

Doctoral students navigating the borderlands of academic teaching in an era of precarity

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Doctoral students navigating the borderlands of academic teachers in an era of precarity

Neoliberalisation of academia has led to an increasing recruitment of doctoral students in teaching roles. Whilst there is evidence of doctoral students being engaged in teaching roles and the reasons for doing so, **there is a pressing need to understand their experiences and to develop effective support practices to help them in their roles as teachers.** Using borderlands theory as a lens, the thematic analysis of case study data from doctoral students in two English universities indicates that although they were navigating similar borderlands, the structural inequalities posed by their institutions led to differential support for their teaching roles and teacher identity development. The paper highlights the need for aligning doctoral roles to academic roles. It concludes by challenging the precarious support available for doctoral students, and proposes recommendations for the holistic development of doctoral students as competent and successful teachers (and researchers) in an increasingly precarious academia.

Keywords: doctoral students, graduate teaching assistants, emerging teaching professionals, neoliberal culture, precarity.

Introduction

The number of precariats in Western academia continues to rise (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015) as a result of neoliberalisation that emphasises cost-effectiveness in the university work and practices (Williams, 2013). Academic staff are faced with casualisation, providing just-in-time research and teaching as well as meeting performance criteria linked to various metrics (Gill and Donaghue 2016; Heijstra et al. 2017). The new and emerging academics, the **doctoral** students, are beginning to navigate this precarity mire either consciously or unconsciously. Doctoral students are regularly recruited to teach undergraduates within higher education institutions (HEIs) and sometimes this role forms part of a doctoral studentship. In countries such as the UK, USA and Canada,

they are commonly referred to as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) (Park, 2004). GTAs, along with associate lecturers/contractual workers, are recruited to improve staff-student ratio which is often considered as an indicator for better learning and teaching experience in various university league tables¹ (Chadha, 2013). They are therefore fulfilling teaching roles that respond to the shortfall in academic teaching staff and/or release the permanent staff from rising teaching pressures as student numbers continue to rise. Research on GTAs have shown that they see teaching as a positive experience which helps develop their academic identity (Emmioğlu, McAlpine and Amundsen, 2017; Jordan and Howe, 2018) and their market value (Mantai, 2019). Recently, there has been more interest in the development and evaluation of formal teaching support programmes for GTAs (Chadha, 2013; 2015, Beaton, 2017). However, what is less understood is how informal and formal teaching support help doctoral students navigate their multiple identities of student, researcher and teacher in an era of precarity.

Liminality and Borderlands

Within the context of neoliberalisation and precarity, we argue that GTAs occupy a liminal space as a doctoral student, researcher and teacher that can be likened to a borderland (Andzaldúa, 1987). GTAs enter, what Meyer and Land (2005) term as a liminal state that has a transformative function in a process of becoming an academic, i.e. shifting from one state of being into another. The concept of GTAs occupying a liminal space, although not new is less common (see Winstone and Moore, 2017). GTAs are described as having an ‘ambiguous niche’ (Park, 2004) by having these plural

¹ For example, see the QS World University Rankings at <https://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings/methodology> and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings at https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/stats_female_male_ratio/sort_order/desc/cols/stats

identities. Anzaldúa (1987) used the term borderland to describe those of Latino and Chicano descent who live on the border between Mexico and the USA and who now have a hybrid life of neither being fully Mexican or American. In the same way, GTAs have a hybrid life of a student-researcher-teacher and occupy a borderland. Winstone and Moore (2017) allude to this hybridity by referring to GTAs as being “sometimes fish” and “sometimes fowl”. Unlike the Mexican and American citizens, in Anzaldúa, who may live permanently in the borderlands, we conceptualise GTAs as temporary borderland citizens who aim to move beyond the borderlands and are possibly enroute to becoming an academic. Conceptualising GTAs’ identities as being in a temporary borderland allows us to investigate these identities as being complex, shifting and intersectional rather than hegemonic (Garbutt, Biermann and Offord, 2012). In other words, whilst doctoral students hold the “legal citizenship” of being a student, they regularly (re)cross this social border into being an academic by undertaking teaching which allows them to share the same culture and practices of their desired professional destination, of becoming an academic.

Hence, the doctoral student-researcher-teacher borderland, now also referred to as the GTA borderland in this paper, is not a physical space, but a social space of practices where doctoral students seek similar support and legitimisation of being an academic (Paasi, 2009). This journey, however, is never straightforward as navigating the liminality entails the acquisition and use of new forms of written and spoken discourse and the internalisation of these (Land, Rattray and Vivian 2014). We further argue, that whilst there is evidence of doctoral students undertaking teaching roles, there is a pressing need to understand how the teaching support available affects their experiences in navigating the borderlands and developing their identity as an academic. This is particularly important as doctoral students as GTAs have now become part of

the precarious HE landscape, and for successful transition to academic work, they need to be able to cope with and navigate their experiences whilst in the borderlands. Using a qualitative multiple case study approach, this paper seeks to explore:

- a) The extent that informal and formal teaching support structures affect GTAs experiences in accessing and navigating the doctoral student-researcher-teacher borderlands within a neoliberal culture of precarity.
- b) How institutional structural inequalities can affect GTAs experiences in moving beyond the doctoral student-researcher-teacher borderlands in a context of precarity.

The next section highlights the neoliberal culture within academia in which doctoral students undertake these teaching roles to comprehend the challenges they experience.

Situating doctoral students' teaching work in neoliberal Higher Education

Most Western universities have been shaped by the neoliberalisation processes that reflect an increasing emphasis on economic competitiveness, quality assurance and accountability (McCaig 2018; Naidoo and Williams 2015). Neoliberalism in this paper is understood as a specific mode of governance that is paradoxical in terms of promoting free choice and individual liberties whilst also introducing new techniques that regulate competitive relations and institutional/individual success (Raaper 2016). Radice (2013, 408) would describe this contradiction as 'a combination of Stalinist hierarchical control and the so-called free market'. In practical terms, neoliberalism has promoted privatisation of public sector services and introduced the understanding of citizens as consumers (Peters 2012). The neoliberalisation of higher education has constructed undergraduate students as consumers who pay for the service offered: their

education (Williams 2013). As universities primarily rely on tuition fees for income, the sector has witnessed severe massification where the student numbers in the UK have reached over 2.5 million students in 2019/20 (HESA, 2021). We recognise that academic work is also being shaped by these neoliberal forces that expect academics (but also students and administrators) to become self-managing and self-improving with an aim to succeed in highly competitive and instrumental higher education environments (Gill 2014; Gill and Donaghue 2016). For example, it is now widely known that academic work has become insecure where ‘precariousness rather than security’ defines academic life (Gill and Donaghue 2016, 92). The UK University and College Union (UCU) suggests that 54% of all academic staff in the UK work in precarious conditions, e.g. they have short-term contracts and/or they are paid by the hour (UCU 2016). It is likely that large proportions of undergraduate teaching are carried out by staff with short-term or bank contracts (UCU 2016). The UCU (2018) Freedom of Information request indicated that most UK universities rely on hourly paid staff to deliver around 25% of their undergraduate teaching, with some pre-92 universities even employ hourly paid staff for up to 50% of their undergraduate teaching. This ongoing casualisation of academic workforce is part of neoliberal reforms in higher education (Olssen and Peters 2005; Thwaites and Pressland 2017). It has been argued that higher education is one of the most casualised sectors of employment in the UK second only to the hospitality industry which has a greater proportion of casualised workforce (Gill and Donaghue 2016).

The legal frameworks, also, have been adjusted to protect the consumer interest in HE, for example, in the UK, the Consumer Rights Act 2015 regulates the relationship between students as consumers and universities as providers (see CMA 2015). This has placed pressure on HEIs in England to consider ways of responding to the consumer

interest in the environment that is already grappling with student numbers and other pressures of performativity created by research and teaching excellence frameworks. Recent scholarly work (Bosanquet 2017; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Thwaites and Pressland 2017) has emphasised the impact that neoliberal reforms have on early career academics, their career trajectories and wellbeing. For example, Bosanquet (2017) argues that early career academics are particularly vulnerable to a variety of performance measures such as research outputs, impact metrics and funding targets, that are seen essential for gaining a permanent or at least long-term academic employment.

One set of vulnerable early career academics that this becomes relevant to are the GTAs. Amongst the various ways in which institutions have responded to the pressures of increasing student numbers is to employ casual and so called 'atypical' teaching staff to improve staff-student ratio, such as doctoral students as GTAs. The GTAs often engage with teaching as the main source of, or as a supplement to the funding for their doctoral studies (Winstone and Moore 2016). While it is expected that large proportions of undergraduate teaching is conducted by GTAs in the UK, the actual statistical data is unavailable, possibly due to the temporary nature of their work. Furthermore, they often work on an hourly paid basis, where the contact hours of teaching are rewarded but preparation, marking and pastoral care of students are not often remunerated (Gill 2014; Raaper 2018) unlike their academic peers who have successfully moved beyond the borderlands. GTAs working arrangements are labelled as 'atypical' in the UK HE sector, and the UCU (2020a) indicates that there are nearly 70,000 university teaching staff (primarily early career staff) working based on 'atypical' arrangements that reflect in hourly paid casual work on the lowest contract levels with no job security, holiday pay or sickness cover. While there is limited information on GTA pay, the Times Higher Education (2014) survey indicated that the

hourly rate differs across universities, ranging from £10 per hour at some universities to more than £40 an hour at others (see Else 2014). However, UCU (2020a) also indicates that when taking into account all the work that is carried out by hourly-paid staff, the rate is usually inadequate and can even come down to £4 an hour which is less than the UK national minimum wage.

Furthermore Heijstra et al (2017) argue that PhD students and early career researchers who are new to the academic field feel that they need ‘to shine on all fronts of the profession’ which makes them especially vulnerable for exploitation whilst in and trying to permanently cross the GTA borderland. This is particularly the case as fierce competition for a limited number of academic jobs makes the definite upward mobility challenging, putting vast pressure on individuals to prove their competitiveness (Thwaites and Pressland 2017). Natanel (2017, 242) has vividly problematised the borderland situation where PhD students are enforced to ‘[vie] against each other in order to gain the experience as educators and researchers that will enable employment in seemingly elusive permanent full-time positions’. In other words, a nomenclature that implies that GTAs are to ‘assist’ while occupying the borderlands is often misleading as PhD students can find themselves delivering large proportions of undergraduate programmes without any significant training or support (Gill 2014; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Raaper 2018). Furthermore, it is important to note that by undertaking hourly paid work, GTAs might actually reinforce the system that promotes precarious academic contracts rather than full-time employment of new academic staff. It is therefore hugely important to problematise casual work and to find ways to recognise and support GTA role within the borderlands where they may be taken advantage of in an increasingly precarious HE market.

As a sector we have recognised the need for academic staff in the UK to undertake some professional development in learning and teaching to secure the Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA, now Advance HE) which validates their teaching readiness and competencies (see Advance HE 2018). In most UK universities, it is a requirement for new lecturers to achieve fellowship and over 120² institutions having accredited schemes (Advance HE, 2020). As part of this scheme, universities also offer training opportunities to their GTAs, whether it is a formal teaching qualification that leads to a teaching accreditation such as Associate Fellowship or Fellowship Status of the HEA (FHEA) in the UK or a series of non-credit bearing workshops. However, there is limited advice on the expectations and development opportunities for GTAs because of their uncertain academic lives in the borderlands. Since GTAs occupy the borderlands, unlike academics, the teaching support offered is uneven in its scope and scale, particularly for students outside of those institutions that belong to research council funded Doctoral Training Centres (DTC) (see Budd, O'Connell, Yuan an Ververi, 2018). Therefore, while GTAs are all occupants of the borderlands, their experiences is unlikely to be homogenous because of institutional differences, and this raises significant concerns about support available to GTAs and their development as teachers.

This paper explores GTAs experiences in the borderlands in the neoliberalised higher education settings that are insecure and chaotic in terms of support they offer to GTAs. It particularly seeks to highlight the support mechanisms available and challenges experienced by GTAs during their early university teaching experiences as they navigate the student-teacher-researcher borderland. We also argue that is essential

² According to 2018-19 statistics, there are 165 HE institutions in the UK (Universities UK, 2020)

to problematise GTA work in contemporary HE settings and to develop holistic support and recognition systems that would systematically facilitate doctoral students' development as university teachers and academics. This project was set up to respond to such gap existing practice and to encourage discussion on future developments of GTA role and support needs.

Methodology

To understand GTAs borderland experiences, the project used two British universities as multiple case studies (Yin, 2013) to capture the teaching and professional development experiences of eight doctoral students from a range of disciplines (see Table 1 and Table 2). Doctoral students were engaged in a teaching role and were recruited using a snowballing sampling approach. The use of a multiple case study enabled us to explore how borderland experiences may be affected by institutional differences in doctoral teaching training provision and support mechanisms in place, in newer and more established universities. The two universities selected represent two different levels of established research and teaching support as these may affect doctoral student experiences and support. University A is a teaching-focused newer university (post-1992³) with recent research degree awarding powers, while the University B was established in 1960s and focuses on both teaching and research with a well-established doctoral programme and part of a DTC. The key structural differences across the two case study universities are outlined below.

The University A is a relatively new university with a small number of doctoral students and therefore new to employing doctoral students as GTAs. The doctoral students interviewed were from four different disciplines: Music, Mathematics,

³ The post-1992 university label refers to former polytechnics that were given a university status with the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (see more from Eurydice, 2019)

Geography and Sociology. Of the four students interviewed two were international doctoral students and two were home students. The university did not have a doctoral school and the students were based in individual departments but jointly attended the university wide research training sessions. All students interviewed were on scholarships; their funding scheme required them to complete the doctoral study in a given timeframe and to undertake some undergraduate teaching alongside. The teaching commitments of the four students varied, some acted as teaching assistants and others in relatively smaller departments were responsible for running a course, where they had a responsibility for curriculum development and design. Their teaching training programme included a series of workshops, running alongside their teaching commitments and targeted at discussing best practices and teaching techniques.

The University B had a well-established doctoral programmes which came under the university-wide doctoral school responsible for coordinating the doctoral research training. The support for research came from supervisors, university-wide research training sessions run by the doctoral school as well as from the DTCs. With regards to teaching, the doctoral students were required to take two non-credit bearing teaching and learning workshops prior to undertaking any teaching. They also had the option to undertake a formal teaching certificate in learning and teaching worth 60 credits which led to the Fellowship of the Advanced HE. However, engaging in teaching was optional for these students, unless they had a departmental studentship with teaching requirements (two of the interviewees were on departmental studentships). The participants selected were on the formal teaching programme.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Surrey Self-Assessment Form (ID: 160708-160702-20596432). The participants were explained the purpose of the study and that their participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. Participants were provided with an information sheet and were required to sign a consent form. The interviews explored doctoral students' motivations for teaching, the teaching support structures they accessed and their experiences of teaching.

An exploratory combination of both deductive and inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2013). The doctoral students' experiences of their teaching and teaching support were used as units of analysis. The data was first analysed by exploring the support that doctoral students were receiving to navigate the borderlands outlined earlier in this paper, as well as structural inequalities that affected their experience. The second stage of analysis focused on inductive approaches, letting the participant voices around GTA experience and support to emerge. Meaning and patterns in interview transcripts were actively sought by a systematic examination of the transcripts. This helped to identify codes which were supported by illustrative interview extracts, these were later grouped into the content-driven emergent themes as presented below.

Findings and discussion

The findings indicate how doctoral students navigate the complex field of higher education when undertaking the GTA roles. This includes entering the borderland that

for GTAs provides hope for more secure academic futures, but also causes uncertainties and dislocations as the GTA roles are often undefined with limited institutional support.

Entering the Borderland for Academic Career

First, the interviews revealed that most doctoral students in this study wanted to engage in teaching because of their ambition to cross the GTA borderland and pursue an academic career:

Like, I think that I felt that a career in academia and teaching could be something I wanted to... Would be a career that I would enjoy, and that I would derive, you know, meaning from, or meaning that I wasn't getting, necessarily, from my other job. (Participant 7, University B)

Yes, definitely it was something that I really wanted to have, the teaching role, because one of the reasons why I wanted to be an academic was the teaching side of it. (Participant 1, University A)

However, this desire to enter the GTA borderland was also shaped by their awareness of the precarious academic job market (Gill and Donaghue 2016; UCU 2018, Mantai, 2019). For example, the account below illustrates how doctoral students often choose their places of study based on employability prospects. Teaching experience can therefore be seen as an important aspect of developing one's employability in a sector that is increasingly competitive (Heijstra et al 2016; Natanel 2017).

So I spoke to people I knew at other universities, what are the possibilities of, 'If I came to do a PhD with you, would you allow me to teach?' A lot of universities there, they're very, kind of, sketchy as to whether that's a possibility. It's not an assured thing. For me, having just come out of the job interview process of, 'You're over-qualified, you're under-experienced,' I didn't want to go and do yet another qualification. Therefore, come out even more qualified than I was before, but with no experience because I would just be three years / four years older, more qualified and still apparently unemployable. So, for me, I would only ever have

done, and I'm only ever doing, a PhD where teaching is a part of it. (Participant 4, University A)

Thus, the access to the GTA borderland appears to be essential for doctoral students to relieve some of the precarity that they face in the process of becoming academics. However, gaining access to this borderland was variable amongst doctoral students interviewed. Most students in this study were able to gain teaching experience as a result of the contractual obligations of their doctoral scholarships or by serendipitous association with supervisors who created and provided teaching opportunities:

In the scholarship breakdown the maximum teaching hours were six hours a week, but I've got four hours a week. (Participant 1, University A)

Yes, I was demonstrating on a course that my supervisor was convening. And because I hadn't passed the confirmation I wasn't allowed to convey core module content, but I was demonstrating on it with him.[...] Well, I'm not so certain, I probably asked him if I could teach or demonstrate on something (Participant 8, University B)

It is also important to note that the doctoral students in this study were standing for their right to teach and occupy the GTA borderland and perceived it as an important element of their doctoral training and professional development. However, this uneven access to teaching, where some students relied on close contacts such as their supervisor to gain teaching experience (see also Maintai, 2019), demonstrates significant forms of inequality in the borderlands where doctoral students compete for their academic futures. In other GTA research, doctoral students have also reported how supervisors can stop them from pursuing teaching by suggesting they concentrate on their research (see for example, Beaton, 2017). It is evident that some doctoral students – particularly those without the studentship requirement to teach – are in a more vulnerable and

precarious position to access the GTA borderland and to develop their teaching profile. Teaching opportunities in the participants' experiences therefore function as a kind of border to successful academic future. Elenes and Delgado Bernal (2009) explain that the role of a geographical border in borderland theory designates who can and cannot legitimately enter and occupy certain spaces; similarly these GTAs narratives demonstrate that a border exists around the borderland and a gatekeeper sponsor such as through a supervisor or a studentship provides the legitimate pathway to enter this territory.

Experiencing Liminality in the Borderland

In the GTA borderland, it is where doctoral students begin to create and experience their hybrid identities of student-teacher-research. **They experienced teaching to be** challenging and different from what they were expecting:

I was hoping to see some students like that, challenging me and leaving me speechless, but that didn't happen, therefore I realised that there is a need that I have to be more innovative and creative in my sessions, and then, yes, preparation started to take so much time. (Participant 1, University A)

I found the debates interesting, and the complexity of the teaching environment, and the, sort of, I don't know, unpredictable nature of it, in terms of, you know, different... You can deliver the same class, or the same seminar plan, to three classes, and it will go differently in each one. (Participant 7, University B)

I never let anybody down anyway, but if students ask me for help, 'Oh yes, no problem'. Then there are certain points in the year that, 'Oh yes, no problem,' becomes days on end when I don't do anything other than help students, which is part of my job, but it isn't my main job. That caused me, kind of, a bit of stress, that when I realised that, 'Actually, I can't solve these problems for you'. (Participant 4, University A)

Doctoral students who were engaging with teaching were thus entering a liminal state which is stressful as it requires them to navigate new discourse communities with diverse norms and expectations (Land, Rattray and Vivian 2014). The GTA borderland became a place for transformative experience for doctoral students in their process of becoming future academics (Meyer and Land. 2005). However, there was a recognition that being in the GTA borderland created confusion, conflict and struggles in their different roles and identities:

Yes. So it felt that it was, kind of, eating too much into the time I would want to be spending on my research. That was the realisation of, 'I'm not doing as much research as I would like, therefore-', (Participant 4, University A)

I suppose it was kind of a balancing act preparing the work and my own research at the same time, but I think because from the start I knew what day I was teaching, because obviously I had to have office hour as well, trying to work out, 'Well I'll set that day aside just to do teaching work, to do the prep, to do the marking, to set the assignments.' (Participant 3, University A)

It's like living in limbo at the moment because when I'm with my students I am like an adult and a teacher, and when I'm with my supervisors I'm still technically a student so I also fall into the student part of it and I feel the same insecurities, anxieties, with my students. I don't know exactly what I can say about that teaching. (Participant 1, University A)

Participant 1 (above) demonstrates the identity "limbo" that occurs in a GTA borderland clearly. She shows how the identity that she foregrounds depends on a power relationship between herself and her supervisors (student identity), and herself and her students (teacher identity). This hybrid identity allows her to understand simultaneously her identities of being a student and a teacher. Further, both Participants 1 and 4, allude to the difficulty in balancing their time. Without the protection of employment law and unionisation, it is likely that GTAs can be taken advantage of

(Vaughn, 1998). In the UK, GTAs, whose teaching does not form part of studentships, have recently been able to join one of the academic unions for free, but their rights are still limited and dependent on their institution (UCU, 2020b). Hence, undertaking a GTA role clearly becomes the borderland for doctoral students where they fluctuate between two worlds and where the belonging (or lack of) becomes a key issue (Anzaldua 1987). Just like the Mexican citizens in Anzaldua's *Mezcla*, the legal protections and support that GTAs receive would depend on their "legal citizenship", and as a GTA their legal protection would be less than as a research student. GTAs are thus being 'cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems' (Anzaldúa, 1989, p. 78).

Support in the Borderland

In the GTA borderland, the support provided to doctoral students depended on the institutional structures (such as a structured training programme via the doctoral school) and informal relationships developed with supervisors and other teachers in the department. These types of support helped the participants to navigate the liminality of the GTA work and familiarise themselves with diverse discourse communities characteristic to liminal spaces (Land, Rattray and Vivian 2014). For example, within the structured programme in University B, doctoral students were able to reflect on their teaching which helped to develop their teacher identity and confidence:

...I think the GradCert provoked a lot of self-reflection about my teaching. I felt quite self-aware. I mean, you know, it's a good thing. I mean, it's... And, I suppose, in a sense, it didn't make me afraid to fail, because it was a good way of showing how, you know, even professors and long-established teachers, still encounter the same difficulties that I do. And that, you know, not every seminar goes well, and it is just good to ask questions. And I felt that I could ask those

questions, actually, during the GradCert. So that was good. (Participant 7, University B)

I don't think I was very confident at the time. It was still the early stages. Whenever I would meet with somebody from – well, with [Programme Leader], I could tell him what I was going through when teaching. He would reassure me that everything was fine and I didn't do anything wrong because at first I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing or not and then I would have this validation issue on his part, that I was doing something right. This [GradCert] helped me gain some confidence, after the modules had finished I think, or at least after the first module had finished. (Participant 5, University B)

Furthermore, the structured programme enabled doctoral students to interact with academics who were already on the other side of 'the border' (Elenes and Delgado Bernal, 2009) and to meet other doctoral students navigating the borderlands which provided them with a sense of belonging and recognition that they were not a lone occupier of the borderland. It seemed to be essential for the participants to feel part of the community that goes through similar challenges when legitimising one's role (Paasi, 2009): as a teacher, researcher and academic in this study:

In Law, because it's very much your own project, you're not really collaborating with anyone else on your PhD. People were quite positive about the fact that it was something to come in and meet other people on. Also, to meet people in different parts of the university, doing different subjects. Actually, it was quite useful for your own research. Unlike some of the more science-based subjects, where you're going in on someone else's project, in law, you don't have that automatic support network around you. So, probably not the teaching at all, so much as the actual cross-university meeting people. (Participant 6, University B)

However, in University A, doctoral students did not have a structured programme to attend and instead sought support from significant others within their immediate sphere, usually from their doctoral supervisor or a senior academic leading the course:

I would definitely go to my supervisor. I have told him very honestly everything, even the things which I didn't like about the course, 'I told you, every week we are doing a different topic, you know? Things should be related, at least a bit, but after the Christmas break, I found the things were all related'. (Participant 2, University A)

...the actual subject, what I was doing, was something I have done before and I'm very comfortable doing. Therefore, it wasn't something I had to think about. I knew what I had to do. It's taught in conjunction with a colleague here. It's more a senior colleague. So he gave me, 'This is the order I teach it. You can either follow it, or don't follow it.' So this year I've followed the same order he's done. (Participant 4, University A)

It could be argued that in both institutions, doctoral students were able to understand the pragmatics of working on borderlands where everyday practices, norms and cultures clash and create conflicting experiences (Darder, 2012). However, those on the structured programme were able to realise that all doctoral students in the borderlands were going through similar experiences, and they found it easier to understand and accept difficult teaching encounters:

I don't like to be the centre of attention and when you are in the classroom you have to be. But I think I learned to live with it while I was on the GradCert, that it's okay to be exposed and it's okay to be honest and to some extent reveal your vulnerability, to the extent that the students do not take advantage of it. I think it alleviated some of the fears that I had. (Participant 5, University B)

It is therefore evident that the structured professional development programmes aimed at doctoral students do not prevent or remove difficulties that occur in the GTA borderland. As a liminal experience (Meyer and Land 2005; Land, Rattray and Vivian 2014), the early teaching encounters inevitably cause uncertainties, stress and issues of belonging as it is part of the doctoral student transition to academic work and practice. However, such programmes appear to provide coordinated support, peer networks and

sense of belonging that GTAs interviewed in this study highly valued (Rienties and Hosein, 2015). It helped to receive support beyond the immediate academic network that primarily centres around the doctoral supervisor who often acts as a gatekeeper and pastoral care provider (Lee, 2008). It is important to note that the lack of or limited access to such structured programmes is likely to make the doctoral students' successful entrance to academia more difficult as the borders between the academia and doctoral studies are significant in the increasingly competitive and precarious higher education context (Bosanquet 2017; Raaper 2018).

Concluding thoughts and implications

Previous research on GTAs have recognised their plural identities of being student, researcher and teacher (see Mantai, 2019; Emmioğlu et al, 2017). However, most of this research saw these identities as separate and part of a journey to the development of an academic identity, almost like a pre-professional academic identity (*sensu* Jackson, 2016). However, by using this approach, research has failed to understand GTA identities as a hybrid (except perhaps Winstone and Moore, 2017) and therefore, opportunities for GTA support and development may be atomistic, serendipitous rather than holistic and structured. We have, hence, conceptualised GTAs as occupying a temporary borderland with a hybrid identity of student-researcher-teacher. Through this conceptualisation, we showed how GTAs entrance into this temporary borderland is uneven and unequal and often, like the Mexican citizens in Anzaldúa's borderland theory, the GTAs entered the borderland to improve their life opportunities because of the employment precarity in the now neoliberalised higher education landscape. Unlike the hybrid (i.e. the Mestizas) citizens in Anzaldúa's who can occupy their territory permanently, the GTAs precarity is reflected in the temporary nature of their borderland.

GTAs had similar liminal experiences and struggles in making sense of their multiple identities in the borderland regardless of their institutions. However, GTAs, who were navigating the borderland within an institution that provided structured support, felt less isolated and had an increased sense of belonging in the GTA borderland because of meeting other GTAs in similar positions, that is, “others like me”. These GTAs also recognised the struggles they face with respect to teaching were similar to other academics who had already cross the borderland. Hence, it is likely if these GTAs do become academics, this hybrid identity would make acculturation into academia easier. This exploratory project has, hence, highlighted structural inequalities in the support available to GTAs. Thus, established doctoral schools with structured professional development programmes appear to be in a better place to offer coordinated guidance and networking to doctoral students (Rienties and Hosein, 2020) than newer universities with a limited number of doctoral students whose main and often only point of contact is their supervisor and the department. The post-1992 universities that often have limited number of doctoral students may struggle to provide a more organised teaching support by way of a customised programme due to the consequent resource implications.

Some successful examples of existing GTA development programmes (see Chadha 2013; Gunn 2007 and Park 2004) and professionalisation of graduate teaching (see Winter et al 2015) can be found in literature. However, there appears to be no organised effort or shared understanding of how doctoral students are and should be supported in their teaching roles in the GTA borderland. While the employability metrics of undergraduate students are increasingly important in various quality assurance exercises, it is important not to ignore our responsibility for the holistic development of doctoral students as teachers and researchers to enhance their

employability and support their successful transition across the borderland into their academic career. The findings suggests that those who had access to teaching courses and formal teaching support were better able to enter and cope with the borderlands of academic teaching. The sector appears to be falling short in its responsibility towards the professional growth of doctoral student often due to the short-term nature of their teaching engagement. We need to be mindful as a sector that in trying to meet the learning and support needs of undergraduate students, we are not marginalising the developmental needs of another student body, the doctoral students. By offering temporary, insecure and/or instrumental support, there is a risk that the GTA borderland becomes a place where a new generation of academics internalise precarity as part of accepted academic life.

However, this narrative of ‘student as consumer’ appears to focus on the learning needs of undergraduate students, while ignoring the developmental and support needs of doctoral students as they traverse this borderland. In other words, the prevailing discourse of students as consumers can be counterproductive as it does not address the needs of doctoral students who are likely to do a significant amount of undergraduate teaching and student support during their studies.

The project enables us to construe GTAs as occupying a borderland and having a hybrid identity, and hence make the following recommendations:

1. Creating a closer alignment between doctoral training and holistic development of doctoral students as academics

This may require developing a doctoral role profile that considers the roles and competencies of academic profession, and positions doctoral students who want to pursue with academic career and who engage with teaching and research roles during their studies as ‘academics in the making’ (see Archer 2008, 2008b, Gill 2014,

Fitzmaurice 2013). Reforms could include an integration of teaching competencies within the vitae research development scheme, and the development of doctoral programmes with integrated teaching programmes.

2. Developing communities of practice with focus on teaching support

Several institutional and sector-wide support groups (e.g. the Society for Research into Higher Education 'Newer Researchers' network and the Early Career Higher Education Researchers group in the UK) offer research related development and guidance to doctoral students. However, there appears to be limited evidence of presence of groups that would offer teaching support and a sense of belonging for doctoral students who undertake teaching roles. Such sector-wide communities of practice would be particularly helpful in mitigating the shortcomings of institutional support, particularly in universities where doctoral student numbers are low and coordinated institutional support absent or often not possible due to the resource limitations. Such support groups can help to overcome the feelings of isolation often experienced by doctoral students, by offering an opportunity to develop peer support and informal networks particularly for doctoral students from resource restricted institutions.

3. Recognising diverse experience and support needs

It is likely that the support needs of doctoral students are diverse depending on the nature of discipline, whether they are home or international students, and the extent of support offered by their supervisory team/departments. Differences are also likely to exist between those with prior teaching experience and students who are new to the field and teaching practice. It is therefore important to recognise the diversity of these GTAs and their needs in order to develop a support structure that acknowledges diversity and individuality in the development of their teaching identity. It may be the case that structured doctoral training programmes need to include more optional

workshops and courses, alongside with mentoring schemes, that allow doctoral students to build up their own professional development programme that suits their diverse needs.

4. More recognition of the GTA role

The labelling of GTAs as atypical provides less legitimisation of their role within the higher education sector and they may fail to have protection through employment law and unionisation that is afforded to academics (Vaughn, 1998). Further, changing the labelling of GTAs contracts as atypical in statistical returns, may help policymakers in recognising the extent of support GTAs provide to institutions and higher education sectors. This can then allow for reduction in precarity by affording more coordinating support for GTAs nationally and internationally either through their own work union or a special branch of their student union and/or academic union.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants

Participant	University A	Participant	University B
1	Female, International Student, Social Policy/Sociology, Prior teaching experience in HE	5	Female, International Student, Translation Studies, Prior Teaching Experience in HE (during PhD)
2	Female, International Student, Mathematics, No prior teaching experience in HE	6	Female, Home Student, Law, Prior Teaching in a professional context
3	Male, home student, Geography, Prior teaching experience but in schools	7	Male, Home Student, Politics, Prior Teaching Experience in HE (during PhD)
4	Female, home student, Music, Prior teaching experience but in sixth form colleges and private tuitions	8	Female, International Student, Arts, Prior Teaching Experience in HE (during PhD)

Table 2. The two study contexts

<p>Context One - post 92 university (University A)</p>	<p>Context two - pre 92 university (University B)</p>
<p>Ranked highly in teaching metrics</p>	<p>Ranked highly in teaching metrics</p>
<p>Relatively new doctoral programmes</p>	<p>Well-established doctoral programmes</p>
<p>Relatively small cohort of doctoral students</p>	<p>Large cohorts of doctoral students</p>
<p>Participation in teaching as graduate teaching assistants mandatory but paid on an hourly basis as part of the expectation of the doctoral programme.</p>	<p>Participation in teaching as graduate teaching assistants/teaching fellows voluntary except in the case of students with departmental studentships but paid on an hourly basis in both cases.</p>
<p>The students supported in their teaching via some teaching and learning workshops.</p>	<p>The students supported in their teaching via two non-credit bearing teaching and learning workshops and the graduate certificate in learning and teaching which would lead to a formal certification and a fellowship of the higher education academy.</p>
<p>The degree of teaching responsibility would vary from department to department with maximum six hours of teaching permissible in a week.</p>	<p>The degree of responsibility for teaching would largely involve seminar, laboratory demonstrations and tutorials and most cases doctoral students have autonomy to decide how they would like to deliver the session.</p>