

Counting and mattering: bringing GTA visibility to the fore in data, at a time of sector change

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Sara Hattersley is Associate Professor in University of Warwick's Academic Development Centre, a cross-faculty department leading initiatives and professional development programmes in learning and teaching, supporting the Education and Student Experience Strategy. For 10 years, Sara's work and expertise has centred around professional learning for postgraduate researchers who teach, primarily through the *Academic and Professional Pathway for PGR teachers* (APP PGR), accredited by Advance HE, where hundreds of Warwick PGRs have gained Associate Fellowship status. She is co-founder of the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community, a cross-institutional community of practice and incoming Chair of Warwick's first cross-institutional GTA working and advisory group. Sara is an advocate of the PGR teacher voice on a number of Warwick committees, and nationally co-leads the GTA Developer Network, which represents over 50 HEIs, providing connection for those in educational development or faculty roles who work closely with PGR teachers. Although teaching-focussed, Sara's research interests centre around the self-efficacy and identify of early career teachers, compassionate pedagogy, inclusion, persistence, and digital and blended learning. She is currently a co-mentor on an international research project, connecting PGR writing groups between Warwick (UK) and Monash (Australia).



Abstract

UK Higher Education faces mounting pressures from financial instability, rising student numbers, and increasing regulatory demands. In this context, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a critical role in sustaining teaching and learning during these challenging times. Despite their continued and growing presence, GTAs often remain absent or unseen in national datasets, institutional metrics and reporting, and quality assurance frameworks, leaving their contributions under-recognised and their professional status unclear.

This paper considers GTAs in relation to sector bodies and national datasets, examining the implications of their relative invisibility for strategic planning, accountability, and student outcomes, particularly in light of growing sector-wide emphasis on compliance and performance indicators. Drawing on institutional knowledge, experience and sector data, it advocates for a more rigorous approach to counting and representing GTAs both locally and nationally, positioning visibility as essential for equity, recognition, and the future resilience of our work. It argues that by 'counting better', we might also, at last, move towards liberating GTAs from the ubiquitous and well-document liminal space which they occupy.

Keywords: GTA, PGR, teaching, data, metrics, HESA, OfS, NSS

Where we find ourselves now

Five issues and 67 papers later and we are here: the conference special issue of the JPPP. I want to start by acknowledging the work of the editorial team and to take my place once again, in the time-honoured tradition, of closing this issue of the journal. I have written four Afterwords now for the JPPP, each one reflecting a contemporary theme, but I somehow find myself back in familiar territory this time. Back in 2021, when we first published the JPPP, we were still caught up in the global pandemic. Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) were an invaluable source of expertise at Warwick, when the HE world pivoted to online learning, supporting the emergency provision, guiding our 6000 first year undergraduates and adapting their own practice in immediate and noticeable ways. *“Now more than ever, as we emerge into new ways of working as an institution, we will need a range of colleagues, who can work in nuanced ways and adapt to changing times”*, I mused (Hattersley, 2021, p.68). The thing is, I could have written that yesterday...

It is no secret that Higher Education in the UK is experiencing testing times. Nearly half of UK HEIs are facing financial deficits in 2025-6, a combination of volatility in student numbers (particularly postgraduates); increase in employer national insurance contributions; below-inflation tuition fees and a loss of direct government funding over time (Office for Students, 2025). In spite of student recruitment rises in some research-intensive Universities, long-term sustainability and cost-saving measures are manifesting themselves in a variety of ways, here, and with colleagues and departments elsewhere, as the Union voice once again grows (Norden, 2025). Student wellbeing is a huge concern, with cost-of-living pressures meaning more of our students, around 68%, are now working in termtime, reducing the time they are spending on independent study (Neves et al., 2025). Alongside financial challenges, our students report loneliness, and lack of confidence and self-efficacy in study, which particularly affects minoritised groups (Unite Students, HEPI., 2025). And then the hot, ubiquitous topic of AI in HE: both celebrated as the enabler we need and the threat we don't, depending on who you talk to. Student adoption of AI is growing, whilst staff training and confidence lags behind and over half of students now state a preference for online or hybrid approaches (JISC, 2025). *“We're beholden to meet students where they are.”* said our colleague Prof Sarah MacDonald, Monash University earlier this year (Karp, 2025) and the growth in interest in stackable learning and the age of the microcredential and lifelong learning entitlement do point to shifts in our habits and practices which seem very different and perhaps, like the disruption of 2020, sector-changing.

It was in this context that Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community held its first PGR Teacher Conference this summer, with a theme which reflected the shifts and challenges of the sector: *Evolving Experiences in Postgraduate Teaching*:

Navigating Changing Landscapes, Practices, and Technologies. This special issue of the JPPP is an extension of the thoughts, positions and arguments made on the day.

I was proud that we had hosted a PGR Teacher Conference, small and perfectly formed as it was. I wondered how many other such conferences there had been. I didn't know of any. After a bit of research into this, it seems that you can count the number of PGR teacher conferences on the fingers of one hand...

Counting colleagues...or colleagues who 'count'?

While we are counting things, it's 10 years this term since I began working with PGR teachers at Warwick, in the professional learning space, and what a privilege it's been! Our programme the *Academic and Professional Pathway for PGR Teachers* (APPPGR) has seen over 500 Warwick GTAs engage with us and the programme continues to be popular....maybe too popular? Something else I have noticed lately is the size of our waiting lists for the programme: we have many more applicants than we can accommodate annually. The value of CPD to our GTAs, and the issues of equality of opportunity in accessing it are well known (McLeod, 2025; Sadera et al, 2024; Peng et al, 2022). While PGRs patiently await their turn, in a large institution like ours it's not always possible to see the full picture (just how many *might* come?), so I have been tenaciously pursuing institutional data. In short, we have a lot of GTAs at Warwick. I know this is reflected more widely in the sector. There is also an uneven disciplinary distribution with a large proportion of our GTAs working in our Faculty of Science Engineering and Medicine. Science-based signature pedagogies (Schulman, 2005) are distinct, but nevertheless, we know that these colleagues also benefit from coming together with others, from across the faculties. A teaching philosophy dialogue I assessed recently for AFHEA, between GTAs from Life Sciences and History, provided illuminating insight into ways of seeing across the disciplines.

But back to the figures. What does the picture look like more broadly? Well, there are no specific, nationally available statistics on the number of GTAs working in the sector. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the go-to body for sector data, does not have a coding for GTAs specifically, who instead, will fall into both student and/or staff categories, and in the latter are probably classified (alongside others) as 'fixed term' or 'atypical staff' (HESA, 2016). These colleagues will have a contract of employment (Warwick GTAs have such a contract...so far so good) but anyone employed through temping agencies (as postgraduates sometimes are) won't be counted. Tracking back, HESA adopts Office for National Statistics (ONS) 'Standard Occupational Coding', where 'Higher education teaching professionals' (code 2113, number fans!) describes colleagues at level of qualification, including

‘skill level 4’ *lecturers, senior lecturers, assistant professors, and teaching fellows*. Again, no specific mention of GTAs.

One reason why GTAs are hard to capture in data, of course, is that their work is for a (albeit hugely varied) fixed duration: the lifespan, or less, of their PhD. However, even in HESA’s latest, more agile, ‘real-time’ and granular data collection approach ‘Data Futures’ (HESA 2023-4), it is still unclear to me whether GTA visibility will actually surface.

(Coincidentally, HESA was established in 1993, the year I embarked upon my own undergraduate degree...does this mean that GTAs have never been counted properly in over 30 years...more..?)

More broadly there has been extraordinary growth in the number of teaching-only contracts in UK Higher Education: over 80% between 2005 and 2019, described as “*not a component in a well-considered strategic plan, but something which occurred in a more haphazard way*” (Jenkins and Wolf, 2023). Although the GTA role in universities is much longer established, they are clearly dwelling in this same space, often indistinguishable from other colleagues in the data. Contract types and varied job titles (‘tutor’, ‘demonstrator’, ‘sessional staff’, ‘associate tutors’, ‘graduate students’, ‘casual academics’, ‘temporary worker’ are a few I have come across) make it very difficult to search for GTA presence in any datasets, or to understand the nature of their work. Research councils cannot help us either, not surprisingly, with bodies like UKRI not keeping any sort of data relating to teaching. And the international picture is much the same. OK, it’s time to stop looking....

Turning to professional learning, then, truly my business, and it is also unclear how many of our GTA colleagues have received professional recognition. The ‘typical’ category of fellowship awarded to GTAs is Associate Fellow (AFHEA), although some achieve Fellowship, depending on teaching experience. In 2023-4, Advance HE reported 4,643 awards of AFHEA status through accredited provision (that residing within institutions, like ours) but note that “*this is the most diverse category of fellowship*”, with a range of colleagues represented, including postgraduates (Advance HE, 2024, p.11). Last year at Warwick, the vast majority of those colleagues awarded AFHEA status were GTAs, graduating as they did from the APPPGR programme. This is a common model, and in many cases, AFHEA status is an outcome of such programmes designed to support GTA teaching practice. Other CPD opportunities exist for GTAs to gain a fellowship status too, and 85% HEIs report that access to accredited status is available to GTAs in their organisations (Quirke and Standen, 2024, p.14).

It’s an unclear picture, then, nationally. Does it matter? Much of the decision-making around GTA work is left to individual institutions to manage and in part there is sense in this. At Warwick, our SEM-strong space means that some decentralised arrangements regarding CPD (e.g. specialist in-department approaches to the teaching of mathematics) suit the pedagogical requirements of the department. But

challenges remain. We do know from the WPTC survey that devolved approaches lead to disparities (Lewis et al, 2021) so when we scale that up, nationally (and internationally), there is a danger that more of our earliest career, most vulnerable colleagues will fall outside of policy frameworks, work-place protections and opportunities for professional learning. By not counting, we are not accountable.

GTAs and performance metrics

But it's not only our responsibility to GTAs as early career colleagues, that a better eye on numbers would support. Flipping to the institutional and strategic lens, the lack of benchmarking and data visibility means that policymakers and educational leaders are unable to properly account for the contribution of GTAs to teaching quality and student outcomes, particularly in relation to current sector measures.

To illustrate this, I recently tried to understand the impact of GTAs in Warwick's National Student Survey (NSS) returns, and in doing so, I hit upon more problems. I am not sure 'GTA' is a term that is habitually understood by our undergraduates. Instead, when looking at the qualitative feedback data, a range of descriptions from '*The PhD student teacher in my class..*' (pretty obvious who that is) to '*the seminar tutor...*' (much more ambiguous) are probably being used to acknowledge the presence, practice and impact of our GTAs which means it is impossible to be certain who is doing the work. I realised I needed to use around half a dozen search terms to yield results (positive and negative) which *could* be referring to our GTAs. And maybe I missed some? NSS is administered by the Office for Students (OfS); you'll be unsurprised to hear that GTAs have no place in their regulatory framework or data either (mostly because it integrates HESA data: see above). Although OfS focuses on student outcomes, which GTAs can undoubtedly influence, there has been no reporting mechanism for institutions to share the contribution of GTAs specifically, other than, perhaps, Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) narratives, where categories of staff, their contributions and their teaching status could be made visible if institutions choose to make them so (we did, albeit briefly..). However, the OfS's renewed strategy for TEF (currently under consultation) seems to suggest a reduction of the 'narrative' element, perhaps squeezing the space where the GTA story could be told, nationally. And if there is to be more of an emphasis on quantitative indicators, and GTAs are not meaningfully represented in this data, their somewhat invisible status seems destined to continue.

Under TEF's current 'B conditions of registration' (the minimum quality standards required of institutions) I can *really* see the spaces in which GTAs contribute to the quality or learning and teaching; "*..support to help students with*

course content...to identify and address knowledge or skills gaps...” is but one of them.

Something else that interests me is the section on staff containing expectations which, seen through the GTA lens, demonstrate their importance in this context. That is, that teachers should be ‘appropriately qualified’ meaning: *“individuals hold a teaching qualification”* (so our GTAs should have access to AFHEA); teaching teams are *“(not) comprised solely of inexperienced teachers”* (our GTAs should work alongside more senior colleagues and not be left with the burden of responsibility); emphasis on *“research at the forefront of relevant disciplines”* (our GTA’s current dual role as researchers has credence) and *“(not) over-reliant on visiting teachers”* (perhaps pointing to a need for recognition of our GTAs as more established colleagues). (OfS, 2022, p.15). There’s a flavour of a holistic ‘teaching team’, so whilst our earliest career teachers are not named explicitly, their visibility as part of a programme ecosystem is surely something we must shore up when we think about institutional reporting.

Whilst it is unclear what the details of the revised TEF will be, with the seeming shift towards regulatory compliance, changed ‘minimum standards’ and metric-based evidence (Dickinson, 2025), it seems incongruent that we should not have a handle on data around one of the biggest contributors to teaching in our sector institutions: GTAs. Moreover, for institutions to not consider the impact of GTA work represented within our current datasets like NSS, could be both a huge omission and a risk.

A moment for GTAs to matter

At this year’s Warwick Inclusion Conference, Binna Kandola, a specialist and prominent figure in workplace diversity, talked about numbers-driven approaches to equality, diversity and inclusion, inviting the audience to consider whether, in diversifying our workforces, we are interested in ‘opportunities’ or simply ‘measurable outcomes’ (e.g. reporting gender, ethnicity data etc). *“What gets measured gets done; what doesn’t gets ignored”* he purported (I wrote it in my notebook). Whilst I am no fan of data for data’s sake (I have seen plenty of impenetrable tables of institutional data presented in meetings, only to be filed away shortly afterwards), I do think GTAs have mattered less because they remain unseen in so many places in our data. Plenty of publications, including papers in the JPPP and sister journal, *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, have platformed and championed PGR teacher work, along with the national GTA Developer Network. But there is something compelling about numbers.

Forthcoming changes to TEF will sharpen the focus for what is measured, with all eyes on themes like assessment and feedback, habitually lower scoring in

undergraduate evaluation, especially ‘how feedback helps students to improve their work’ (OfS, 2025). This is a key area of influence for GTAs: recent UKCGE reporting noted that in the 21 HEIs represented, 93% said marking was a GTA responsibility in their organisation. However, marking was also associated with workload management problems, and lack of expertise and opportunities for calibration (Quirke and Standen, 2024). If we allow these challenges to persist, what impact will that have on our GTAs, but also our undergraduate students...and on our increasingly scrutinised data? To note: I am not blaming GTAs for poor student outcomes here, but I am challenging more senior colleagues to consider whether or not support and mentoring for GTAs is adequate, in key areas of work like this.

Returning to the start of this piece, I reflected on the need for adaptable colleagues in challenging times. What the papers in this issue show is that we are already blessed with such colleagues. Our GTAs are engaging in reflective, active, compassionate and imaginative practices with self-awareness and resilience. They form an indispensable part of our educational ecosystem, and they are doing their bit. So I’ll conclude this paper with a call to educational leaders and to the sector. First of all, institutions should interrogate their own data, fully understand GTA numbers, their teaching contributions and professional learning needs, building this into strategic planning. They should ensure their visibility, to both department staff and students, so as recognisable, distinct colleagues their work is foregrounded (and ‘findable’ in data): good practice acknowledged and support needs noticed. Secondly, changes to national datasets to explicitly include GTAs, intersected with existing demographics, will give us a clearer picture of their work across the disciplines and support accountability and benchmarking related to workload, professional status and impact on learning and teaching.

This year I came across a sector article (even older than me!) claiming “*the number of teaching assistants had increased significantly since the 1960s (with)...assistants substituting for professors in teaching undergraduates as their enrolment increased, especially in public universities.*” Sound familiar? It also described the student-staff dual role as “*incompatible*” (Dubin et al, 1967, p.521), foregrounding the discussion around GTA identity which has persisted in our discourse ever since. In my community, of GTA developers, we have shouted about the good practice of these early career colleagues for a long time; spoken of their specific challenges and precarity and acknowledged institutional barriers and opportunities, and yet they remain relatively unseen. Maybe such stories are not enough? Perhaps alongside this, positioning GTAs in national datasets and reporting *is* the key to visibility, a shoring up of their professional role and, at last, maybe, emergence from the liminal state. However, we should do this not just to create more data, but as an active tool for change; because it’s the right thing to do. We count on our GTAs. We should ‘count’ them and be accountable to them. And in doing so, we will ensure that they, as our colleagues, do count and do matter.

Declarations

This represents my own writing and thinking, but I acknowledge the use of CoPilot to help me locate specific pages in national data spaces (HESA, OfS) and in the ordering of my list of references, a job I hate (I did say thank you).

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