From Burnout to Balance: Embedding Wellbeing in the Professional Trajectory of GTAs

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Abstract:

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in higher education balance the dual demands of teaching and research, which can foster professional growth yet often lead to overwork and burnout. This reflective paper draws on my experience of teaching professional writing to MA Foreign Language (FL) students at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU). It highlights stressors related to workload, mentoring, and balancing institutional expectations with research progress. In response, I implemented four wellbeing strategies: (1) structured feedback windows, (2) realistic goal-setting, (3) peer support networks, and (4) regular reflective practice. Drawing on pedagogical principles from feedback and self-regulated learning research, these strategies enhanced both teaching quality and research productivity. The analysis positions wellbeing not as a reactive response to burnout but as a proactive, integral practice essential for sustaining GTAs' professional and personal development in higher education.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), burnout, wellbeing, professional growth, higher education

1. Introduction: The Role of GTAs in Higher Education

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) hold an essential, intermediary role in higher education. They support the teaching mission of universities (McLeod et al., 2025) while simultaneously advancing their own research (Bhamani & Hjelsvold, 2019). In their instructional capacity, GTAs design lessons, assess student work, provide feedback, and mentor learners (Parker et al., 2015). These experiences contribute to the formation of their academic identity and enhance professional competence, yet the breadth of responsibilities can also generate significant strain.

The strain experienced by GTAs reflects broader discussions of burnout in academia. Burnout, defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981, as cited in Berta & Pembridge, 2019) as a response to prolonged work stress involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced efficacy, has been widely examined among academics and professionals. It is recognized as a response to chronic workplace stressors with serious consequences for wellbeing and effectiveness (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Kinman & Wray, 2018). However, while this scholarship has deepened understanding of academic burnout in general, it has paid limited attention to early career academics situated in transitional roles such as GTAs (Berta & Pembridge, 2019). Existing studies on GTAs primarily address their pedagogical competence, professional training, and identity formation, but rarely consider how they sustain their wellbeing amid institutional expectations and workload pressures. This gap highlights the need for reflective inquiry into how wellbeing can be actively embedded in the lived realities of GTA work.

This paper addresses this gap through a reflective account of my experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India. In this role, I taught the development of “authorial voice” in professional writing to MA Foreign Language (FL) students. While this role provided valuable teaching experience, it also introduced stressors such as intensive lesson preparation, assessment loads, student mentoring, and the pressure of balancing teaching with research. These intersecting demands led to fatigue and early signs of burnout, which, in turn, encouraged a re-evaluation of my working practices. Drawing on reflective inquiry, I implemented four interconnected strategies—structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and regular reflective practice—to create a more sustainable balance between wellbeing and professional performance.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to offer a situated account of how wellbeing practices can be embedded into the daily realities of GTA work, showing how they enhanced both teaching quality and research progress; and second, to situate this reflection within wider scholarly debates on the sustainability of academic careers, highlighting how wellbeing and professional growth are not opposing priorities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of the GTA role.

2. GTAs Navigating Dual Roles: Opportunities and Strain

The role of GTAs is undeniably demanding, as they must balance the responsibilities of both researcher and instructor. Despite their essential contribution to higher education, systematic research on their wellbeing remains limited. As Berta and Pembridge (2019) observe, “Research in burnout, particularly academic and higher education burnout, is without much examination of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who occupy both the role of learner and emerging teaching professionals with various responsibilities relating to the education of students other than themselves.”

The broader literature, however, provides important context. Research on teacher burnout has been widely documented across educational levels and offers a useful framework for understanding GTA experiences. Kyriacou (2001) identified stress as a persistent feature of the profession, pointing to factors such as workload, classroom management, role conflict, and challenging working conditions. More recently, Reinke et al. (2025) described burnout in teaching as a “worldwide epidemic,” finding that 78% of teachers in a large post-pandemic survey reported considering leaving the field, with stress and emotional exhaustion as the strongest predictors of attrition. Burnout not only impacts teachers themselves but also negatively affects students, with high teacher stress linked to reduced motivation, engagement, and achievement (Nalipay et al., 2024).

Parallel to this, scholarship on graduate students has highlighted elevated rates of stress, anxiety, and depression. Levecque et al. (2017) reported that doctoral students are significantly more likely than the general population to experience common mental health problems, largely due to workload, financial pressures, and career uncertainty. Evans et al. (2018) similarly found widespread prevalence of mental-health challenges among graduate students, pointing to institutional and cultural pressures within academia. These studies suggest that graduate education itself can be a site of psychological strain, even before additional teaching responsibilities are considered.

Despite these two substantial literatures—on teacher burnout and on graduate-student mental health—the intersectional experiences of GTAs remain underexplored. Parker et al. (2015) note that GTAs frequently experience role conflict, as the demands of teaching and research are perceived as competing rather than complementary. Moreover, GTA responsibilities are particularly time-intensive and emotionally demanding, resonating with Hochschild’s (1983) notion of emotional labour. However, GTAs operate under distinct structural constraints compared to full-time faculty: they often have temporary contracts, limited financial stability, and minimal institutional authority. These systemic conditions can restrict autonomy and access to support, exacerbating stress while limiting opportunities for wellbeing.

This imbalance highlights a critical gap: while both teacher burnout and graduate-student mental health have been investigated extensively, the specific wellbeing of GTAs has received comparatively little attention. Given the reliance of higher-education institutions on GTAs to deliver teaching, future research must

examine their unique opportunities and strains, situating GTA wellbeing within broader debates on academic labour and sustainability. Addressing this gap requires attention to both individual agency and institutional structures, recognizing how wellbeing is shaped by their interaction. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship, conceptualizing GTA wellbeing as the dynamic intersection of personal strategies, role demands, and institutional supports that collectively enable sustainable professional growth.

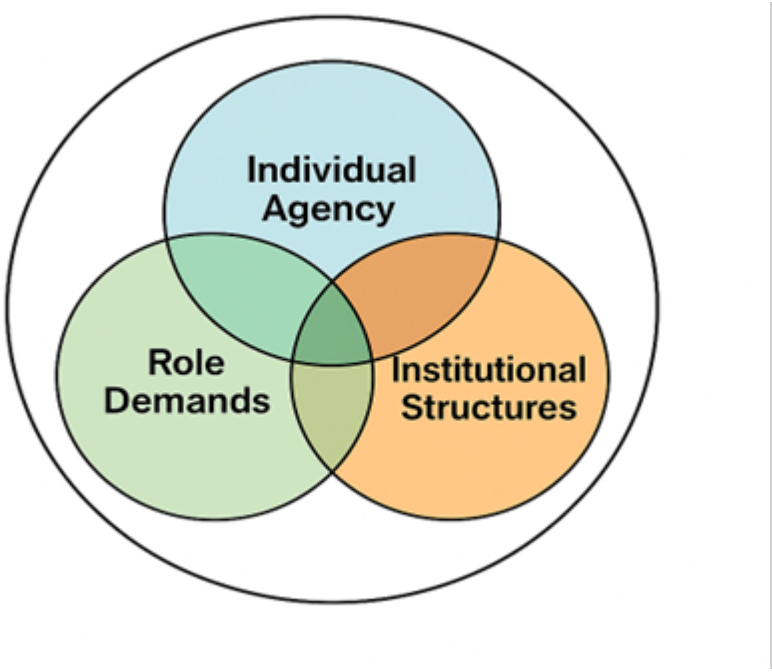

Figure 1 *Interconnected Dimensions of GTA Wellbeing in Higher Education.*

As a GTA myself, I directly encountered many of the tensions outlined in this literature. The next section situates these theoretical insights within my own teaching context, outlining how these pressures manifested in practice and prompted reflective strategies toward a more balanced professional approach.

3. Teaching Context: Authorial Voice at EFLU

As a Graduate Teaching Assistant at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, I taught MA Foreign Language (FL) students to develop “authorial voice” in professional writing. The course focused on high-stakes genres such as emails, statements of purpose (SOPs), letters of recommendation (LORs), reports, and cover emails—texts directly tied to students’ academic and

career advancement. This made the instructional responsibility both meaningful and demanding.

Voice is an especially challenging construct to teach. Most scholarship defines it within academic writing, where it represents a writer's stance, identity, or presence in disciplinary discourse (Ivanic, 1998; Hyland, 2012; Canagarajah, 2015). Professional writing, however, has received less attention, despite distinct expectations across genres. A cover email requires persuasive brevity, an SOP blends personal narrative with academic aspiration, a report emphasizes clarity and neutrality, and a professional email demands tactful authority. In each case, students must construct a voice that is authentic yet contextually appropriate.

For ESL learners, this challenge is intensified by the pressure to conform to standardized conventions that privilege monolingual norms (Canagarajah, 2006). Many students struggled to gauge the appropriate degree of personal expression, formality, or authority within each genre. For example, they were often unsure about how much self-disclosure was acceptable in a statement of purpose or how to balance politeness and confidence in correspondence. These uncertainties underscored that voice in professional writing is not a fixed skill but a flexible, context-sensitive construct negotiated within linguistic and institutional constraints.

For me as a GTA, these complexities magnified the demands of teaching. Lesson planning required balancing genre instruction with opportunities for students to explore multiple rhetorical positions. Feedback involved guiding both linguistic accuracy and the nuanced expression of tone and stance. Individual mentoring supported students' identity negotiation but also added to the emotional and cognitive intensity of the role. At times, I reflected critically on whether my guidance was fostering authentic voice development or reinforcing restrictive academic norms.

Teaching professional writing thus proved both rewarding and exhausting. It deepened my pedagogical understanding and awareness of multilingual identity work, yet the sustained preparation and emotional labour also contributed to fatigue and early signs of burnout noted in the literature. The following section examines these stressors more closely and explores how reflective wellbeing strategies helped establish a more sustainable professional balance.

4. Key Stressors in the GTA Role

The combination of high expectations, heavy responsibilities, and limited institutional support shaped my early experience as a GTA at EFLU, where the high stakes of teaching professional writing to MA Foreign Language students intensified common challenges. Preparing lessons on genres such as emails, reports, and SOPs required tailoring examples to diverse backgrounds, making preparation time-consuming and often encroaching on my research. This aligns with findings that early-career educators frequently "overprepare" to prove competence (Admiraal et al., 2023). The feedback load was similarly demanding, as students expected

detailed, individualized comments on high-stakes drafts, with hours spent far exceeding my formal workload. Mentoring added further strain: students often sought broader academic and career guidance, requiring sustained emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), a hidden contributor to burnout that academics frequently underestimate (Kinman & Wray, 2018). Most persistently, balancing GTA duties with doctoral research produced role conflict (Katz & Kahn, 1978), a recognized predictor of burnout in higher education (Watts & Robertson, 2011). These stressors—lesson preparation, feedback, mentoring, and role conflict—generated fatigue and reduced self-efficacy, not as personal shortcomings but as structural features of the GTA role. Recognizing them became the first step toward developing strategies to restore balance, which I discuss in the next section.

5. From Burnout to Balance: Embedding Wellbeing Strategies

Recognizing the early signs of burnout in my GTA role at EFLU prompted me to reassess how I managed the competing demands of teaching and research. Rather than persisting with unsustainable routines, I began implementing strategies that could protect my wellbeing while supporting professional growth. Four approaches proved particularly effective: structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and regular reflective practice. While these began as personal adjustments, they ultimately redefined how I approached academic work, demonstrating that wellbeing can be embedded in everyday professional practice rather than treated as an external concern.

5.1 Structured Feedback Windows

Feedback provision was among the most demanding aspects of my teaching. Students often submitted multiple drafts of high-stakes documents such as statements of purpose and recommendation letters, expecting detailed and rapid responses. This open-ended feedback cycle consumed disproportionate time and encroached on my research.

To address this, I introduced structured feedback windows, informing students of designated periods for draft reviews and limiting the number of revisions I would comment on. This practice reflected the principles of effective feedback, emphasizing clarity, timeliness, and learner self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Establishing clear boundaries reduced the anxiety associated with an “always-on” teaching mode, improved feedback quality, and modeled for students the value of responsible time management.

5.2 Realistic Goal-Setting

At the start of my GTA experience, I set unattainably high expectations for myself—perfect lessons, exhaustive feedback, and uninterrupted research productivity. Over time, these ideals became unsustainable and fostered self-criticism.

Drawing on theories of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), I began practicing realistic goal-setting. For teaching, this meant focusing on depth rather than breadth; for research, breaking large projects into achievable milestones. This pragmatic shift from perfectionism to progress improved motivation and reduced cognitive overload. As Locke and Latham (2002) suggest, setting specific, attainable goals enhances performance—a finding that resonated with my own sense of renewed balance and confidence.

5.3 Peer Support Networks

Teaching in a GTA role can be isolating, especially when workloads and expectations are high. To counter this, I initiated informal exchanges with fellow GTAs at EFLU, where we shared resources, lesson plans, and reflections on common challenges.

These peer support networks quickly became vital spaces for professional and emotional growth. Campbell et al. (2019) highlight how peer-supported faculty development fosters pedagogical improvement and resilience. My experience reflected this: discussions with peers transformed individual frustrations into collective problem-solving and helped normalize the pressures we faced. Beyond reassurance, the networks provided practical tools, such as more efficient feedback methods and shared classroom strategies.

5.4 Regular Reflective Practice

To sustain wellbeing, I also adopted regular reflective practice as a means of monitoring workload, teaching quality, and emotional state. Guided by Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner," I maintained weekly journals documenting classroom experiences and stress levels.

This habit cultivated perspective and adaptability. Reflection allowed me to identify patterns—such as over-preparation or creeping fatigue—and to adjust strategies before burnout escalated. Echoing Kember et al. (2008), I found that reflection enhanced self-awareness and resilience, reframing setbacks as opportunities for learning rather than as evidence of failure.

5.5 Synthesizing Strategies and Broader Support

Individually, each of these strategies addressed a specific stressor; collectively, they shifted my approach from reactive coping to proactive wellbeing. Table 1 summarizes how each strategy related to key stressors in the GTA role and the outcomes achieved.

Table 1 *Linking GTA Wellbeing Strategies to Key Stressors and Their Impacts*

Wellbeing Strategy	**Key Stressor Addressed**	**Implementation Example**	**Impact on Wellbeing and Professional Practice**
Structured Feedback Windows	Feedback—continuous student expectations for detailed, rapid comments on multiple drafts	Established fixed feedback periods; limited number of revisions per student	Reduced workload intensity; preserved research time; improved feedback quality; encouraged student independence
Realistic Goal-Setting	Role conflict—tension between teaching responsibilities and research progress	Set achievable weekly goals for both teaching and research; prioritized essential tasks	Enhanced focus and motivation; reduced cognitive strain; created sustainable balance between roles
Peer Support Networks	Mentoring—emotional labour from extensive student guidance and lack of collegial support	Formed informal GTA peer groups to exchange teaching materials and discuss challenges	Reduced isolation; provided emotional reassurance; normalized shared struggles; fostered collaborative resilience
Regular Reflective Practice	Lesson preparation — extensive planning demands leading to fatigue and self-doubt	Maintained weekly reflective journal; evaluated teaching load, fatigue, and areas for improvement	Increased self-awareness; improved adaptability; reframed over-preparation as learning rather than failure

While these strategies emerged from individual agency, their long-term success depends on institutional enablers. Universities can reinforce GTA wellbeing by formalizing mentoring structures, offering workload training, and recognizing the emotional labour inherent in teaching. Providing access to mental-health resources,

structured feedback systems, and professional-development workshops can further integrate wellbeing into academic culture. When institutional and individual efforts align, the result is not merely burnout prevention but a sustainable model of professional growth for early-career academics.

6. Discussion: Wellbeing and Professional Growth as Interdependent

The strategies I adopted as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at EFLU—structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and reflective practice—did more than alleviate immediate stress. They revealed a deeper insight: wellbeing and professional growth are not opposing priorities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of academic life. This challenges the assumption, still prevalent in many academic cultures, that success requires personal sacrifice and overwork. Instead, my experience suggests that sustainability arises when wellbeing is embedded in professional practice.

6.1 Wellbeing as a Foundation for Effective Teaching

When I was fatigued, my teaching quality suffered. Feedback became rushed, lessons felt less focused, and I had less patience for student concerns. By contrast, after implementing strategies that safeguarded my energy, I found myself more engaged in the classroom. My feedback was sharper and more constructive, and my lessons were delivered with greater clarity and confidence. This aligns with research showing that educator wellbeing is positively linked to teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Dreer, 2023). In this way, prioritizing wellbeing directly enhanced the professional dimension of my role.

6.2 Professional Growth as a Source of Wellbeing

At the same time, professional achievements strengthened my sense of wellbeing. Progress in my doctoral research provided reassurance that I was moving forward in my academic trajectory, while positive feedback from students reinforced my confidence as a teacher. These experiences cultivated a sense of self-efficacy which is a key determinant of motivation and resilience. In moments where I could see tangible progress in both teaching and research, stress was tempered by a renewed sense of purpose. This reciprocity underscores that professional growth itself can be a powerful resource for wellbeing when pursued sustainably.

6.3 Rethinking Wellbeing as Proactive Rather than Reactive

Another key insight from my reflection is that wellbeing must be understood as proactive rather than reactive. Too often, wellbeing is treated as a set of coping mechanisms deployed only once burnout has already occurred. My strategies, however, functioned best when implemented consistently, preventing crises rather than responding to them. For instance, reflective practice allowed me to identify early signs of fatigue, enabling adjustments before stress escalated. This echoes the argument of Kinman and Wray (2018), who stress the importance of resilience-building practices in higher education to counteract systemic stressors.

7. Conclusion

The experience of serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) offered both opportunities for growth and risks of imbalance. On the one hand, teaching high-stakes professional writing provided valuable pedagogical experience, deepened my understanding of feedback, and strengthened my confidence as an educator. On the other, the combination of extensive preparation, continuous feedback demands, mentoring responsibilities, and the need to progress my doctoral research created conditions that mirrored the early stages of burnout: fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and reduced accomplishment.

This reflective paper traced my trajectory from burnout to balance, highlighting the four strategies that enabled me to recalibrate: structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and regular reflective practice. Collectively, these practices helped me protect my energy, manage workload more effectively, reduce isolation, and sustain adaptability. Importantly, they demonstrated that wellbeing is not a secondary concern to be addressed once professional goals are met, but a foundation that actively enables effective teaching and focused research.

The central argument that emerged is that wellbeing and professional growth are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing. When I prioritized wellbeing, my teaching quality improved, my research advanced more steadily, and my motivation was renewed. In turn, professional achievements strengthened my confidence and resilience, further supporting wellbeing. This interdependence suggests that sustainable academic trajectories depend on embedding wellbeing into professional practice rather than treating it as an optional or reactive measure.

Ultimately, the journey from burnout to balance is ongoing. Academic life will continue to present shifting demands, moments of overextension, and the need for recalibration. Yet my experience has shown that with intentional strategies and supportive communities, it is possible to navigate these challenges in ways that sustain both wellbeing and growth. For GTAs—and for institutions that rely on them—the lesson is clear: thriving in higher education requires not only professional competence but also the resilience and balance that come from embedding wellbeing at the heart of academic practice.

Ethical Claim: This paper is based solely on reflective self-analysis and does not involve human participants, data collection, interviews, or surveys and all the other ethical guidelines have been taken into consideration. I declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with the publication of this paper with any external organisation and I assume the full responsibility for the disclosure of any such conflict.

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