

Graduate Teaching Assistants Survey Report

Introduction

PhD students are employed as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to teach undergraduate and postgraduate courses throughout King's College London (KCL). GTAs give lectures, demonstrate experiments, run seminars, mark assessments, conduct tutorials, do administration, and provide pastoral support to students. The kind of teaching GTAs undertake varies from department to department, though across the university GTAs represent a significant part of the workforce; KCL would not be able to deliver a world class education to 26,000 students without the work of GTAs, yet they are among the most poorly paid academic staff in the university.

GTAs at KCL are more exposed to exploitation than other members of academic staff. Firstly, they are employed on temporary, hourly contracts that are issued departmentally. Secondly, GTAs have little choice but take on this poorly paid work, in order to gain the requisite teaching experience to progress in an academic career. Thirdly, GTAs are expected to work hours far beyond their contracts, in order to deliver a high standard of teaching and support to their students. Furthermore, most GTAs are doctoral students that need to balance their research with teaching duties. If the pay and working conditions of GTAs is not fair, the experience of PhD students at KCL may be affected, increasing the risk of dropping out.

This report documents the results of a recent online survey that aimed at producing objective evidence on the working condition and pay of GTAs at KCL. Particularly the survey focuses on whether GTAs are paid fairly, whether GTAs work more than what they are contracted for, and whether GTAs report that quality of teaching is affected as a result of poor working and pay conditions. The survey results show that a majority of GTAs report that they are paid unfairly, they work more than their contracted hours and that teaching is negatively affected. Some key statistics are as follows:

- 96% of GTAs at King's College London work more than their contracted hours to perform their teaching duties
- 77% of GTAs 'often' or 'very often' work over their contracted hours
- Only 3% of GTAs never work over their contracted hours.
- 35% of GTAs reported that they were not paid at all for core tasks including seminars, marking, lecturing, lab demonstrations, office hours and essay consultations.

A Note on the Survey

438 entries to the online survey were recorded; however, some of these were discarded, as they did not contain any data. Most of these were most likely people entering the survey webpage multiple times and completing the actual responses once. In the tables below are reported all the responses, excluding the missing ones. Furthermore, approximately 100 responses were made by non-GTAs, who were asked regarding their whether they were interested in gaining teaching experience. The number of responses for each question varies as certain questions were not applicable to all, and some responders left some question uncompleted.

Do GTAs think they are fairly paid?

Are GTAs fairly paid for:	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Teaching*		
Fairly or very fairly	101	50
Neutral	37	18
Unfairly or very unfairly	65	32
Total	203	100
Marking*		
Fairly or very fairly	17	10
Neutral	37	21
Unfairly or very unfairly	122	69
Total	176	100
Admin*		
Fairly or very fairly	34	20
Neutral	55	33
Unfairly or very unfairly	78	47
Total	167	100
Preparation*		
Fairly or very fairly	21	11
Neutral	20	10
Unfairly or very unfairly	156	79
Total	197	100
Overall*		
Fairly or very fairly	22	11
Neutral	47	24
Unfairly or very unfairly	129	65
Total	198	100

Questions:

“On a scale of 1-5, how fairly do you feel you are paid for carrying out your GTA duties?”

*Teaching 5 people NA, Admin 41 people NA, Marking 32 people not applicable, Preparation 11 people not applicable, Overall 10 people not applicable

GTAs and Unpaid Work

	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Work more often than contracted hours?		
Never	7	3
Rarely	13	6
Sometimes	26	13
Often	32	16
Very often	123	61
Total	201	100
Do you do unpaid work: any task		
Paid or Not applicable for all of the tasks*	51	22
Unpaid for any one of the tasks*	178	78
Total	229	100
Do you do unpaid work: core activities		
Paid or Not applicable for all of the core tasks**	148	65
Unpaid for any one of the tasks**	80	35
Total	228	100
Do you do unpaid work: preparation		
Paid	159	74
Unpaid	22	10
Not applicable	33	15
Total	214	100
Do you do unpaid work: marking		
Paid	159	74
Unpaid	23	11
Not applicable	33	15
Total	215	100
Do you do unpaid work: feedback		
Paid	91	46
Unpaid	70	35
Not applicable	37	19
Total	198	100
Do you do unpaid work: office hours		
Paid	125	64
Unpaid	16	8
Not applicable	55	28
Total	196	100
Do you do unpaid work: input syllabus		
Paid	2	1
Unpaid	45	29
Not applicable	106	69
Total	153	100
Do you do unpaid work: input material and content		
Paid	7	4
Unpaid	54	34
Not applicable	96	61
Total	157	100

*Any task include: seminars, lecturing, lab demonstrations, tutorials, marking, feedback, admin work, office hours, essay consultations, informal/mandatory/marketing meetings, emailing students or staff, input into syllabus or material/content, VLE, open days and reference writing.

**Core tasks include: seminars, marking, lecturing, lab demonstrations, office hours and essay consultations

Questions:

“How often do you work more than your contracted hours?”

“Please indicate which of the following tasks you are expected to undertake as part of your GTA duties, and if you are paid to do them or not?”

How many hours do GTAs work outside of what they are contracted?

Hours contracted to work for specific activities	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Teaching (hours)		
None	12	7
0.5-9	47	29
10-19	20	12
20-29	26	16
30+	58	36
Total	163	100
Marking (hours)		
None	68	42
0.5-9	32	20
10-19	16	10
20-29	16	10
30+	31	19
Total	163	100
Admin (hours)		
None	113	69
0.5-9	22	13
10-19	10	6
20-29	9	6
30+	9	6
Total	163	100
Preparation (hours)		
None	53	33
0.5-9	38	23
10-19	28	17
20-29	25	15
30+	19	12
Total	163	100

Question:

“How many hours are you contracted to undertake the following activities?”

Extra hours worked outside of contracted hours	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Extra Teaching (hours)		
None	116	71
0.5-9	25	15
10-19	4	2
20-29	4	2
30+	14	9
Total	163	100
Extra Marking (hours)		
None	63	39
0.5-9	39	24
10-19	26	16
20-29	8	5
30+	27	17
Total	163	100

Extra Admin (hours)			
	None	84	52
	0.5-9	47	29
	10-19	18	11
	20-29	8	5
	30+	6	4
	Total	163	100
Extra Preparation (hours)			
	None	29	18
	0.5-9	51	31
	10-19	21	13
	20-29	18	11
	30+	44	27
	Total	163	100

Question:

“If you work more than your contracted hours, estimate how many more in total for the module? (hrs)?”

Do GTA working condition compromise teaching quality

Does the number of hours worked affect:	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Either teaching, marking, feedback and learning		
Don't Know	5	3
Not applicable	10	6
No	55	35
Yes	89	56
Total	159	100
Marking		
Don't Know	11	7
Not applicable	35	22
No	51	32
Yes	62	39
Total	159	100
Teaching		
Don't Know	8	5
Not applicable	12	8
No	89	56
Yes	50	31
Total	159	100
Feedback		
Don't Know	15	9
Not applicable	32	20
No	49	31
Yes	63	40
Total	159	100
Learning		
Don't Know	16	10
Not applicable	19	12
No	64	40
Yes	60	38
Total	159	100

Question:

“Do you feel the number of hours you are contracted compromises the quality of any of the following?”

GTA support and general working condition

	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Supported in balancing research and teaching		

Very supported	3	2
Supported	39	26
Neutral	64	43
Unsupported	31	21
Very unsupported	13	9
Total	150	100
know with whom to discuss pay and work conditions		
No	72	48
Yes	78	52
Total	150	100
Valued at the department level		
Very valued	11	7
Valued	52	35
Neutral	52	35
Unvalued	20	13
Very unvalued	15	10
Total	150	100

Questions: "How supported do you feel by the department in balancing teaching and research commitments?"

"Do you know who to go to discuss your pay and conditions?"

"How valued do you feel as a member of the department you teach in?"

Graduate teaching: is there an unmet need?

	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Interested in teaching experience?		
Yes	92	89
No/Don't know	11	11
Total respondents	103	100
Reasons not to teach		
There are not enough teaching opportunities	27	29
I am unaware of how to find out about teaching opportunities	26	28
I do not have the time to undertake teaching	17	18
I have already gained the experience I needed	6	6
Other	18	19
Total	94	100

Questions:

"Are you interested in gaining teaching experience?"

"What is the Primary reason for not undertaking any teaching?"

From the GTAs

My students cannot receive the standard of teaching or feedback that they expect or deserve, or that the university promises them, unless I consistently and persistently work extra hours for free.

If I spend 90 minutes marking a bad paper then I end up getting paid £3.10 an hour. Since I can't afford to work this way I compromise by spending less time, and offering less detailed feedback so the student suffers.

Furthermore, as there is not time assigned for marking training, if we have not done it before we have to teach ourselves and have no guidance for whether we are doing it correctly or not (apart from being told to ask a colleague, which would eat into their time and they might not be willing and neither party would be paid).

The papers need to be read quickly even to read them in double the time that is actually paid. The feedback needs to be generalised, to an extent, because there is no paid time to do them. Students are not getting the full benefits of learning in the course because of these issues.

If I were to stick to the hours I was contracted for, I would prepare perhaps a quarter of the required reading per week and mark a third of the essays with reduced feedback.

In case one sticks to the paid 6 hours obviously the quality of the teaching, the feedback to the students etc. breaks down to a low level. It cannot be of interest to KCL that that happens in case one really wants top teaching, top graduates and top reputation and everything for 9000 pounds per year.

GTAs [graduate teaching assistants] and other casualised labour are used to cut costs – perhaps reducing the quality of students' experiences, or perhaps just exploiting the GTAs. We are too often not used as 'extras' but as actual lecturers, yet without the fair pay or levels of experience.

It's not possible to mark a lab report in one hour. I have been doing this for 3 years now and got fairly fast and efficient with it and by now really do know my subject. But providing the student with helpful feedback while ensuring you mark the student fairly is not possible in one hour. I can barely check if his calculations and results are correct in the short time allocated for marking and feedback.

It's a huge amount of work which is appallingly paid. Frankly, I treat GTA teaching as an act of charity.

I am now only teaching courses that I have taught before, but when teaching my course for the first time, I did around 3 hours preparation for each class, and was only paid for 1. There is a lot of rhetoric about how this is supposed to balance out, but many GTAs do not teach the same course repeatedly, and so are always doing lots of extra work.

It seems generally recognised that having the GTA attend the lecture they'll be teaching on enables them to see things from the student's perspective, address questions that come up, and generally do a better job of teaching the material. We're only paid for one hour of preparation and doing each week's reading takes at least two hours (on a good day) so many GTAs attend these lectures unpaid. Given it would result pretty quickly in a better student experience one thing that would straightforwardly help in my department at least would be paying the GTAs to attend these lectures. One hour preparation time is a joke in terms of how long it takes to teach material well. However, at least recognising this one form in which GTAs already go above and beyond and paying us for it would be welcome.

Lack of respect from professors, and admin staff. GTAs are treated like a free labour and are not respected.