

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHERS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO TEACHING:

An Initial Exploration of Survey Findings

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My PhD work mostly focuses on the use of statistics to look at the role of lambs in the spread of footrot, a disease that is common in sheep flocks. I have taught in statistics-based modules in both the School of Psychology and Life Sciences, and my teaching focus is on helping to make statistics and coding with R accessible

Abstract

Many postgraduate researchers (PGRs) take part in teaching or have teaching-related opportunities at Warwick, but currently, little is formally documented about their experiences. The aim of this research is to find out more about PGRs and teaching at Warwick, and to provide some insight into their experiences, many of which will have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief overview seeks to highlight some of the initial findings from an inaugural Warwick survey of PGRs, made in relation to teaching.

Keywords: Warwick Survey, Postgraduates, Teaching Experiences, Training, COVID-19.

Introduction and Methods

PGRs at Warwick were invited to take part in an online survey about their experiences. There were six sections to the questionnaire – PGR Teacher Characteristics, Visibility of Teaching Opportunities at Warwick, Teaching Responsibilities of PGR Teachers, Awareness of Development Opportunities, Impact of Development Opportunities and Looking to the Future.

Selected Results

Response rate and distribution

The questionnaire was advertised both online and by to PGR student via departmental mailing lists in July 2021. There are 127 responses, 106 of which are useable, having been received from PGRs at Warwick who specifically gave consent for their data to be used. Of these, 45.3% are from the Faculty of Social Sciences, 33.0% from the Sciences, Engineering and Medical departments, while

16.0% are from the Arts department. However, 5.7% of the respondents did not indicate their departments.

How do PGRs gain teaching opportunities, and what do they teach?

The survey was open to all PGRs at Warwick irrespective of teaching experience. Most respondents (61.3%) indicated that they have a teaching role at Warwick. As shown in **Table 1** below, PGRs mostly become aware of teaching opportunities via email or

departmental advertisement, followed by word of mouth from either supervisors or friends. Some (7.5%) PGRs are, however, not aware of any teaching opportunities in their departments.

Running seminars and marking are identified as the most common teaching roles for PGR students and this is illustrated in **Table 2** below. This finding may be attributed to the fact that many respondents (45.3%) are from various Social Science departments.

How have you been made aware of PGR teaching opportunities in your department?	Number of responses (%)
Email	55 (51.9)
Departmental advertisement	28 (26.4)
Word of mouth – colleagues/friends	27 (25.5)
Word of mouth – supervisor/other mentor	25 (23.6)
Not aware of PGR teaching opportunities	8 (7.5)
Warwick website: GTA job search	0 (0.0)
Other	0 (0.0)

Table 1: Awareness of Teaching Opportunities

Teaching participated in by PGR teachers	Number of responses (%)
Marking	36 (34.0)
Seminar – in person	34 (32.1)
Seminar – online	31 (29.2)
Individual student support sessions/mentoring – online	19 (17.9)
Laboratory (wet/dry) – in person	17 (16.0)
Individual student support sessions/mentoring – in person	15 (14.2)
Lectures – online	8 (7.5)
Lectures – in person	8 (7.5)
Other	6 (5.7)
Module convention	2 (1.9)

Table 2: Teaching Roles for PGR Students

What prevents PGRs taking teaching opportunities?

Table 3 shows that the biggest factor which prevents PGRs from taking teaching opportunities is attributed to PhD-related time commitments. This is followed by feelings about lack of subject knowledge.

Teaching-related development opportunities

Around a third of respondents either agree or strongly agree that Warwick provides sufficient teaching-related development opportunities for PGR teachers. **Table 4** shows that half of the respondents are aware of the Preparing to Teach in Higher Education course, which is a mandatory introduction course required by departments before teaching, while less than half are aware of any other courses run at Warwick, which are all voluntary.

Table 5 shows that PGRs predominantly take training courses to either improve their practice, gain experience, or boost their CV.

Table 6 suggests that PGRs would generally like more training opportunities, although a third would be potentially more likely to participate in programmes if they were paid. There was some suggestion that peer-support programmes would be well-received. However, **Table 7** demonstrates that awareness of available courses is currently relatively low. This invariably means that lack of awareness of the training courses on offer is potentially the bigger problem, rather than lack of opportunities at Warwick.

What does, or might prevent you from taking teaching opportunities?	Number of responses (%)
Time commitments – PhD related	53 (50.0)
Feelings of lack of subject knowledge	35 (33.0)
Unaware of opportunities	20 (18.9)
Other	17 (16.0)
Time commitments – non-PhD related	14 (13.2)
Lack of supervisor approval	11 (10.4)
Rejection via application	8 (7.5)

Table 3: Inhibitive Factors to Teaching for PGRs

Which of the following courses are you aware of?	Number of responses (%)
Preparing to Teach in Higher Education	53 (50.0)
APP PGR (Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduate Researchers who Teach)	38 (35.8)
PGA TLHE (Postgraduate Award in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education)	22 (20.8)
TPiHE (Teaching Practice in Higher Education)	6 (5.7)
Departmental courses/training	29 (27.4)
Academic Development Program	18 (17.0)
Other	3 (2.8)

Table 4: Awareness of Training Courses at Warwick

Reasons for undertaking teaching related development opportunities?	Number of responses (%)
To improve practice or gain experience	33 (31.1)
To boost CV	24 (22.6)
Course recommended by supervisor/mentor	13 (12.0)
Other – please state	4 (3.8)

Table 5: Reasons for Undertaking Training Opportunities

How can support for PGR teachers be improved?	Number of responses (%)
Payment for undertaking training	32 (30.2)
Mentoring/peer support	27 (25.5)
Mandatory requirements for departments to provide mentorship/support to new tutors	24 (22.6)
Further training or Continuous Professional Development	24 (22.6)
Spaces for sharing practice/experience	21 (19.8)
Networking	15 (14.2)
Socialising	12 (11.3)
Other	1 (0.9)

Table 6: Measures for Improving PGR Teacher Support

If you have not undertaken teaching related development opportunities, why is this?	Number of responses (%)
Unaware of these opportunities	28 (26.4)
They are unpaid	12 (11.3)
Lack of time	11 (10.4)
Courses were not recommended as useful by supervisor/other mentor	5 (4.7)
Courses were discouraged by supervisor/other mentor	0 (0.0)
Other - please state	0 (0.0)

Table 7: Reasons for Non-participation in Development Opportunities

Conclusions

Many PGRs at Warwick are involved in teaching in some way and this study provides some of the first insights into how PGRs acquire teaching opportunities at Warwick, their teaching roles, and their awareness of various developmental opportunities available to them. Initial findings suggest that opportunities to teach are largely departmentally-driven, perhaps through some informal networks.

The study also highlights that, potentially, a lack of awareness of the opportunities available is a barrier to PGRs undertaking teaching-related development opportunities, and that although PGRs identify that they would like more opportunities, awareness of the ones currently available is

seemingly low. The question of how to raise awareness, equitably, of the opportunities currently available to the PGR community, is one that needs to be addressed.

There appears to be an appetite, overall, for more PGR teacher support, and for this support to include mentoring or peer support. An interesting initiative that can propel this need into action is the buddy and peer mentoring scheme launched by the newly launched Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community. This novel project aims to connect PGR teachers from a distance, whilst also creating an enabling digital environment for PGR teachers to share insightful pedagogic practices.

The full results from the PGR Teaching Survey will be published in the Autumn 2021.

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