

## **Building Resilience: Promoting Mental Well-being in Graduate Teaching Assistants Through Structured Institutional Support**

**Usooro Udousoro Akpan** (He/Him), Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick;  
[usoro.akpan@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:usoro.akpan@warwick.ac.uk)

My research interest spans several areas, including mental health, behavioural science, patient and public involvement in research, trauma-informed care, and education development.



## **Abstract**

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) occupy a unique and demanding space within academia, balancing the simultaneous roles of student and instructor. Their dual responsibilities expose them to heightened stress and social isolation, which together compromise their mental health and efficacy as educators. Yet, when institutions adopt a comprehensive, intentional approach that combines structured mentorship, robust pedagogical training, and policy-driven support systems, the narrative can be transformed from one of vulnerability to one of resilience and empowerment.

Effective mentorship not only fosters psychological safety and professional identity among GTAs but also cultivates a collegial culture where challenges are shared, feedback is constructive, and personal growth is prioritised. Complementary to this is the role of compulsory and well-tailored teaching development programmes, which provide the emotional and practical tools necessary for confident, reflective teaching. However, support must extend beyond the classroom; equitable policies around workload, leave, and recognition are essential to creating a sustainable academic experience for GTAs, particularly when informed by global best practices.

Embedding mental well-being into every facet of institutional support, whether through peer networks, supervisor relationships, or formal training, promotes resilience and prevents burnout. As universities increasingly allow GTAs to deliver core teaching responsibilities, they must commit to providing an ecosystem that values, nurtures, and equips them not only as temporary instructional staff but as future leaders in education.

Through a shift from reactive to preventive mental health strategies and from fragmented initiatives to cohesive institutional cultures of care, higher education can unlock the full potential of GTAs while advancing student learning, faculty development, and academic excellence.

**Keywords:** Graduate Teaching Assistants, mental health, mentorship, coping, teaching, development.

## Introduction

The complex experience of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) is shaped by the dual pressures of research responsibilities and teaching commitments. GTAs are typically postgraduate students who engage in their studies while performing instructional roles in undergraduate courses (Jordan and Howe 2017). Balancing these two significant aspects of their lives often results in a challenging experience characterised by competing demands on their time and energy. Research suggests that academic and teaching roles can create a conflict that impacts GTAs' efficacy and well-being, as they are frequently required to prioritise their teaching duties amidst their academic pursuits (Barr and Wright 2018; Christiaens et al. 2024). This duality is especially pronounced in research-intensive institutions where GTAs play a crucial role in facilitating undergraduate learning through lab sessions, discussions, and grading (Alicea-Muñoz et al. 2018). As a result, they navigate the complexities of being both learners and educators, which can heighten stress and anxiety levels.

Mental health challenges are prevalent among GTAs, often exacerbated by feelings of isolation, job insecurity, and overwhelming workloads. Reports indicate that many GTAs face significant mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, primarily due to insufficient social support and the pressure to excel in both their studies and teaching roles (Ely et al. 2022; Suart et al. 2021). The unique nature of their positions can isolate GTAs from their peers in graduate programs and the undergraduate students they teach, creating a sense of loneliness that compounds already challenging academic demands (Musgrove et al. 2021). Additionally, the precariousness of employment as a GTA, tied to funding availability and performance evaluations, fuels job insecurity, contributing to stress that can negatively affect both their teaching performance and personal lives (Suart et al. 2021). The cumulative impact of these factors can lead to a cycle of stress that threatens their academic success and mental well-being (Ely et al. 2022).

Institutional intervention is essential to address the myriad struggles faced by GTAs. Universities and departments must recognise the importance of providing adequate training, professional development, and mental health support resources tailored specifically to the needs of GTAs (Fantone et al. 2023; Parker et al. 2015). Programmes that aim to enhance pedagogical skills through focused training can equip GTAs with effective teaching strategies, helping them feel more competent and confident in their teaching roles and reducing anxiety related to performance (Doucette, Clark, and Singh 2020; Nguyen et al. 2019). Furthermore, creating a supportive environment that promotes open communication and community among GTAs can mitigate feelings of isolation and ensure they have access to necessary mental health resources (Goodwin, Cary, and Shortlidge 2021; Sadera et al. 2024).

Professional development programs that emphasise not just teaching methodologies but also self-care and stress management strategies are crucial for creating a sustainable teaching environment for GTAs. Initiatives that integrate feedback from GTAs on their training experiences can lead to improved onboarding processes and ongoing support structures (Reeves et al. 2018; Tinker, Greenhough, and Caldwell 2018). Establishing mentorship opportunities, where experienced faculty or advanced GTAs guide newcomers, can also play a vital role in easing the transition

into these dual roles, ultimately enhancing both faculty and student experiences (DeChenne et al. 2015).

## **Mentorship and Supervision: Foundations for Psychological Safety**

Effective mentorship plays a pivotal role in creating supportive environments for Graduate Teaching Assistants, significantly impacting their confidence, professional identity, and stress levels. Mentorship programmes designed specifically for GTAs can foster environments conducive to learning and psychological well-being. By facilitating constructive supervisory relationships, institutions can empower GTAs to navigate their dual roles of student and educator effectively.

The dynamics of supervisory relationships are particularly integral in shaping the confidence and identity of GTAs. Research underscores that positive supervisory experiences correlate strongly with increased self-efficacy among graduate students (Brock et al. 2024). The presence of a supportive mentor can mitigate the stress often associated with the transition into teaching roles, allowing GTAs to develop a sense of belonging and professional identity. For instance, studies have suggested that structured mentorship initiatives contribute to higher retention rates and enhanced student-teacher interactions in educational settings (Paolucci et al. 2021). Such relationships cultivate an atmosphere where GTAs can openly discuss teaching challenges, share resources, and gain instructional strategies from more experienced peers or faculty members.

Structured mentorship programmes vary in their implementation but share common goals of improving supportive relationships and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Initiatives like peer mentorship among GTAs have revealed that relationships built through shared experiences foster not only emotional support but also professional growth (Camarao and Din 2023). These peer relationships are particularly beneficial as they reduce feelings of isolation, promote motivation, and build a community of practice within the academic environment.

Moreover, mentorship programmes that incorporate experiential learning elements further enhance the efficacy of GTAs (Brock et al. 2024). For instance, GTAs who participate in pedagogical training workshops report heightened confidence levels and a clearer understanding of their teaching roles. This experiential approach allows them to practice innovative teaching methods in a supportive environment, thereby enhancing their readiness to effectively engage undergraduate students. Such programmes instil a sense of ownership and agency in GTAs regarding their teaching practices, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes (Camarao and Din 2023).

The implementation of mentorship programs must be intentional to maximise their effectiveness. Institutions are encouraged to incorporate regular feedback mechanisms where GTAs can express their experiences and suggest improvements in mentorship practices (Tinker et al., 2018). Such practices ensure that mentorship remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of GTAs. Initiatives like regular

peer reflection sessions bolster community building and foster a shared commitment to professional development among GTAs (Camarao & Din, 2023). The emphasis on collaborative learning draws attention to the collective experience of navigating teaching and research responsibilities, facilitating a sense of solidarity and teamwork.

## **Teaching Development Programs: Empowering GTAs for Pedagogical and Emotional Success**

Well-designed teaching training programmes play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of GTAs, significantly boosting their confidence, reducing the potential for burnout, and improving resilience. These training programmes equip GTAs with the necessary pedagogical skills and emotional support, thereby promoting successful instructional practices that ultimately benefit both GTAs and the students they teach.

Research indicates that GTA training programmes that are structured effectively can instill a sense of confidence in participants by providing them with a comprehensive understanding of teaching methodologies. Well-designed curricula often include workshops on active learning, classroom management techniques, and assessment practices (Roden et al. 2018). For instance, a study found that GTAs who received intensive training focused on active learning techniques reported increased confidence in their teaching abilities and were more likely to implement these strategies successfully (Richards-Babb, Penn, and Withers 2014). Conversely, the absence of structured training is often associated with feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty among GTAs, contributing to burnout as they struggle to meet teaching expectations without adequate preparation (Nagy et al. 2019).

Additionally, the design of teaching training programmes can significantly influence the stress levels experienced by GTAs. Programmes that explicitly address the emotional and psychological challenges of teaching help GTAs develop coping strategies, ultimately reducing feelings of anxiety (Alicea-Muñoz et al. 2018; Musgrove et al. 2021). For example, including components that focus on wellness and resilience in training courses can create an atmosphere where GTAs feel supported in both their teaching responsibilities and personal well-being (DeChenne et al. 2015). These components prepare GTAs for the pressures associated with teaching and instill in them a mindset of growth and adaptability, vital for their long-term success in both academic and professional settings.

The format of these training programmes is also critical to their effectiveness. Evidence suggests that compulsory training programs are more beneficial than optional ones (Parker et al. 2015). Mandatory participation ensures that all GTAs receive foundational training, which fosters a department-wide culture of teaching excellence. In contrast, optional programmes risk leaving some GTAs unequipped to handle the complexities of their teaching roles. A study showed that GTAs who participated in compulsory training exhibited greater instructional effectiveness and felt more integrated into their departments compared to those who attended optional sessions (Gardner and Parrish 2018; Nguyen et al. 2021). This highlights the

importance of institutional commitment to comprehensive, mandatory training arrangements for GTAs.

Successful frameworks for GTA training often include a blend of initial instruction followed by ongoing support through mentorship and peer observations. Such models enable GTAs to practice their skills in a safe environment, receive constructive feedback, and continuously improve their pedagogical methods (Burmila 2010; Schussler et al. 2015; Smith and Delgado 2021). One notable example is the Graduate Teaching Scholars Programme, which not only focuses on advanced teaching training but also mentors GTAs by pairing them with experienced faculty who provide guidance throughout their teaching assignments (Lockwood, Miller, and Cromie 2014).

Despite the evident benefits of structured teaching training, many institutions still face challenges in implementing high-quality programmes consistently. A comparative analysis of various professional development initiatives underscores the need for localised approaches that consider departmental resources and faculty engagement (Batterton et al. 2024; Reeves et al. 2018; Sadera et al. 2024). Establishing a culture of continuous improvement within teaching training frameworks is paramount; collecting and analysing feedback from GTAs about their experiences can help refine and adapt programmes to better meet the needs of future educators (Sadera et al. 2024).

Overall, the emphasis on structured, compulsory teaching training for GTAs demonstrates an essential shift towards valuing educational practice within graduate education. By creating environments that prioritise pedagogical training alongside emotional and professional support, institutions not only empower GTAs but also enhance the overall educational experience for undergraduates. Cultivating resilience, confidence, and teaching effectiveness ultimately supports the development of future educators who are better prepared to meet the demands of academia.

## **Institutional Policies and Global Variations in Support**

In recent years, the increasing reliance on GTAs in higher education institutions across various regions has prompted significant discussions regarding the effectiveness of university policies related to workload management, leave entitlements, and recognition systems. The comparative analysis of university policies in the UK, US, Australia, and other countries sheds light on both the strengths and gaps within these frameworks that influence GTAs' experiences and development.

One notable strength in Australian universities is the emphasis on workload regulations which are explicitly stated in several collective agreements. These agreements frequently define the maximum number of hours that GTAs can be required to work, ensuring a balanced workload that allows them to manage both teaching and research responsibilities effectively (Hughes and Ellefson 2013). In contrast, institutions in the US often lack standardised workload regulations across various departments, leading to inconsistencies in how GTAs experience their

teaching duties. Many GTAs may find themselves overworked, particularly in fields with high student enrollment, which can exacerbate stress and anxiety (Shortlidge and Eddy 2018).

Additionally, policies relating to leave entitlements for GTAs vary significantly. In the UK, there is a growing recognition of the need for appropriate leave policies, including provisions for parental leave and sickness absence specific to GTAs. While this is not universally applied, universities that implement such policies can alleviate some of the pressures that GTAs face (Lane et al. 2018). Conversely, US institutions typically have less structured leave policies for research and teaching assistants, which can contribute to job insecurity and reduced job satisfaction. GTAs may feel compelled to forgo personal or family time to meet the demands of their positions, which can adversely affect their mental health and academic performance (Hardré and Burris 2010; Nemerever and Rubalcava 2022).

Recognition systems for GTAs also illustrate a divergence in approaches. In the US, acknowledgment of GTAs' contributions to teaching remains inconsistent, often overshadowed by a greater focus on research output (Smith and Smith 2012). Recognition programmes are part of some HEIs: in one example from Australia, there has been a concerted effort to recognise the teaching contributions of GTAs, including awards and formal recognition programmes that celebrate excellence in teaching (Hughes and Ellefson 2013). Such systems not only validate the efforts of GTAs but also promote a culture of teaching excellence, encouraging GTAs to invest more deeply in their pedagogical growth (Tinker et al. 2018).

Furthermore, within these frameworks, mental well-being has emerged as a critical area that institutions must address in conjunction with academic development. Best practice models integrating mental well-being with academic support are beginning to emerge in various contexts. For example, some Canadian institutions have instituted programs that prioritise wellness within their GTA training courses, incorporating strategies that foster community building and resilience (Justice, Zieffler, and Garfield 2017; Winter et al. 2014). These initiatives emphasise the importance of collegiality and peer support, providing GTAs with a network that can help mitigate feelings of isolation.

Similarly, there is evidence in the literature which points to the value of mentorship programmes that explicitly integrate mental health and well-being into their teaching training models. For instance, in a study highlighting the practical implementation of mentoring structures, GTAs reported feeling significantly less stressed and more confident in their teaching roles when supported by experienced mentors (Flaherty et al. 2017; Richards-Babb et al. 2014). These mentoring frameworks not only aid in skill development but also nurture emotional and mental health, which can enhance overall job satisfaction and retention rates among GTAs (Tinker et al. 2018).

On an international scale, it is crucial for universities to leverage best practices from various contexts in designing supportive environments for GTAs. For instance, universities in the UK could benefit from looking at Australia's structured workload policies, while US institutions might glean insights from Canadian approaches to mentorship and mental well-being integration (Sandí-Ureña, Cooper, and Gatlin 2011; Smollin and Arluke 2013). Creating an environment that holistically supports GTAs

through effective policies, comprehensive training, and targeted recognition will ultimately lead to better educational outcomes for both graduate instructors and their students.

The cross-regional comparison reveals that while some university policies are commendable, significant gaps remain in workload regulation, leave policies, and recognition systems for GTAs. Institutions must prioritise the integration of mental well-being within academic development practices, as doing so not only strengthens the experience for GTAs but can also enhance the effectiveness of teaching within higher education.

## **Conclusion: Toward a Culture of Care in Academia**

The need for cohesive, structured institutional support for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) is increasingly apparent in light of the common challenges they face, including high workloads, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of adequate recognition and mental health resources. Effectively addressing these issues requires a systemic change that is driven by both evidence and equity, ensuring that GTAs are supported in their professional development as well as their mental health and well-being.

Institutional support plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of GTAs. Evidence suggests that poorly structured teaching environments can contribute to high levels of stress and burnout, as GTAs often navigate complex expectations and responsibilities without sufficient guidance or assistance (Sum, Chew, and Sim 2019). Programmes that integrate proactive strategies for preventing burnout, such as training on stress management and emotional regulation, are essential (Kranak 2022; Szigeti 2024). A cohesive support system would involve deliberate policies that monitor workload, foster community among GTAs, and ensure equitable access to mental health resources. This would help mitigate feelings of isolation and anxiety that often affect teaching assistants who are predominantly student-researchers (Kijima, Tomihara, and Tagawa 2020).

Crucially, systemic changes must prioritise preventive mental health strategies rather than merely reactive solutions. Reactive mental health programs that respond to crises, while crucial, are often insufficient to address the underlying factors contributing to burnout and low morale among GTAs (Velando-Soriano et al. 2023). For example, Chun-Yan and Liao emphasise the importance of proactive interventions designed to enhance teaching enjoyment and reduce burnout (Chun-Yan and Liao 2024). Institutions should implement structured interventions that integrate evidence-based practices into the support offered to GTAs, including sustained mental health awareness campaigns, stress management workshops, and mentorship programs that provide consistent emotional support (Zheng 2022).



A call to action for universities is imperative: they must shift from traditional approaches that often emphasise mere compliance with academic standards and workload to more holistic models that prioritise the overall well-being of GTAs. Universities can learn from models across various fields by providing integrated training that combines pedagogical skills with mental health resources (Finamore et al. 2020). For instance, well-structured training programs that emphasize emotional intelligence and coping strategies are increasingly necessary for preventing burnout among educational staff (Mahali and Sevigny 2021).

Furthermore, best practices in institutional support include supervision systems that offer both professional development and personal growth opportunities for GTAs. By providing environments where GTAs feel valued, supported, and recognised for their contributions, institutions can promote positive outcomes across the board, including reduced burnout rates and increased student engagement (Yilmaz et al. 2023). Such frameworks should facilitate constructive feedback and recognition of GTAs as integral members of the educational community, rather than merely adjunct support staff.

The commitment of university administrations to these initiatives can lead to substantial improvements in the retention of teaching assistants while enhancing the overall educational experience for students. Engaging in continuous assessment of these programs and adapting them based on feedback from GTAs will help create a robust support system that is both responsive and forward-thinking (Salazar et al. 2022). This approach embodies a preventive framework that aligns with equity and efficacy for all students and instructors involved.

In conclusion, the need for cohesive, structured institutional support for GTAs is evident. Emphasising systemic change driven by both evidence and equity is paramount to ensuring that GTAs receive the necessary mental health support and professional development they deserve. Transitioning from reactive to preventive mental health strategies is essential for providing resilient and effective teaching environments. Universities are encouraged to take immediate action in implementing these changes, ultimately contributing to the well-being and professional growth of their graduate teaching assistants.

## **Ethical Claim**

This critical reflection did not involve the collection of new human data. Institutional and supervisory approval were obtained as part of the author's ongoing doctoral research programme. No individual participant data are presented, and therefore formal participant consent was not required. The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the development or publication of this manuscript. All views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the affiliated institution.

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