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It's all about balance: Graduate Teaching Assistant reflections on finding balance between teaching, learning, and research

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Abstract

Expected to demonstrate merit in teaching, research, or in many cases both, academics are under increasing pressure to meet institutional expectations of excellence, requiring an ability to balance the myriad of ever-growing responsibilities placed upon them. This excellence, no longer only expected of seasoned academics, has resulted in increased pressures for those at all levels of academia. Positioned in university departments across the UK, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are

experiencing first-hand the complexities of this balancing act, arguably in some cases stretched further due to their student positions.

As a GTA there is an expectation that alongside PhD studies students will perform a range of teaching and assessment-based duties across undergraduate programmes; the nature of these duties can include but is not limited to running seminars, supervising dissertation projects, and marking assignments. In theory the responsibilities of a GTA should be both limited and manageable, enabling students to develop the skills required for their potential future in academia, without compromising their ability to focus on their own studies; however, the reality of the role is often misaligned with the projected ideal.

For many GTAs the experience of teaching, including the related responsibilities, results in significant time pressures, where time allocation trade-offs between PhD study and the tasks associated with their teaching roles become commonplace. Using reflections of former and current GTAs at a UK business school, this paper seeks to explore the realities of balancing teaching, learning and research; critically assessing the concept of balance using the contrasting perspectives of Inter-Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and Interrole Facilitation (Frone, 2003) to provide insights into how these sometimes conflicting responsibilities are shaping our future academics.

Introduction

Across Higher Education (HE) institutions, the number of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) has been growing rapidly for over 30 years: GTAs are postgraduate students, typically at doctoral level, who as part of their studies are required to teach and engage with other tasks expected of academic faculty (Winstone & Moore, 2016). Described as 'postgrads on the edge' (Linehan, 1996) and the 'donkey's of the department' (Park & Ramos, 2002), the position of a GTA is not always presented in the most favourable light. Unsurprisingly, due to both an increase in the number of GTA positions and reports of the problematic nature of the role in the context of stability, workload, and wellbeing, the experience of GTAs is receiving growing attention within academic research (Raaper, 2018).

In this reflective paper we provide insights into the experiences of GTAs at different stages of their PhD journey: the authors of this paper are current and former GTAs, with one author in their 3rd year of their GTA programme, and the other author a full-time lecturer who prior to gaining employment was also part of a GTA programme. Through personal reflections that have been interpreted using concepts from the theories of Inter-Role Conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and Interrole Facilitation (Frone, 2003), this paper seeks to contribute to the overall understanding of the balancing act of the GTA position and how it is shaping prospective academics. As a reflective piece, it is understood that the thoughts expressed may not be wholly representative of the GTA population, however it is hoped that the topics discussed are both relatable and insightful to fellow GTAs and academics alike.

Literature review

In the 21st century, universities have seen a shift in the environment in which they operate, thus requiring a complete re-evaluation of HE and its position within society (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019).

Naturally, such challenges are felt at an individual level within the HE sector, with academics commonly stating that they are overworked, under pressure, and not provided with adequate time or resources to meet growing expectations (Chadha, 2013). Historically, GTAs have been utilised as a means of alleviating such pressures (Park, 2004), however over time this has brought with it its own issues.

In UK institutions, the role of GTAs was born out of an urgency to provide adequate staffing to a growing undergraduate population (Smallwood et al., 2022), and although current undergraduate figures are dropping (Shearing, 2023), postgraduate numbers are rising, therefore the need for GTAs remains. In earlier instances of GTA roles, the given responsibilities were limited, with the assumption that their research must take priority. However, since the 1990's the expectations surrounding the activities a GTA should engage with have increased, thus leaving many students in challenging positions where a trade-off between responsibilities is required (Darling & Dewey, 1990).

The GTA role traditionally involves engagement with undergraduate modules, which includes delivering seminars or workshops, marking, and general administrative support (Sharpe, 2000). Further to this, the position of a GTA is clearly defined as a 'student', with many quick to distinguish between the role of student and that of a seasoned academic (Robertson & Yazan, 2022). Increasingly however, the distinction between student and academic is becoming blurred; many GTAs report engagement with tasks that stretch far beyond undergraduate support, and as is often now acknowledged, GTAs are

performing vital roles in universities (Barr & Wright, 2019). While this increased level of responsibility provides opportunities for further development, it must be questioned whether universities are considering the impact of such tasks on their student's studies.

In reflections on their experiences, many GTAs have noted feelings of anxiety (Chen Musgrove, Petrie & Cooley, 2021), struggles with identity (Zhang, 2020), and being overwhelmed (Cho et al., 2011). While it is often noted that the experience isn't wholly negative, the narrative presented is often less than complimentary (Freyburg & Ponarin, 1993). Further to this, numerous studies have considered the impacts of the GTA role at a departmental/institutional level, with an assessment of the perceptions of both students and staff taking centre stage (Hickok, 2016; Wald & Harland, 2020). The nature of the GTA role and its wider implications are often presented through a critical lens, especially when concerning the overall quality of outputs delivered. Considering this, many may wonder whether the role of a GTA is inherently flawed; the role is not structured in a way that enables equitable effort towards each responsibility.

Methodology

The insights provided in this paper were gathered through a reflective qualitative enquiry that took the form of individual reflection followed by paired discussion among authors. It was from this approach that we discovered commonalities in our perspectives of the GTA role, the nature of which has been shaped by both positive and negative experiences.

Based on the key areas of focus identified through the discussion of our experiences, two theoretical viewpoints; Inter-Role Conflict Theory

(Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) which depicts the conflict and resulting struggles felt by an individual undertaking multiple roles; and Interrole Facilitation (Frone, 2003), which suggests that participation in one role eases participation in another, were identified as appropriate means of supporting sensemaking and discussion. While these theories are typically used to assess work-life balance, we deemed their arguments appropriate as a supporting tool for discussing our experiences due to the notion of balance forming the focal point of each.

Discussion

Challenges of the PhD and GTA roles

The conflict a person may experience between the different work roles they have adopted has been described as Inter-Role Conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This concept is a form of role conflict primarily involving sets of opposing pressures that typically arise from a person's participation in various roles. In other words, this conflict is experienced when the arising pressures of one role are incompatible with the pressures arising in another. Here, Inter-Role Conflict Theory is applied to not only identify the responsibilities associated with the PhD and GTA roles, but to also highlight the emerging demands and increasing challenges of balancing the act of studying and teaching. We argue that there is a high level of role pressure incompatibility as participation in the PhD role, which requires the development of research skills and original contributions, often becomes more difficult by virtue of participating in the GTA role. We reflect on these challenges which are primarily based on time, workload, and behavioural expectation conflicts.

Time and Workload Conflicts of the PhD and GTA roles

The range of responsibilities involved in PhD/GTA roles easily facilitate a time-based conflict, primarily due to the time pressures involved with the GTA role which often make it impossible to comply with the deadlines associated with the PhD role (Bartolome & Evans, 1979). Here, our reflections stem from our experiences during the first two years of the PhD/GTA programme. During this time, we have often dedicated more time to teaching-related activities due to the stricter deadlines involved, especially where student feedback and marking are concerned. Additionally, the administrative tasks that GTAs are expected to conduct along with other, unforeseen activities, such as module meetings, familiarisation with new teaching materials and departmental events are responsible for taking unexpected time away from PhD related responsibilities. Thus, it is not the nature of such activities that is challenging, but their tendency to arise unexpectedly, and their need to be handled efficiently, regardless of PhD deadlines. This uncertainty surrounding GTA workload has made it difficult to establish realistic PhD deadlines and has hindered our ability to engage in deep focus work.

This unpredictability also challenges our ability to distribute workload appropriately (Cho et al., 2011; Fairbrother, 2012). Here, the primary workload conflict relates to that of contractual obligations and departmental expectations with regards to teaching responsibilities. Although the GTA programme regulations state that students should be involved in teaching-related activities, these are not explicitly specified or defined. Implicit in the roles' title, GTAs are primarily responsible for 'assisting' in teaching, however, this is not reflected in our experience on the GTA programme. Whilst the department has been immensely supportive of our GTA role, a foundation has not been established in terms of presenting detailed duties and responsibilities. This has meant that although contractual obligations relate to

‘assisting’, we have been given full autonomy in teaching, which has often translated to increased responsibility and workload, similar to that of full-time lecturers. Initially, this was difficult to navigate, as the inherent flexibility and lack of structure of the PhD programme made it easy to prioritise teaching-related activities.

Behaviour-based Conflicts of the PhD and GTA roles

Behaviour-based conflict relates to the in-role behaviours that may be incompatible with the expectations regarding behaviour in multiple roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This suggests that if a person is unable to adapt their behaviour to comply with the expectations of their adopted roles, they may be likely to experience conflict between them. As established in the work of Park and Ramos (2002), Raaper (2018) and Harland and Plangger (2004), the definitions of GTAs highlight the complexity and uncertainty associated with the role. This uncertainty and lack of clarity surrounding our position has often resulted in confusion and issues establishing identity.

Despite the lack of clarity regarding the definition of the GTA role, the desire to establish our identity within the department has often motivated us to voluntarily attend departmental meetings, away days, and training sessions. Although under no obligation, showing interest and engagement is generally encouraged for those seeking a full-time position post PhD. However, doing so contradicts with the time required for PhD research, causing a constant dilemma as to what should be prioritised to become more ‘marketable’ post PhD. In addition to this, those pursuing a full-time post are highly encouraged to have research publications by the end of their PhD, as it is seen as a prerequisite for a successful academic career (Fairbrother, 2012). However, doing this alongside PhD research and teaching is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, having taken on such opportunities, we can now reflect that rejecting them was not something we considered, as it

would have led to feelings of incompetence and self-sabotage in terms of future career prospects.

In our experience, the biggest dilemma between the GTA/PhD roles relates to that of efficiency expectations. To begin with, our GTA role was seen as an opportunity to not only establish our teaching identity, but to also demonstrate our capabilities to the department. However, the expectation of being highly efficient in completing teaching-related activities whilst also meeting PhD deadlines has been both challenging and unrealistic. Thus, it is acknowledged that in our experience, maximising the potential of the GTA role has often had a negative consequence on our PhD role, despite the scholarship conditions stating that teaching-related activities should not compromise our ability to successfully complete the PhD within the allocated timescales.

Benefits of the PhD and GTA roles

As opposed to the drawbacks traditionally cited, it has been suggested that engagement with multiple roles simultaneously can provide benefits in the context of our outputs (Voydanoff, 2004). This benefit received because of role balancing is described as Interrole Facilitation, a theory by Frone (2003) which suggests that participation in one role can make it easier to participate in another. In the context of this reflection, Interrole Facilitation is used to explore the potential for benefits to be derived from the previously discussed challenges, with the aim of balancing the narrative of our experiences to demonstrate that while often difficult, there are positives to be found among the conflict of roles. The following discussion will be divided into two key areas; development related benefits and future outlook related benefits.

Development Related Benefits of the PhD and GTA roles

The challenges associated with the dual identity of teacher and student are relatable to both authors, however, we also contend that the roles of researcher and teacher are complimentary, enabling the development of mutually beneficial skills and attributes. Considering your role as a student that teaches, you are in a unique position: emerging expert and learner (Muzaka, 2009). Consequently, you are not only able to focus on the delivery of content as opposed to the content itself, but your approach to content delivery is often more empathetic (Clark, 2021), as you too are in the position of learner and understand what makes successful teaching. From the perspective of developing research skills, we believe this occurs naturally through consistent engagement with both roles, as many of the skills required for research align with those needed for teaching, as they present similar challenges.

We agree that a heavy, and somewhat diverse workload can increase pressure and negatively impact outputs (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). However, in contrast to this, we also propose that engagement with multiple tasks can provide opportunities for mental recess that enables us to produce better outputs. Often described as all consuming (Morgan, 2020), the traditional PhD route (with the absence of teaching or other related roles) can result in decreased motivation and productivity due to the sole focus on one task (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Considering this, the necessity of dedicating time and focus to other tasks, in our experience, can be beneficial, as it allows us to remove ourselves from the stresses aligned with PhD study, which when returning to our PhD based work enables us to approach it with a fresh mind. By limiting the time we can dedicate to different responsibilities, we find that when time is available to work on our PhD, we are more focused and productive. We acknowledge that certain tasks may be completed quicker if we were able to focus purely on our PhD,

however, we contend that feelings of isolation, being ‘lost’ in the process, and being unable to consider the bigger picture would likely cause greater issues than those presented by conflicting roles. It is with this in mind, among our other positive reflections, that we recognise that while undertaking multiple roles is undeniably challenging, it is an opportunity that brings with it significant developmental benefits.

Future Outlook Related Benefits of the PhD and GTA roles

In a study conducted by Guerin (2020), participants stated that perceptions of life as an academic are often shaped by experiences at an earlier level of education. However, this limited exposure to the realities of academia results in naivety in those pursuing a doctorate, often leading to a shift in perspective regarding academia once engaged with further study (McAlpine & Turner, 2012). As a GTA, you are not only witnessing the roles of academics, but experiencing them first-hand, and are therefore able to pass an educated judgement on your own suitability for academia. We consider the GTA role as an opportunity to ‘test the waters’ of academia, providing students with first-hand experience of the role of an academic, thus enabling expectations to be managed and students to become well-informed.

The concern surrounding the worth of engaging with certain tasks and their ability to support future success in obtaining a full-time academic position is understandable; time is limited, and it is vital that outputs are contributing to the development of a desirable candidate profile. It is widely understood that a degree, in this case a PhD, is not enough to make you stand out from the crowd (Tomlinson, 2008); increasingly candidates for full-time academic positions are expected to demonstrate impact across both industry and institutionally constructed academic career frameworks. Reflecting on the experiences throughout doctoral study, a GTA would quickly realise that the variety of skills they have developed could be used to

practically demonstrate suitability for a full-time position. Consequently, it is not just the practice of teaching or conducting research that should be recognised, but the learnings that come from these experiences that can seldom be replicated through alternative means.

In the context of academic career readiness, many traditional PhD programmes are deemed inadequate (Brennan, 2020). For GTAs however, the structure of a traditional programme is enhanced by relevant opportunities, therefore providing hands-on experience of the role of an academic. While we are not suggesting that the GTA role is an exact replica of a full-time lecturing role, we would argue that it is closely aligned, with a focus on many features of a typical academic position. Further to this, we would also suggest that the experience of balancing multiple roles will enable greater success once obtaining a permanent academic position due to previous experience of meeting expectations. This is crucial not only to ensure success from an institutional perspective, but also to maintain a healthy and manageable approach to work despite the inevitable pressures (Austin, 2002). In our own reflections, the ability to develop relevant skills, both academic and individual, is conclusively seen as a benefit to the GTA role, and from the perspective of the former GTA it can be confirmed that this experience is fundamental in enabling future success.

Conclusion

To conclude, the expectations placed upon those at all stages of the academic career path are demanding, with those at the earlier stages of their academic journey increasingly feeling the pressures of meeting the requirements of their departments, institutions, and the wider academic community. GTAs are facing not only the challenge of

completing a PhD, a significant task in itself, but also the challenge of managing multiple responsibilities that often stretch far beyond the role in its advertised form. It is no surprise that this balancing act poses issues, leaving students questioning their actions and how to best approach the tasks they are faced with. However, the complexities of being a GTA are far from purely negative, instead the experience of maintaining multiple roles not only enables personal development but can enhance the benefits of each individual role.

Throughout this reflective essay we have explored the highs and lows of the GTA role, drawing upon our own experiences to form an overview of the current reality GTAs are faced with. Through the acknowledgement of both challenges and successes, it is hoped that this paper has provided insights into the experiences of students who are currently undertaking, or have previously undertaken, the position of a GTA, and a new way of thinking about the conflicts and benefits derived from the experience.

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