

# Graduate Teaching Assistants at LSE:

Student

Perspective Report

## **Executive Summary**

This report details the findings of both LSESU's focus group in the autumn of 2018 and some subsequent semi-structured interviews with GTAs. Both the focus groups and the survey were designed in order to help inform how GTAs feel about their current working conditions at LSE. This report provides a thematic analysis of these responses and makes a series of recommendations to address the concerns raised.

The analysis of this data revealed three overarching themes that affected students' experiences: pay and conditions, disparity in role conditions and esteem of role. The first section of this report explains the background to this research and our initially quantitative findings from the survey in 2016.

The 'Pay and Conditions' section of this report details the disparity between expected work and the reality of the amount of work GTAs are allocated, and subsequently, inadequate financial compensation.

The 'Disparity in the Role' section of this report focuses on GTA's dissatisfaction with the duties required of GTAs across different departments. Some GTAs are asked to do administrative work that isn't beneficial or necessary to their academic career.

Finally, the 'Esteem of Role' section expands on the GTAs' dissatisfaction with the credit that they are given for their contribution to the academic and teaching community at LSE.

LSESU implore LSE to ensure the recommendations of this report are incorporated into the existing GTA policy. In the LSE 2030 Strategy the school outlines its desire to “invest in the social scientists of the future through... enhanced support for PhDs, postdoctoral and early career researchers”. Based on the research we’ve done we believe that without the changes to the existing policy this cannot be achieved. In the words of one respondent: “There is a clear sense amongst the GTAs that the school doesn’t respect or value us. It’s not limited to individual departments but an attitude that pervades the school.”

## **Introduction**

LSE Students’ Union (LSESU) prioritises the welfare and well-being of PhD students who teach, whether as a requirement of their studentship, or in employment as graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). For the purposes of this paper, the acronym GTA will be used to denote PhD students who are employed to teach. A distinction should be drawn between those whose teaching is a requirement of their studentship and those who take on the role voluntarily. As part of our endeavour to ensure GTAs feel supported, both in their paid work, but also as students undertaking their PhD, LSESU has gathered feedback from PhD students who teach about their experiences. While many GTAs report that they feel well-supported by their departments, that the pay they receive is commensurate to the work they undertake, and they feel their work-life balance is conducive to achieving a good result in their PhD; many others report that there are problems with being a GTA at LSE, that not only impact on their paid working life, but also on their studies. This report sets out the feedback LSESU has received from GTAs about their experiences, and makes a set of recommendations to improve the conditions of GTAs at LSE.

We are hopeful this paper and its recommendations will spark a conversation across the School about the incredible work undertaken by PhD students who teach, and how LSESU can work with the School to ensure GTAs feel their work is valued, both financially and in esteem.

## **Background**

In 2016, LSESU's PhD Officer commissioned the SU to conduct a piece of quantitative research about the experiences of GTAs. The data collected via electronic survey asked GTAs about issues such as whether they had received their contract, the size of classes they are expected to teach, and their mental well-being. The survey received 110 responses.

The key findings from the 2016 research are as follows:

- 61% of respondents did not feel there were adequate mental health services in place to support PhD students who are experiencing workplace stress as a result of their combined studies and teaching.
- 32% of respondents reported teaching two or more classes that exceeded LSE's cap of 15 students per class<sup>1</sup>.
- 39% of respondents reported having not received their contract from HR on time and/or been paid on time.

<sup>1</sup><https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Teaching-and-Learning-Centre/Assets/Documents/Handbooks/Handbooks-2018-19/GTA-Handbook-2018-19-FINAL-single-pages.pdf>

- 23% indicated that their contract does not provide a breakdown of the hours by task they are required to perform per week.

In the Autumn of 2018, LSESU held an informal focus group with GTAs to consult them on how they would like the Students' Union to support them, and to give a forum for GTAs to raise issues they think the Students' Union should be campaigning on. The participants of the focus group reported the following issues as a matter of priority:

- **Marking issues:** participants reported before starting employment, they are given a contract that only specifies the terms of the teaching period. They are also expected to mark exams at the end of the semester, but they are not given a contract that specifies the terms of this type of employment until two weeks before the marking period starts. Participants indicated this also applies for summer schools, where GTAs are paid depending on the amount of exams they mark rather than on the hours they spend marking them.
- **Preparation time:** participants raised that the teaching contract they receive includes the hours of preparation for classes. However, only roughly a third of the actual preparation time is included.
- **Contract issues:** participants expressed displeasure with the way contracts are organised. Participants understood that contracts are not centralised, with each department deciding on the terms of the contract. This is due to the fact that some aspects of the contract can be subject-specific and would be hard to negotiate if they were centralised.

Departmental autonomy appears to be a contributing factor to all of the above. For example, the issue around the amount of hours considered in the contract is easier to be discussed and solved within individual departments. Whilst GTAs

understood why this could help find a short-term solution, they were concerned that that improvements in the terms and conditions for one cohort of GTAs would be lost from one year to another and that not all departments would benefit.

Participants stated that the Geography and Government departments secured changes to pay and conditions, but these changes did not transfer to other departments. Participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire for minimum standards to be outlined and implemented across all LSE departments.

- Impact on academic work: participants described how GTAs are affected by the amount of time they dedicate to teaching, as they have less time to conduct re-search for their PhD. The majority of participants stated that their supervisors advised their students not to teach, or to teach a maximum of one class. Participants describe a lack of awareness around the scale of the workload that would be expected of them as GTAs, and that the contracts they received do not match the reality of the number of hours that GTAs dedicate to teaching. Despite this, participants expressed the bind they find themselves in, as teaching is considered a necessary experience for PhD students that wish to undertake a career in academia.
- Training issues: participants reported that the only mandatory, paid training they had received was a three day induction at the beginning of the academic year. During these sessions, participants did not feel they had been adequately pre-pared to understand the learning and assessment outcomes of the teaching they are about to undertake. Participants acknowledged that additional courses on teaching are

available, but these are unpaid and can take time away from their PhD research. GTAs expressed a desire for the subject-specific training, especially for those GTAs teaching in departments outside their subject area. This background work provided contextual knowledge that enabled us to carry out further research, the results of which are discussed below.

## **Findings**

As a result of the findings of the 2016 GTA survey, and the 2018 GTA focus group, LSESU held the first GTA Town Hall meeting in Autumn 2018, to further canvas the opinions of GTAs and create a forum for GTAs to meet to discuss issues at the intersection of their paid (teaching) work and their academic work.

The Town Hall meeting raised many salient issues which paralleled the findings of the GTA Survey and the GTA focus group. The Town Hall was attended by 20 GTAs from a range of departments across the School

## **Pay and Conditions**

Attendees of the Town Hall raised pay and conditions as a significant discussion point. Participants raised discrepancies between departments as a cause of concern. For example, GTAs from the Government reported that they are paid for 2 hours per class, whereas in reality it takes between 6 to 8 hours of work, including preparation time. One GTA commented that when they worked out the amount of money they were paid in relation to the time they spent preparing their wage was “under £6 per hour” (considerably less than London Living Wage). GTAs are required to prepare the hand outs, and prepare presentations,

“this gives us no incentive to try and improve our lesson plans or refresh our understanding of a given topic”. They also reported they are paid for 30 minutes per essay, which they feel is not adequate.

Attendees also suggested that those teaching a class for the first time should be paid more than those teaching a repeating class, recognising the extra labour undertaken in research and ensuring adequate background reading is in place for the first time of teaching, versus when these materials are already assembled. However, as one student suggested “some of this duplication of work could be avoided if there was communication between former GTAs and current GTAs”.

GTAs reported that the formula used to calculate marking time does not account for class sizes, which creates a discrepancy between teachers. GTAs are paid 6 mins per homework, but attendees reported it takes between 10 minutes to 25 minutes for each homework in reality. The formula used to pay works on the assumption of the average class size adhering to a cap of 15 students, however in reality, some GTAs teach only ten students while other teach 30 students. One GTA commented that because they had “closer to 30 students in their class” they were “never able to build a report with their student, or even attempt to answer all their questions”. Attendees at the meeting felt that it is vital that the cap of 15 students be adhered to, and more strictly enforced.

Many attendees from across departments desired a better form for logging hours of working. Currently there is no breakdown provided of preparation time, marking time and teaching time, and how much each of these activities is worth.

Some attendees reported feeling underpaid for office hours. One participant stated that they are paid for four 15 minute meetings, when they have 31 students to administer to in office hours, leading to them providing office hours for free. Another attendee raised the problem of GTAs becoming dissertation officers: the GTA was asked to give advice on research design and structure of dissertation to Masters students, which does not exist in the job specifications.

By July, the Masters students were no longer allowed to seek advice from their dissertation supervisor, and so rely on GTAs. “We are currently paid only for one hour of administration commitments, but the time we have to dedicate to the task usually is more, given the amounts of emails we receive from students and informal feedback we are supposed to provide them with.” One GTA reported in this period needing to see 12 people per hour instead of 4, including reading draft chapters and editing Masters dissertation work, despite only being paid for one hour. This led to them taking over their paid hour to ensure all students were seen. Eventually the GTA was paid for the extra hours at the end of this period due to raising the issue with their department, but this was not resolved through formal channels, and was not part of the GTA contract.

## **Disparity in role description**

Several attendees were dissatisfied with the disparity in duties required of GTAs across different departments. For example, in Accounting, GTAs reported feeling expected to act as mentors to students, as well as teachers, which is not explicitly in the job description. In reference to a specific incident, a GTA told us that one of their “students fell through the cracks and was really struggling (he had a disability and I flagged it up with Disability Wellbeing

Service) but no one ever helped so I had to give up my own time to make sure.” In other departments, the role of GTA takes on the administration of the Moodle page, as well as other administrative duties. Many GTAs felt that this kind of work is not developmental or helpful for their career, and not explicitly stated in the job description of being a GTA.

There was a perception amongst some attendees that GTA roles are prioritised for those on LSE studentships, and those on ESRC scholarships do not have these opportunities advertised to them. In the Gender department, attendees reported that all teaching is paid, but development roles, such as working as a Research Assistant, are targeted towards those in receipt of an LSE studentship, and not those on ESRC.

## **Esteem of role**

Attendees expressed feeling dissatisfied with the credit that GTAs are given for their contribution to the academic and teaching community at LSE. Many attendees felt that GTAs should be given the same status as LSE staff, and the title itself ‘Graduate Teaching Assistant’, does not accurately reflect the work that is required of the role.

One GTA stated that they felt this title was “not adequate in light of the responsibility and time commitments of our role.” For example, at Oxford, the equivalent roles are called ‘Lecturers’, and that the inclusion of the word ‘Assistant’ does not give accurate credence to the amount of teaching (often alone) that GTAs do.

Another way that GTAs felt that more esteem could be given to their role is by including their names on the staff list, and uploading their profiles to the LSE staff website, with biographies and photographs.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, GTAs do not believe LSE as an institution supports them in a professional capacity, often feeling overworked, under-appreciated and underpaid. One GTA was quoted as saying that they have been advised to stop teaching by “teaching staff and academic supervisors” due to their treatment.

## **Recommendations**

1. Consistent pay across all departments, to ensure the GTA experience is standardised across LSE.

2. Consistent pay across all departments, with In addition, enforcing strong minimum standards in place to ensure dignity at work. These will be designed by a working group from across academic departments, as well as Human Resources, LSE Students’ Union and UCU.

3. Target mental health services towards PhD students who teach, ensuring they are aware of the university’s Employee Assistance Scheme, and LSE Counselling.

4. Strictly enforce the 15 students per class cap, ensuring that GTAs are able to develop a rapport with students and are able to focus on their own studies.

5. Review the job name of 'Graduate Teaching Assistant', and look to create a culture that celebrates the vital role of GTAs as part of the academic and teaching community of LSE. This could include staff profiles of GTAs on the LSE departmental websites.

6. Ensure work that is being asked of GTAs is developmental if it has been advertised as such. GTAs should not be hired to fill in as administrators if this is not the job they have signed up to.

7. Provide more opportunities for subject-specific training to GTAs, particularly those who are teaching outside of their chosen discipline.

8. Ensuring GTAs are paid for both their teaching and the time it takes to prepare the materials. With the SU, GTAs, UCU and HR working collaboratively to design a system that calculates and pays GTAs for all their time.

## **Appendix A)**

### **Methodology**

The analysis of this report is made up from two different qualitative methods of research. Initially, an in-formal focus group was held in the Autumn of 2018. In this focus group, GTAs were asked a handful of questions by a moderator who took minutes and encouraged the discussion to continue beyond the stage it might have otherwise ended. The moderator was careful to ensure there was no influencing of answers through their questioning.

In additional, in the Autumn of 2019 we ran a handful more semi structured interviews to provide rich de-tails on subjects and themes that emerged in the original focus group. As we're aware that a significantly smaller sample size of participants is used in semi-structured interviews we only asked them a handful of questions.

### **Semi Structured Interview Questions:**

- 1) Did you ever teach a class with more than 15 students in it?
- 2) Did this effect your work as a GTA?
- 3) Are you ever paid for more than just the hours you taught?
- 4) Do you feel like there's a disparity between the role advertised and the work done?
- 5) Do you feel supported by LSE?

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