

Graduate Teaching Assistant Opinions on Balance of Teaching and Professional Training

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Received: May 30, 2018

Accepted: June 22, 2018

Online Published: August 15, 2018

doi:10.20849/jed.v2i2.450

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/jed.v2i2.450>

Abstract

This study was designed to determine the experience of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in programs that provide educational training in teaching and professional practice. Because this study involves investigational research, qualitative approaches were used, including interviews with ten teaching assistants working with educational faculty in Najran University. Content analysis, a qualitative data analysis method, was used. GTAs reported on the teaching programs and professional practices needed to fulfill their training requirements and the balance between teaching standards and quality performance, in terms of evaluation, advancement, training programs, and opportunities available in teaching departments. Overall, GTAs were not satisfied with their teaching training programs. The responses were in consensus that GTAs desired more time to learn professional teaching skills, and that they would like more observation and evaluation of their performance. Seeking the opinions of GTAs regarding teaching training programs will not only enhance their experience, but also could improve the education that they provide to students.

Keywords: graduate teaching assistant, graduate student, teaching assistant, teaching training programs, teaching skills, content analysis

1. Introduction

Educational institutions are a basic pillar of economic growth and development, and social advancement, because they train individuals to qualify for important roles in the workforce. Thus, institutions must provide high-quality educational programs that can improve and change to meet the demands of society. This study focuses on the outcomes of graduate students who have graduate teaching assistant (GTA) positions in the same college. These graduate students have significant teaching responsibilities that include assisting staff in the department with teaching as well as other tasks and roles. This type of teaching practice can help GTAs improve their professional teaching development and learn skills that can be translated to other experiences and training programs. GTA training programs cover a variety of concepts including classroom management, teaching strategies, and practices. Thus, having a GTA with balanced training in teaching and practice is often essential, particularly in situations that involve classroom concerns, improving self-confidence, increasing motivation with teaching skills, and developing leadership skills that will translate into successful academic careers (Kennes, 2007). Thus, by improving GTA skills, the department will also improve the experience of new students in general educational courses provided in the department. However, because GTA training programs currently lack some of the improvements and advantages that are typical in training programs, an additional layer of advanced training is needed in teaching practice and development of learning processes as well as preparatory teaching strategies that include workloads, evaluation, observation, mentoring, and providing feedback. This study seeks to address this gap by evaluating similar, previously described, programs offered in advanced countries in general, and Arab and Gulf countries in particular, that foster outstanding opportunities for GTAs to expand their skills and practices in educational fields.

2. Literature Review

This paper begins by describing the function of GTAs, and the role of practices, training programs, and development programs needed to improve teaching, by reviewing previous investigations in this area. In this section, we review different perspectives on each focus area explored in the study, including being assigned to teaching courses, mentoring, observing GTAs, and evaluation via feedback reports. Most universities worldwide design GTA training as a program that offers the first few years of work experience at the same institutions in

department-specific supplemental training, policies, and procedures. Further, GTAs are required to teach for a specific number of hours—about 20-30 credits—to complete their degree of study at the Masters or graduate levels (Chadha, 2013; Dotger, 2010).

Most graduate students with high scores were accepted as GTAs in their own department to assist academic staff with scientific research and publication (DeChenne, 2010). The purpose of their application was to gain teaching experience while they worked on their Masters or Doctorate degrees (Alshehry, 2018). This study shows the importance of GTAs, who are considered a part of teaching staff in colleges or universities and have duties including teaching, interacting with interns in the departments, engaging in training programs, and developing teaching strategies (Schussler et al., 2012; Brewer & Smith, 2011). There are, however, some challenges to preparing GTAs to teach (Sezgin & Duran, 2011). Prior to each course taught by a GTA, the department must evaluate their teaching skills as satisfactory or unsatisfactory using a typical course grading scale from (A-F), until more experienced staff decide that the graduate student is ready to be an assistant for the course they wish to teach (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014). Preparing GTAs to teach includes determining how to improve their teaching skills, because the teaching profession requires an ability to engage in tasks, explore and solve problems, recognize procedures, and understand student misconceptions (Fuentes et al., 2014). For example, a faculty teaching statement must adhere to specific guidelines that require faculty to describe their experience and understanding of the nature of learning, teaching, and knowledge, as well as the aims of teaching, professionalism, and discipline (Pratt, 2005). Training GTAs is an important part of professional development for faculty members. Fifield (1993) stated that “improvement of GTA training is a very important way to bolster college biology teaching in general.” Thus, the training process enhances faculty teaching skills and quality, while preparing GTAs for their doctorate degrees with more professional skills. GTA training also provides evidence of the value of this training to college departments, teaching plans, and training (Rushin, 1997). However, some previous studies show a lack of motivation to develop GTA teaching and training programs, with some departments using GTAs to teach rather than the settled faculty members in lower division laboratories and recitation classes that have close contact with undergraduate students (Lawrence et al., 1992). Because of their potentially extensive contact with learners, the perceptions of GTAs who view themselves as candidate teachers should be considered important, and the development of GTA training programs must consider these suggestions to develop optimal teaching skills and practices. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to evaluate the experiences of graduate students working as teaching assistants in the same place they graduated from who became a part of the faculty of education, and to determine the best way to balance their teaching experience with the areas in which they would like to receive training.

According to these goals, we asked the following questions:

How do graduate teaching assistants evaluate the teaching and training program overall?

Which parts of the teaching and training program should be altered based on the GTA opinions?

In addition to teaching assistant skills, what other formal teaching opportunities might be valuable additions; such as workshops, seminars, and internships in the college training progression?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper is an embedded single-case study; this is qualitative research involving a case study with more than one sub-unit of analysis (Yin, 2011). In this study, GTA teaching and training practices are discussed in the context of the academic teaching program for these teacher candidates. These advanced teaching and training programs to establish a professional practice among the faculty of education were evaluated in this study by analyzing qualitative data consisting of answers given in response to open-ended questions investigated in this study.

3.2 Data Collection Tools

Data in this study were obtained from GTAs using three open-ended question forms to determine their opinions of the teaching practices and training programs offered to them. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews, designed to gain an in-depth understanding of how GTAs experience their teaching and training processes in departments. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight GTA participants. Interview questions, answers, and discussions were all in Arabic, and the researcher then translated these into English. The specialist assessed the data collected in terms of experience of research and clarity of regulation, content, and response formats.

3.3 Data collection and Analysis

Content analysis is a qualitative data technique used to analyze the data in this study. Responses to the open-ended questions in this study were analyzed in four stages: coding data, finding themes, organizing the codes and themes, and interpreting and describing the findings. These were coded individually and organized by the researchers. Coded data were then classified based on differences and similarities to collated topics and subtopics (Yildirim & Simsek, 2015). Finally, these codes were evaluated based on agreements in perspectives to ensure the consistency and reliability of our calculations.

4. Results

We investigated general considerations of the teaching practices and training opportunities available to GTAs based on the opinions of GTAs. First, with regard to the research questions about how GTAs feel about the teaching and training programs overall, most responses were in consensus with regard to issues that GTAs observed with the teaching and learning program offerings. GTA3 stated, “As participants in the department, we feel that we faced a lack of training opportunities with regard to professional teaching values.” GTAs 5 and 8 also said, “I find that the current training programs available to us for teaching are unsuccessful; one of the significant problems of these programs is the fact that after four years of study in an undergraduate program, we graduate without adopting professional values in our teaching practices ... we can implement this in the future, and we do not yet have any professional creativity.” GTA2 also agreed, stating “We have a full teaching workload, which prevents us from having enough time for our own training. This is insufficient considering that we need to have effective educational practices and training to improve our own teaching.” GTA6 also observed that “Teaching is a good field for developing the use of teaching professionals, training processes, and assessments.”

GTA4 said “I think it is highly important to create some new ideas and concepts to increase awareness of what the teaching profession involves and what is needed.” The GTAs agree with the issues of the training programs; as GTA1 stated, “In our observation, the training practices are inadequate and sufficient training programs are not offered.”

Second, some research questions focused on the opinions of GTAs concerning potential changes in teaching and training. GTA3 stated that “We need to change the offered programs to improve teaching and training. There are inadequate opportunities to practice the learning and teaching process. We need to focus on improving creativity to create standardized teaching knowledge.” GTA6 echoed these sentiments, with this statement “I believe that it is mostly concentrated on practice rather than theory, which is only mentioned as briefly.” GTA2 also said “We need to have more training practice in fields within the teaching profession that require specialization, that are carried out in non-formal educational settings.” GTA2 insisted that “We do not think that the programs provided are satisfactory. Teaching practice is something that cannot be achieved by college students that have not yet had access to this kind of teaching knowledge and training programs. In other areas where the perceptions are not so bad, I think there are some deficiencies; for example, some of our academic staff do not have enough knowledge in teaching practices and training to train others in the field.” GTA1 also stated this that “available teaching and training programs miss a lot because we evaluate them mostly by the students exam scores, which is not fair to us—we have missed a lot of professional training that might have helped improve our teaching performance.” GTA2 stated “It is very important to change the way the teaching profession is carried out and how the services are provided based on the needs of the educational environment and the programs that can evaluate teaching improvement. The department however, needs to continue improving the quality of its performance periodically.” In addition, GTA8 stated “the current teaching and learning programs are not sufficient to meet our needs as a lecturers or teachers; the program needs to be revised in order to educate beginning teachers like us so that we can teach future generations and improve general educational skills, which is an area of weakness.”

The third research question addressed a problem that falls within the overall theme; the participants were asked to define whether any other formal opportunities exist for teacher and training development. The answers of the GTAs are mostly grouped under the following themes: lack of training practices, process of improving programs, personal and professional values, and GTA qualifications. Consistent with the responses of GTA2, GTA4 stated in response to the above question, “There is a noticeable lack of training practices that fulfill our professional development needs to achieve high-quality teaching with useful evaluation feedback from our students.” GTA6 also felt that “The department plays a prominent role in this; they need to take this into consideration for future improvements in the processes of training highly qualified teachers, based on the quality assurance that the institutional scores are requested.” However, GTA7 followed this with this statement, “We have a lot of improvements to incorporate in terms of the training that the department could offer to us. A cooperative

program could be discussed that involves experienced academic teachers who can discuss positive solutions via workshops or seminars that we can use to evaluate our current teaching and find avenues for improvement.”

GTA2 also explored the main purpose of this, stating that “Training is an important task for us to focus on. It should evaluate us individually on what we need to focus on during our work as assistant teachers.” GTA1 agreed with this, stating that “Teacher education development in general must include some seminars that could deal with the basic professional values we need.” Another GTA8 added that “we need to be creative and attach importance to professional values to be innovative, and we must have creative teachers, which would be reflected in our students’ understanding and learning.” Therefore, as GTA5 stated, “The development of GTAs must be enhanced via seminars, workshops, and internships, aimed at bringing key 21st century skills and knowledge base, and encouraging critical thinking, research questioning, and improving problem solving skills.” GTA3 also stated that “It is important to present seminars to us by academic teachers who are more innovative and experienced than us.” GTA8 observed that “We could have these workshops or seminars by other departments or units in universities that have the knowledge to offer this to us. These would cover what we need in terms of teaching skills and practices to be improved, rather than having us obtain knowledge and experience purely from interacting with students.”

5. Discussion

In this study, GTAs offered their perceptions on teaching and training programs generally in terms of improving teaching, performance, education, and training programs offered, in order to improve their skills and knowledge and facilitate their smooth entry into the teaching profession. GTAs observed deficiencies in their preparation for the teaching profession, including insufficient observation and evaluation of their performance. In this study, GTAs pointed out gaps in the program related to their teaching and training practices. As mentioned before, these results demonstrate the insufficiency of training given to assistant teachers, and reveal that GTAs have many suggestions for improvement that they would like departments to consider. They should be included as participants along with their academic teachers in decision-making for any improvements needed in the bachelors programs they teach, as well as in making additions to the postgraduate program, such as seminars and workshops.

GTA responses indicate that they are not in favor of traditional or usual routes of education. A literature review reveals existing studies that support the findings of this study. A study conducted by Fuentes et al. (2014) discussed the strong need to prepare graduate teaching assistants well for their professional positions as teachers during their graduate education, to allow them to solve problems and recognize the role of the teaching practice offered to them. A study by Schussler et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of considering the GTA position as a part of teacher training, due to lack of time, because their heavy teaching workload prevents them from engaging in professional practices of teaching and training (Brewer & Smith, 2011), and also enhances their internship chances as seen in this case study. In a study conducted by Pratt (1993), teacher training programs that include academic lectures, as in the USA and UK, were compared with training programs in educational programs in university institutions.

This study also highlighted the placement gap in the teaching programs offered in the country. The study concluded that GTAs described the teaching and academic achievement of teaching assistants which exhibit identified problems that are parallel to findings from field studies addressing problems in teacher training programs identified in several studies (Alshehry, 2018; Brown et al., 2014; Ruchin, 1997), which are included in our literature review. These studies emphasize that GTAs who are educated in courses that provide limited professional development go on to have low academic access to their chosen training professions. The GTAs furthermore stated that their existing academic practices and teaching choices are inadequate to gain sufficient knowledge. A study of training programs (Dechenne, 2010) emphasized the importance of attention that these GTAs receive in the field, based on previously published papers that investigated teaching practices in programs with other faculty members. A study by Brewer and Smith (2011) also stated the need to attract these GTAs to the academic environment using training practices to enhance the quality of teaching professionally. The findings of this study showed that GTAs agree that the programs available to assist teachers were not satisfactory. It has been observed that there are opportunities to improve aspects that need development based on the country’s standards for teaching qualifications. Further, in this study, GTAs expressed their views on enhancing the contents of the teaching practice with field experience and compared these with other academic schools; all these suggestions can be incorporated if the department was willing to make the decision positively. Our results show that certain factors have a significant influence on the success of teacher training programs, as follows. First, the training program provided for GTAs needs to be updated based on current needs with a focus on objectives, content, and academic teaching qualifications and practices, and can be carried out in parallel during active

teaching. Next, change and improvement are needed in teaching practices and training goals. This study however, is limited to the perceptions of academic lecturers, and it will be necessary to get their perceptions about how to deal with their GTAs.

Lastly, it is extremely important and necessary that future studies evaluate these programs in an effective and continuous manner with a focus on practices and training programs, social and economic need and development, and teaching and educational needs. We must also recognize that educational decision-making processes influence educational training and internship assessments, which then affect attitudes towards the professions (Sezgin & Duran, 2011). With regard to additional goals of teacher training programs, the GTA participants commented mostly on the need to focus on achieving their teaching qualification and improving their scientific knowledge using program resources. All participants agreed that the purpose of being a GTA should be to develop 21st century teaching skills that are up-to-date with the current situation. The personal and professional qualifications that GTAs should explore during teaching and training processes include good problem solving and communication skills, field knowledge, and a good command of educational institutions.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, these findings should be considered to improve teaching practices and training suggestions. GTA participants delivered their opinions on matters such as revising the entire program, increasing the duration of training and internship, giving the GTA the right to work individually on professional development, and improving the educational environment to facilitate their teaching performance.

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