



QAA
Scotland

Statement of Expectations for the Support of Postgraduates Who Teach

**Focus On: The Postgraduate
Research Student Experience**

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Introduction

This work is part of QAA Scotland's [Focus On](#)¹ activity which covers topics that occur frequently in [Enhancement-led Institutional Review](#)² outcomes.

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The work undertaken

The project team conducted a national and international scan of policy and practice to support PGWT, including all Scottish HEIs, several institutions from the rest of the UK (rUK), and HEIs in North America, Asia, Africa, and Australasia. The findings have informed this Statement of Expectations document and an accompanying Key Issues document.

It is widely recognised that postgraduates who teach make a significant contribution to both their institution and to their students' learning. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that teaching can perform an important developmental role for postgraduate students.

Postgraduates who teach (hereafter referred to as PGWT) require substantial support to ensure that both the quality of their teaching and their own development are satisfactory. Given the importance of PGWT to current undergraduate teaching in many Scottish HEIs, the quality of teaching they provide (and the support they receive in order to achieve this) can have a significant impact on the undergraduate student experience. This support may be supplied at the level of the institution or organisational unit.³

This Statement of Expectations, developed following a national and international scan of policy and practice at HEIs and feedback and consultation from the sector, is intended to provide institutions with a practical tool to benchmark, evaluate and enhance their provision in this area using approaches tried and tested by colleagues in the Scottish sector and beyond. We have divided this document into three sections:

1. Expectations of institutions
2. Expectations of organisational units
3. Expectations of PGWT themselves and expectations of undergraduate students

¹ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on

² www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review

³ The term 'organisational unit' is the term used in this document to cover individual departments/ disciplines/ schools/ colleges within an institution.

The key recommendations in each section are those we consider most appropriate for each area in a typical institution. However, we recognise that there is great variety across the sector in terms of organisational structure therefore it might be that some recommendations for action at organisational unit-level might be more appropriate for institutional-level action in certain places. We would encourage colleagues to make use of this document and recommendations in the way that makes most sense for them and their institutions. Examples of practice for each of the areas outlined in the Statement of Expectations can be found in the scan document.

Expectations of institutions

There are several ways that PGWT can be supported at an institutional level in the context of valuing learning and teaching and in policy and procedure, for example through university-wide policy or guidance, or in the actions and strategies of senior management (e.g. Learning and Teaching Strategies).

Policy and strategy

Our research has found that where institutional policy or guidelines exist relating to support for PGWT students are more aware of training and development opportunities, and there is less confusion over issues of role, pay, conditions, and responsibilities. This is a strong rationale for **developing an institutional policy/strategy on supporting postgraduates who teach**.

Clarifying pay and conditions

One of the biggest concerns for PGWT relates to rates of pay, in particular consistency and clarity across the institution, and delays in issuing of teaching contracts (Lee and Pettigrove, 2009). Several Scottish and rUK institutions highlighted this as an issue for their postgraduate students. There seems to be a lack of consistency and clarity around what PGWT will be paid for, how long this should take (e.g. marking an essay), and the rate at which they are paid (often differential across the institution). Some institutions have attempted to address this problem by **introducing institutional guidance on the number of hours PGWT will be paid** for tasks, e.g. [St Andrews](#).⁴ Such a definitive statement might not be possible in all institutions but, at minimum, **PGWT should be told what their rate of pay will be**.

While they should receive their contracts before they begin teaching, this is often not the case, and PGWT report frustration that they are not sure what their teaching commitments will be until the last minute. Delays to contracts being issued also lead to delayed payment – a problem specifically mentioned by PGWT themselves. We recognise the challenges involved in confirming teaching and payment before the semester begins (for instance, students might be permitted to change course options until a few weeks into the semester). However, delays in issuing contracts can lead to delays in payment (often reported as several months). **PGWT should expect to receive their contracts before they begin teaching and to be paid in a timely manner**. Improved communications between PGWT, organisational units, and central HR would be beneficial.

Fair recruitment

Recruitment of PGWT should be in line with existing university recruitment and selection policies and opportunities should be fairly available for postgraduate students (recognising the developmental benefits of taking on a teaching role). Recruiters should ensure they are aware of and uphold equality and diversity issues when recruiting PGWT (see Ensuring equality and diversity). Recruitment almost always takes place at organisational unit level, which can cause issues of a lack of fairness or standardisation. Appointing an organisational unit HR staff member with specific oversight of this area or providing training/checklists or proformas/set criteria/template job descriptions would be helpful.

⁴ www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/policy/hr/hourlypaidcasualteachingstaff/#how-many-hours

Defining roles and responsibilities

Most Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not explicitly specify in guidance or documentation the grade at which employment will be undertaken by PGWT (the exceptions are University of Edinburgh and St Andrews, where demonstrators are employed at Grade 4 and 5, and tutors at Grade 6). In most cases Scottish universities explicitly state that the maximum number of work hours should not exceed six hours per week, although in practice this varies widely and many are concerned that senior staff are underestimating the time taken for PGWT to undertake teaching tasks. Job titles also vary; PGWT are described at most universities as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) but are also called tutors and demonstrators (Edinburgh), postgraduate teachers (St Andrews), approved teachers or tutors (Heriot-Watt) and teaching assistants (TAs – Stirling and Strathclyde). A few HEIs did not have a specific title for PGWT.

There is a wide range in the tasks PGWT are asked to carry out and in the level of detail provided. Across the Scottish HEIs, PGWT are asked to teach tutorials, give lectures (sometimes specified as 'limited' or 'occasional'), provide assessment support, undertake pastoral duties, and carry out teaching preparation, invigilation, and administration – not all of these are specified as part of the PGWT's role, but all can reasonably be expected of a university-level teacher. The lack of clarity which arises when PGWT are not made specifically aware of their role and extent of responsibility can lead to exploitation of PGWT (who might feel pressured to teach beyond their role or time available), a lack of appropriate training, or disappointment.

It is reasonable that **PGWT can expect a clear outline of their grade, job title, precise working hours, and what they will be expected to do**. While some information will need to be provided by organisational unit staff familiar with the precise teaching role, **general information on job titles, grades, and responsibilities can be provided at an institutional level in a policy document or written guidance**.

Appropriate training and development

One of the most significant issues for PGWT is the inconsistency of access to training and development (Beaton 2017; Harvey 2017). In a sector where decisions on access to training, the extent of development, and payment for training are usually made at organisational unit level the quality and quantity of training and development received can vary widely. An institutional statement setting out a minimum requirement for training and support can help to ensure at least a minimum of consistency. While it is important that **a commitment to appropriate training for PGWT be set out by the institution**, the specific content of training and development development may be more effectively decided at local level, depending on institutional structure or discipline. Guidance for the support of PGWT can point to good practice in training, development, peer support, mentoring, and review around the institution.

Opportunities for professional accreditation (HEA or other)

Many HEIs have recognised the benefit of teaching accreditation (e.g. Higher Education Academy) for their teaching staff as a measure of quality and of staff development and progression. Yet, PGWT are usually not included in any measure or target for accreditation (this is usually limited to permanent staff). As a consequence, the developmental value of accreditation for PGWT is often overlooked. Institutions can support PGWT who want to achieve accreditation by paying any associated fees, creating or supporting structured, accredited routes open to all PGWT (e.g. the Edinburgh Teaching Award at the University of Edinburgh).

Valuing PGWT

There is a longstanding perception, well supported by research, that PGWT and their contributions to teaching are not valued by institutions. PGWT often feel that they are exploited as 'cheap labour' (Muzaka 2009) and that they are neither seen as integrated members of staff, or as undertaking supported, developmental work. Recognition of the value of PGWT to the institution can be shown by **supporting** organisational unit **or institution-level awards** (e.g. student Teaching Awards, organisational unit awards). **Any policy or guidance relating to PGWT should explicitly state that the contribution of PGWT to teaching is valued.**

Ensuring equality and diversity

There is a high proportion of women in casual and unstable employment (Beaton, 2017; Crimmins, 2017), and women continue to be underrepresented at higher levels of university leadership. There is also evidence to suggest that unconscious bias can affect the feedback that students provide, disproportionately affecting women and minorities. **The institution has a responsibility to ensure that it is working to support PGWT who are women or who have protected characteristics or any other equality and diversity characteristics.**

Expectations of staff in organisational units

Much of the day-to-day support of PGWT happens at organisational unit level and teaching and administrative staff can uphold institutional advice and guidance, adapting it to their disciplinary environment and supplementing it with specific support such as mentoring.

Tailoring training and development

While training and induction can be mandated at an institutional level, **the most effective training is conducted in partnership with individual** organisational units. Many institutions have implemented a range of generic, centralised training provision which sits alongside discipline-specific training (Chadha 2013; Cho et al. 2011; Luft et al. 2004). Yet access to this training (in terms of payment and organisation) is usually controlled at organisational unit level. Furthermore, training for PGWT can be enhanced by the increased involvement of discipline-specific staff who are able to address the precise tasks PGWT will undertake within the department.

As a minimum, **PGWT should receive an induction to their role and training for any mandatory parts of their role**. The induction training should happen before the PGWT begins teaching. Organisational units can helpfully **provide written documentation for PGWT** (such as a handbook) detailing training and resources, teaching organisation, the boundaries of the PGWT's role, key contacts, and pointing to relevant teaching regulations. Organisational units should **ensure their support is developmental** (connected with careers advice, and transferable skills). **Organisational units should point PGWT to further development opportunities elsewhere** if they will be beneficial to their teaching.

Mentoring works particularly well for PGWT and is successfully implemented at several HEIs. When carried out at organisational unit level it can model teaching behaviour within a discipline, provide specific and meaningful feedback and support, and incorporate PGWT into a teaching community. **Peer support networks** run effectively at several institutions and organisational units are well placed to support this relatively low-effort support by providing resources (spaces to meet, materials, payment and training for peer group leaders). **Online communities of support** can be helpful for busy PGWT and those teaching online (Dean et al., 2017). Accreditation for PGWT, even if offered and undertaken at an institutional level, can be **supported and championed by staff in** organisational units by ensuring PGWT are aware of opportunities, or by running local schemes.

Supporting PGWT as members of the teaching community

A common grievance for PGWT is that they are not considered part of the teaching team in an organisational unit. At several HEIs, PGWT reported feeling like adjuncts, and not being included as integral members of the teaching team. This is perceived as a barrier to the development of a professional identity as a university teacher. Where possible, **PGWT should be given access to spaces and resources used by teaching staff in the organisational unit** to avoid stratification of roles. **Allowing PGWT to be involved in course design** serves an important dual function: it allows them to feel part of the teaching team and is an additional source of feedback for the course designer. Professional development activities can be community-building (Beaton, 2017); **organisational unit-level teaching development can be opened to all staff**, including PGWT, creating a sense of a teaching community. All staff in the organisational unit (including administrative staff) should be encouraged to recognise PGWT as a core part of the teaching team.

Identifying a named person with responsibility (PGWT champion)

There should be a **named person within the organisational unit** whom PGWT can approach for guidance or about problems relating to their teaching role. This is often the head of the organisational unit or an appointed delegate, or academic staff who work with PGWT such as course leaders. Such a person is well placed to **coordinate training and support for PGWT** in the organisational unit.

Supporting PGWT as a research supervisor

This role of PGWT champion should be distinct from that of the research supervisor. Supervisors should be informed of this in training or through institutional guidance. Best practice suggests that **supervisors should be notified if their students undertake paid teaching positions** and are expected to raise concerns if they feel teaching may impact their research progress.

Giving feedback and reviewing performance

Feedback is an important part of development for PGWT. **As a minimum, PGWT should be given access to all student feedback that relates to their teaching.** Some organisational units offer peer or staff observation opportunities where PGWT can get feedback on their teaching from other PGWT or from senior staff. It is beneficial for **PGWT to have an opportunity to review their teaching**; this might be via a meeting with the course organiser, a peer network, or a mentor. Organisational units can also provide resources for self-review and reflection.

Expectations of postgraduates who teach

There are some ways in which PGWT can support themselves. They also have responsibilities in relation to the students they are teaching.

Committing to development and support

Peer support, with help from the organisational unit, can be a valuable developmental and community resource. **PGWT are encouraged to seek out opportunities for development and support.**

Acting on feedback from students

PGWT can play a vital role in course feedback, replaying student views and their own opinions to the course organiser/leader. PGWT should seek to establish communication with the course organiser and to **communicate student comments and contribute their own views** that might improve the course content, structure or format.

Understanding your role and responsibilities

PGWT have an important role in in the learning and teaching experience of students as well as limited responsibility for their pastoral care. It is important for student satisfaction that **PGWT fulfil their role to a high standard.** PGWT should also ensure that they **pass on any concerns about individual students** to the appropriate person or service. PGWT should **uphold all teaching rules and guidelines** when teaching students (e.g. accessibility and inclusivity). PGWT need to be aware of their responsibilities around equality and diversity in relation to the students they are teaching.

Key recommendations

Expectations of institutions

Policy and strategy

Institutions should consider:

- developing an institutional policy/strategy on supporting PGWT.

Clarifying pay and conditions

Institutions should consider:

- introducing institutional guidance on the number of hours for which PGWT will be paid
- making explicit the rate of pay for PGWT
- ensuring PGWT receive their contracts before they begin teaching and that they are paid in a timely manner.

Fair recruitment

Institutions should consider:

- recruiting of PGWT in line with existing university recruitment and selection policies, and making sure that opportunities are made available in a fair and accessible manner
- creating documentation to support PGWT recruitment such as HR proformas/set criteria/template job descriptions for PGWT roles
- providing PGWT with general information, that is a clear outline of their grade, job title, precise working hours, and what they will be expected to do as part of their role. This general information should be provided at an institutional level in a policy document or as written guidance, which should be available for all staff and PGWT.

Appropriate training and development

Institutions should consider:

- establishing a policy for, and maintaining a commitment to, providing appropriate training for PGWT.

Valuing PGWT

Institutions should consider:

- acknowledging and valuing the contributions of PGWT within the institution in policy and/or guidance relating to PGWT recruitment, development and training
- supporting organisational unit or institution-level awards for recognising PGWT teaching.

Ensuring equality and diversity

Institutions should consider:

- ensuring that PGWT who are women or who have protected characteristics are supported appropriately.

Expectations of staff in organisational units

Tailoring training and development

Staff in organisational units should consider:

- ensuring that training is conducted in partnership with other organisational units, including any centralised institutional support
- providing PGWT with an induction to their role and training for any mandatory parts of their role (at the minimum)
- providing written documentation (such as a handbook) for PGWT detailing training and resources, teaching organisation, etc. within the organisational unit and centrally within the institution
- ensuring that training provided for PGWT is developmental
- pointing PGWT to further development opportunities elsewhere, both within and out with the institution
- establishing a mentoring network within the organisational unit for PGWT, including peer support networks and online communities of support
- encouraging organisational unit teaching staff to champion gaining accreditation to PGWT and supporting PGWT colleagues in working towards accreditation.

Supporting PGWT as members of the teaching community

Staff in organisational units should consider:

- providing PGWT access to spaces and resources used by teaching staff in the organisational unit
- encouraging PGWT to be involved in organisational unit-level teaching development, including course design.

Identifying a named person with responsibility (PGWT champion)

Staff in organisational units should consider:

- identifying a named colleague within the organisational unit responsible for the coordination, training and support for PGWT.

Giving feedback and reviewing performance

Staff in organisational units should consider:

- providing PGWT access to all student feedback that relates to their teaching (at a minimum)
- providing PGWT the opportunity to review their teaching via a meeting with the course organiser, a peer network, or a mentor.

Expectations of postgraduates who teach

Committing to development and support

Postgraduates who teach should consider:

- seeking out opportunities for development and support, both within their organisational unit and within the wider institution.

Acting on feedback from students

Postgraduates who teach should consider:

- seeking and establishing communication with the course organiser, and communicating student comments and contributing their own views.

Understanding your role and responsibilities

Postgraduates who teach should consider:

- developing a greater understanding of effective teaching and becoming an effective teacher within HE through engaging with colleagues and peers within their organisational units, participating in development opportunities and engaging with the principles of reflective practice
- sharing any concerns about students to their line manager/colleague responsible for PGWT
- upholding the ethics of teaching of the institution and organisational unit at all times.

Institutional PGWT Policy/Strategy URLs

Information provided from participating institutions regarding PGWT Policy/Strategy

Scotland

Heriot-Watt University

www1.hw.ac.uk/ordinances/ordinances.pdf

University of Edinburgh

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/facilities/academic/tutoring>

University of St Andrews

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/teaching/strategypolicy/policy/postgraduate/research/studentteachers/

University of Strathclyde

https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/ps/cs/gmap/academicaffairs/policies/Policy_and_Code_of_Practice_for_PGR_Study.pdf.pagespeed.ce.cqDvalO3SD.pdf

RUK

London School of Economics

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Teaching-and-Learning-Centre/TLC-for-You/Graduate-Teaching-Assistants/TLC/graduateTeachingAssistants/resourcesForGTAs.aspx>

University College London

www.ucl.ac.uk/gs/doctoral-education-strategy/Doctoral-Education-Strategy.pdf
www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/docs/post_grad_ta_scheme.php

University of Liverpool

www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/tgsd/code-of-practice-on-assessment/appendix-5-PGR-CoP.pdf

University of Sheffield

<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/hr/guidance/contracts/sgtc>

University of York

www.york.ac.uk/admin/hr/policies/appointments-contracts-leavers/graduate-teaching-assistants/policy/

International

Aarhus University

http://cul.au.dk/fileadmin/CUL/Dokumenter/Om_CUL/Practice_at_BSS_for_the_development_of_teaching_and_teaching_competencies_2014.pdf

The University of Hong Kong

www.gradsch.hku.hk/gradsch/web/apply/guide1718/4-1.html

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