Postgraduates who Teach

Inside the Postgraduate Experience: Postgraduate Research Project 2015
University of Bath Students’ Union

1. Background

The majority of Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) respondents at the University of Bath teach or demonstrate during their research degree\(^1\). The experience of these postgraduates has been raised as a national issue by both the Students’ Union and the National Union of Students (NUS) as currently this group fall between a representational gap as both staff and students.\(^2\) In response to this, the University College Union (UCU), in conjunction with NUS, launched the Postgraduate Employment Charter to call for minimum standards of pay, conditions, opportunity and professional development and to raise the profile of postgraduate employment issues.

Training for postgraduates who teach was reviewed by the University of Bath in 2013, leading to the introduction of ‘Teaching Introduction for Postgraduates’ (TIPS) a PG Skills session with separate strands for lab-based and seminar-based teaching. In 2014 the Bath Scheme was also introduced for the professional development of teaching staff, including postgraduates.

A focus group was undertaken by the Students’ Union with five PGRs from various departments who have carried out teaching work to discuss their experience of teaching at the University of Bath. Teaching issues highlighted in Research Academic Council, University of Bath response to the PRES 2013 and the NUS Postgraduate Teaching Survey (2013), as well as the NUS/UCU Postgraduate Employment Charter were also discussed.

For simplicity, the term ‘GTA’ (Graduate Teaching Assistants) is used throughout this paper to refer to postgraduates engaged in teaching or demonstrating, rather than the standard University of Bath term ‘postgraduates who teach’. GTA is widely used across the sector, including in PRES 2015.

1. Allocation of work

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\(^1\) PRES 2015, Q17, ‘taught (or demonstrated) ... during your research degree programme’, 53.9% (Bath).

\(^2\) Sally Williamson (SU Education Officer 2013-14), *Improving the Experience of Postgraduates who Teach or Demonstrate*, 2014.
Allocation of teaching work to PGRs apparently varies across department, and participants were concerned at the informality and lack of transparency. It was reported that often teaching was assigned by contacting the head of teaching personally, rather than a system that gave suitable candidates an equal opportunity of having work assigned to them. One student commented that teaching allocation can be done ‘quite sneakily’ and may be subject to ‘knowing the right people’ rather than being transparent and equitable. This was echoed by discussions in Research Academic Council, with one PGR describing allocation as ‘dependent on which PGRs are in which office on which day’.

‘In my department they send out e-mails to certain people who have been recommended.’

PGR focus group

Increasingly, universities are introducing a clear policy on the allocation of PGR teaching posts to ensure fairness and transparency in recruitment including a requirement to advertise all posts and the form this should take. The University of York specifies the form this advertising should take and makes it a key priority of the selection process to ‘increase the number of PGRs who can participate in paid teaching’, as well as individual suitability for the post. Among GW4 partners, the University of Exeter requires the advertising of all posts to comply with the University’s equal opportunities standards, while the University of Bristol states that ‘all PGR students should be made aware of any teaching opportunities available to them and the process for application’. The University of Bath does not currently have a similar policy in QA9 or other Code of Practice.

2. Training

The spread of the PGRs within the focus group means that some of the training they received will have differed depending on the year they started their research degree. However, all participants expressed criticisms about the training they had received.

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3 Research Academic Council minutes, 26 June 2015.
4 University of York, University Policy on Postgraduates who Teach (PGWT), http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/hr/resources/policy/postgraduates-who-teach.htm#2 (accessed 6 July 2015)
3.1 Centralised nature of training

‘Teaching Introduction for Postgraduates who teach’ (TIPS), the PG Skills training session for postgraduates new to teaching\(^7\), was criticised for not taking into account the ‘massive variation in how people teach’. Its centralised nature means that it does not accommodate for the variety of subject areas that postgraduate teachers are coming from. Splitting the training up between ‘lab-based’ and ‘seminar-based’ was seen to be ‘confusing’ as not every non-lab subject is the same. It was also seen as containing a large proportion of pedagogical theory that had ‘very little practical merit’. Most participants believed that current training does not adequately prepare postgraduate students to teach and they are left to ‘learn as they go along’. This was echoed in PRES 2015 response, with some respondents not finding the session useful, including comments calling for more specific, practical training.\(^8\)

3.2 Departmental training

The Postgraduate Employment Charter calls for GTAs to receive an ‘induction into discipline-specific teaching practice and an introduction to course materials, teaching methods, modes of assessment and feedback and student complaint procedure’.\(^9\) PRES 2015 response raised the lack of departmental training, and few respondents had received departmental training. In the Department for Mathematical Sciences, departmental training was provided, which was found to be more useful and relevant, and the Department for Economics notified postgraduates of nationally-run discipline-specific workshops for GTAs in economics.\(^10\) It was found to be useful by a participant who went on the training. Participants felt that individual departmental training would be ‘far more productive’ and should involve lecturers giving more ‘hands-on and relevant’ advice. There was seen to be scope for a university-wide teacher training course but that this should run alongside departmental training and should cover best practice on areas such as student confidentiality, how to work with small groups of students, how to deal with problems and information on university-wide policies relating to teaching. Currently, this sort of information is said to be lacking from the course and GTAs only receive this information

\(^7\) University of Bath, PG Skills, Teaching Introduction (for Postgraduates who Teach), [http://www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching/rdu/courses/pgskills/modules/RP00136.htm](http://www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching/rdu/courses/pgskills/modules/RP00136.htm) (accessed 30 June 2015).

\(^8\) PRES 2015, Q32, ‘additional comments about the formal training you have received from the University for your teaching.’


\(^10\) PRES 2015, Q33, ‘comments about the formal training you have received from your Department for your teaching.’

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in ‘off-hand comments’. This lack of clear channels of communication disproportionately affects part-time and distance learning postgraduates.

3.3 Lack of further training

Participants had not received any other training after the training they received at the start. It was commented that it was difficult to give a consistent teaching experience when ‘the support you are given isn’t consistent’ and all the materials postgraduate teachers need are not always supplied. Nearly a third of PRES respondents who taught felt they had not received appropriate support and guidance for teaching, suggesting the variability of support is more widespread. The proportion of PGRs who reported receiving adequate support was higher among GW4 partners.

This was seen as directly affecting the ability to provide good tutorials, relating closely to the lecturer whose course the GTA was supporting. Good practice was reported in lecturers sending an e-mail at the end of each week stating what they had covered in lectures that week.

Some universities also provide detailed guides for new GTAs, including much of the training content. PGR Academic Reps at Research Academic Council suggested the introduction of a Moodle course containing teaching resources and development opportunities.

3.4 Effects on undergraduates

A prominent theme that came out of this discussion was that through providing inadequate training for GTAs this was likely to reflect badly on undergraduates who are more likely to receive ‘variability of teaching.’ It was noted that due to the increase in fees, undergraduate students are now expecting more from the teaching they receive. One participant warned that unless the process of training postgraduate students was improved and more formalised, the University’s number one position in National Student Survey (NSS) satisfaction ratings ‘might not last long’.

3. Feedback to GTAs

1.1 Student feedback

12 PRES 2015, Q17a, ‘If yes, to what extent do you agree that you have been given appropriate support and guidance for your teaching?’ 28.4% definitely or mostly disagree, 57.2% definitely or mostly agree. (Bath)
13 Ibid., 60% (GW4 response).
15 Research Academic Council minutes, 12 February 2014.
Feedback for GTAs was seen to be lacking by some participants. Feedback given from students was seen to be ‘not very constructive’ as often all that is provided is a rating from one to five on their overall performance with no qualitative detail. The Department of Mathematical Sciences appears to have more constructive feedback forms with more detail, but felt that it would be helpful for its feedback to be passed on more quickly so that it can be acted on sooner.

1.2 Teaching observation
Participants reported that teaching observation of GTAs was rare, with only one participant confirming that their teaching although this would have been welcomed to develop their teaching. It was felt that GTA teaching quality is not effectively monitored by the University and how this, again, will reflect badly in undergraduate student opinion who will expect a high quality of teaching for the increased fees they are now paying. It was recommended that the university have a centralised policy with standards across the university and departmental standards for giving GTAs constructive feedback.

4. Pay

5.1 Pay comparison and preparation time
An investigation by the Times Higher Education into rates of pay for GTAs reported that rates of pay varied from £9.96 to £73.44. The University of Bath pays £13.05 per hour, placing it towards the lower end of responding universities for the sector as a whole.

However, the base hourly rate is not the only factor, with preparation time also a consideration. The NUS/UCU Employment Charter calls for each hour of teaching a GTA should be paid for 2.5 hours in total, but the University of Bath currently uses a multiplier of 1.5 to pay for preparation time. There was strong feeling among participants that GTAs are not sufficiently reimbursed for teaching preparation. This varied per subject as humanities and social sciences subjects were seen by as requiring more preparation time than the sciences. The University of Bristol has changed its preparation time policy to reflect this variation.

Among GW4 universities GTA pay is as follows:

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18 University of Bristol, Personnel weekly briefing notes: Pay Rates for Part-Time Hourly Paid Teachers, [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/weekly-briefings/archive2008/05dec08.html](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/weekly-briefings/archive2008/05dec08.html) (accessed 15 July 2015).
University of Bristol paying £14.44,\(^{19}\) adjusted rate varies.

University of Exeter base pay rate of £15.96, with an adjusted rate of £31.92.\(^ {20}\)

University of Cardiff £19.88 for teaching and £10.45 for demonstrating,\(^ {21}\) adjusted rate of £40.78\(^ {22}\)

The University of Bath’s base pay rate £13.05 and pay adjusted for preparation time of £19.58,\(^ {23}\) pays the lowest base hourly teaching rate in GW4 and where data is available substantially less than GW4 partners.

5.2 Lack of pay review

GTAs do not currently receive an annual pay review because they are on zero-hour contracts. Therefore experience in teaching is not reflected in the payment received and it was noted that it did not make sense that PG teachers in their first year of teaching are getting paid the same as those in their third year.

‘Fixed at the bottom and can never increase’.

PGR GTA focus group

5.3 Unpaid activities

Participants also stated that they were required to undertake various unpaid activities in order to fulfil their roles properly, including replying to student e-mails. Participants reported receiving high numbers of e-mails, particularly during the exam period, as often GTAs are seen as ‘more approachable than the lecturer.’ It was noted that GTAs are encouraged to work office hours that they are not paid for, with one participant commenting that there was often a conflict for GTAs in wanting to provide pastoral care

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\(^{19}\) University of Bristol, Hourly-paid teacher pay rates, [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/hpt/hpt-payrates.html](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/hpt/hpt-payrates.html) (accessed 7 July 2015).


\(^{22}\) ‘Tutors receive payment calculated on the basis of a nominal two hours ‘preparation’ time (currently £10.45 per hour) for every one hour of teaching (contact) time. Contact hours are paid at the University’s current teaching rate of £19.88 per hour.’ This adjusted rate is for University of Cardiff School of English, Communication and Philosophy, other faculties pay rates not available. University of Cardiff School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Thinking about teaching as a Postgraduate Tutor in ENCAP? [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/encap/degreeprogrammes/postgraduateresearch/thinking_about_teaching_booklet.pdf](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/encap/degreeprogrammes/postgraduateresearch/thinking_about_teaching_booklet.pdf)

\(^{23}\) University of Bath, Rates of pay for casual workers.
for students to ensure their wellbeing, but not paid for this time as it cannot be accounted for in timesheets. Participants agreed that undergraduate students are likely to be more satisfied if they receive more extensive feedback, but felt that the time they are paid for marking does not allow to give their preferred level of feedback.

‘Doesn’t take into account the amount of prep we put in... I don’t think 7 papers in an hour is feasible.’

Marking class presentations was seen as even more problematic by participants, as GTAs are not reimbursed for the time spent typing up feedback for these. GTAs in the Department of Mathematical Sciences noted that they are not paid for inputting marks and attendance into the system.

It was also noted that GTAs are not paid for the training undertaken for teaching roles, with one participants commenting that ‘if you are doing training within a job you get paid for it.’ It was observed that other staff at the University get paid for training and that GTAs should be ‘receiving the same treatment as any other staff’ at the University.

5. Zero-hour contracts

6.1 Lack of employee rights

Participants were critical of zero-hour contracts for GTAs. Despite University of Bath policy\(^\text{24}\) for teaching staff who work 322 hours per annum or 1 day per week over a 12 month period (0.2 FTE) to be given a choice to transfer to a fractional contract, participants were not aware of any GTAs who were not on zero-hour contracts. It was noted in the University of Bath ‘Let’s Talk’ that there is an ongoing move towards fractional contracts ‘where appropriate’\(^\text{25}\) but the number of postgraduates this would potentially affect is not known, and leaves the majority who are not included without any improvement in working conditions. The University of Bristol posts its similar policy online,\(^\text{26}\) but the University of Bath policy is not set out in a similar way. The zero-hour status leaves GTAs without sick pay, or maternity and paternity leave. One participant

\(^{24}\) University of Bath, Executive summary of guiding principles for the assimilation of part-time teaching staff (2009).


\(^{26}\) University of Bristol, Hourly paid teachers, [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/hpt/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/hpt/) (accessed 10 July 2015).
expressed that ‘unless something goes wrong a lot of us don’t know how vulnerable we are’ with the University having ‘no obligation’ to look after GTAs.

Participants commented that GTAs ‘have to work through illness no matter what’ and that if such unexpected problems such as family illness occurs there is no financial support for GTAs to take any necessary time off. It was also noted that there are some GTAs who are working almost full-time, have been so for ten years and are ‘petrified of having a child because the University has no legal responsibility to look after them at all’. There were complaints that current contracts were ‘not a reasonable system at all’ and participants commented that the University of Bath is the second highest user of zero-hour contracts in the country, with the University of Bristol giving a considerable number of GTAs more stable contracts.

GTAs are still eligible for statutory sick pay at some universities who use casual contracts. 27 The government eligibility criteria for statutory sick pay include the requirement to be classed as an employee by the employer, 28 so inclusion in this category would offer GTAs increased protection. Increased communication of the terms and conditions of employment for GTAs would be welcomed, with a number of universities now posting postgraduate teaching contracts online. The University of Sheffield has produced the Sheffield Graduate Training Contract specifically for its GTAs, rather than rely on zero-hour contracts. 29

Participants expressed that they would be happy to go through a more formal process of recruitment for their postgraduate teaching jobs if it meant it entitled them to a contract and therefore stability and security in their employment. It was also felt that this would improve the quality of teaching as well if combined with a more transparent recruitment process.

6.2 Teaching hours

Participants discussed that while there is a clause within their PhD contracts that states that PGR students are expected to ‘reasonably contribute towards the teaching environment’, there is no safety-net in return with ‘nothing to stop the university [not] giving you work’. It should be noted that QA9 states that ‘postgraduate research students will not normally be required to engage in teaching activity that occupies more than six hours of work per week (including contact time and time for marking submitted work)

calculated as an average over the teaching year but this would not prevent a specific piece of teaching work.

Participants complained of the precariousness of the role. It was reported that GTAs ‘often do not know week to week’ what hours they will receive, so a consistent wage cannot be relied upon. The instability of teaching hours, it was also noted, can lead to a very high turnover of who is teaching a course. As there is no obligation on the part of GTAs to remain on a single course for an entire year or semester, due to the zero-hour contract, a GTA can ‘leave at any time’. This impacts on the consistency of teaching for undergraduate students. Further, the treatment of GTAs was also noted to impact on the quality of teaching undergraduates are getting due to ‘stressed out teachers’ who do are not paid to adequately prepare and may not be focused on it due to the stresses of the job.

6. Balancing teaching and PGR study

7.1 PGR study takes second place
Although QA9 covers usual maximum requirements, participants described term-time as an intense period when many GTAs cram in teaching hours to make enough money to get through the university holidays. This means that PGR study can get sidelined due to the need to financially survive throughout the year. It was stated that this can cause tension and conflict with supervisors as it is ‘their priority to get me through my PhD, whereas my priority is doing my PhD whilst being able to live’. It was agreed that taking on a GTA role can often mean there is ‘not enough time in term time’ to focus on PGR study.

7.2 Outside the teaching culture
Participants were emphatic that they did not feel a part of the teaching community at the University of Bath. One GTA commented that ‘we are not considered staff, we are not considered students, we’re sort of in this [no-man’s land] where they can’t figure out what to do with us’. The university was seen to do ‘absolutely nothing’ to aid GTAs in feeling part of the teaching community. This was seen as a factor that affected teaching, with GTAs seen as an ‘appendage’ to other teaching staff, leading to a lack of communication between academics and GTAs.
GTAs are also not invited to meeting with other academic staff in their department, but participants reported that GTAs in other institutions were included in meetings. It should be noted that as casual teaching staff, GTAs would not be paid for attending meetings.

This treatment of GTAs was accounted for in the tendency of other academic staff to regard them as ‘transient characters’ that ‘do bits on the side’ for full-time academics, rather than acknowledging their contribution to teaching. One participant reflected that:

‘I get the impression that sometimes a lot of lecturers feel like they are the ones providing us with the service, the skills … but we are providing a specialised service to students too’.

In general participants felt ‘taken for granted’ with academic staff thinking they are ‘throwing us a bone’ by giving GTAs a ‘brilliant experience’, but in reality they are not treated as equals with other academic staff, the work is hard, they are not sufficiently rewarded for their time and receive no job stability.

The University of York’s policy on GTAs explicitly recognises the value of their work, taking as its starting point the acknowledgment that ‘research students who contribute to the teaching at the university play an important role… enhancing the learning experience of the students they support. The university values this contribution and seeks to maximise the professional development opportunities available to them’. The sharing of best practice among departments on the inclusion of GTAs offers the potential to improve their status as teachers.

7.3 Accreditation

Nearly a third of Bath respondents of the NUS Teaching Survey 2013 reported that any form of continued professional development, including skills development and

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31 University of York, University Policy on Postgraduates who Teach (PGWT).
mentoring and coaching, were not available.\textsuperscript{32} The Higher Education Academy (HEA)\textsuperscript{33} provides accreditation for training provision, which many new teaching posts require. The Bath Scheme, introduced in 2014 and run by the University’s Learning & Teaching Enhancement Office (LTEO), is a ‘nationally benchmarked, formal award for... professionalism in teaching’ open to GTAs as well as University staff who teach or support teaching.\textsuperscript{34} The scheme fulfils nationally fulfilled benchmarks\textsuperscript{35}, which enable easier individual access to HEA fellowship. However, it is not clear what the level of take-up is among GTAs, or how well entry to it is communicated to them, either in TIPs training or during the course of their teaching work.

Participants were not aware of any accreditation for postgraduate teaching, viewing the useful experience that teaching work provided as difficult to quantify on a CV. One participant commented that the ‘experience just goes into a void’ with it difficult to ‘explain what it’s worth when there is very little evidence.’ It would therefore be appreciated to have some form of accreditation for teaching undertaken as it ‘would be an investment for the future.’ The scheme’s introduction is a positive step, but participants’ concerns suggests that improved communication of the Bath Scheme is needed for GTAs.

7. Support

8.1 Representation

Participants noted that they would go to a module leader or a lecturer if they had teaching-related issues. Academic Representatives represent PGTs and PGRs on course issues, but none of the participants felt they had a specific representative they could speak to about problems with teaching and it was noted that there was a general lack action on GTA issues. One participant commented that PGRs suggested that rather than operating through Academic Representatives, a designated GTA contact could be introduced as an effective ‘channel between us and everything else in the institution’ on teaching issues.

8.2 Union membership

\textsuperscript{32} NUS, NUS Teaching Survey 2013, Q30 Have you had the opportunity for continued professional development throughout the year? - 9 out of 25 reported no opportunities (Bath response).
\textsuperscript{33} HEA, Professional recognition https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/professional-recognition (accessed 30 June 2015).
It was noted by participants that the majority of GTAs do not know what the University College Union (UCU) is and that they have a right to join it. This reflects the findings in the NUS Postgraduate Teaching Survey (2013) that found that only 2 out of 25 respondents were members of the UCU or other trade union. Participants expressed that their right to join a union or what a union does had not been adequately explained to them, one participant stated that ‘the University are happy for postgraduate students not to be aware of the union.’ It was also observed that GTAs who strike to attempt to improve pay or conditions would be vulnerable due to zero-hour contracts: ‘there is nothing to stop a department turning around and saying you have got no hours next month.’

8. Recommendations

1. Selection of GTAs should be communicated to all eligible postgraduates, offering equality of opportunity that would enable part-time and distance learning students to apply.

2. The TIPS session should be developed to include more practical training.

3. Introduction of qualitative student feedback forms, with response provided to GTAs promptly.

4. Best practice on the inclusion of GTAs into departmental teaching culture could be added as appendices to QA9.

5. Teaching observation by a member of academic staff should take place twice in the first six months with feedback provided as soon as possible.

6. An improved hourly rate to bring the University into line with GW4 partners, combined with greater paid preparation time. A multiplier of 2 hours pay for each hour of teaching would take greater consideration of preparation time and unpaid work.

7. The introduction of a contract that recognised the specific circumstances of postgraduate teaching, offering employee status and eligibility for statutory sick pay.

8. Improved communication of the availability and content of the Bath Scheme would be likely to increase the numbers of GTAs who would benefit from the professional development it offers. An increased online presence, inclusion in the TIPS session and promotion by department and supervisors would be important means of achieving this.

36 NUS, NUS PG Teaching Survey for University of Bath (2013).