions regarding support for GTAs revolve around quality assurance and quality enhancement issues, primarily in terms of supporting the learning experience for undergraduate students. Park (2002) comments on the fact that some undergraduates feel "short-changed" when being taught by GTAs and in a recent study by Masuka (2009) undergraduate students thought it problematic that GTAs did not receive "teacher training" and expressed concern when they were tutored by a GTA rather than a member of staff. Hopwood and Stocks (2008) report on the perceptions of postgraduates who felt that they did not have opportunities to learn how to teach, and how this was seen as problematic to the GTAs as well as to the undergraduates. Scrutiny of the training and development of academic staff is undertaken through internal and external quality reviews, and increasingly questions are being asked about the provisions for GTAs who are taking an increasing role in the learning experience of students. These quality assurance and enhancement concerns, although being of concern to GTAs, will certainly be more of a concern to higher education institutions, and may underpin their decisions in terms of the amount and quality of training provision that is provided for GTAs.

Professional Development

The development needs of the GTAs also need to be considered. Some GTAs may go on to take academic positions; however, all GTAs require support in terms of their own

immediate development (Hopwood & Stocks, 2008). Developments in North America such as the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program (LaPidus, 1998) go some way to meeting the development needs of postgraduate students. In the UK, the introduction of Higher Education Academy (HEA) subject centres has led to an increase in the provision of development opportunities for GTAs, with some centres, such as Bioscience and Psychology targeting support for GTAs. The issue of professional development for GTAs, both initial and continuing, is something that is being addressed by the UK Council for Graduate Education but is also something that needs to be addressed at a local level.

An Institutional Approach to GTA Training.

The approach taken by the University of Glasgow is outlined here. Following a Senate resolution in 1993, the position on GTA development and support was clarified, such that each GTA, before commencing or at an early stage of their career as a tutor or demonstrator should undertake a compulsory 6 hours of training and development in learning and teaching. Three hours of this training was to be provided by the central unit tasked with learning and teaching provision, and the remaining hours to be undertaken within the department in which they were to teach. Thus it was felt that generic issues would be "dealt with" centrally, and more subject specific issues, including assessment, would be dealt with locally. GTAs are informed of the local component of their training when they attend the central provision, which is called GTA Statutory Training. Approximately 300 new GTAs complete the GTA Statutory Training each year. The training serves as an induction to learning and teaching, the GTAs' roles and responsibilities, as well as an induction to the university support services that are available. This training is provided primarily to meet the institutional needs for quality assurance and enhancement. Additional provision of training is provided by the central support service on request from departments, to groups of their GTAs and this has been related to, for example, the assessment of essays or laboratory reports and facilitating group work. Again, this can be seen to meet the institutional agenda.

GTA Professional Development

In 1998 a course was proposed, which provided an opportunity for continuing professional development (CPD) for GTAs and a venue for those who wished to think more seriously about their role in the learning process as well as those who saw themselves moving into academic positions, post-PhD. This was the GTA Module: Approaches to Teaching, Learning and Assessment. It was accredited at 15 points at Masters Level (where 180 points are required for a full Masters qualification), and was initially accredited by the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) for associate fellowship status. The course is currently accredited by the HEA, such that successful completion entitles participants to become Associates of the HEA.

In the academic year 2004-05 a new course team was appointed. They undertook a re-development of the course, within the bounds of the intended learning outcomes stated in the course documentation, and given in figure 1.

Figure 1.   Intended Learning Outcomes for the GTA Module: Approaches to Teaching Learning and Assessment.

By the end of the Module participants should be able to:

• *employ* a reflective framework in which to interpret and adapt their own teaching;

• *analyse* and *assess* their own teaching practice in terms of what is considered 'best practice';

• *refer* to and *assess* principles and techniques of course planning and design;

• *apply* current theories of student learning to their teaching method;

• *adapt* current teaching and learning theories to suit their particular discipline, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a range of

    (i)   teaching approaches and methods, and

    (ii)   assessment strategies and techniques.

The philosophy behind the course was to model content and process. The course team believed it was not sufficient to merely teach about learning, teaching and assessment (LTA), but also to provide and engage the students in a number of models of engagement in LTA, as well as providing many avenues for reflection on their learning within the contexts of their own disciplines and their own teaching. This was envisaged

as engagement in "learning in the classroom" (in the sense of the space in which participants taught), and externally in peer groups and through the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE).

The course has undergone revisions in the light of evaluations as well as in terms of the engagement with external accreditation, firstly with the HEA, and latterly through a more active and explicit engagement with the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF) (HEA, 2006). This closer alignment with the UK PSF is deemed to be of great benefit, as it links to a nationwide focus on CPD in learning and teaching throughout academic careers.

The GTA Module: Content and Process

The GTA Module is intended as a practice-based course, and so the participants are required to be teaching during the course, and preferably to have some experience of tutoring or demonstrating prior to enrolment. The philosophy behind the course and the means by which course team and participant interaction are expected to take place are explained in the initial induction session. At this point it is made clear that students are expected to attend and to participate in the classroom and formative assessment activities, and are given a learning contract signed by the course team and the participants. They are encouraged to take this away and think about it before signing, to be sure that they want to commit to the course. Part of the success of the course is derived from the fact that students engage in a range of activities, many of which require their physical presence in a session which takes place in the evenings after work. They are also provided with a large amount of ongoing formative feedback, and therefore need to submit work at given deadlines. This is made clear to them in the induction session, and this is what they commit to in signing the learning contract.

The course's credit-rating of 15 points at Masters level is equivalent to 150 notional learning hours. There are ten face to face sessions as detailed in figure 2.

Figure 2.   Session titles for the GTA Module

Session titles

Introductory evening

Approaches to Teaching & Learning 1

Approaches to Teaching & Learning 2

Student Learning

Design

Small groups 1

Assessment

Evaluating practice

Small groups 2 / lab demonstrating

Final meeting / round up

The face to face sessions have associated pre-readings, with post session activities allied to a number of these. Students are formed into peer groups for small group discussions on progress and to enable them to get to know a smaller part of the cohort. From these peer groups participants arrange to observe each other teaching, from which they write an observation report and reflect on their own as well as a peer's teaching. Each of the post session activities is provided with feedback, including suggestions for ways in which the work can be improved. The final summative assessment consists of a portfolio of work comprising the post-session activities, the peer observation exercise and an essay which should provide a critical reflection on teaching practice. The essay is submitted for formative assessment, a month before the final deadline, and returned with feedback and suggestions for improvement.

The pre-session reading is an integral part of the course, this involves two peer-reviewed papers or book chapters relating to the topic of each session, and every participant is expected to read these. Exercises are undertaken in the face-to-face session, using the readings to inform discussion. The course team endeavours to use a different methodology each week in terms of how the reading are integrated, including for example, small groups, pairs, posters, notes, presentations, individual reflections, defining activities and fish-bowl activities.

Each week a different learning environment is created by altering the learning space. This has involved changing the format and layout of tables to be in a board room style, café format, individual rows or an uninterrupted circle. On occasion participants or groups can absent themselves to other spaces to undertake exercises in a "tutor-less" group. The constant changing is not intended to confuse the participants or engender a feeling of unease, but rather to alert them to the fact that differences in the learning environment can be used to good effect.

Teaching styles also take many forms, using powerpoint slides to direct activities, like a lecture, sitting in large or small groups for discussions, allowing the students to direct activities, using handouts or props (including dice and hour glasses), encouraging students to engage through creating posters, inviting comments and questions or designing tasks.

Participants are encouraged to collect feedback on their teaching in a number of ways and from a range of sources. Throughout the course, feedback is collected from the participants, and again, in terms of involving them in an appreciation of the range of processes that are available to them, feedback is collected in a myriad of ways. These feedback mechanisms include minute papers (Angelo & Cross, 1993), students are asked to write a reflective piece on questions posed by the course team, they select words from a typed sheet provided by the staff (including phrases such as "pure dead brilliant") to describe a session, or selecting three words of their own and ascribing positive or negative feelings to them. In addition to modelling student feedback practices, this feedback is also used in active evaluation processes, such that the course team can be responsive to students' needs, and can demonstrate the efficacy of "closing the loop" for evaluation (George & Cowan, 1999)

The course is supported by the university's virtual learning environment (Moodle). It provides a repository of course materials and additional resources which have been identified as being useful or interesting. It also provides a number of avenues for discussion about topics that have arisen in class, as well as discussion about work that has been submitted for formative assessment. The social forum is used by some, as the participants work across different campuses, and for the first time this year there

was a request to use the glossary tool as a means of helping to explain some of the jargon that was new to participants engaging in learning about learning.

In the initial stages of development of the course, there was also a modelling of different teaching in terms of the numbers of staff (one, two or three) and the ways in which these staff interacted as teachers and with the group. Although the distinctions were seen to provide some further insights into teaching, team teaching is not widely practiced across higher education and so it would be unlikely that participants would be involved in this, for this reason the practice was discontinued. However, in terms of personal and professional development for the course team, it has been seen as a loss.

Developing Professional Aspects of the Course.

Developments continue in the course, not least with the introduction of the UK PSF and the closer alignment of the course to this framework. The framework, in addition to providing a background to the course, and a means by which participants can self-assess and be assessed, also inducts participants into thinking about the GTA Module as a step on the way of their CPD in learning and teaching rather than as merely an assessment hurdle. Further research is proposed which will examine the learning experience from the course, and the individual professional development which is derived from it. These are aspects of the postgraduate experience that Regan and Besemer (2009) indicate are poorly researched. The intention is to analyse the potential impacts of this form of professional development as course participants transition to academic positions. This research also affords the opportunity to engage in deliberations around professional learning from and through professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009).

The experience of being part of the GTA Module has had a profound impact on teachers and participants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this course is highly valued by participants and their subsequent employers. Many of the participants remain in touch with members of the course team, even though they have moved to academic positions in the UK or overseas. Some of this is perhaps due to the intensive nature of the course, the amount of work that participants undertake and the large amount of staff contact in terms of face-to-face sessions and feedback. However, the intensive nature

of the course does lead to limitations in terms of the number of GTAs who can be supported in this way. The number of applicants always far exceeds the number of places available. Research is underway into other ways in which a larger number of GTAs can be supported in their CPD for learning and teaching, and developments in potential future provision are ongoing.

Other models currently under development should provide opportunities for a larger number of GTAs to engage in structured reflection on their practice, but this may be at the expense of the cohort experience which participants currently enjoy during the course. One model would involve working with departmental contacts, providing course materials and activities for them to work through in longer timescales and providing support for individual applications for recognition with the HEA. This development would provide a blended approach, using face-to-face and online activities and engagement with departmental and central support unit staff. Although the experience of the GTA Module has been a very positive one for the participants, it may prove necessary to move to this different model of engagement, to enable more GTAs and other groups of hourly paid staff to benefit from structured reflection on their practice and the opportunity to be guided and supported to obtain recognition through the HEA.

Acknowledgements

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