

**Why are they here? Exploring the expectations of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) attending an academic development programme (0138)**

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Post-graduate training has undergone a number of significant changes since the mid 1990s. Despite these developments, queries are frequently raised pertaining to how effective these changes have been for preparing GTA's as teachers (Park and Ramos, 2002). Within a dynamic, shifting context preoccupied with league tables and a consumerist outlook, teaching and learning has finally found a place on the national agenda within higher education. The Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) helped launch the national debate around teacher preparedness, recognising the need to respond to a fluid environment where teachers are regularly required to regularly accept challenges, among others understanding the consequences of widening participation and students as fee-payers. The profile of postgraduates as teachers has increased tremendously along with the expectations placed on them (Hopwood and Stocks, 2008; Muzaka, 2009). The recent recession in the UK has resulted in a significant cut in the financial contribution made by Government towards higher education. Not only do we need to curtail our spending, but also ensure that the money spent on provisions, (for example the development of transferable skills as stipulated by the SET for Success Report of 2002) is money well-spent.

With a surge in graduate schools within higher education institutions and graduates required to teach more frequently (Adenekan, 2008), it has become essential that training is appropriate, rigorous and equips the graduate with a relevant skills set. This can be problematic as graduates in the UK often engage with teaching as a means of securing financial support primarily, and secondly to actually gain experience as teachers (Park and Ramos, 2002). Therefore they may seem uninterested in the whole notion of preparation for teaching and its impact upon their already-limited time; engagement with academic practice can be of secondary or tertiary importance. However, it has been suggested that the rate of pay is not substantial and postgraduates are increasingly

expected to make a valued contribution to their teaching duties (McGough, 2002). Additionally, there is increasing pressure towards professionalization of university teaching through the attendance at academic development courses and programmes (Ginns et al, 2008). So what is it that drives GTAs to engage with academic development programmes?

Empirical research was undertaken to establish the expectations of participants that had enrolled on a GTA training programme, at a Russell Group institution, using questionnaires. The participant group consisted of 26 postgraduate and post doctoral students from the nine different schools across the university<sup>1</sup>. The questionnaire, which participants were asked to complete during an introductory session, comprised of three questions. A summary of the main themes identified from the data have been presented in table 1.

<b>Question</b>	<b>Sample responses</b>	<b>Main themes identified</b>
Why did you enrol on this programme?	“I enrolled because it was suggested as an essential activity for any student that was teaching.” “To improve my chances of getting a GTA job next year.”	To gain a formal qualification (8)
		Career orientation/progression (6)
		To develop teaching techniques (5)
What expectations (if any) do you have of the programme?	“I am curious to see how it is useful with respect to the humanities, or even music department.” “Some discussion sessions, some more workshop-style sessions.”	Develop confidence (8)
		Provide general information on teaching (6)
		Develop appropriate teaching skills (5)
What are your expectations of yourself as a teacher?	“I aspire to be a teacher able of unlocking students’ musical talents.” “I hope to be encouraging and enthusiastic.”	Make the subject interesting (8)
		Achieve results/ maintain standards (7)
		Instil passion (4)

Table 1: Main themes identified from questionnaire

<sup>1</sup> Law, medicine, physical sciences and engineering, dentistry, humanities, social science and public policy, psychiatry, nursing and midwifery, biomedical and health and life sciences

The data revealed the importance of participants receiving a recognised teaching qualification. A previous study carried out by McGough (2002) concurred with this finding in which the majority of respondents interviewed (80%) would have liked to undertake GTA training which led to a national qualification – a demonstrable artefact of added value. In the present climate of mass education and a competitive, global market such a result may not be unexpected, but it tells us something very particular about the shifting identity and priorities of the GTA. The notion of teaching as paid work and a short-term activity (Park, 2004) is balanced by the long-term benefit of rewarded professional training (Muzaka, 2009). The other implication is that teaching for the sake of educating the student body is not necessarily a primary goal for undertaking a teacher-training programme, although the expectations that the majority of GTAs have of themselves as teachers is one of added value, by ‘making the subject interesting’.

When asked what expectations they had of the GTA programme, a number of respondents wrote ‘developing confidence’. From the actual responses, the notion of developing confidence appears to be two-fold – confidence required in supporting learning, and the confidence required in maintaining the standards of the department. The implication of this response is that postgraduate teaching has also become part of the audit culture which we now experience in higher education. It has previously been suggested that engaging GTAs in teaching does require careful management due to quality assurance issues (Park and Ramos, 2002) and the evidence from this research would certainly concur with that view. As postgraduates are required to take on more teaching, cope with greater numbers of students, negotiate the particular protocols of their institution and department, so too, have they had to reflect upon their own career progression and development. This research suggests, that even though their place within academia may remain unclear (Muzaka, 2009) there is certainly a shifting ideal around their identity as teachers and the teaching which they undertake.

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