

Toward Improving the Mental Well-being of Students in Higher Education: The Pastoral Support Role of Graduate Teaching Assistants.

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Toward Improving the Mental Well-being of Students in Higher Education: The Pastoral Support Role of Graduate Teaching Assistants.

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Abstract

According to the Student Academic Experience Survey 2024, despite the crucial need for academic excellence, the mental well-being of university students is relatively low compared to that of other young individuals. Consequently, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a unique and invaluable role in supporting students' well-being, both academically and personally. GTAs are particularly suited to provide pastoral care and support due to their close interactions with students

and their firsthand experiences of how learning can be inherently challenging and unsettling. This study examines the pastoral support role of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in promoting students' well-being through the lens of Social Support Theory, drawing on the lived experiences of three GTAs from two different research centres within the same higher education institution in the United Kingdom. To achieve this, the Five Ways to Wellbeing (FWW) framework- which includes 'Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give'- was utilised to reflect on our teaching practices. The outcomes and impacts of adopting this framework on students' mental well-being and academic performance are also discussed. Overall, the study concludes that by integrating social support into their teaching, GTAs enhance both students' academic success and well-being.

Introduction

Students' well-being in higher education has been a significant concern over the years. This issue mainly stems from the increasing percentage of young people experiencing low mental well-being, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students (Neves & Hillman, 2019; Sampson et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic fallout, such as the cost-of-living crisis, have greatly exacerbated the mental well-being challenges faced by young people (Meadows et al., 2024). According to the 2024 Student Academic Experience Survey report, the well-being levels of university students are relatively low and have remained unchanged over the years (Li, Du & Chow, 2024; Neves et al., 2024). By employing a combination of doctrinal self-study and autoethnography methodology, this study draws on social support theory, reflecting on the experiences of three graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) from the same institution but different research centres who have worked with students in both

undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The report reveals that undergraduate students possess a lower sense of personal well-being compared to the broader population of young adults. Mental well-being involves feeling good and functioning effectively, as well as the capacity to cope with negative and distressing emotions (Prydz et al., 2024).

Mental well-being is closely connected to mental health; however, this study focuses specifically on the well-being of students. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is a state of well-being in which individuals recognise their abilities, cope with the everyday stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to their community. In contrast, mental well-being is a broader concept that more specifically refers to the subjective experience of feeling good and fulfilled, although it may or may not indicate the absence of mental illness or distress. It has been highlighted as an indicator of national prosperity and is associated with improved physical and mental health. Both mental health and mental well-being are closely related, as they significantly contribute to a person's overall psychological state.

Despite numerous well-being-led approaches to quality in higher education, mental well-being can be all-encompassing, as it often remains invisible in plain sight (Jayakody & Perera, 2003; Nurunnabi, Almusharraf & Aldeghaither, 2020). Furthermore, some students may not acknowledge or admit to fluctuations and changes in their well-being. Several triggers can challenge students' well-being, including increased stress from workloads, anxiety about submitting assignments or taking exams, feelings of isolation, and other related concerns (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). Research has demonstrated that low levels of mental wellness significantly impede students' learning capacity, affecting their concentration, motivation, self-

confidence, self-efficacy, and ability to attend sessions or engage in assessments (Quinn et al., 2009). Meanwhile, addressing well-being issues in higher education is crucial for helping students succeed. However, many well-being programmes and events have failed to meet the needs of students in higher education due to their diverse personality types (Arie, 2017).

To address this, studies have highlighted the benefits of introducing pastoral support, mainly through peer support and learning, as an effective means of promoting students' well-being (Henning et al., 2018). In line with this, the UK higher education setting has continuously witnessed the use of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), typically PhD students, to provide academic support for undergraduate and postgraduate students through teaching and offering feedback on assessments, as well as non-academic support (Clegg & Martin, 2019). One of the non-academic roles of GTAs is to provide pastoral care and advice to the students they teach. Several scholars have argued that this role is more effortless for and better performed by GTAs because they have close interactions with students and a lived experience of how learning can be intrinsically challenging and unsettling (Becker et al., 2017; Barnett, 2023). While there is growing insight into the use of GTAs for pastoral care, most studies tend to focus on more specific instructional settings influenced by institutional culture (e.g., Becker et al., 2017), rather than the holistic interactions between GTAs and students.

This study, therefore, examines the pastoral support role of Graduate Teaching Assistants in promoting the mental well-being of students within the UK's higher education system. It allows us to evaluate our effectiveness in fulfilling these roles by contributing to the improvement of our students' mental health through the Five Ways to Wellbeing framework (FWW), which includes the following: Connect,

Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give. In doing so, we highlight the various challenges faced in this responsibility while providing practical recommendations on how higher education institutions can better support GTAs in effectively performing their pastoral support role.

Pastoral Support Duties of GTAs in Higher Education

Faculty staff have a frontline role in providing pastoral care by supporting students emotionally and academically (Ramulggun et al., 2022). Although GTAs are called ‘contingent faculty staff’ (Nasser-Abu & Fresko, 2018), they are primarily responsible for providing academic support to students. They also serve as accessible and approachable resources for students. GTAs are also often accessible and approachable by students. They teach and closely interact with many students through pastoral care duties (Park & Ramos, 2002; Raaper, 2018). Houghton and Anderson (2017) emphasised that good teaching practices promote students’ mental well-being. GTAs are students’ first point of contact as they provide emotional and pastoral support, even though some might not be aware (McNulty, 2022; Chow, de Bruin & Sharma, 2023). Although they are not trained counsellors, they can create a safe space for students to express their concerns and anxieties. This safe space is created by fostering an open environment that allows students to express their perspectives (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019) without fear of judgment. While they serve as tutors for the students, they can also share their coping mechanisms and strategies with them, as they are students themselves. Sharing their lived experiences reassures students and proactively addresses their mental health needs.

In addition, as academics are limited in the personal issues they can handle (Veles, Graham & Ovaska, 2023), GTAs play a critical role in identifying when students need further support from specialised groups set up at the university. They act as a bridge between students and professional help desks, such as counselling centres, academic advisors, employability advisors, or disability services. Their knowledge of the various supports available for students enables them to appropriately refer and signpost students to where they can obtain the help they need.

Theoretically, the pastoral support role of GTAs is grounded in social support theory. This theory emphasises the significance of social networks and interpersonal connections in promoting well-being (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Caplan (1974) described social support as the ongoing information and cognitive guidance provided alongside tangible resources, assistance, and emotional sustenance during times of need. Cobb (1976) further defined it as activities stemming from the relationship between individuals, enabling 'the subject' to feel cared for, loved, valued, and esteemed. Social support theory is based on cordial interactions, where one party supports another to enhance their well-being. It posits that individuals with stronger social support networks, like GTAs, can offer informational and emotional support to their students through these positive interactions (Lahey & Cohen, 2000). GTAs serve as role models for students; thus, in addition to displaying these supportive behaviours, they also indirectly encourage students to adopt similar practices. They deeply understand the pressures students face, empathically listen to their challenges and ensure they provide the necessary support and guidance.

In contrast, research on the roles and responsibilities of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) at various institutions reveals differing opinions regarding the inclusion of pastoral support duties. For

example, some universities, such as the University of Glasgow (UOG), agree that GTAs should provide pastoral support for their students. Conversely, others, like Imperial College London (ICL, 2022), believe that while it can be provided, it is not solely the responsibility of GTAs. However, several higher education institutions, including the University of York (UOY), emphasise that GTAs should not provide pastoral support to students, as it is beyond the scope of their role. The University of Michigan (2021) and the Harvard University Graduate School (HUGS) in the United States do not explicitly state that GTAs are required to provide pastoral support. However, this responsibility can be inferred from documents detailing the roles and responsibilities of GTAs. To foster a supportive learning environment for students, all educators, including GTAs as part of the faculty, should adopt a 'whole university approach' that encompasses pastoral support and promotes mental well-being, as 'good teaching promotes students' mental well-being' (Houghton & Anderson, 2017: 20).

Other theoretical frameworks used in related studies include Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises balancing social contexts with students' environments (Douwes et al., 2023a). It asserts that students' development is shaped by their interactions with multiple environmental systems- micro-faculties and macro-institutional policies. The Resources Theory, developed by Hobfoll (1989), explains that students with comprehensive well-being resources during their academic years are better positioned for sustained well-being; this concept is also employed in a study by Khatri et al. (2024). The Self-Determination Theory is a widely recognised theory of human motivation, development, and wellness, as utilised by Douwes et al. (2023b) in their studies, and it clarifies how faculty behaviours impact students' well-being. Like this study, Chen, Bian and Zhu (2023) and Holliman, Waldeck and Holliman (2022) have investigated social support theory. However, unlike these related

studies, this study applies social support theory within the context of integrating the five foundational pillars of New Economics for Well-being into teaching practice. This makes our study unique, as no prior research has combined the theory with the FWW framework. Social support theory posits that individuals with strong social support networks, such as the backing provided by GTAs, are more positively influenced by the support they receive. This suggests that GTAs who directly interact with students provide emotional and informational support, fostering a nurturing environment for them. The study critically reflects on the experiences of three Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to examine how the Five Ways to Wellbeing framework (FWW) was integrated into their teaching practices and applied through their pastoral support roles, thereby enhancing students' mental well-being and overall performance.

Methodology

In this study, we employed the autoethnographic method of inquiry. Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology that seeks to discuss and systematically analyse personal experiences to understand cultural contexts (Ellis et al., 2011; Wyse et al., 2017). We utilised collaborative autoethnography, a method that involves a team of researchers working together to investigate their personal experiences for a shared purpose (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2013). Collaborative ethnography has also been applied in research within higher education (Duffy, Wickersham-Fish & Rademaker, 2018; Serafini et al., 2023). Additionally, we adopted a doctrinal self-study emphasising the critical examination of publicly available policy documents and job descriptions of institutions (Ham & Kane, 2004). Therefore, as GTAs from the same higher education institution but from different research centres in the UK, we convened to share our personal experiences and

critically reflect on our roles in providing pastoral care. The research process involved drafting personal narratives individually, drawing on self-reflection and personal memories, and concentrating on our engagement with pastoral responsibilities. Afterwards, through open dialogue, discussion, and collective analysis, we explored how our teaching experiences are similar or distinct and how they intertwine with broader institutional and academic contexts. Our reflections were interpreted through the lens of social support theory and framed around the five key pillars of mental well-being, which provided the conceptual foundation for understanding the role of GTAs in fulfilling pastoral care duties.

Exploring how the 'Five Ways of Wellbeing' (FWW) are Embedded in GTAs' Teaching Practice

Connect

The quality of students' connections with peers, family, and educators is well documented as a key determinant of their sense of belonging and overall well-being (Oreopolous et al., 2020). However, as a group of three Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) at a university in the UK, we have observed first-hand the challenges students face in building relationships with professors and peers due to factors such as social anxiety, power dynamics, and a lack of initiative (Griffin et al., 2014). Our collective experiences suggest that GTAs are uniquely positioned to bridge these gaps. As literature highlights, our "liminal" role, occupying an intermediate space between students and staff, enables us to foster meaningful connections among students and between students and faculty (Compton & Tran, 2017).

While some research critiques this liminal position as a disadvantage (Winstone & Moore, 2017), we collectively argue that it is a strength. Our position enables us to build trust and facilitate student partnerships, which, in turn, lead to enhanced well-being. Students frequently express that they feel more comfortable seeking guidance from GTAs, particularly regarding assessments or challenging study material, because we are perceived as more approachable and less intimidating than senior academics. This sense of relatability stems from our dual status as both students and instructors, fostering an environment of equality. Studies support this perception, describing GTAs as possessing positive traits such as being approachable, relatable, and interactive, in contrast to professors who are often perceived as strict, distant, or disengaged (Kendal & Schussler, 2012).

Furthermore, we have collaboratively played a crucial role in fostering social connections through group discussions and collaborative activities in seminars. By organising students into small groups, we have provided opportunities for them to engage with one another, building relationships beyond the classroom. These interactions contribute to a greater sense of belonging among students.

Overall, our work as GTAs has fostered academic success and cultivated an inclusive, supportive environment that encourages social and emotional well-being.

Be Active

Research indicates that physical activity enhances individuals' mental health and overall well-being (Biddle et al., 2019; Dore et al., 2020). Unfortunately, many university students in the United Kingdom do not engage in physical activity at a level sufficient to reap the potential mental health benefits (Rhodes, 2024). This observation encourages

universities to implement classroom interventions that incorporate physical activity into learning. As GTAs, we recognise the importance of promoting the physical well-being of our students, as we are often conscious of the challenges of balancing academic responsibilities with mental and physical health; we frequently experience the same stresses of long hours of sitting and mental fatigue. Our role as GTAs enables us to empathise with students' struggles, validate their experiences, and advocate for how physical activity can help alleviate stress and improve focus.

In our roles, we have actively incorporated physical movement into sessions by encouraging short breaks during long seminars and allowing students to stretch and re-energise. We have also sought to promote campus wellness resources by guiding students to available resources at the universities, such as fitness classes, gyms, and recreational sports. Furthermore, we have adopted dynamic teaching methods, including moving around the classroom and facilitating interactive, hands-on activities that keep students engaged and physically active. By fostering an environment that encourages students to balance their academic responsibilities with physical health, we believe we contribute to their overall well-being.

Take Notice

The ability to notice students' behavioural patterns regarding attitude and engagement (both participation and non-participation) is a core component of our roles as GTAs. According to research, noticing contributes to the highest levels of well-being and is one of the unique predictors of well-being (Mackay et al., 2019). For us as GTAs, taking notice involves paying attention to the actions and inactions of students by employing the five facets of observing experience, describing experience, acting with awareness, being non-judgmental of individual experience, and maintaining non-reactivity to individual

experience (Baer et al., 2006). Following cues from Hayes and Ciarrochi's (2015) core psychological well-being skills, we, as GTAs, need to be sensitive to behavioural patterns, such as detecting sensations, identifying, interpreting, and labelling emotions, as well as mapping out how our teaching techniques affect students and how we connect with their worldview. From our experiences, we can see that taking notice is one of the core elements in understanding the difference in the well-being of engaged students versus those who are not.

According to Coren et al. (2022), taking notice involves being mindful of one's surroundings at any given moment. This means being aware of oneself and the environment, including the sensations, thoughts, and feelings that are reflected (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Huppert, 2009). This awareness, or mindfulness, can fulfil one's basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008) and reduce symptoms of anxiety and stress (Zargarzadeh & Shirazi, 2014).

Reflecting on our experiences has led to the understanding that being attentive is a continuous process for aligning our teaching and pastoral support skills with students' expectations beyond the classroom. Recognising that each student is unique and acknowledging their differences in terms of race, colour, gender, sociocultural background, economic status, political affiliation, and religious beliefs enhances our ability to engage with them on an individual and personal level. Moreover, we should remember how these factors are intrinsic to the learning process and the overall university experience for them. Taking an interest in students' backgrounds and commenting on unique aspects such as their clothing styles, current events in the news, and specific foods related to their culture is a rewarding practice. Additionally, observing students' hobbies and how they interact with

their social environments is essential. Overall, being mindful of one's surroundings is linked to positive mental health benefits (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Keep Learning

Learning is simply an action that enables the discovery of new things that can be beneficial. Its outcome is that it helps keep the mind and spirit fresh and active (Aked et al., 2008). Learning throughout life has been shown to benefit well-being, with effects mediated by self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of purpose, and social integration (Hammond, 2004). As GTAs, we encourage students to take courses that will alleviate their fears and increase their confidence when writing assessments or examinations, as these are typically their significant concerns.

Examples of resources we encourage students to utilise include workshops on academic and critical writing, assignment planning, and statistics support sessions. The university skills centre offers these sessions and provides constructive feedback to students on their academic skills. However, this is often underexplored by students due to other commitments, such as time conflicts with lectures (Dougherty, 2022). According to Dorji (2021), students who attended these sessions performed better academically than their peers, as their participation helped reduce anxiety related to factors like impostor syndrome and enabled them to excel in their studies.

Give

Mental well-being is enhanced when individuals achieve a sense of purpose by contributing to their communities through acts of kindness, sharing, giving, and demonstrating team-oriented behaviours. This is likely associated with increased self-worth and positive feelings

(Farrier, Dooris & Froggett, 2019). As GTAs, in addition to fulfilling our obligations to students and taking on assigned roles, we make ourselves available to those who need extra explanations by organising support sessions, tutorials, and one-on-one catch-ups for students who were unable to attend classes due to unforeseen circumstances.

We encourage students to cultivate team spirit during seminars and share their knowledge with peers and colleagues during class activities. Additionally, volunteering offers students opportunities to build confidence and motivation while supporting others in their local communities. One of our frequently shared experiences with students is that serving as student ambassadors on an open day at the university helped us step away from our studies and emotions, enhancing our clarity upon returning to our research work afterwards.

Barriers to Effective Pastoral Support Roles of GTAs

Lack of proper training and maintaining professional boundaries: Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are uniquely positioned to provide pastoral care due to their frequent and close interactions with students in academic settings. However, they typically lack formal training in providing appropriate support in this role. Zhang (2023) highlights the multifaceted nature of GTA-student relationships, which extend beyond the traditional instructor-student dynamic. GTAs may also engage with students in peer-like or social settings, such as participating in university-organized events, societies, and clubs alongside them. These overlapping roles can create blurred boundaries, complicating the maintenance of professionalism in their interactions (Grey & Osborne, 2020).

Unlike mental health professionals and psychologists, who are trained to navigate complex relationships, GTAs often find themselves unprepared to manage the challenges that arise within these relationships (Oberlander & Barnett, 2005). Young and Bippus (2008) observe that most universities overlook relationship management issues in GTA training, which is necessary to prepare them adequately for classroom management. Moreover, even when GTAs successfully direct students to appropriate university support services, the psychological and emotional burden associated with being the first point of contact could impact their mental health. This means that in the pastoral role, GTAs have a dual responsibility for safeguarding both their well-being and that of their students. Studies have shown that GTAs often struggle to balance their mental health with that of their students, which may lead to harm for both the GTAs and the students they aim to support.

Time constraint

GTAs often face time constraints when supporting students, as they must balance their academic commitments (Bridgeman & Barbas-Marcroft, 2024). Typically, GTAs are allocated a limited number of hours each week to dedicate to teaching-related activities (Smallwood et al., 2022). For example, in some universities, GTAs are restricted to six hours per week, which includes preparation, assessment, and face-to-face teaching. This challenge is even more pronounced for international students who are GTAs, as they are further limited by immigration regulations that restrict the number of hours they can work each week. These institutional and immigration restrictions limit the availability of 'time' for GTAs to provide pastoral support effectively. Since pastoral care is time-consuming and emotionally draining, it often requires GTAs to exceed their allocated hours. However, GTAs do not have additional time to dedicate to this role, as their primary obligation is to complete their studies within a

predetermined timeframe set by their institutions, leaving little room for flexibility in taking on additional responsibilities (Acheme & Biwa, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study utilised doctrinal self-study and autoethnography methodologies based on the argument that many Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) inherently adopt the Five Ways to Well-being (FWW) framework without recognising it (McNulty, 2022; Chow, de Bruin & Sharma, 2023). As illustrated, integrating this framework into the roles of GTAs provides a comprehensive strategy for enhancing both academic engagement and students' mental well-being. The principle of 'Connect' demonstrates how GTAs should strive to foster a sense of community by promoting collaborative learning and open communication among students. 'Be Active' emphasises the advantages of incorporating movement into teaching sessions through interactive activities, short breaks, and discussions during quick walks. With the principle of 'Take Notice', the practice of mindfulness and reflection allows students to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings while fostering a supportive and empathetic learning environment. As GTAs, it is essential to promote ongoing personal and group development ('Keep Learning') by introducing students to vital support and resources that can enhance their knowledge and skills. This approach also effectively addresses the challenges of impostor syndrome and anxiety in students. Lastly, by dedicating time to 'Give' support for students' academic and mental well-being, we, as GTAs, contribute positively to the university community, reinforcing a culture of mutual support and connectedness.

However, as GTAs, we have positioned ourselves to offer pastoral support to students; several challenges, such as a lack of professional training, time constraints, and increasing workloads, present significant barriers to the successful implementation of the FWW framework. Therefore, since GTAs are future academics (Clegg & Martin, 2019), they should be consciously sensitised to include these roles in their teaching practice as it promotes students' mental well-being. Thorough sensitisation involves embedding the pastoral support roles of GTAs in their contracts and making them aware of their boundaries as faculty members. Additionally, regular workshops on the concept of pastoral support and how the framework can be integrated into their day-to-day activities should be conducted by all higher institutions that employ Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) as part of their faculty. This can also be achieved by incorporating it into the teaching pathway sessions that prepare them to apply for UKHEI fellowships. The training will equip them with the necessary skills and enhance the GTAs' confidence in managing student issues appropriately, thereby reducing emotional stress. Furthermore, universities can provide emotional support structures to GTAs, such as counselling or peer support networks, to alleviate the psychological burden of the role. While our research was conducted based on self-reflections on our teaching practices as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), we have contributed a nuanced perspective on how GTAs enhance students' well-being through pastoral support roles, utilising the Five Ways to Well-being.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical clearance / Data Availability

This article is a reflective piece which centres on authors' professional experiences, observations, interpretations and relevant literature, which is appropriately cited. As the article does not involve human participants, personal data or primary empirical research, formal ethical approval is not required.

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