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Valbona Muzaka

Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Sheffield, UK

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The niche of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs): perceptions and reflections

Valbona Muzaka*

Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Sheffield, UK

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs') niche in the current UK higher education system by means of reflecting on the results of a survey undertaken at a department of the University of Sheffield. The survey highlights that GTAs occupy an ambiguous niche; they are simultaneously teachers, researchers, students and employees, with considerable tensions emerging as a result of the often conflicting rights and responsibilities associated with such roles. The paper concludes that a dialogue should take place within and between universities in order to decide the desired status of the GTA within the UK higher education system and design a workable framework to sustain it.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants; UK Higher Education; doctoral students; teaching quality

Significant discussion has been taking place within UK higher education circles since the early 1990s about the structural shifts in the character, organisation and administrative arrangements of the UK higher education system and concerns for the quality and quantity of teaching and research provided (e.g. Gibbs and Jenkins 1992; Martin 1999; Smith, Scott, and McKay 1993). One of the key concerns relates to the challenge of ensuring that rising student, societal, and governmental expectations are met satisfactorily and the quality of teaching and research is not compromised in the face of growing student numbers, reduced staff–student ratios and deepening resource constraints. One way UK universities have found to deal with some of these challenges has been to employ a greater number of part-time staff, many of them doctoral students, to deal with certain teaching tasks. Many departments now rely considerably on this cohort of part-time teaching staff, who are typically well motivated, cheap to employ and adaptable and flexible as employees (Gillon and Hoad 2001). Employing doctoral students, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) for undergraduate teaching in UK universities did not start in the 1990s, but since then doctoral students have assumed a wider role in teaching undergraduate students and many degrees have become increasingly dependent on this type of staffing, particularly in traditional, research-led departments (Lueddeke 1997; Park and Ramos 2002).

Clearly, such pressures and changes are not unique to the UK; the strengthening of the research-teaching nexus for doctoral students has also been advocated and attempted in other countries such as Germany, Belgium and Australia (Crewe 1996).

*Email: v.muzaka@sheffield.ac.uk

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In the USA, large and research-led universities have long used doctoral students to teach, especially on large introductory undergraduate courses (Shannon, Twale, and Moore 1998). US literature on issues concerning GTAs grew particularly since the 1960s when the growing GTA numbers became alarming to those concerned with the quality of teaching and learning in US universities (D’Andrea 1996). The US experience with GTAs, and the relatively extensive accompanying body of literature, can provide useful insights and lessons for the UK system, although actual responses need to take into account the concrete economic, cultural, social and political context in the UK (D’Andrea 1996; Park 2004).

Despite the growing reliance on GTAs to teach in UK research-led universities during the last 20 years or so, research on GTAs in the UK is still underdeveloped. The aim of the present paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the niche that GTAs occupy in the UK higher education system by means of reflecting on some comments collected through a survey undertaken at a research-led, social science department of the University of Sheffield. The survey aimed to probe what the three directly affected groups, namely undergraduate students, GTAs and academic staff, perceived to be the most beneficial and problematic aspects of employing GTAs to teach small group seminars. GTAs teach more than 70% of small group seminars for first and second year undergraduate students in the department, with the rest of the seminars and most lectures covered by academic staff.2 A brief account of the methodology used for the survey is given in the first section, followed by its results organised into various themes in the second section.3 Although the survey is based on one department only, there are reasons to believe that its results may be indicative of GTAs’ role in similar departments elsewhere in the UK. To the extent that this is true, and based on the discussion in the third section, an additional aim of this paper is to reinforce the demand for rethinking and reforming the status of the GTAs in the UK.

The survey
The survey was carried out during December 2006 in a social science department of the University of Sheffield. Two separate survey forms were used, one for undergraduate students and one for GTAs and staff. The survey format for both was simple, asking open-ended questions about the most beneficial and problematic aspects of having GTA-run small group seminars. The aim of this format was both to avoid confusion among respondents and to allow them to explore and express their own perceptions and views. The survey form used for GTAs and staff differed from that used for students in that the former asked GTAs and staff about their perceptions from all three different vantage points: that of students, GTAs and department. The survey form was sent via email to all 25 full-time academic staff and all 25 GTAs in the department. In total, 10 GTAs and eight academic staff responded to the survey via email. In order to preserve anonymity, all returned forms were saved using numbers (i.e. GTA 1 or staff 1). A confidential, unstructured and informal interview was carried out with the Deputy Head of the Department aimed at gaining further insights into the departmental policy of employing GTAs and related issues.

A similar survey was undertaken by Park (2002) at the University of Lancaster in which a total of 22 staff members (university-wide, mostly Heads of Departments)
and 15 GTAs participated. The survey undertaken here focuses on one department only and, unlike Park’s survey, it also includes comments from a group of 51 undergraduate students. A total of 16 first year, 22 second year, and 13 third year students participated in the survey. This represents a randomly chosen sample of students but they were part of seminar groups for specific modules in the first, second, and third year, respectively. Permission was asked and secured by the relevant departmental authorities and the respective seminar tutors. The survey form and its aims were explained to the students and all efforts were made to clarify to them that they were under no obligation to participate in it. It is impossible to say how many decided not to participate, as the forms were circulated by students themselves and collected in a folder in the same manner. The survey form was anonymous and it asked students to highlight at least one beneficial and problematic aspect of having their seminars run by GTAs.

The survey results

Beneficial and problematic aspects for students

This section is organised into the three dominant themes that emerged from students’ responses: (i) GTAs’ subject knowledge; (ii) GTAs’ teaching style; and (iii) GTAs’ interpersonal skills. Interestingly, some facets within these themes were considered to be both beneficial and problematic (by different students). GTAs and staff perceptions of beneficial and problematic aspects for students are also included within these three themed subsections.

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs’) subject knowledge

That GTAs may lack a sound, overall knowledge of the subject was by far the most oft-repeated problematic aspect for students from their vantage point. Most students perceived GTAs’ knowledge to be too specific and narrow when compared to academic staff; as students put it ‘GTAs’ expertise is sometimes too specific and specialised’ (student 4) and ‘academic staff would know the subject better, since they are employed full-time to teach it’ (student 18). Even in cases when GTAs’ own research was in the same subject area, it was still considered lacking in breadth; as one put it, ‘knowledge of individual seminar topics can be vague’ (student 13). However, a few students considered the specific knowledge of GTAs to be beneficial in that ‘it can bring the latest perspective or research in that field’ which sometimes makes for ‘thought-provoking and interesting seminars’ (student 38). Some staff members also highlighted the fact that GTAs could offer students the advantage of being taught by teachers ‘familiar with the latest material’ (staff 2). Interestingly, only one GTA considered the ‘lack of in-depth knowledge’ to be somewhat beneficial for students in that it encouraged a healthy and enquiring attitude into the seminars as opposed to having them run by ‘a person “knowing” everything’ (GTA 4). Some GTAs, however, perceived that their lack of detailed knowledge either in the subject area they teach or in a particular seminar topic could lower the standard of teaching for students and enhance the chances that students would feel they were not ‘getting expert tuition’ (GTA 7). Only one staff member perceived students to feel less confident in GTAs’ academic judgement, while most academic staff perceived
students to be disadvantaged by potential lack of GTAs’ (teaching) experience rather than lack of subject knowledge per se.

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs’) teaching style

This theme includes comments about beneficial and problematic aspects in relation to the seminar structure and teaching methods used by the GTAs. Again, this theme is highlighted by respondents themselves, as the survey form did not ask specifically about GTAs’ teaching style and methods. Although it is difficult to quantify these comments given the survey format chosen, it appears that students’ perceptions about the problematic and beneficial aspects of having their seminars taught by GTAs are more balanced with regard to their teaching styles than they appear to be regarding GTAs’ subject knowledge. For instance, many students perceived it to be beneficial to have GTAs run small group seminars since their recent university experience gives them additional awareness and knowledge of what might work best for students in this setting, thus helping to keep ‘seminars useful and interesting’ (student 22). As another put it, GTAs’ ‘understanding of what an undergraduate can realistically do is invaluable’ (student 25). Most students who chose to comment on this theme found it beneficial to attend seminars run by GTAs, as these tended to be more flexible and less formal. Many students commented that GTAs tend to be better at stimulating group discussion because they: (i) are exploring their own ideas about the subject; (ii) tend to avoid ‘unrelated monologues’ typical of some academic staff; (iii) are not afraid to try new methods of running the seminar; (iv) tend to be more open to ideas from the group; and (v) are better at using technology and IT. Most staff members also perceived it as beneficial for students to have GTA-run seminars as GTAs tend to be more open to innovative teaching methods, more enthusiastic about learning to teach, and more capable of providing a more informal learning environment.

Interestingly, when students commented on the problematic aspects within this theme, two major points emerged. The first, and the most important from the students’ point of view, relates to a perceived lack of communication between GTAs and the respective module leader, while the second relates, more generally, to the seminar format. With regard to the former, some students thought it was problematic to have seminars run by GTAs as sometimes seminars were not in line with the lectures and at times, were even conflicting. Lack of communication and coordination between module leaders and GTAs meant that students felt they were sometimes given ‘work that conflicts with what we are required to do’ (student 11), with seminars sometimes focusing ‘on different areas to what the module leader intended . . . this can be detrimental to students’ performance in essays and exams’ (student 35). One student commented that it was best to attend a seminar group run by the module leader as s/he will teach the class ‘exactly what is expected of students in the exam’ (student 24). In addition, a few students raised concerns that GTAs were not too familiar with the university’s assessment criteria and ‘the standard of their marking varies significantly’ (student 45). With regard to the second point, a few students commented that one of the problems with GTA-run seminars was that some of them have less-developed teaching skills compared to staff. Interestingly, some others commented that GTAs ‘do not actually teach’ (student 17); some students perceived it problematic that ‘instead of mass input of info’ (student 29), the
seminar format is ‘too student-centred’ (student 29), or ‘allows too much student involvement’ (student 31). In addition, some students commented that GTAs ‘don’t have as much experience of teaching as regular academic staff’ (student 41) as a result of which they sometimes ‘don’t lead the conversation well enough’ (student 2) or ‘struggle to facilitate discussion’ properly (student 7).

The argument that seminars were too student-centred was highlighted as beneficial for students from the perspective of only one of the respondent GTAs. More generally, GTAs thought that students might consider GTAs’ role to be beneficial mainly in terms of there being more teaching hours and opportunities to interact more with the subject and other students than would have been the case in their absence. However, some GTAs, and two staff members, perceived it to be problematic for students that GTAs lacked teacher training and that students’ contact with ‘real academics’ during their university education was severely curtailed. Indeed, a few students commented that they found it difficult to reply to the survey questions because they had not had any or enough small group teaching with academic staff.

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs’) interpersonal skills

From students’ perspectives, these skills appear to be the most beneficial in terms of attending GTA-run seminars. Typically, most students perceived GTAs to be more approachable and less intimidating because, due to their age and recent experience of undergraduate university life, they can identify better and are more in touch with students and academic demands. This is important in that, as one student commented, GTAs appear to be ‘halfway between academic staff and student’, which provides ‘a dimension of their teaching that is not possessed by academic staff’ (student 6). Some students commented that they find it easier ‘to understand and learn from GTAs’ (student 33), find them less daunting to approach, and consider them better placed to advise students (especially so if they have studied in the same department). In addition, most students also perceived some GTAs to be passionate and enthusiastic about their subject, to have a more encouraging attitude towards students, more accessible in terms of contact time, and quicker at answering their emails. The only problematic aspect within this theme relates to a few GTAs being perceived nervous at times, and not appearing confident or ‘lacking control over certain classroom situations’ (student 49).

GTAs themselves also perceived their recent undergraduate experience to be beneficial for students, in addition to students benefiting from dedicated, enthusiastic and keen teachers, and an informal and non-intimidating learning environment. Interestingly, the respondent GTAs had not commented on students perhaps perceiving them as less confident or authoritative in a small group setting than academic staff. Similarly, staff members had not commented on these students’ perceptions, although the latter do not appear to be dominant. Like students and GTAs, most staff members considered it to be beneficial for students to have GTA-run seminars in that they offer access to enthusiastic, committed and ‘conscientious young scholars’ (staff 3) who, in addition, are more capable of relating to students and addressing their concerns.
Beneficial and problematic aspects for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) from the perspective of GTAs and staff

Beneficial aspects

The two most oft-repeated beneficial aspects for GTAs from their own perspective relate to work experience and skill acquisition. Many GTAs commented that they considered it beneficial teaching seminars because it offered them work experience which, in turn, was expected to increase their employability, whether within academe or outside it. As one GTA summarised it succinctly, ‘it is a good CV thing’ (GTA 5). Next to this theme, and related to it, was the perceived benefit of skill acquisition. Most GTAs commented that working with students in a small group setting helped to increase their ability to: (i) deal with difficult questions and people; (ii) transfer and apply their knowledge in another environment; (iii) hone their public speaking skills and confidence; and (iv) interact with young people. Most of these skills were considered transferable in different professions. Additionally, two GTAs, but none of the staff respondents, considered their small group teaching beneficial in terms of learning in other subject areas apart from their field of research which, in turn, helped to ‘broaden horizons’ (GTA 4), as well as ‘to come up with new ideas and insights related to your area from the discussions with students’ (GTA 9).

Many of the respondent staff also perceived the acquisition of skills mentioned above as beneficial for GTAs; as one commented ‘GTAs learn management skills, people skills, presentation skills... needed in any type of employment’ (staff 7). However, more staff than GTAs considered the teaching experience beneficial for GTAs in terms of preparation of the future faculty. In fact, only one GTA commented that ‘teaching should be considered a necessary, indeed, intrinsic part of the learning process postgraduate students are involved in’ (GTA 5, emphasis mine). On the contrary, most staff thought that GTAs’ teaching experience was beneficial for their professional development within the faculty and academe. As some put it, teaching experience helped GTAs gain ‘insights into how the academic process really works’ (staff 3) as well as in ‘consolidating the identification of GTAs and feeling of belonging to the department’ (staff 2). On the contrary, this latter theme was not picked by GTAs.

Problematic aspects

The predominant theme here, as perceived by both GTAs and staff, relates to time pressure. The majority of GTAs commented, in one way or another, that teaching took considerable time away from their research and could delay the timely conclusion of their PhD. One GTA noted that ‘my productivity as a PhD student fell significantly when I started teaching’ (GTA 4). Some commented that preparation for classes and other related tasks was very time-consuming; as one commented ‘to do the job properly, it can be very time-consuming and only a fraction of this time is actually paid for’ (GTA 10). Unlike most GTAs, only one staff member commented that GTAs ‘are simply not paid enough’ (staff 7). Almost all staff members also perceived time pressure to be the main problematic aspect for GTAs, in that time spent on teaching encroaches in GTAs’ research although, with regard to the latter, less so ‘when the subject taught is closely related to the area of research’ of the GTA (staff 5).
Another problematic area considered by GTAs, but not mentioned by staff, relates to a perceived lack of authority of GTAs in the way the module is organised and taught. Some GTAs commented that they felt they lacked authority in the organisation and running of the module and related issues; as one put it ‘the department gives us no authority to decide so students see no point in us’ (GTA 4). Related to this, a few GTAs also commented on feelings of being used as ‘scapegoats for the department’ (GTA 6) on which both the blame for any ‘wrongdoing’ and the bulk of undergraduate teaching was laid. As one observed, ‘it is frustrating as you can see that your work is appreciated neither by the other staff nor by the students’ (GTA 4). By contrast, only one staff member perceived that GTAs might feel they are being taken for granted by the department and staff members.

Beneficial and problematic aspects for the department from the perspective of staff and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)

Beneficial aspects

Almost all staff members observed, as expected, that the main beneficial aspect of using GTAs to teach small group seminars for the department was (i) reduced workload for academic staff and; (ii) related time released for staff to engage in research. As one staff member put it, employing GTAs is ‘an effective management tool and resource to utilise . . . it ensures teaching loads are not too high to allow focus on other responsibilities – especially research’ (staff 2), the latter being particularly important since ‘the department’s reputation is based on research’ (staff 7). Interestingly, the majority of the respondent GTAs perceived lighter workload for staff members to be secondary to economic benefits for the department. Most GTAs commented that the most beneficial aspect for the department was that it had access to a plentiful pool of cheap teachers. In addition to saving financial resources, this was perceived to further benefit the department both in terms of releasing time for staff to focus on research and in it being able to ‘offer to undergraduates a reasonable amount of seminar time which would have been impossible if it relied on the full-time academic staff alone’ (GTA 6). The latter was also perceived as beneficial for the department by some staff members.

Problematic aspects

The most problematic issue which arises from employing GTAs to teach seminars, from the perspective of both staff members and some GTAs, relates to the inability of the department to guarantee consistency in teaching. As one staff member commented ‘it is difficult for the department to know if GTAs are providing the students with good teaching’ (staff 7); this is made more difficult in part because monitoring is insufficiently developed and because ‘student surveys come when it is too late to correct any situation’ (staff 7).

Both some staff members and some GTAs perceived to be problematic for the department that GTAs were perhaps not providing the best possible service, thus potentially reducing the quality of the degree. Indeed, a few GTAs considered it problematic for the department to ‘justify to students why they are not taught by academic staff’ (GTA 5). One staff member also thought that the department ran the
risk of having to deal with unsatisfied ‘paying consumers’ who think they should be taught by full-time academic staff. Interestingly, out of 51 students, only one commented that students may feel they are not getting ‘value for money’, but s/he further commented that ‘I have never felt this about a GTA’ (student 22). Finally, another important issue picked by both GTAs and staff members relates to the challenge for the department to ‘ensure effective induction, support and coordination’ (staff 7) and to ‘put more resources into training, funding and standardising’ (GTA 5) the departmental teaching practice.

Reflections

Asking students, GTAs and academic staff about what they perceive to be some of the beneficial and problematic aspects of using GTAs to teach small group seminars has brought to the fore some of the issues that arise from the ambiguous role that the GTAs occupy in this department. To the degree that is possible to generalise from the survey results, students perceived their seminar teachers (GTAs) to be halfway between students and academics, GTAs perceived themselves mainly as doctoral students with certain teaching responsibilities and staff members perceived them as research students and academic apprentices. The findings of other surveys undertaken in a few research-led UK universities have also indicated that GTAs occupy an ambiguous role (Lineham 1996; Lueddeke 1997; McGough 2002; Park 2002; Park and Ramos 2002), being defined as ‘neither fish nor fowl’ (Park 2002), ‘postgrads on the edge’ (Lineham 1996) or ‘postgraduate chameleons’ elsewhere (Harland and Plangger 2004). Early concerns related to conflicting interests among GTAs’ duties as teachers, students and professional apprentices, and those related to the uncertainty and ambiguity of their status, were repeatedly raised in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s (Crewe 1996); currently, GTAs enjoy a formal and recognised status in the USA (Park 2004). This is not generally the case in the UK universities and certainly not in the department where this survey was undertaken. The status of the GTA within the department is important because what a GTA is and does ultimately shapes each of the three participating groups’ perceptions of the benefits and difficulties of employing GTAs to teach small group seminars.

Many of the issues emerging from the survey deserve further consideration but this section is limited to some reflections on how GTAs’ status can be improved in ways which make the best of what GTAs have to offer and reduce the problematic aspects associated with their teaching. The two most problematic aspects for students emerging from the survey relate to the perceived lack of GTAs’ overall subject knowledge and teaching skills. The former has been linked, in extreme cases, to institutional cheating and fraud: ‘while children having children is regrettable … children teaching children is unconscionable’ (Anderson, in Rowley 1993, 3). Sensational claims like this, however, are not based in a sound understanding of (higher education) teaching and learning. GTAs’ less-than-optimal subject knowledge, if this is universally accepted to be the case, can only become problematic for undergraduate students if the aim of small group seminars, and indeed of (higher) education overall, is the rigorous injection of what is to be known by s/he who knows all to those who do not. But the main aim of (higher) education, at least its professed aim, has moved away from such traditional and conventional association towards a
new emphasis on learning and preparation of conscientious, skilful and independent learners and citizens.

In this context, being a GTA, and not necessarily an ‘expert’, could be beneficial in that a GTA’s own inquiry into the subject area may help to convey students the message that knowledge is not transmitted but actively constructed. This issue relates closely to the debate within educational circles on the distinction between teacher-centred and student-centred approaches to teaching (e.g. Kember 1997; Ramsden 1992; Samuelowicz and Bain 1992) and their impact on students’ approaches to learning, with the latter approach generally leading to deep rather than surface learning compared to the former (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). That the issue of subject knowledge was perceived as problematic by the respondent students may be explained on the grounds of students’ expectations of higher education learning not being in sync with its professed aim or these professed aims not being in sync with higher education practice itself. These structural dimensions are important, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

While the issue of GTAs’ less-than-optimal subject knowledge may appear less problematic if one accepts the importance of adopting a student-centred, learning-oriented approach to teaching, the issue of GTAs’ less-than-optimal teaching and pedagogical skills becomes more important precisely because of it. As noted, the lack of these latter skills was seen as problematic by students, GTAs and staff alike, the latter two groups framing it mainly in terms of teaching quality and consistency. Clearly, ensuring high teaching quality and consistency within a department or university is not an issue limited to GTAs’ teaching. In most research-led departments, both full-time academics and doctoral students are primarily selected because of their research capabilities and potential, rather than teaching potential. However, unlike academic staff for whom there exist various support structures aimed at their professional development at departmental and university level, such structures are much less developed for GTAs. At the national level, all UK universities have had a director and unit of staff development since at least 1995 (Wright and O’Neil 1995), but most of the academic staff development has been geared towards full-time staff (Griffiths 1996). As far as doctoral students are concerned, while graduate training for research has certainly improved in the UK, graduate training for teaching is much less well organised and administered (Crewe 1996). This is obviously a generalisation because individual universities and departments in the UK have already identified the benefits and introduced a variety of training programmes for GTAs that aim to integrate research training with teacher education (Barrington 1999; Harland and Plangger 2004; Lueddeke 1997).

The University of Sheffield offers one such programme, a two-year, part-time Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education tailored specifically for doctoral students who teach. However, the course is limited to 16 places for all the university’s GTAs and there are around 25 GTAs within this particular department alone. At the department level, GTAs receive two one-day sessions during the academic year which focus primarily on departmental policies and procedures. Important as they are, such (few and far in between) sessions can hardly prepare GTAs with the pedagogical skills to deal with what awaits them in a classroom situation. GTAs are allocated with teaching hours according to the department’s (short term) needs and given a teaching schedule, without being given any real evaluation of their skills and needs for further training and mentorship, although some responsibilities towards
the GTAs are assigned to module leaders in their teaching teams. However, such responsibilities do not amount to mentorship; they are geared towards dealing with teaching issues that may arise during the course of a module, rather than the professional, ongoing development of the GTAs. Indeed, as indicated by the survey results, GTAs lacked both a sense of academic ownership and authority over matters of course content, organisation and delivery (also noted by students). They also did not see themselves as academic apprentices engaged in a meaningful, systematic professional development programme, although most staff perceived GTAs as academic apprentices.

Partly as a response to the results of this survey and growing concern amongst staff members over the issue of teaching quality and consistency, particularly since the recent introduction of university fees, a mandatory training programme for GTAs was introduced in the department at the beginning of the 2007–2008 academic year. If successful, the programme will address only some of the issues raised with regard to GTAs’ teaching skills, but it does not amount to a comprehensive professional development scheme that equips GTAs with the necessary experience and skills for the full range of teaching, research and administrative tasks of an academic post. Some of the issues related to training and professional development raised here have also emerged from surveys in other universities and departments (Lineham 1996; Park 2002; Park and Ramos 2002). Some universities in the UK have already devised two-level training programmes for GTAs that include university-wide and departmental-specific programmes (Lueddeke 1997), perhaps not unlike the arrangements at the University of Sheffield and the department in this study. However, a 2002 survey of 70 UK departments of the same type as the one surveyed here highlighted amongst other things that GTAs’ training varied across departments, with 90% of GTAs’ departmental training sessions amounting to no more than three days a year and with only one in 10 university-wide courses leading to a recognised teaching qualification (McGough 2002). The same study also found that the majority of the GTAs were not satisfied with the standards of training and more than 80% of the respondents were keen to undertake teaching training that led to a nationally recognised qualification.

Driven by similar concerns, some scholars and practitioners have suggested that doctoral training should be expanded to include not just research but also teaching and other managerial skills, and reorganised in the form of an academic apprenticeship (D’Andrea 1996; Barrington 1999; Harland 2001; Lueddeke 1997). This would not only ‘catch academic staff at the start’ (Barrington 1999), avoid the problem of ill-prepared GTAs and eliminate the need for on-the-job training for new lecturers, but will also equip doctoral students with an enhanced portfolio of skills increasingly vital in today’s job market. While these changes in doctoral training may take some time to occur, if ever, the necessity of transforming and professionalising the experience of doctoral students who teach is of urgent importance. Individual departmental initiatives generally tend to address some of the issues associated with the ambiguous status of GTAs but, given the transitory nature of GTAs, one cannot expect individual departments to invest in and establish comprehensive GTA professional development programmes if other departments and universities in the UK do not do the same. It is for this reason that a ( overdue) dialogue within departments and universities must take place in order to grant a formal and recognised status for GTAs within the UK higher education system as a whole and
design a workable framework to sustain it. Only then can individual departments ensure that students are afforded the maximum benefit from their learning process and that GTAs do a good and satisfying job.

Notes
1. Undergraduate student growth has slowed down recently; the overall number of students in higher education in the UK rose by a considerable 9% between 1997/1998 and 2001/2002 but only by 1.8% between 2003/2004 and 2004/2005 (HESA 2006).
2. Departmental Memorandum, 9 March 2006, on file with author.
3. The survey form was open in format but several interesting themes emerged; due to space restraints, however, only the dominant ones will be considered in this section.

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