

Afterword: EDI and the PGR teacher experience: issues, opportunities and aspiring to an inclusive future in Higher Education

Sara Hattersley

Associate Professor, Academic Development Centre, University of Warwick

Sara Hattersley (she/her)

Associate Professor, Academic Development Centre, University of Warwick

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/staff/sara_hattersley

Correspondence: S.Hattersley@warwick.ac.uk

Sara leads on professional learning of postgraduates who teach, as part of Warwick's Academic Development Centre, and is a Senior Fellow of the HEA (Advance HE). She is course leader for the Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduates who Teach (APP PGR) and the Postgraduate Award in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PGA TLHE), as well as providing mentorship and assessment across the other ADC professional pathways. Sara was a Foundation Fellow of WIHEA and collaborated with PGRs in 2021 to establish the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community. She co-leads the initiatives of the national GTA Developer Network and is an established member of the Learning Design Consultancy Unit at Warwick.



Abstract:

PGR teacher 'liminality' is well documented, but when seen through the lens of equality, diversity and inclusion, the story becomes more nuanced. This Afterword looks through this lens, considering affordances, opportunities and issues arising for PGR teachers, thinking about their place in a sector which increasingly seeks inclusion. The author makes observations relating to recent institutional evidence and published literature, as well as considering how EDI can be most meaningfully understood in professional learning. She concludes with a celebration of PGR contributions to EDI and a stance that PGRs need to be central to the ambitions of inclusive University futures.

It is a privilege to be invited to write the Afterword for the JPPP, the third issue of this journal and, therefore, the third year of the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (WPTC). Building on the eloquent contributions of our PGR authors in this issue, I would like to conclude with some thoughts about the wider context, the issues related to PGRs and equality, diversity and inclusion and how this fits with my own work, in professional learning.

Building inclusion at Warwick

I started my teaching journey (over 25 years ago!) as an adult literacy and language tutor in adult, community and further education. I saw first hand the impact that things like poor schooling, inequality of opportunity, neurodivergence, disability and having English as an additional language had on an individual's ability to succeed in education. When I joined the Higher Education sector, I was surprised at how little the notion of inclusive education was a part of the discourse. I think that has radically changed. Inclusion is a central pillar of the [Strategy at Warwick](#) and you'll find similar commitments at other UK HE institutions. Warwick has made tangible improvements, some of which are outlined in the [Social Inclusion Annual Report](#) (University of Warwick, 2023). Reading this report, it's clear how wide-reaching the work is, with some key achievements and targets, for example, Warwick has closed the Black awarding gap and pledges to eliminate this disadvantage completely by 2025 (yes, that's only two years away...). But how does this relate to postgraduate researchers? And to those who teach? This summer, Warwick launched the [National Centre for Research Culture](#) imbued with a sense of partnership, cross-institutional working and collaboration. This could be an exciting place for PGRs, with [a number of initiatives](#) which seek to widen opportunities and open doors (for example, Burford's work on transparency in the doctoral recruitment process; Meurer's initiative for PGR careers and skills in Chemistry; Koresteleva's promotion of international sustainability training for early career researchers). And work is continuing on [Warwick's Inclusive Education Model](#). But in my pursuit of where PGR teachers fit into this, it gets more fuzzy. Warwick recognises (and I agree) that in order to build a more inclusive institution it needs representation at the top and ambitious KPIs in the social inclusion strategy focus on those colleagues in leadership roles (e.g. by 2030 a pledge to have 50% women professors, 25% BAME and 18% disabled colleagues at professorial level); the right kind of promotion and recruitment is a priority. In the comments for a recent WONKHE piece (Waring: 2023) discussing traits in Higher Education leadership (including 'passionate curiosity', 'team smarts' and 'fearlessness'...) a fellow reader notes the absence of diversity, "*One of the challenges with HE which isn't shared with many other sectors is the homogeneity of its leadership. I'm referring to their career pathway and experience. For HE to thrive and innovate requires a broader set of skills and experience.*"

PGR liminality and equality, diversity and inclusion

So how do we get there? How does this consideration for inclusivity in recruitment to leadership roles relate to those academics at an earlier point in their career, like postgraduate researchers who teach? Some call this the 'pipeline'. Reflecting on access to teaching for international GTAs at a UK University, Winter et al (2014) surmise that recruitment was largely based on immediate need, without a thought for the 'future of

academia', highlighting in their study that the opportunities to teach, for international GTAs, were less. Although almost 10 years ago, I am wondering how far we have moved on. Winter's assertions about inequitable recruitment chime with those found in the **WPTC Survey of PGR Teaching** from 2021. It found discrepancies in recruitment practices, with some respondents noting a lack of transparency and one pointing to similar appointments of convenience: *"I got my teaching jobs on a basis of 'who you know, not what you know'. While I feel like my experience was fairly successful, it feels like there is a light nepotism culture for PGR teaching."* Furthermore, when correlated with EDI data collected in the survey there was evidence of disadvantage in recruitment relating to gender and ethnicity, one example being: *"I was chosen for a position of responsibility (sort of spokesperson for the PGR teachers in my dept) where the choosing criteria was ostensibly how many years of teaching experience I had. However, there was a female student of Asian-British ethnicity of identical experience who was seemingly not considered."* The survey's nuanced look at the relationship between PGR teaching and protected characteristics revealed other factors. The survey found that higher numbers of female PGRs and non-binary/third gender PGRs felt that their interactions with students had been affected by their gender, sexuality, ethnicity or disability. In particular, female, BAME PGRs were more likely to experience less respect from students, for instance; *"Some students may address female staff in a less formal/respectful way. I also remember a couple of comments in the evaluation form being awfully rude"* and *"Some students seemed much more likely to listen to fellow PGR teachers who were male."* Age and relative teaching experience were other emergent findings, with mature PGR respondents noting that they had not only less opportunities to teach but a lack of recognition of their existing teaching experience, *"I have lived experience and professional experience of the areas I am researching and motivated to teach, I was unaware of the teaching opportunities when they arose...I felt overlooked..."*. Comments that particular impacted me related to the fact the professional learning opportunities were not designed for those with existing experience of teaching. It's true so say that in the Academic Development Centre our professional programmes place emphasis on 'current experience' (a preference of our accreditors, Advance HE) and although previous teaching can be evidenced (and specifically built upon through the [APP EXP pathway](#)), there is no real acknowledgement, accreditation of prior learning or experience (APEL) or validation of that in the eventual qualification outcome.

I feel there is more to interrogate here. Much of the literature relating to PGR teacher identities notes the 'liminal space' that they occupy as both 'staff' and 'student'. However, looking at the PGR teacher experience through the lens of equality, diversity and inclusion, we realise that this liminal space cannot simply be understood as professional identity. Intersectionality needs to be surfaced and understood both in relation to teachers and their teaching identities, and their access to teacher education and opportunities. Some recent publications provide insights. Huang et al (2023) describe the marginalised nature of Chinese, female GTAs and call for *"Higher education practitioners and scholars (to) avoid bias by*

learning to better individuate—focus on GTAs’ unique experiences rather than their group membership.” Dillard et al (2023) point to undergraduate student perceptions of international PGRs as ‘less relatable’ and discuss whether this has origins in cultural difference or a lack of confidence; a confidence that might be addressed through professional learning opportunities. Winter (2014) earlier, explored the teacher development needs of international GTAs and their experience of professional learning, which could be seen as a ‘double foreign language’ and I know that the focus on narrative and reflections which is ubiquitous in programmes like mine does sometimes seem like an unfamiliar genre. The internationalisation of Higher Education means that intercultural understandings of PGR teaching are becoming more surfaced I perceive. But looking at EDI more widely, there are other lenses too. Hastie (2021) describes an absence of discussion in the postgraduate pedagogies literature of the impact of socio-economic background and describes (as a working class PGR) their experience of class in relation to liminality weighing up noteworthy disadvantage (imposter syndrome) with more positive and enabling characteristics (approachability). In fact, they assert, being working class and a GTA might just provide the perfect ‘training ground’ for a future career in academia. And like the JPPP editors, I too read the paper by Slack and Pownell (2023) but was particularly struck (apart from the great title!) by the examples of PGR teachers managing their identity in the teaching space to positively impact and advocate for their students, for example *“introducing themselves as a disabled person...”*. I find this urge to be human, relatable and ‘legitimate’ to undergraduates as very familiar: I see it in the work of the PGRs I teach all the time, through their narratives of professional practice and programme journals.

Professional Learning, PGRs and EDI

So what then is the best way to support and develop PGR teachers in the space of equality, diversity and inclusion? I have often found this troubling as a course leader; worried that, as a broad-ranging topic, I would not be able to do it justice or somehow end up being tokenistic. But I think I have settled on something now: that professional learning in this space is an authentic and discursive practice. And that’s different from ‘training’. Hassenfeldt (2019) in investigating GTA understanding of autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in students calls for better training and resources. This is a request I have seen at Warwick through my work with the Doctoral College, for example, where academics have asked for more training on ASD in relation to supervision and where, as part of the forthcoming PGR strategy, the notion of ‘what training is needed for PGRs’ has recently been a hot topic. The trouble with training is that it implies a ‘one and done’ opportunity. It’s a good starting point, for sure. But it does not really help us to get to a point of real understanding, where we can adapt, question and challenge our practice as a result.

On the subject of ASD, the recent, brilliant [Neurodiversity toolkit](#) offers helpful resources...but much more than that. As an initiative co-produced with neurodiverse students, this tells the stories behind the difference. As these materials launched, I attended a [WIHEA masterclass with students](#) who shared their authentic experience of disseminating their diagnosis through formal university processes. They described systemic challenges which are not only inefficient, but exhausting to the individual. As someone 'on the other end' of those systems, I could immediately and more deeply understand their challenges. This year, for the first time in my 20 years at Warwick, I received a disability statement for a participant from Disability Services. It was really helpful. But I know there will have been others that simply did not make it to me. In the absence of such information, I have always requested, at application stage, that my participants share anything they feel is relevant which means I can make reasonable adjustments on the programme: anything from beliefs, caring responsibilities, disability or simply preferences. And I act on those. But as we know from the BAME attainment gap, issues do not only exist solely on entry: they manifest through the processes of curricula, which needs to be continuously checked. A good example of this came this year when a neurodivergent student on APP PGR explained the challenges with my flexible approach to online work. In trying to be kind, and account for the difficult balance of work I know PGRs face, I had inadvertently disadvantaged this individual by not adhering to firmer deadlines. This led to a nuanced discussion, shared understanding and, for me, a new way of thinking about how I manage the online work of my programme to be fairer to all. No 'training session' could have done that; it relied on authentic dialogue alongside someone with lived experience.

All teachers, not just PGRs should consider their positionality and how it impacts on their practice. I now begin the APP PGR programme with this activity (based on Jacobson et al, 2019), having been through it myself with colleagues as a developmental exercise in the Academic Development Centre last year. I found this process both painful and revealing, as I understood, 30 years after my own undergraduate journey, where my lack of cultural capital as a first generation, working class female in a Russell Group university left me with an imposter syndrome I still struggle to shake off. But by sitting with these feelings, I have begun to realise how they have come to form my identity as a teacher, where they might lead to unconscious bias and where they also, to a degree, provide an opportunity, aligned with Hastie's assertions; a kind of pedagogic superpower.

PGRs and their impact on EDI

Returning to the issues of equality, diversity and inclusion more widely, I wanted to conclude with a reflection on some of the positive examples I have seen from our community this year related to, or initiated by, PGRs. [Becky Vipond's tenacious work](#) advocating for an international Warwick scholarship PhD student of lower economic status, enabling them to receive financial support from the University to cover relocation costs (against much

challenge) was something I truly admired. [The Active Bystander for PGRs programme](#), developed by former WPTC member Pierre Botcherby, has provided a bespoke and sustainable programme with PGR teachers in mind, which can now be a source of continued professional development for future generations. [Reading Decoloniality](#) is an interdisciplinary reading group and open source publication founded by recent PGRs, to enable critical dialogue and engagement around themes of decolonisation in the literature. The WIHEA-funded project [Building Values-Based Learning and Pedagogy in Sports Coaching](#), led by Youn Affejee used pedagogical principles to bring increased inclusion in sports coaching, and is now being disseminated to specialist 'activator' sports coaches by colleagues at Warwick Sport. Recently, Bing Lu's [Inclusive Education Best Practice Toolkit 2023](#), co-created with staff and students, seeks to bring recommendations to the fore about inclusive practices in the Faculty of Arts. Finally, I want to acknowledge the current members of WPTC whose decision to focus on issues of EDI this year has permeated their work, with nuanced changes such as improvements in accessibility to this journal, and to appropriately re-branding our community of practice to better speak to a wider variety of PGRs at Warwick.

What these initiatives all have in common is authenticity, collaboration and dialogue. They are just some recent examples, alongside which there are countless, unseen pedagogic practices by PGRs who teach, seeking to foster inclusion, understand diversity and bring equality into Higher Education. I know this, because I read it in this issue and in almost every submission on the APP PGR programme. Advance HE refreshed its professional standards in 2022 (Baldry et al, 2023) with a greater emphasis on participants needing to demonstrate that their practice is inclusive and effective in order to achieve the relevant professional status. This will be no problem for PGR teachers. Institutional strategy and KPIs are one thing, but they cannot be achieved without the actions of individuals and engaged groups. The landscape of EDI seems varied and challenging but by hearing each other, being curious, sharing authentic stories and experiences and making an active effort to 'join the dots' we can keep improving. I am hopeful that Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community and the Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice continue to give voice and advocate for change. I also call upon my colleagues, those in more senior roles, to recognise both the challenges and affordances of PGR teachers within the realm of equality, diversity and inclusion. Because we cannot achieve the inclusive Higher Education we aspire to without developing (to quote Sian Waring) the 'battle-hardened confidence' of our PGR colleagues. And if they (those featured in this issue and beyond) represent the future of Higher Education, from what I have seen, the future of HE leadership is bright. I do hope they'll stay.

References

- Baldry, J., & Alexandrou, D. (2023) Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education: report of the review 2021-2023, Advance HE https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/PSF%20Review%20Report%20-%20final_1675089490.pdf accessed on 28/10/23
- Dillard, J., Sadek, K. & Muenks, K. (2023) Undergraduate perceptions of graduate teaching assistants: competence, relatedness, and autonomy in practice, Higher Education Research & Development, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2023.2215169
- Jacobson, D., & Mustafa, N. (2019) Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18 DOI: 10.1177/1609406919870075
- Hassenfeldt, T., Factor, R., Strege, M., & Scarpam, M. (2019) How Do Graduate Teaching Assistants Perceive and Understand Their Autistic College Students? *Autism in Adulthood*, 1:3, 227-231 <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/aut.2018.0039>
- Hastie, A. (2021) Class Act: Reflections on a working-class academic sense of self as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, 1:1 <https://www.journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/gtateach/article/view/1055>
- Huang, T., Chen, S., Lin, J. & Cun, A. (2023). Marginalized, silenced, and struggling: Understanding the plights of Chinese graduate teaching assistants. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 12:1 DOI: 10.1177/2212585X231156996
- Slack, Rachael & Pownell, Madeline (2023) 'Treat GTAs as colleagues, rather than spare parts': the identity, agency, and wellbeing of graduate teaching assistants, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:9, 1262-1275, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2023.2241392
- University of Warwick, Social Inclusion at Warwick: Annual Report 2023 Social Inclusion at Warwick: Annual Report 2023 by Michaela Hodges on Prezi Design, [Accessed on 28/10/23]
- Waring, S. (2023) Five traits for Higher Education leadership – whatever your job title, WONKHE Comment, 18/10/23 <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/five-traits-for-higher-education-leadership-whatever-your-job-title/> [Accessed on 28/10/23]
- Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (Lewis, Joy, Shah, Hattersley) (2021), PGR Teaching Survey https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/pgrteachers/survey/2021/pgr_teacher_survey_report_2021.pdf [Accessed on 26/10/23]
- Winter, J., Turner, R., Gedye, S., Nash, P. & Grant, V. (2015) Graduate teaching assistants: responding to the challenges of internationalisation, *International Journal for Academic Development*, 20:1, 33-45, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2014.986661