

Dedicated and overworked: Graduate Teaching Assistants at the London School of Economics¹

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What challenges do Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) face in their everyday practice? Despite growing concerns around the personal and professional development of doctoral students, we know little about their well-being and working conditions as GTAs at the London School of Economics. We therefore fielded a survey exploring a broad range of experiences and perceptions related to this role, from rationales of work and relations with co-workers, to control over work and responses to performance monitoring. A total of **173 doctoral candidates** (roughly half of this segment of the workforce) who have worked as GTAs in 2021-2022 at the School completed the questionnaire.² This executive summary focuses on what we learned about work effort, working hours, and work strain among GTAs.

Characterizing overwork

Our results indicate that more often than not, GTAs are overworked. This has adverse consequences on their personal lives, well-being, and other sectors of their professional lives. Below we describe various facets of this pattern:

- **Polyactivity.** GTAs usually hold multiple occupations: 89% of participants were registered as full-time doctoral students. Perhaps more surprisingly, 57% held another paid role at some point in the year the survey covers. It is therefore safe to assume that GTAs work more hours than the national average (38 hours).
- **Anarchic working hours.** The pattern of multiple occupations translates into working habits that blur the boundaries between personal and working lives: 70% of respondents often (or almost always) work in the evening; 63% often (or almost always) work during weekends; 53% often (or almost always) work on vacation.

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² More details on questionnaire design, sample characteristics and distribution procedures are available on demand. To design the questionnaire and interpret results, we drew heavily on pilot studies and reports conducted at the School, higher education research, and existing research into the sociology and psychology of work. Due to space limitations, we do not cite these references here.

- **Work strain.** Unsurprisingly, for many participants these working habits are associated with adverse health and well-being patterns: 63% of respondents often (or almost always) feel exhausted after a workday; 48% often (or almost always) lack time for their personal life; last but not least, 46% find their job stressful to some degree.
- **Frequency of unpaid pedagogical work.** Pedagogical work plays a substantial role in the patterns described above. 62% of GTAs in our sample work overtime as part of their teaching role. Consistent with this, more than half (55%) feel that their remuneration is not fairly aligned with the amount of work they produce.
- **Forms of unpaid pedagogical work.** This unpaid work takes two forms. First, over a third of participants (35%) often (or almost always) complete tasks that do not fall within the formal definition of their role. We call this invisibilised work. Second, participants routinely work overtime to complete tasks that do fall within their role (table 1). We call this “devalued work”. Particularly, marking and writing up feedback are a source of overtime for 74% of GTAs, as is preparing for class (see table 1). Furthermore, participants often work unpaid contact hours: 49% report working overtime to answer emails, and 24% to meet with students.

Table 1: Sources of overtime work

Forms of Unpaid Pedagogical Work	Ratio (%)
Marking and writing feedback	74.42
Answering emails	49.42
Doing the assigned readings	43.60
Designing slides	27.91
Meeting with students	23.84
Designing session plan	20.93
Choosing learning activities	13.37
Filling in the register	11.63
Writing reference letters	10.47
Meetings with convenor	9.30
Other	5.23
Updating the Moodle page	2.33

- **Teaching-research conflict.** Pedagogical overwork also places pressure on research activities. Almost three quarters of participants (72%) found themselves with too little time for research due to their pedagogical work. This teaching-research conflict likely explains why incoming and intermediate doctoral candidates (those who have not completed their third year) represent the bulk of GTAs in our sample. As doctoral deadlines near, managing both activities becomes less and less tenable.

Explaining overwork

For most doctoral candidates, teaching is not a formal obligation. Why, then, do they accept work demands that often interfere with their personal life and other sectors of their professional lives? Our findings point to four explanatory lines.

- **Financial pressures.** Nine out of ten participants benefit from doctoral funding. Still, a substantial portion (37%) report that affording essentials (e.g., rent) was their first or second main motivation for taking on the role. In addition, being able to afford extras (e.g., holidays) was the first or second motivation for an additional 23% of participants.
- **Market competition.** The British higher education sector is moving fast towards an economy of work centred on casualisation. In this context, doctoral candidates are pushed to accumulate new experiences and accept high work demands to maximise their chances in the labour market: 73% believe that their teaching experience has bettered their career prospects.
- **Control systems.** Performance monitoring procedures create a strong incentive to perform well: despite high levels of performance (91% reported positive evaluations), 41% report that TQARO evaluations have been a source of stress for them.
- **Work ethic.** All other things being equal, education workers tend towards overwork when they invest intrinsic meaning into professional activities, such as when they perceive teaching as a means to improving society. Such work orientations translate into higher levels of (subjective and objective) involvement with work. This is clearly the case of GTAs, who believe their pedagogical work is important for them and for others (table 2).

Table 2: Experienced meaningfulness of teaching work

	Agree (%)	Neither agree or disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.	86.63	6.40	6.98
My work as a teacher is very meaningful to me.	88.95	6.40	4.65
I feel I'm doing something good for society with my teaching.	81.98	13.95	4.07
I feel I have positively influenced the lives of my students.	82.56	12.79	4.65
I have been able to develop my professional skills.	87.79	6.98	5.23
This work experience has improved my career prospects.	74.42	18.02	7.56
I feel my work as a teacher was valued by my students.	90.70	6.40	2.91

Recommendations

Based on our findings regarding the nature and sources of overwork among GTAs, we suggest three lines of reform.

- **Re-designing teaching contracts.** We found that contracts routinely underestimate the amount of time required to perform certain pedagogical tasks (table 1). Particularly, contracts allocating thirty minutes to read, grade and write up feedback for student essays conspicuously underestimate the effort required to perform this task well. Because of this, we recommend a substantial increase in the amount of

paid time allocated to provide feedback and meet with students, and to set this increase in consultation with GTAs.

- **Reforming doctoral studentships.** Since financial pressures force many doctoral candidates into detrimental forms of polyactivity, increasing their disposable income seems *de rigueur*. We recommend four reforms to achieve this. Firstly, and most obviously, doctoral stipends should be increased. While the exact magnitude of this increase should be discussed further with student representatives, we argue that studentships should at least match the annual amount of the London Living wage. Where studentship rates are set externally to the School, LSE should take a leadership position and fill the gap while lobbying for increases to the national baseline. Secondly, studentships should grant access to basic socioeconomic rights. Parental leave has recently been introduced and sick leave, pension schemes, medical insurance, a nursery, and other fundamental rights should also follow. Thirdly, the financial and career pressures we describe are even greater on most self-funded students. Accordingly, full funding and hardship funds at these recommended rates should be available to all PhD students. Finally, studentships should be paid monthly. Doctoral candidates will thus not be constrained into looking for more regular sources of income.
- **Implementing job diagnostic surveys.** Our survey leaves questions unanswered that are key to developing informed solutions. Focus areas should include inequality, well-being, department-specific issues, and training and support. If our findings are taken seriously, School services should consult with GTAs and carry out regular and incentivised diagnostic surveys to identify problems, re-design the role accordingly, and to track progress.