

Policy statement on the employment of postgraduate research students as teaching assistants or demonstrators

Background

- 1 This policy statement covers current postgraduate research students of the University who are working to support the teaching and learning activities of other registered students, normally undergraduates, of this University. It encompasses activities such as laboratory or computer class demonstrating, running problem-solving sessions, taking tutorial classes or seminars, giving lectures, performing assessments and providing feedback.
- 2 This policy primarily applies to postgraduate research students whose primary status is that of a university student. Staff appointed as Graduate Teaching Assistants with a formal contract of employment from the University which encompasses PhD study and teaching responsibilities with an associated salary, may be covered by some aspects of this policy depending on the length of the employment contract.
3. The decision on whether or not to utilise postgraduate students in support of undergraduate teaching rests with individual Schools or units responsible for curriculum delivery. Where postgraduate research students are involved, there is a need for consistency in the selection, training, support, monitoring, and payment of those employed in these roles. The purpose of this policy statement is to provide a framework for this.

Principles of Policy and examples of practice

4. The selection process used to decide which postgraduates will contribute to teaching activities should be fair, transparent and open to all in the full spirit of the University's Equality & Diversity Policy.

5. Schools should determine the relevant criteria for selecting those who will contribute to teaching; for example, these might relate to year of study, area of expertise, or prior relevant experience. Schools should then issue an open invitation to appropriate postgraduates to express interest in the position/s available. They should provide the students with some written information about the associated duties, requirements and responsibilities.
6. The School Director of Teaching & Learning (SDTL), or his or her nominee, should be responsible for overseeing arrangements for appointing, training, supporting and monitoring those postgraduates who contribute to teaching.
7. The School Director of PGR Studies, and the relevant supervisor, should be informed about teaching allocations so that they can maintain an oversight of the overall workload of the postgraduates concerned.
8. As agreed by the University Board for Teaching and Learning on 22 November 2001, it is recommended that postgraduate research students in the University:
“should be involved in no more than an average of six hours of teaching or demonstrating a week during academic terms, to include preparation time if substantial.”
9. It is important that any monitoring of overall workload of postgraduate research students who contribute to teaching includes consideration of preparation and assessment time in addition to student contact hours.
10. Any student employed by the University to support the teaching and learning of other students should be appropriately trained. The Centre for Quality Support and Development, in collaboration with the Graduate School, runs the Preparing to Teach course, which has been specifically designed to support postgraduate research students who contribute to teaching in the University. The normal expectation is that research students engaged in supporting teaching and learning should participate in, at least, the three core sessions of the course. The course can be accessed directly from the Centre or via the Graduate School’s Reading Researcher Development Programme.

Many Schools and Departments, at their own discretion, supplement this central provision by arranging their own training, particularly for laboratory classes and demonstrating duties that might involve the use of specialist equipment. However, Schools and Departments may also wish to offer training which substitutes for centrally-provided training. Where this occurs, it is necessary to ensure that the replacement training adequately prepares students for the range of teaching duties they will undertake. Therefore, where Schools are intending to replace any central training with their own provision, they should inform the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies.

11. Records of training undertaken should be kept by the student and the SDTL.
12. Postgraduates should be provided with on-going support mechanisms throughout their teaching activities. This should normally include some form of mentoring.
13. There should also be some level of monitoring of how allocated teaching duties are carried out, for example by seeking feedback from relevant undergraduate students, or staff 'observers'. Any such feedback should be discussed with the postgraduate research student concerned in a supportive manner.

Payment

14. All postgraduate research students engaging in teaching duties beyond those expected as part of the research training experience will need a contract of employment appropriate to the duration of the work and will be paid by timesheet.
15. Students will be paid, at the appropriate University Student Demonstrator Rate, for all contact hours and for time spent in preparation and marking, where this is felt to be more than minimal.
16. The majority of scholarships for research studies are both within the threshold permitted by HMRC and are awarded to support the candidate in their studies. As such, payment under such studentships is not regarded as income for tax purposes. Moreover, although students may have the opportunity to gain experience in teaching during their funded period, it will not be a condition of their award that they undertake teaching. Any substantial engagement in teaching duties will be regarded as separate to the scholarship and payment managed separately as under points 14/15.

Implementation

17. Heads of School (usually through their School Director of Teaching & Learning) are responsible for ensuring that local practice within their School is in line with these principles.

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