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Background

GTAs are postgraduate students who teach part-time, on a paid basis, whilst obtaining a doctoral degree, but in some cases also Master of Philosophy or Master of Research degrees (Chadha 2013). While employing GTAs to teach on undergraduate courses is not new in the UK, the growing scale on which it is now happening requires attention. This paper argues that GTA work in many UK universities is related to neoliberal policy reforms. As I have argued elsewhere (XXX), I understand neoliberalism as a specific mode of government that is rooted in economic discourses of competition. These discourses promote a view of citizens as consumers, welfare rights as consumer rights, and commercialisation and privatisation as common practices for reorganising the public sector (Peters 2012). Lynch (2006) argues that the understanding of education as being another market category has become dominant in higher education. Within this neoliberal context, universities are pressured to change: to improve their 'educational products', to respond to markets and to increase their competitiveness (Jankowski and Provezis 2014, 477). In order to cope with some of these challenges – particularly with a need to teach more students with decreasing resources (Park 2004) – the universities are employing a greater number of part-time staff (Muzaka 2009). Many are doctoral students, reflecting a situation where the increasing employment of GTAs is related to a need to reconcile rising student numbers with pressure on academics (Park 2002). It is therefore unsurprising that the GTA role is currently reflected in 'diremptions and discrepancies, particularly in terms of GTA identity, status and responsibility' (Fairbrother 2012, 354). Park (2002, 51) argues that GTAs are often made to 'carry heavy burdens' with 'a muted voice'. By drawing on a Foucauldian theorisation and two focus groups carried out in one UK university, this paper aims to trace the ways in which the GTAs interviewed perceive their work and subjectivity.

Foucauldian theorisation and discourse analysis

The concept of the GTA as 'a subject' in this paper will refer firstly to the individual as being 'a subject to someone else by control and dependence', and secondly, as being tied to '[their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, 331). For Foucault (1982) the subjectivities are shaped by power relations that exist in complex relations: 'in the whole network of social'. This also means that the subject is not a substance but a form that can differ depending on a type of relationship the subject establishes with the social context and to oneself (Foucault 1984). As subject is social, any exploration aiming to trace the subject needs to start with 'the presumption of a constitutive sociality' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). Furthermore, it is discourse that enables to explore this sociality. Like many authors (e.g. Diaz-Bone *et al.* 2008), this paper recognises that a Foucauldian research requires methodological adaptations. For the purposes of this study, I have combined Foucault's theorisation with Fairclough's (1992, 2001) approach to discourse analysis. Guided by Fairclough (1992), each discursive artefact (focus group transcript) was analysed as:

- (1) a text by describing its vocabulary, grammar, textual structures;
- (2) a discursive practice by analysing the situational context of text production and intertextual discourses;

(3) a social practice by tracing the social determinants influencing the discourse, key statements and effects of the statements.

The discourses were created by conducting two focus groups with nine GTAs from one Russell Group university in the UK (hereafter: the University). In 2013/2014, the University had about 25000 students and 3000 academics. The sample was formed by purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

Indicative research findings and their theoretical significance

The discourse analysis demonstrates that the GTAs describe the University in which they work and study as promoting internationalisation and client culture. While, the GTAs are unsure about the forces responsible for neoliberalisation – indicating the idea of diffuse power (Foucault and Deleuze 1977) - they also see neoliberal reforms constituting their work. They perceive their role as being grounded in an idea of ‘*offloading*’ (GTA1, Languages) that helps to balance the workload of academics. A vivid example is provided by a GTA from Psychology:

...GTAs [are] acting a little bit like peacekeepers and a little bit like a machine factory, just to get everybody through. So especially with the labs, so I taught the same lab 21 times over three-week period, and it was a little bit like a factory turning out the same thing over and over and over again to students. (GTA2, Psychology)

The example above demonstrates a Foucauldian understanding of the subject who is shaped by the social context s/he is part of (Foucault 1984). The idea of ‘a machine factory’ refers to GTAs as subjects who take care of increasing teaching loads in the University. However, there is also some evidence of pastoral care in analysed discourses. One GTA from Education describes it as ‘nurturing’:

...you’re nurturing, you’re looking at these people who are still in the learning process, and you’re saying, ‘I’m here to work with you, I’m here to help you’ (GTA3, Education)

The findings suggest that the GTAs try to negotiate their subjectivity in a Foucauldian sense (1982): in addition to institutional pressures, the GTAs emphasise the importance of being supportive of students. However, the competing experiences of high workload, student demands and pastoral care cause stress among GTAs which they do not receive enough support to deal with. They rather problematise the inconsistency of their roles: ‘*our role as GTAs across the university is very inconsistent*’ (GTA1, Languages). It could therefore be argued that the GTAs perceive their subjectivity as highly pressurised. Furthermore, they are left alone to cope with the pressures.

This paper contributes to a much needed scholarly discussion on graduate teaching. It demonstrates the ways the GTAs in the University and possibly in many other institutions around the world perceive themselves as very little supported ‘machine factories’ and ‘peacekeepers’ rather than the future generation of academics.

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