



Graduate Teaching Assistants: what training do they want?

Rachel Horrocks-Birss
University of Dundee, UK

Presentation abstract

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are increasingly relied upon for teaching, yet their training varies significantly (Slack and Pownall, 2023). While some institutions do not require any training, others offer one-day workshops, asynchronous online resources, or year-long courses. This training can positively impact GTA's confidence and self-efficacy, but it is often seen as 'superficial and irrelevant', with limited utility (Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2020, p.548). To encourage GTA engagement, training should be practical and specific, directly related to the students' practice (Barr and Wright, 2019). The learning development team at the University of Dundee has recently revamped the Learning to Teach in Higher Education (LTHE) course, which is mandatory for all new GTAs. The redesign focuses on training GTAs through practical workshops, modelling a range of teaching approaches, and encouraging participants to share and reflect upon their practice. While this redesign has been largely well-received, some participants have expressed a concern regarding the balance between interactive activities and information delivery. To further refine the course, the team have conducted a survey of past LTHE participants to explore their views after they have begun teaching. The survey encouraged reflection on what parts of the LTHE course were most beneficial to their teaching practice, as well as any gaps they encountered during their initial training. This paper will draw upon survey data to highlight the teaching priorities and training needs of new GTAs. It will outline plans for further enhancement of the LTHE course and offers practical recommendations to learning developers aiming to provide more effective support for GTAs within their institutions.

Keywords: graduate teaching assistants; training; teacher education; postgraduate development.

Community response

Attendees described the session as ‘interesting’, with one participant noting that it prompted them to reflect on the ‘potential implications for student peer mentor training’. This feedback suggests a high level of engagement and highlights the session’s relevance and potential to inform practice. In particular, it points to the broader significance of tailored training for GTAs, a distinct area within higher education. Research has emphasised that GTA training must account not only for potential gaps in teaching experience but also for the unique strengths GTAs may offer such as being more current with academic literature due to consistent engagement in research activity (Sharpe, 2000). Furthermore, there is a well-documented demand for structured support in this area, with numerous studies highlighting GTAs’ strong interest in receiving targeted training (McLeod et al., 2025).

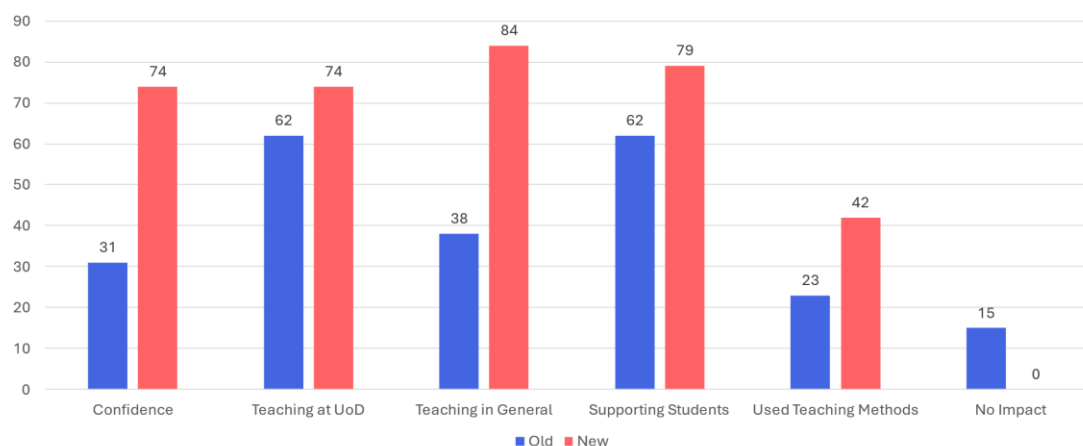
One attendee highlighted a notable finding of the ‘relatively low confidence’ reported by international students following the training. They suggested this may be linked to concerns about ‘linguistic competence’, with students whose first language is not English potentially questioning whether their English is ‘good enough’ to teach in an English-speaking institution. As a possible solution, the attendee proposed incorporating support specifically aimed at ‘enhancing students’ linguistic confidence’ within a teaching context. Research has supported this: confidence in language skills has been shown to positively correlate with perceived teaching ability, particularly among non-native English-speaking teachers (Faez, Karas and Uchihara, 2019). Yet, further evidence suggests that teaching self-efficacy is more strongly influenced by the quality and relevance of training than by whether an individual is a native speaker (Gao et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of training programmes that not only acknowledge linguistic challenges but that empower GTAs, regardless of language background.

One attendee noted the expressed interest from GTAs in receiving more robust training on ‘intercultural awareness’. They remarked that this specific demand had not emerged in their own feedback of similar training, although they had addressed related themes ‘through the lens of inclusive teaching’. This distinction highlights a possible gap between how intercultural issues are framed by facilitators and how they are perceived or prioritised by participants. Importantly, research has shown that many educators are not adequately prepared to teach in cross-cultural contexts, often lacking both the confidence and

pedagogical tools to navigate cultural diversity effectively (Gopal, 2011). This highlights the value of explicitly incorporating intercultural competence into GTA training.

Figure 1. Impact of old course vs new course.

Impact: Old Course vs New Course



As shared in the presentation, there were significant improvements across all areas from the old GTA training course to the new GTA training course, prompting significant reflection from attendees.

Next steps and additional questions

One area where further detail was requested was in the specific training to ‘foster understanding of teaching philosophy’, with a question as to whether this was connected with the writing of teaching statements. In existing research, teaching philosophy is often considered particularly in the context of reflective practice, shaping pedagogical identity and increasing effective teaching. Studies have examined how engaging with teaching philosophy can help instructors articulate their values, align their teaching methods with learning outcomes and navigate their roles within institutional contexts (Brookfield, 2017; Nuttall, 2022). Training that encourages reflection on teaching philosophy can support GTAs in making their pedagogical choices more intentional and theoretically informed.

Other areas identified for further consideration included requests for more information about the GTAs who were contracted to deliver study skills teaching. Audience members expressed an interest in how these roles were arranged and what specific responsibilities the GTAs were expected to undertake, perhaps to consider how this may be adopted within their own institutional context. Additionally, a question was raised regarding the perceived value of the observation process from the GTAs themselves, an established tool of educational practice that is often used for developmental and evaluative purposes.

Despite the significant improvements to the course, GTAs still provided suggestions for further enhancement. This included a desire for more streamlined workshops that would allow for deeper discussion, an increase in practical sessions and stronger links to employability such as opportunities to work toward, or achieve, Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA). These comments suggest that GTAs place value not only on the knowledge gained through such training courses but also on the practical and career development opportunities that they provide.

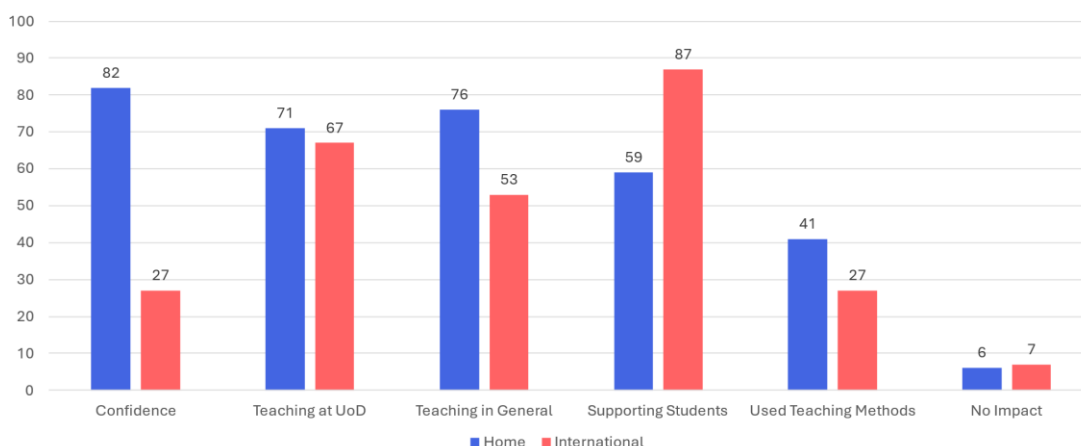
Author's reflection

GTA training is highly varied across institutions, as reflected in the range of responses to the paper. My study explored GTA's thoughts on the impact of the training offered at the University of Dundee, and it was beneficial to share these results with the ALDinHE community and hear more about practice across the sector.

One key area of discussion in the question time was that of international students' confidence upon completing the course, compared to their UK peers. As seen in Figure 2, international students reported a lower rise in confidence than home students. It is important to clarify, however, that the survey question measured a *change* in confidence, not confidence itself. Participants were asked about the impact of the LTHE on their practice and asked to tick boxes that applied to them, including phrases such as, 'I know how to support my students better because of the LTHE', 'The LTHE increased my understanding of teaching in general', or, crucially, 'I feel more confident because of the LTHE'.

Figure 2. Impact of the LTHE on home students and international students.

Impact: Home vs. International



As seen in Figure 2, only 27% of international students chose to select the ‘I feel more confident because of the LTHE’ box, compared with 82% of home students. This could, as suggested in the community response, be a sign of relatively low levels of confidence within the international cohort, in which case training in linguistic competence may well be beneficial (and could be fruitful regardless). Conversely, however, international students could be reporting a relatively low *change* in their confidence levels after completing the LTHE, because they were already confident teachers before beginning the course. Compared to home students, international participants were far more likely to have previous teaching experience, with some having taught for years in their home countries. In these cases, one would expect that a semester-long introductory course would not have much impact on their teaching confidence.

As the study did not explicitly measure confidence levels, it is impossible to tell from the data whether this gap in ‘confidence boost’ is due to international students lacking in confidence or because they were already highly confident before beginning the course. Either way, I was intrigued by the discussion in the community response surrounding the issue of ‘intercultural awareness’ being bundled up with the larger issue of ‘inclusive teaching’. As one respondent noted, it is likely that our (typically Western) understanding of what training GTAs need may well rely on different vocabulary and make different assumptions than our GTAs themselves. It is a helpful reminder that, as learning

developers, we must work to avoid generalisations about what support our students want (or don't want) and we must push against stereotypes that see international students as lacking compared to their UK counterparts.

On that note, I was surprised and pleased to see so many references to 'teaching philosophy' or to otherwise theoretical aspects of teaching in the responses to my survey. I had (wrongly) assumed that GTAs would be primarily concerned with the practical elements of teaching and would not be interested in less obviously applicable aspects. In the LTHE course itself, we introduce the idea of a Teaching Philosophy in our first class, connecting it to the Teaching Statement they may be asked to write for job applications. Then, in the final class, the students verbally share their developing philosophies in small groups. This activity has largely garnered positive feedback, though occasionally participants comment that the requirements were somewhat unclear, so further scaffolding or structure may be necessary.

What was particularly intriguing about the study results, however, was that, in addition to this initial support during the LTHE course, participants requested follow-up sessions covering more theoretical elements, such as inclusive teaching, curriculum design, and educational theory. While some of these (particularly inclusivity) are immediately applicable in a classroom context, others seem less practically relevant to a developing GTA. Students may be requesting theoretical content for a variety of reasons, including personal interest in teaching, but also likely out of a growing recognition of the competitive nature of the academic job market and a desire to gain as much pedagogical knowledge as possible. Even if GTAs are unlikely to engage in curriculum design or educational scholarship during their PhDs, it is encouraging to see them actively developing their careers in a teaching-focussed direction.

Finally, I am happy to offer details of our GTA internship in the Academic Skills Centre. To provide GTAs at the University of Dundee with additional teaching experience, we created a year-long internship open to four current or past LTHE participants. In this internship we prioritise offering a range of teaching experience, including one-to-one appointments, small-group teaching (both online and in-person), and resource development. This variety helps GTAs develop their skills and provides them with a greater range of experiences to discuss in future job applications. To support their development, we provide a range of training, including group induction, one-to-one mentoring, appointment shadowing, and

practical workshops (covering technical topics such as teaching online). The internship has been highly successful in its first two years, as tutors reported how their experience teaching within a learning development context has impacted both their own subject teaching and even their doctoral research.

To conclude, GTA training is currently an underdeveloped field, with huge variety across the sector and little consensus on what topics and experiences are most necessary. As the results from my study demonstrate, GTAs are highly interested in opportunities to develop their teaching careers, particularly those that lead to a certification such as fellowship of Advance HE or completion of a PGCAP. Given the ambitions of our GTAs and the competitive state of the job market, it is essential for learning/academic developers to improve our teaching training to provide GTAs with the practical support they need to improve as educators and further their careers.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Robert Pin-Nan Chang from University of Arts London and Amy May from University of Nottingham.

The community response was edited by Rebecca Randles, who captured the key themes of the community discussion.

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

Barr, M. and Wright, P. (2019) 'Training graduate teaching assistants: what can the discipline offer?' *European Political Science*, 18, pp.143-156. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0175-6>

- Brookfield, S. D. (2017) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. 2nd edn. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Faez, F., Karas, M. and Uchihara, T. (2019) 'Connecting language proficiency to teaching ability: a meta-analysis', *Language Teaching Research*, 25(5). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168819868667>
- Gao, Y., Gumah, B., Kulbo, N. B., Addo, P. C., Kulbo, D. B. and Aziabah, M. A. (2021) 'Predictors of teachers' self-efficacy in teaching EFL: an examination of "nativeness" and teachers' training', *Frontiers in Education*, 6. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.729271>
- Gopal, A. (2011) 'Internationalization of higher education: preparing faculty to teach cross-culturally', *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(1), pp.373-381.
- McLeod, C. L., Almquist, C. B., Ess, M. P., Zhang, J., Schultz, H., Nguyen, T., Tran, K. and Hughes, M. (2025) 'Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs): roles, perspectives, and prioritizing GTA workforce development pathways', *Educational Sciences*, 15(7). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070838>
- Nasser-Abu Alhija, F. and Fresko, B. (2020) 'Graduate teaching assistants: motives, difficulties and professional interactions and their relationship to perceived benefits', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 39(3), pp.546-560. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1681374>
- Nuttall, C. (2022) 'Teaching philosophy statements as a vehicle for critical reflection', *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 14(1), pp.72-82.
- Sharpe, R. (2000) 'A framework for training Graduate Teaching Assistants', *Teacher Development*, 4(1), pp.131-143. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530000200106>
- Slack, H. R. and Pownall, M. (2023) "'Treat GTAs as colleagues, rather than spare parts": the identity, agency, and wellbeing of graduate teaching assistants', *Journal of*

Further and Higher Education, 47(9), pp.1262-1275. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2241392>

Author details

Rachel Horrocks-Birss is an Academic Literacies Developer at the University of Dundee. She coordinates embedded academic skills teaching across the university and leads the Learning to Teach in Higher Education course for new GTAs. Rachel also leads the development of the Writing for Success Diagnostic Tool, which allows students to self-assess their academic writing skills.

Licence

©2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE)* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).