

A new tribe on campus: an evaluation of a different type of Graduate Teaching Assistant role

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Over the last ten years an increasing number of UK universities have introduced Teaching Assistant roles. The traditional 'Graduate Teaching Assistant' (GTA) role provides funded postgraduate opportunity in return for teaching support and as Park (2004) highlights, often serves as the first career step for aspiring academics. This paper explores the role and impact of GTAs in relation to existing academic tribes and territories. (Becher and Trowler, 2001) The GTA role at Middlesex University is a unique one and this paper traces the path of a recent graduate who becomes a full-time employee, whose role is to assist academic staff in the delivery of quality education to students in a variety of learning environments.

In August 2010 sixteen such posts were introduced across the University's four schools and the Learner Development Unit of the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement. This exciting new initiative was introduced as a pilot project for a period of just less than two years. The primary purpose of the post was to assist academic staff in the delivery of quality education to students in a variety of learning environments. A careful review and evaluation showed the pilot to have been a success from the perspective of all stakeholders, and consequently the initiative was expanded. In September 2012 fifty new GTAs were appointed, with data from the evaluation and review of the pilot informing this next phase of the role.

This paper addresses the key areas of work undertaken by post holders; experience of the current role focusing particularly on complexities, contradictions and challenges; impact of the role and future developments. It draws on qualitative data gathered from the School Learning Teaching and Strategy Leaders reports, Heads of Department, along with one to one interviews and focus groups with the GTAs and academic staff. In addition and importantly, quantitative data demonstrating the impact that the role has had on student progression and achievement will offer further triangulation of the evidence in an equally concrete and vivid way.

It is apparent that the nature of the role is determined by departmental and discipline subject needs whether that need be to provide technical support, administrative support, teaching support or help with coursework. Being overtly prescriptive was not seen as a helpful approach as while the role needed a clear focus it was important to be responsive to changing needs which might vary from month to month.

An important theme coming out of the data was that the GTAs facilitate more possibilities to encourage students to actively participate in the learning experience. They relate well to the students, who appear to be positive in relation to the role of the GTAs with students expressing their satisfaction at their availability as a resource and the services offered. However, it is also evident that the existence of such a role leads to some blurring of boundaries between what is academic work and what is GTA work with at times a lack of clear demarcation lines and transparency. We argue that unless this is explored and addressed within teaching teams and the wider university academic identities and roles will continue to be disturbed.

References

- Park, C (2004) the graduate teaching assistant (GTA): lessons from North American experience. *Teaching in Higher Education* 9(3):349-361
- Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001). *Academic Tribes and Territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines* (2nd edition). Buckingham: Open University Press/SRHE.