

# Growing our own: enabling PGR teachers to flourish in authentic ecosystems

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Sara Hattersley is a colleague 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. Sara leads ADC's provision 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. Sara mentors and assesses colleagues with a range of teaching experiences but her passion is in growing the confidence and self-efficacy of early career colleagues. She is co-founder of the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community, a cross-institutional community of practice recently recognised by Advance HE in the CATE awards. Sara is an advocate of the PGR teacher voice on a number of Warwick committees, and nationally Sara co-leads the GTA Developer Network, which represents over 50 HEIs and provides 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 blended learning, and PGR communities of practice. She is currently a co-mentor on an international research project, connecting PGR writing groups between Warwick (UK) and Monash (Australia).

## Abstract

Postgraduate researchers who teach (PGR teachers), or Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a valuable role in global Higher Education, being a central part of the teaching workforce. PGR teachers are noted, amongst other things, for their ability to relate closely to students, bringing research-informed perspectives and providing effective and nuanced support to students in a massified HE sector. However, in spite of their longstanding presence, they are ubiquitously described as being in a 'liminal space' in the literature, and as early career colleagues, often have less professional experience and reduced agency to make pedagogical decisions, all whilst experiencing precarity and other challenges relating to occupying an impermanent role.

Professional development opportunities for PGR teachers are reasonably widespread but do they enable the best way for PGR teachers to grow and thrive in their teaching work? This Afterword, drawing on the contributions of authors in Issue 4 of the JPPP, considers how PGR teachers are deploying the outcomes of professional learning, and where the 'best space' might be for them to develop and evolve as practitioners. It reflects on the structure and rationale established in the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community and argues for the support and initiation of similar PGR communities of practice across the sector, as being optimal spaces for PGR teachers to thrive, learn and grow with peers.

## Building a narrative for PGR teacher place and contribution

Once again, I am delighted to be invited by the editors of the JPPP to write the Afterword for Issue 4: it's becoming a bit of a habit. It is kind to have acknowledgement in the Editorial for the role I have played in Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (WPTC) and the production of the journal but I am keen to say that this is very minimal: the JPPP process is managed successfully by the editorial team of Warwick PGRs, with guidance from the Teacher Mentor: this year Youn Affejee. This is essential to me: that ownership of this space is preserved as PGR-centred.

My (now four year) career as the JPPP bookend [began in 2021](#) as I reflected on the crucial position taken up by Warwick PGRs during the pandemic contingency work which really shone a light on the unique space these colleagues can occupy, especially in supporting positive relationships with students, as **Lillie et al** attest in this issue. [The following year](#), in the era of post-pandemic uncertainty, I called for a reimagining of PGR teacher identity: something that would elevate them (once and for all?!) beyond the 'donkey in the department' (Park and Ramos, 2022). [Last year](#) the editors chose to focus on equality, diversity and inclusion: a double-edged sword in my reflections. PGR teachers' own professional and personal liminality, deepened and nuanced by identities such as race, gender, class and disability, presents

challenges for these colleagues which we must recognise. But also, the PGR teacher role has huge potential in helping us effectively move towards a more inclusive HE: they have strengths we should harness. Which brings me neatly to this year's issue, with a wide-ranging focus on ***'Re/De-constructing the teaching space, piece by piece.'*** I love this title: it speaks of both care and radicalism: building up strategies and practices that make a difference but also questioning received wisdom and trying something new. This dual lens shines through in the papers in this issue: it's a celebration of the tangible differences PGR teachers can make, when they have the freedom to act.

So how do we best afford to our PGRs the opportunity to find agency and self-direction in their teaching work? Much literature and dialogue focuses on how PGR teachers 'fit in' or (mainly) how they 'don't'. I am wondering if the answer therefore lies somewhere else.

### **How beneficial is CPD to the PGR teacher experience?**

One theme of this year's JPPP Issue was continuous professional development (CPD): truly my business, as an academic developer. Naturally, I am an advocate of learning opportunities for PGR teachers: programmes, workshops, forums, specific skills training and the chance to gain a qualification or professional recognition. I am also delighted to see how such activities have been positively received by PGRs in this issue. However, as Blair asserts very recently (2024) "*continuing professional development for staff does not always reflect the creative and developmental approaches that they aspire to.*" Although this blog piece focuses on staff mobility and appraisal processes (often the preserve of more senior, permanently employed colleagues, anyway) it calls for a shift away from what can be a 'tick box', performative approach to development. Often I see PGR teacher CPD badged as 'training' conflating it perhaps with other mandatory staff training activities (e.g. information and data security training: recognising its importance, of course!) which imply a 'one-off' activity and often (literally!) a box to tick. Blair goes on to call for "*a stronger focus in (staff) discussions on the importance of collaboration within and across universities and different industry sectors.*" I agree. Elsewhere in the literature, we find evidence that PGR self-efficacy and confidence in teaching reduces after formal CPD has ended (Chiu and Corrigan, 2018; Peng et al, 2022): that back in departments, classrooms and lab spaces, beyond the comforts of a managed CPD environment, PGR teachers could start to lose their way. I certainly try to ensure that my own CPD programme for PGRs provides a safe, nurturing, challenging but accessible space and I have evidence that it does: in recent evaluation feedback one student commented that they did not want the programme to end. It could be easy to be flattered by such comments perhaps, but maybe there's a danger in not preparing PGR colleagues adequately for the 'afterwards': out there in the wilds of their own teaching context. Peng et al particularly note a decline

in GTA's ability to engage students in classroom settings, and so the suggestion by **Lillie et al** that perhaps CPD should also focus on helping our PGRs manage connections with students is a convincing one.

Reflecting on the papers in this issue, it is clear that CPD in and of itself is not what matters: more important is the application of it, as a catalyst for thinking and acting. For **Thomas-Pickles** microteaching formed one part of a wider understanding of the value of peer feedback; for **Li** (Zhuo and Li), studying intersectionality provided a language for making sense of positionality and power in the department; for **Çayır** translating active and inclusive learning techniques directly into classroom practice supported diversity. Harnessing the power of reflection, and synthesising theory and practice, has enabled **Kamanga, Dar** and **Kumar** to dwell on relational aspects of their work with students, including belonging, problem-solving and making sense of the discipline. But something else I noticed was the power of being an effective and active peer: equitable participation alongside students (**Hanany**); developing other GTAs with specialist teaching strategies (**Goel**) and recognising patterns and similarities between own experiences, and that of students (several authors). The influence of PGR teacher peers manifests itself in yet another way, where more than one author in this issue has cited previous JPPP PGR contributors, taking narratives forward in their own work. JPPP articles are on the reading list for my professional learning programme, the *APP PGR*, introducing new teachers to the perspectives of their more established peers, and ensuring that PGR published pedagogies have a seat at the table of CPD. And as such it creates an eco-system: a way of growing the dialogue authentically within and for the community. In a similar way, when considering the transition through monthly, departmental peer dialogue meetings, **Zhuo** (Zhuo and Li) reflects, *“as I grew more experienced, I saw myself transforming from an advice seeker to an advice giver in these peer dialogues”* showing how peer relationships have the potential to evolve a professional identity, something we have seen through Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (WPTC). No 'course' or 'training' has facilitated that, but rather, an environment created where PGRs are empowered to work together and grow in a space they own.

### **PGR communities of practice: how we've done it at Warwick**

This year Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community won the Advance HE [Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence](#) (CATE). I'm not including this to brag (!) but I am incredibly proud of the PGR teachers in this community of practice who built something so special that it was worthy of the recognition. WPTC occupies a space, beyond formal training programmes, for mentorship, and for professional and interpersonal interactions, which Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko consider essential to GTA development (2020). Furthermore, such communities of practice have been recommended in a recent Advance HE report to *“explore wider educator/educational*

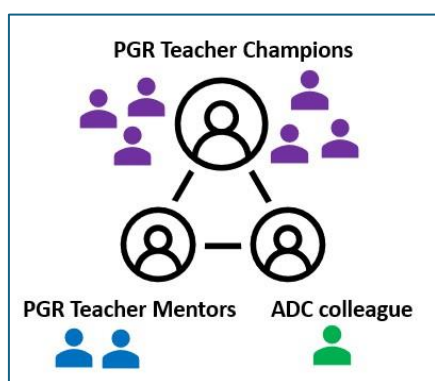
*opportunities for developing postgraduate researchers as GTAs”* (Floyd and Hack, 2021, p. 51).

One of the benefits of the CATE process is the invitation to consider both what makes collaboration work and what the effects of that are, something which representatives from across the first three years of WPTC, **Pierre Botcherby**, **Imogen Knox** and **Youn Affejee** have helped me to reflect on this year (1). I'd like to share a little of what we think makes WPTC work. Firstly, it occupies a space which is unusual in Higher Education: whilst there is discussion about discipline-specific GTA peer mechanisms (we often have such peer networks in our departments), and the value of cross-disciplinary peer learning and mentorship in Graduate education more broadly (Lorenzetti et al, 2020), there is little in the literature or wider field pointing to cross-institutional PGR teacher spaces which seek to bring support, advocacy, recognition and co-creation. Secondly, WPTC embodies, by necessity, a sustained, continuous and inclusive collaborative approach as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where PGRs collectively develop the work allowing it to move in a meaningful direction, with an authentic voice and a vested interest in the community and its needs. This legitimacy is maintained through devolved and shared leadership within the core team between PGR Teacher Champions (who are new to role within the initiative); PGR Teacher Mentors (from the previous year, who support these peers) and me, someone here to support both groups (figure 1).

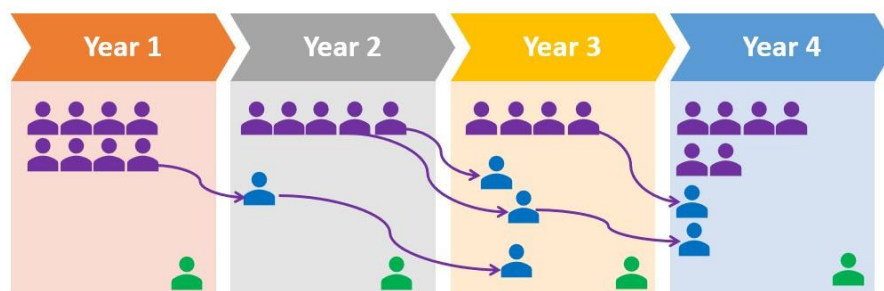
There is a strong rationale for our recognisable yet adaptive structure, which embodies collective effort, shared mission and support, and responsiveness to the changing conditions. Team roles are interconnected. Champions drive the work, collectively negotiating priorities for the year. In the case of the journal, it means organising the call for papers, managing submissions, editing etc. Mentors bring a practical knowledge of the previous work, which might be timescales for the production of the journal, for example, but perhaps, more valuably, a tacit sense of the current climate, issues arising and lessons learned from their own experiences in the previous year (e.g. who is a key contact at Warwick, to support the journal). A culture of peer mentoring is thus enacted, facilitated through our MS Teams space and in regular meetings between Champions and Mentors. Tripartite connections are also maintained, so that the whole team (all the PGRs and myself) can share updates and progress. WPTC is personified by a relational pedagogy, as described by Bovill (2022): a democratic space built on positive relationships which is indispensable for the progression of the work (we work hard, but we also have fun!)

Not only that, but the ecosystem of WPTC also brings developmental and reciprocal benefits to individuals who work in and transition between the roles (figure 2):

*“Transitioning to a Mentor role has enabled me to reflect more deeply on my experiences as Champion. I received valuable feedback on past WPTC activities from the perspectives of incoming Champions. Mentoring and passing on advice is crucial to challenging the gatekeeping so common in Higher Education. Subsequently I have drawn on this experience to mentor Masters students in my own department.” (PGR Mentor, Year 3)*



**Fig 1: WPTC members**



**Fig 2: Transition of Champions to Mentors**

WPTC members have the opportunity to explore areas of individual interest: to experience choice and agency in their work. For example, this year two of the PGR Champions ran a successful workshop for PGRs on *Developing Interactional Competence in Teaching*, drawing on their disciplinary specialism. Skills developed in WPTC can support future PGR careers too:

*“I gained an appreciation of the ‘other side’ of academic publishing, which was helpful for me when preparing my own manuscripts for submission and in reviewing publications! This editorial role has been a valuable addition to my CV, as editorial positions for ECRs can be few and far between.” (Teacher Champion, Year 2)*

WPTC is made up of PGRs from across the Faculties. After nearly a decade running professional development programmes for PGRs at Warwick, I know that one of the huge benefits is the ability to engage with others from across the University, enabling PGRs to see beyond their discipline and affording new understandings.

*“Learning how postgraduates from different departments approached teaching allowed me to both critically assess and transcend the pedagogic strategies of my own discipline thus enhancing my ability to teach students from diverse academic backgrounds. This has proved particularly helpful during my postdoc, when I transitioned into an interdisciplinary field.” (Teacher Champion, Year 1).*

Finally, there is much in the literature about doctoral student wellbeing, and this year I have been part of a cross-institutional writing project considering just this. One final and obvious benefit of close working alongside PGR peers is the collegiality, shared experience and empathy it can bring, as these early career colleagues juggle a



range of activities: teaching being just one. Therefore, to have 'fellow travellers' (Hadjoannou et al, 2007) in the PhD journey can be invaluable. Earlier in this issue, **Goel** showed how teaching self-regulated learning to students could not only have good learning outcomes for them, but save valuable time for PGR teachers with a heavy workload. WPTC is adding to that workload, perhaps, but a small numbers of hours split across the team, worked flexibly, when taken collectively, can lead to effective outcomes. And yes, Teacher Champions and Mentors are paid. So much of our CPD and community of practice work in Higher Education is premised on free labour and good will. This approach, as championed by Su and Wood (2023) brings a 'costing' to expert participation and maintains a commitment to upholding PGR colleagues as valued professionals. Most importantly (and in combination) pay, peer mentorship, flexibility and co-authoring can enable a 'decisional capital' as discussed by Chadha and Shah (2023) which may not exist elsewhere.

### **Ending with a flourish..**

There is much talk of 'belonging' in the sector at the moment, and [Warwick's revised strategy](#) re-commits firmly to this notion. I was not surprised by how many pieces in this Issue made reference to establishing the right environment for learning: somewhere where a student could "*bring my whole self to the class*" (**Dar**); or creating spaces for the "*uncrowning of power*" and where "*a more profound emotional connection between teachers and students is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and engagement.*" (**Hanany**). A safe space, if you will. I also noticed there was no piece on AI in this Issue, in spite of the invitation to write on this topic, which surprised me perhaps. Maybe it's too soon for us to have grappled with pedagogy and practice in the face of this change (do we feel safe?), or maybe in **de/reconstructing the classroom**, PGR teachers are focusing on the differences they can make through dialogue, modelling, noticing, reflection...all of which require an authentic, organic and nuanced approach perhaps, rather than speedily-generated solutions.

Whilst not denying the obvious institutional challenges PGR teachers face - but wanting to shift away from the perpetual discussions about liminality - I pondered a suitable metaphor or analogy for this 'other space' where I think PGR teachers best thrive. When I drew a blank (and in the spirit of the age!), I asked Chat GPT (2) and this is what it suggested (annotated by me):

*Fitting into a department is like being a sunflower in a sunflower field (conforming to and mimicking disciplinary custom and practice, although perhaps losing visibility in the hierarchy). Being distinct is like being a tulip in that same field (much more noticeable but at risk of being distrusted or peripheral because of that). An alternative setting is the wildflower meadow: a space for cultivating something unique, growing in your own way, alongside other distinct individuals to support a creative whole.*

This for me captures the potential of the PGR teacher community of practice pretty well: independent, growing and agentic. Nurturing such spaces in our institutions perhaps could be the best way for PGR teachers to establish themselves and their unique position as specialist educators, connecting our undergraduates with the discipline; providing a fertile, immersive space for propagating successful pedagogies. For us, as institutions, it is a chance to 'grow our own': nurturing compassionate and confident future sector educators and leaders. If well considered and supported, communities of practice like this can achieve a sustainability (Sadera et al, 2024) and continuous eco-system with long term benefits. And moving beyond 'belonging' (which does, to a degree, imply 'fitting in' I think...) I was recently inspired by a presentation by my fellow GTA Developer, Olumide Popoola (Queen Mary University, London) who presented a framework for combining Belonging, Dignity and Justice with our GTAs, resulting in our enabling them to 'Flourish'; "*A just system treats all GTAs fairly and provides equal opportunities for growth.*" (Popoola et al, 2024). WPTC in its own corner is trying to do that: I hope others do too.

### **Acknowledgments and notes**

- 1) Although this Afterword is not co-written, I would like to acknowledge the shared writing in the WPTC CATE submission, some of which is reconsidered here. This writing was co-created with WPTC alumni specifically Pierre Botcherby, Imogen Knox and Youn Affeeje, who worked tirelessly and brilliantly alongside me to draw these ideas together.
- 2) I asked ChatGPT: "Can you give me an analogy for 'fitting in' and 'not fitting in?' <https://chatgpt.com/share/672d6382-f688-8004-9ed3-8867c722ebaa>

With my heartfelt thanks to Yanyan, Meifang, Youn, Adam, Farzan, Irsa and Yvette for their brilliant work for WPTC this year. You rock!

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